

More than Medicine: Psychosocial Approaches to Understanding and Supporting Transgender Youth

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Introduction

On January 31, 2024, following the trend of other jurisdictions within North America, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith announced plans to restrict access to gender-affirming care for trans youth. Proponents of these and similar policies posit that providing gender-affirming care is detrimental to the well-being of youth. However, is this actually true? Research suggests otherwise. Discussions about gender-affirming care typically focus on medical interventions and psychosocial approaches are often dismissed or considered secondary. Thus, there exists a gap in research regarding the impact of this type of care in the context of this type of legislation.

Methods

We used a semi-structured search strategy. Ten databases were searched for English journal articles published online in or after 2014. Only results that specifically discussed one or more gender-affirming care interventions for trans youth were included. The results were then read and coded according to which interventions were discussed.

Literature Review

Multidisciplinary care

- Gender-affirming care is not limited to psychosocial or medical interventions (Coyne et al., 2023).
- Our findings describe the popularity and benefit of multidisciplinary approaches to care

Caregiver Support

- Caregiver support may be the most important protective factor for mental health outcomes in trans youth (Veale et al., 2017).
- Our findings emphasize the critical need for interventions that increase supportive behaviours in caregivers.

Mental Health Support

- Trans youth face elevated rates of mental health concerns, including suicidal ideation, self-harm, and depression (Connolly et al., 2016).
- Our findings identify a need for more rigorous research on the efficacy, acceptability, and feasibility of mental health interventions for trans youth.

Social Transition

- Social transition is one of the few forms of affirming care available to pre-pubertal trans children. It carries many benefits and some risks. (Turban et al., 2021).
- Our findings highlight the importance of providing education and support to families and youth who are considering or pursuing a social transition.

Legislation restricting gender-affirming care for transgender youth not only undermines their well-being but also threatens the provision of vital psychosocial support, and thus it is crucial that professionals working with trans youth advocate for comprehensive care and systemic change to ensure their rights and dignity are upheld.

Discussion

Despite the challenges they face regularly, the trans community has created remarkably strong support systems that expand beyond normative ideas of gender-affirming care. This is especially true on virtual platforms, where trans individuals have access to support, resources, and information that may not be readily available in their immediate physical environments. These digital spaces not only provide access to essential resources and support networks but also serve as platforms for advocacy, empowerment, and social change.

Implications

Recent trends in legislation seek to limit gender-affirming care despite evidence supporting its use, creating a complex landscape for professionals to navigate when working with trans youth. With the support of peers and collaboration between professionals, youth can access a full range of supports. However, providing care is not enough—these policies affect more youth than can be referred to a supportive professional. Participating in advocacy is vital to the pursuit of social justice. The call to action is clear: trans lives matter, so protect trans youth by providing and protecting access to life-affirming supports.

References

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