



[Rainbow Families QLD](#)

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Committee Secretary
Mental Health Select Committee

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MENTAL HEALTH SELECT COMMITTEE INQUIRY – OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Dear Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission this inquiry. Our submission is made on behalf of rainbow families across Queensland, with a focus on representing the voices of the LGBTIQ+ community as well as those of our children.

About Rainbow Families Queensland (RFQ)

RFQ supports, celebrates and advocates on behalf of LGBTIQ+ parents and carers and their children, across Queensland. Our vision is to create a Queensland which meets the diverse needs of all rainbow families, including those in regional areas.

Our work

RFQ runs social groups, events, fertility information sessions, advocates on law reform issues, and has created targeted resources to promote inclusive childcare and health services and plays a major role in supporting mental health in our community.

Our objectives

RFQ's objectives include a strong commitment to social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing, suicide prevention, and ensuring all rainbow families and children are healthy and resilient, connected to community which directly addresses two of Queensland Government's *Our Future State* key priorities: "Keep Queenslanders Healthy" and "Give All Our Children a Great Start".

In 2016 there were 10,500 children in Australia living in same-sex coupled families in Australia. However, this did not include the many children also living with single parents who identify as LGBTIQ+, and couples with children where one or both parents are trans, gender diverse or intersex. While LGBTIQ+ parents are if anything underrepresented in ABS data, there was a 71.5% increase from the 2011 to 2016 census which demonstrates an emerging need. These

statistics also do not include the many rainbow families who may not have self-identified as part of the LGBTIQ+ community due to social stigma and fear of discrimination. Our community is growing substantially every year, but we face significant barriers to inclusion.

Based on the latest health data, the mental health of our communities is in crisis. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people are twice as likely to be diagnosed and treated for mental health disorders in Australia and are 5 times more likely than those in the general population to attempt suicide. Transgender people are at substantially higher risk of suicide attempts (at 11 times the general population). 60% of Australians with an intersex variation had thought about suicide based on issues related to having a congenital sex variation.

As parents, we naturally are most concerned about the impact on children in our families who experience their own kind of minority stress. A large body of evidence shows that our children are thriving in many cases. But while a 2013 study found that some measures of wellbeing for children in rainbow families were more positive compared with other children, 2014 research found that experiences of stigma related to being in a rainbow family, which might include bullying or social exclusion, can be a risk factor for the wellbeing of children.

Mental health impacts

While many new parents generally experience feelings of isolation and postnatal depression after the birth of a child, LGBTIQ+ parents often struggle with where they fit and how to get the inclusive care they need at this difficult time. While some may feel comfortable and supported accessing general mental health services, that is not the case for all members of our community. Research suggests that many trans and gender diverse people avoid medical settings because of the fear of poor treatment.

Navigating perinatal health support can be challenging for many LGBTIQ+ parents. Pregnant parents who do not identify as female can be particularly vulnerable at the time of accessing health systems that either not inclusive or simply ill-prepared to provide the specialist support needed. Services such as antenatal education classes can be entirely unavailable to some e.g. gay fathers where they are not the 'patient'.

As is the case for other marginalised communities, a major contributing factor to the poor mental health of our communities is the ongoing impact of stigma and discrimination. While there is a large body of evidence to suggest that our children are doing as well as or better than children brought up by non-LGBTIQ+ parents, there is still much stigma for our families which negatively impacts on mental health. We carry the burden of feeling like we are 'less than' or that we don't have the 'right' to be parents.

Our families may face discrimination or vilification in the community, and these experiences can restrict the movements of families within the community and lead to social isolation. If families and children fear that they will have negative experiences in the community, they will tend to avoid social situations and places where this can occur. This state of hypervigilance is likely harmful to mental health for parents and children.

Sadly, some of our families do not have the extended family support due to family rejection. Some parents have experienced ostracism when they have left a heterosexual relationship with children after acknowledging and affirming their identity. Situations have included deliberate attempts to make them feel ashamed, allegations that they are not fit parents and deliberate denial of access to their children and isolation from family and friends.

The far reaching social and economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the psychological and mental well-being of individuals across our community.

Despite this, Rainbow Families Qld continued to provide online support and services through our networks and created connections to community and mental health services.

It is essential to note that Rainbow Families Qld is only funded through volunteers and despite being the only organisation specifically delivering services to the LGBTIQ+ rainbow family's community, struggle to secure a sustainable ongoing source of funding – this is not a sustainable position.

For this reason, RFQ strongly supports increased ongoing funding for organisations such as RFQ who deliver essential social support, inclusive, services to LGBTIQ+ communities at risk of worse mental health outcomes.

An example of the help that RFQ provided to a new mother to survive early parenting is provided below:

Case study

Being a new parent is challenging for most people but coping with the impact of stigma and discrimination can compound this experience. RFQ runs play groups for LGBTIQ+ identified parents and their children. Jessie* came to our service with a newborn baby. She had experienced depression after the birth of her child which was brought on, in part, by the way she was treated by her midwife. After the birth of her child as a single parent by choice, her midwife constantly asked her where “the father” was and told her that “your baby needs a male role model – who will that be?”. This left Jessie feeling a sense of shame and insecurity. Once she found our group, Jessie established connections with our community which helped her through a dark time, ensuring that she could focus on the needs of her child and celebrate the precious early days of parenthood. *Pseudonym to protect identity.

Specialised support

Rainbow Families Qld deliver a range of services to our community which are sometimes literally the only positive social interaction that some rainbow families community members experience.

Our services focus on bringing rainbow families together, creating safe positive inclusive spaces, creating opportunities for social connection and generating a strong sense of community. These clearly link to supporting positive mental health solutions, reducing social isolation and loneliness and enriching and empowering our community. These services include:

- Statewide including regional Queensland Rainbow Families social media support groups
- Rainbow family play groups for new parents with children up to 5 years old
- Monthly social group meetups
- Regular social inclusion activities and events including discos, annual camps, children's adventure activities
- Seminars for parents starting their parenting journey
- Advocacy support and change initiatives
- Connection to Australia-wide Rainbow Families organisations

Recommendations

As noted above the mental health statistics for our community are tragic. There are critical gaps in mental health services targeting our community and increased support and funding

for organisations such as RFQ who fill these gaps is needed. Our recommended priorities for the Inquiry include:

- Ensure targeted funding for at risk marginalised communities – prioritise community-led solutions by ensuring ongoing funding for organisations such as RFQ who deliver essential social support, inclusive, services to LGBTIQ+ communities that are clearly at high risk of poor mental health outcomes
- Provide specific training to mainstream mental health service providers to increase awareness and understanding of rainbow families and LGBTIQ+ communities to ensure services are inclusive, accessible, affordable and targeted appropriately towards priority sections of the community.
- Strengthen and enhance the overall capacity of the system supporting social inclusion – provide flexible and additional funding to strengthen the capacity of community based service providers through a sustainable ongoing model to enable proactively responses to the needs of people affected by poor mental health and social isolation.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Yours sincerely



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