



Research Brief: Adult LGBTQ+ Role Models in the Lives of LGBTQ+ Young People

May 2024

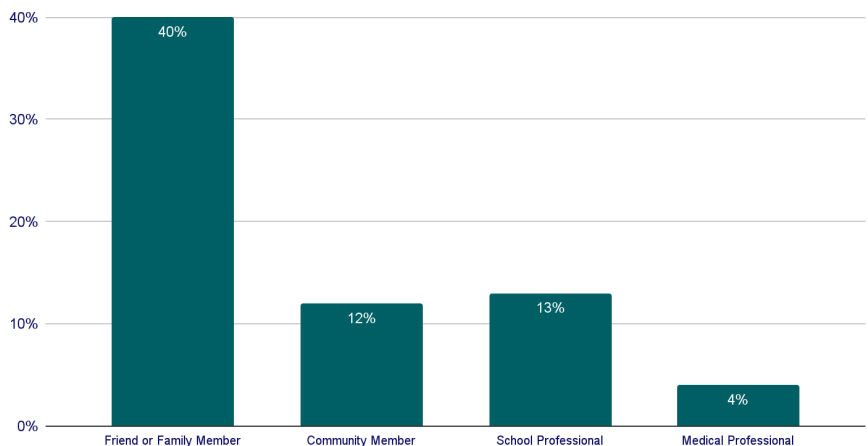
Background

For young people who are LGBTQ+, finding adult role models who share their identities can be both powerful and challenging. Among LGBTQ+ young people, having an adult role model or mentor is associated with higher levels of resilience and emotional strength (Stone et al., 2020), hope (Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2024), self-esteem, academic success, and career aspirations (Edwards et al., 2022). However, previous research has noted that a lack of LGBTQ+ adult role models in the daily lives of LGBTQ+ young people may prompt them to consider public figures or celebrities to be role models. For example, although 60% of LGBTQ+ young people reported having a role model, 60% of those role models were “inaccessible,” meaning figures who were not present in the young person’s day-to-day life (Bird et al., 2012). Those who identified inaccessible role models reported higher levels of psychological distress than those who reported an accessible role model or no role model at all (Bird et al., 2012). More scholarship is needed to understand the role that LGBTQ+ adult role models play in the lives of LGBTQ+ young people, especially differences between role models who are accessible and inaccessible. In honor of National Honor Our LGBT Elders Day on May 16, 2024, this brief uses data from [The Trevor Project’s 2024 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People](#) to examine relationships between access to older LGBTQ+ adult role models and a number of protective factors, including access to affirming spaces and self-reported life purpose.

Results

Two-thirds of LGBTQ+ young people (67%) reported having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives. Two-fifths (40%) reported having a friend or family member as their older LGBTQ+ adult role model, 12% reported a community member, 13% reported a school professional, and 4% reported a medical professional.

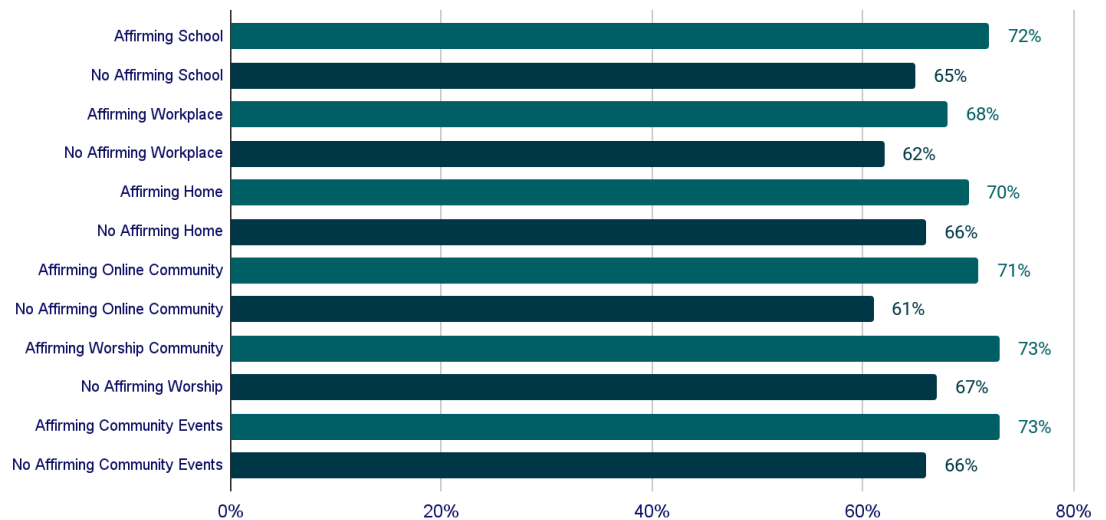
Types of Older LGBTQ+ Adult Role Models in the Lives of LGBTQ+ Young People



LGBTQ+ young people ages 13 to 17 reported higher rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives (71%), compared to LGBTQ+ young people ages 18-24 (64%). LGBTQ+ young people of color reported slightly lower rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives (66%), compared to their White LGBTQ+ peers (68%). However, multiracial LGBTQ+ young people reported the highest rates of having an older LGBTQ+ adult role model (69%), followed by White (68%), Black (66%), Asian American and Pacific Islander (65%), Latinx (65%), Native and Indigenous (64%), and Middle Eastern and North African (54%) LGBTQ+ young people. Transgender, nonbinary, and gender questioning young people reported significantly higher rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives (71%), compared to their cisgender LGBTQ+ peers (63%).

