

Understanding Transgender Youth and Guardian Perceptions of Healthcare and Oral Health Experiences

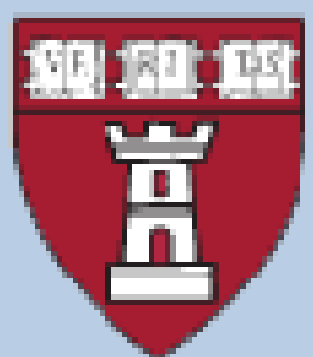


Boston Children's Hospital

Where the world comes for answers

Holly F. Rizzo^{1,2}, Nelson J. Aquino¹, R. Frederick Lambert^{1,2}

¹Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA, USA; ²Harvard School of Dental Medicine, Boston, MA, USA



HARVARD
School of Dental Medicine

Background

- The transgender community is recognized for its resilience, creativity, and significant contributions in areas like art, activism, and media²
- Transgender youth face increased discrimination leading to higher risks of mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and suicidal behavior. Supportive adults can reduce the likelihood of suicide attempts among LGBTQ youth. Recent anti-transgender legislation has negatively affected this population, highlighting the need for more inclusive healthcare practices^{1,3,5-6}
- Challenges exist in accessing gender-affirming healthcare, including lack of provider education on transgender health issues. Studies show transgender individuals, including youth, often experience poorer health outcomes than their cisgender peers⁴
- These individuals are at higher risk for oral health issues due to factors like substance abuse and lack of access to dental care⁷
- There is limited research on oral health experiences in transgender youth, but supportive, culturally competent dental care is crucial.

Methods

- The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardians.
- Participants included self-identified, gender diverse youth aged 15 – 24 and their guardians. Convenience sampling was utilized until thematic saturation was reached.
- The aim of the study was to understand transgender youth and their guardians' experiences with and perceptions of healthcare and oral healthcare and explore differences and similarities between the two groups.
- Participants took part in a single 45-minute in-depth interview.
- Transcribed interviews were coded using NVivo software.
- Using an inductive analytical approach, common patterns and themes were identified within the data.

Limitations

- Sample was drawn from a gender-affirming care clinic in a hospital located in a metropolitan, area within a hospital known for promoting equity and inclusion, which may not fully represent the experiences of transgender youth in more conservative or rural areas with limited access to gender-affirming care.

Findings

Safety and Safe Space Signaling

- Many guardians valued LGBTQ symbols in healthcare settings, feeling reassured that their transgender child would be respected in these environments.
- Transgender youth took proactive steps to ensure their safety by researching healthcare providers for transgender-friendly care. They felt more secure and comfortable with queer healthcare providers, allowing additional trust.

"From the moment you walk in, everybody's wearing rainbow lanyards and it just feels super supportive. Everyone is just so welcoming." Guardian

"I don't have to walk into an intake and think, How many of these people can I trust? How much of this environment is going to be safe for me? If I'm trans, will I receive substandard care?" Transgender woman, 22

Mental Health and Hygiene

- Many transgender youth and their guardians reported mental health challenges that affected hygiene practices in this population. Improvements in both mental health and self-care were noted after initiating social or medical gender transition.

"I've never once had good oral hygiene. I'm doing my best to make sure I want to stay alive, so that's the priority. Hygiene comes a bit after that." Transgender man, 21

"I think his hygiene improved just because he's in a better place, mental health wise. He is where he wants to be, physically and emotionally." Guardian

Regional Bias

- Several guardians trusted hospitals offering gender-affirming care and were willing to travel for such services, relying on referrals from trusted institutions.
- There was a perceived disparity in quality of care for transgender youth based on region. In conservative regions, youth experienced fear, avoiding healthcare due to concerns of discrimination or rejection.

"I don't have to worry about being arrested for abusing my child because we're choosing to let him take testosterone. That's not the case if you live in another state." Guardian

"When I'm in Florida, I panic every time I start to feel sick. I would rather stay home and deal with my sickness myself. In Massachusetts, they can provide me healthcare. There are definitely states that can refuse to provide me with healthcare." Transgender woman, 22

Table 1. Participant Characteristics	N (%)
Guardians	8 (26.7%)
Transgender Youth	22 (73.3%)
- Transgender Man	15 (50%)
- Transgender Woman	3 (10%)
- Non-binary	1 (3.3%)
- Transfeminine	1 (3.3%)
- Transmasculine	2 (6.7%)
Total:	30

Conclusions

- Safe-space indicators contribute to a sense of security in healthcare settings, reducing likelihood of healthcare avoidance.
- Building relationships with healthcare providers allows transgender youth more comfort in disclosing gender-related health concerns. Lack of provider education on transgender health may contribute to medical distrust and avoidance of care in this population.
- Access to gender-affirming services varies widely by geographic location, with political and cultural climates influencing healthcare experiences.
- Mental health challenges impact self-care, including overlooking oral health maintenance. Improvements in mental health were noted in this population after initiating social or gender transitioning.
- Strengthening provider education, expanding access to gender-affirming care, and implementing inclusive policies may improve healthcare experiences for transgender youth.
- Oral healthcare professionals have a unique opportunity to create affirming environments and contribute to the overall well-being of transgender patients.

References:

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