

# TALKING ABOUT



## Conversion “Therapy” Practices



## INTRODUCTION

**Conversion therapy** refers to a dangerous, discredited practice that attempts to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. These practices have gone by many names and misleading euphemisms over many years, including "ex-gay therapy," "reparative therapy," and, more recently, "reintegrative therapy" and even "exploratory therapy."

Conversion practices are rooted in the notion that being gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender is wrong. When a mental health practitioner subjects a young person to these practices, the therapist is putting their own personal agenda ahead of the well-being of their patient—and decades of research shows that they are also putting that young person at risk of serious harm.

This resource provides guidance for talking about these dangerous practices as part of effective conversations that help conflicted audiences understand what's at stake for young people and their families when state-licensed mental health practitioners subject them to these harms under the guise of "therapy."

**Note:** When possible, avoid calling conversion efforts "therapy." These practices are *not* therapy; they have no science-backed guidelines, and therapists using them on minors are violating their ethical obligations as licensed mental health professionals. Though we may need to refer to these dangerous practices as "conversion 'therapy'" in certain contexts, refer to them as *conversion practices* in most cases.

## APPROACH #1: EMPHASIZE SHARED VALUES

**Start by grounding our conversations in key values we share:** a desire to keep young people healthy and safe by protecting them from dangerous conversion practices.

- *We all want kids to be healthy and safe. That's why it's important to protect young people from dangerous conversion practices that try to change a part of them that can't be changed.*

## APPROACH #2: ILLUSTRATE CONCRETE HARMS OF CONVERSION PRACTICES

While some people come into discussions about conversion practices with a level of cultural familiarity, others do not. **That's why it's important to ground our discussions in the damaging effects these practices have on LGBTQ youth who are subjected to them.**

- *Conversion "therapy" is a dangerous, discredited practice that fringe therapists have been trying to force on LGBTQ young people for decades. It results in high risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts and behavior.*

- *In these conversion practices, LGBTQ youth are pressured by a therapist to change in ways that are impossible, resulting in guilt, self-hatred, and high risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior. LGBTQ young people subjected to these dangerous practices are more than twice as likely to report attempting suicide and multiple suicide attempts. Young people and their families should be protected from these dangerous practices.*

## APPROACH #3: DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN LEGITIMATE THERAPY AND DANGEROUS CONVERSION PRACTICES

Those who push conversion practices on LGBTQ youth falsely claim that such practices are "therapy." To counter these deceptive efforts, we can distinguish between legitimate therapy—which can be invaluable in helping young people navigate issues they face as they grow up—and the kinds of harmful, discredited tactics used against young people as part of this dangerous conversion agenda.

- *Young people can benefit tremendously from therapy. It can give them tools to examine who they are and navigate the issues they face as they're growing up. And it only works if the therapist is not pushing an agenda on the child.*
- *Conversion practices are exactly the opposite. Instead of a nonjudgmental approach, a conversion therapist abuses the counseling process and pushes an LGBTQ young person to blame their parents and themselves for the fact that they're gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.*
- *Families need to be able to trust that therapists will help and not hurt their child. We need to protect young people from dangerous conversion practices that isolate and psychologically harm kids, scapegoat parents, and divide families through blame and rejection.*

It can also be helpful to explain that these practices are not actually therapy, that there's no training for conversion "therapy," and that conversion therapists aren't acting within the science or ethics of their profession:

- *Conversion "therapy" is not actually therapy. There's no training for it and no science-backed guidelines supporting it—meaning that people are just making stuff up and calling it "therapy." These fringe therapists are not acting within the science or ethics of the mental health profession, and they're causing lasting harm to young people.*

## APPROACH #4: EMPHASIZE MEDICAL OPPOSITION TO CONVERSION PRACTICES

All of the nation's leading medical and mental health authorities have spoken out against conversion "therapy"—

**NOTE:** This guide looks at the use of conversion "therapy" practices on LGBTQ youth by licensed mental health practitioners. It does not specifically address practices by unlicensed individuals, though some of the guidance may be applicable to these practices. For more background on conversion "therapy" research and policies, read *Policy Spotlight: Laws Protecting LGBTQ Youth from Conversion "Therapy"* at [mapresearch.org/conversion-therapy](https://mapresearch.org/conversion-therapy).

an important fact to name and reinforce when emphasizing the harmful effects of these discredited practices.