LGBTQ+ young people who had access to affirming spaces reported higher rates of having an older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives. LGBTQ+ young people who attended an affirming school reported higher rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives (72%), compared to their LGBTQ+ peers who did not attend an affirming school (65%). Similar trends were observed among youth who worked in affirming workplaces (68% vs 62%), lived in affirming homes (70% vs 66%), had access to affirming online communities (71% vs 61%), attended affirming worship communities (73% vs 67%), and attended affirming community events (73% vs 66%). Analysis of different types of older LGBTQ+ adult role models showed that access to an affirming school, workplace, home, online community, worship community, or community events was associated with higher rates of identifying a friend or family member, community member, or school professional as an older LGBTQ+ adult role model, compared to LGBTQ+ peers who did not report access to those affirming spaces. Interestingly, only those who reported access to affirming online communities and community events reported higher rates of identifying someone they follow online as an older LGBTQ+ adult role model, compared to LGBTQ+ young people who did not report access to those spaces.

LGBTQ+ Youth Who Identified At Least One LGBTQ+ Adult Role Model, By Affirming Spaces



Having access to an older LGBTQ+ adult role model is associated with higher levels of self-reported life purpose among LGBTQ+ young people. A linear regression analysis of these variables revealed a significant model ($F(8, 12,468) = 4,034.83, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.07$). Specifically, having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model was associated with higher levels of self-reported life purpose ($\beta = 0.55, p < 0.001$). An additional model examining different older LGBTQ+ adult role model relationships was also significant ($F(13, 13,463) = 85.42, p < 0.001, R^2 = 0.08$). Community members ($\beta = 0.24, p < 0.001$) and school professionals ($\beta = 0.42, p < 0.05$) who were identified as role models were both associated with higher levels of self-reported life purpose. Reporting other groups of older LGBTQ+ adults or reporting knowing “no one” as an older LGBTQ+ adult role model were not associated with any significant differences in self-reported life purpose.

Methods

Data were collected through The Trevor Project’s 2024 [U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People](#). In total, 18,663 LGBTQ+ young people between the ages of 13 to 24 were recruited via targeted ads on social media.

Access to adult LGBTQ+ role models was assessed via a question which asked, “Do you know at least one older LGBTQ+ person who you would consider a role model or someone you look up to?” Response options included: “Yes, my friend,” “Yes, my parent/caregiver,” “Yes, my parent/caregiver’s friend,” “Yes, my sibling,” “Yes, another family member of mine,” “Yes, my classmate,” “Yes, my coworker,” “Yes, my neighbor,” “Yes, my teacher/professor,” “Yes, someone else who works at my school,” “Yes, my therapist or mental health professional,” “Yes, my doctor,” “Yes, someone I follow on social media (like TikTok, Instagram, SnapChat),” “Yes, someone else (please specify),” and “No, I do not know an older LGBTQ+ person who I would consider a role model.” Several variables were created, one dichotomizing youth who answered yes to any of the adult role model responses and those who did not, as well as several dichotomous variables of different groups: Family and Friends (included friend, parent/caregiver, parent/caregiver’s friend, sibling, and another family member), Community Members (included classmate, coworker, and neighbor), School Professionals (included teacher/professor or someone else who works at school), and Medical Professionals (included therapist or mental health professional and doctor). The response “Yes, someone I follow on social media” was not grouped and was instead analyzed on its own because this response specified a unique online relationship. When assessing life purpose questions, participants were asked to “Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each of the following statements: There is not enough purpose in my life; To me, the things I do are all worthwhile; Most of what I do seems trivial and unimportant to me; I value my activities a lot; I don’t care very much about the things I do; I have lots of reasons for living.” They could respond: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree. The first, third, and fifth items were

reverse coded and a sum variable was created. To assess access to affirming spaces, participants were asked, “Where, if anywhere, are you able to be in spaces that affirm your LGBTQ+ identity (let you be you)?” Response options included: “School,” “Work,” “Home,” “Online communities,” “A place of worship,” “Community events,” “Somewhere not listed above,” and “Nowhere”.