- *There is overwhelming medical consensus that conversion practices put young people at risk. The American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, and National Association of Social Workers have debunked these practices and warned that they put the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth in danger.*

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATION

**Avoid being baited into bad-faith arguments against transgender youth care.** Anti-LGBTQ activists will often fold their conversion agenda into their efforts to ban medically necessary care for transgender youth. Use the approaches below to help people navigate these issues—and **visit [Talking About Transgender Youth Health Care](#) for more on effective conversations regarding care for transgender young people.**

### Talking About the Use of Conversion Practices on Transgender Youth

**As part of their efforts to ban transgender youth and their families from being able to access medically necessary care for gender dysphoria, anti-LGBTQ opponents have tried to rebrand harmful conversion practices as “exploratory therapy.”**

So-called “exploratory therapy” is conversion “therapy” by another name. It involves a therapist unethically trying to change a fundamental part of who a young person is—and causing lasting harm to that young person in the process.

It’s important to know that legitimate therapy already creates space for young people to understand and explore their gender in a non-judgmental environment, in keeping with a therapist’s ethical and professional obligations to their patients. In fact, in-depth assessment by licensed mental health professionals is the foundation of the extensive evaluation process that’s part of the expert medical standards of care for transgender youth.

**“Exploratory therapy” targeted at transgender young people is the same conversion agenda that gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth have been subjected to for decades.** The following approaches can help inform discussions about attacks on transgender youth via this push for deceptively named, but no less dangerous, conversion practices:

#### 1. Help People Navigate Their Unfamiliarity When It Comes to Transgender Youth Care

Anti-LGBTQ opponents’ push for what they call “exploratory therapy” tries to exploit unfamiliarity with transgender youth care, arguing that this care should be banned and conversion practices used in its place. **We can help people understand how legitimate therapy is already a foundational part of transgender youth care and provide them with information that helps them navigate their unfamiliarity and questions.**

- *Every parent wants their child to be happy and healthy. A lot of people aren’t sure what they think about healthcare for transgender youth—and when something’s unfamiliar, it’s natural to have questions. But most of us would agree that we don’t want families deceived into placing trust in therapists*

*who use pressure and shaming tactics to make their child hate themselves and who they are.*

- *It’s important to remember that transgender young people already undergo counseling as part of a careful, extensive process of evaluation and assessment to determine the appropriate course of care. And remember that “conversion therapy” isn’t actually therapy. It isolates and psychologically harms kids, scapegoats parents, and divides families through blame and rejection.*

#### 2. Unmask Anti-LGBTQ “Exploratory Therapy” as “Conversion Therapy” by Another Name

After helping people sort through their unfamiliarity with transgender youth care, **focus on the dangerous, deceptive agenda behind the anti-LGBTQ push for so-called “exploratory therapy”:**

- *Therapy for young people only works if the therapist is not pushing an agenda on the child. What anti-LGBTQ activists call “exploratory therapy” is exactly the opposite. It’s the same dangerous, discredited conversion agenda, just with a friendlier-sounding name. Our laws should protect families from fringe therapists who use pressure and shaming tactics to make their child hate themselves and who they are.*

#### 3. Connect the Dots Between Anti-LGB Conversion Practices and Anti-Transgender Practices

**Finally, make the connections between the agenda and the actors involved across these anti-LGBTQ conversion efforts—no matter what name is used to describe them.**

- *No amount of talk or pressure can make a transgender person not transgender—just like a conversion therapist can’t turn a gay person straight. These dangerous conversion tactics have historically been used to try and shame gay youth into hating themselves and rejecting who they are—and now these practices are being forced on transgender kids.*