Chi-square tests were run to examine differences in rates between groups. Independent samples t tests were run to examine differences in mean life purpose score. Linear regression analyses were used to examine differences in mean life purpose score by the presence or absence of older adult LGBTQ+ role models, controlling for age, census region, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and race. All reported comparisons are statistically significant at least at $p < 0.05$. This means there is less than a 5% likelihood these results occurred by chance.

Looking Ahead

A majority of LGBTQ+ young people in our sample reported having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives, with friends and family being the most common type of role model. Younger LGBTQ+ young people ages 13-17 and transgender and nonbinary young people reported higher rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives. When compared dichotomously, White LGBTQ+ young people reported higher rates of having at least one older LGBTQ+ adult role model in their lives compared to their LGBTQ+ peers of color. However, among all the racial groups, multiracial LGBTQ+ young people reported the highest rates. These results suggest that younger LGBTQ+ young people may have more access to LGBTQ+ adult role models through schools and other youth-serving institutions. Transgender and nonbinary young people may be especially motivated to seek out LGBTQ+ role models due to the heightened stress from anti-transgender legislation and debate in their communities. Furthermore, as prior research has consistently documented, those who are more marginalized (e.g., LGBTQ+ youth of color) often report poorer mental health when compared to their less marginalized peers, which may drive them to seek support from an LGBTQ+ adult role model.

Having access to an older LGBTQ+ adult role model was associated with a number of protective factors in our sample of LGBTQ+ young people. Our findings revealed that environments which affirm LGBTQ+ young people’s identities are associated with increased rates of having an older LGBTQ+ adult role model. Schools, workplaces, homes, and worship communities that are affirming were all associated with higher rates of having a friend or family member, community member, school professional, or medical professional as an older LGBTQ+ adult role model. This suggests that affirming spaces may be an important place where LGBTQ+ young people and LGBTQ+ adults can connect with one another. Other research has documented disparities between accessible and inaccessible role models (Bird et al., 2012) and our findings show that more types of affirming spaces are associated with in-person, accessible role models, while only online communities and community events were associated with online, or inaccessible, role models. Having an

older LGBTQ+ adult role model was associated with a higher level of self-reported life purpose. Previous research has found that life purpose is associated with lower rates of considering suicide, attempting suicide, and self-harm in the past year (The Trevor Project, 2024). These findings underscore the importance of seeing older LGBTQ+ adults in one's day-to-day life in helping LGBTQ+ young people imagine and feel more secure about their own futures (Edwards et al., 2022; Stone et al., 2020; Sulimani-Aidan et al., 2024). They also highlight the need for more opportunities for LGBTQ+ young people to connect with LGBTQ+ adults. School and medical professionals who are out about their LGBTQ+ identities are an important source of role models for LGBTQ+ young people. Legislation should not seek to limit these professionals' ability to share their identity with others at work. Organizations working with LGBTQ+ people should also consider offering intergenerational programming to help LGBTQ+ young people and LGBTQ+ adults connect and learn from one another. Furthermore, organizations should tackle structural barriers that prevent LGBTQ+ adults from serving as role models or mentors, including fears that an adult may be falsely accused of inappropriately "grooming" or "recruiting" LGBTQ+ young people and consequently lose their job (Valenti & Campbell, 2009).

One limitation of this cross-sectional data (i.e., data collected at one time point) is that we cannot determine the causality of these associations. It may be that LGBTQ+ young people who have an older LGBTQ+ adult role model have more access to affirming spaces. It could also mean that those who have access to an affirming space then have access to more LGBTQ+ adult role models. Regardless, accessing affirming spaces exposes LGBTQ+ young people to LGBTQ+ and other affirming adults and can provide them more opportunities to meet potential role models. Given that both affirming spaces (The Trevor Project, 2020) and supportive adults (The Trevor Project, 2019) are associated with lower suicide risk among LGBTQ+ young people, there is an urgent need to make sure that all LGBTQ+ young people have access to both affirming spaces and role models. Future research should investigate where LGBTQ+ young people meet their role models, potential differences between role models and mentors, and interventions which may create structured environments for connection between LGBTQ+ young people and supportive LGBTQ+ adults.

At The Trevor Project, our Crisis Services team works 24/7 to help LGBTQ+ young people in crisis. We also focus on prevention efforts in order to limit the need for crisis resources in the future and limit suicide for LGBTQ+ young people. We provide training to LGBTQ+ youth-facing adults, friends and family, community members, and professionals who work with LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., counselors, educators, nurses, social workers) to increase understanding of LGBTQ+ young people and provide guidance on trauma-informed suicide prevention efforts that are tailored to LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, Trevor's Research team is committed to the ongoing dissemination of research that explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people to prevent suicide in a vulnerable community, as well as improve their life experiences. We hope to help create more spaces where LGBTQ+ youth can access LGBTQ+ adult role models in order to obtain needed support and care.

Recommended Citation: The Trevor Project. (2024). Adult LGBTQ+ Role Models in the Lives of LGBTQ+ Young People.

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