

Pridepalooza 2022 IG Live Supporting Queer Youth

Featuring Shohreh Davoodi & Erica Smith

Shohreh Davoodi: Well, welcome, hello!

Erica Smith: Thank you!

Shohreh: I'm excited we get to have this chat tonight. I feel like especially with the hellscape that is America right now, that if there ever was a time to support queer youth, it's currently.

Erica: Yes, and they need to know that we support them.

Shohreh: Yeah, exactly. So, I'm excited to talk about all of it. Before we get into it, why don't you just introduce yourself for anyone who may be on who doesn't know you and your work.

Erica: Yeah, sure. So, uh, my name is Erica, and I am a sex educator, and that means a lot of different things in a lot of different areas. Part of what I do currently is work with people who were raised in purity culture to give them the sex education that they didn't receive when they should have. But my career has been quite long, and I have done everything from support LGBTQ youth, including trans youth, for 20 years now. And worked in abortion care. Um, currently work with trans and gender non-conforming youth in a hospital gender clinic. And also—gosh, what else? Sex ed for youth in detention. Lots of different things. But right now, I mostly work with folks raised in purity culture and also queer youth and their families.

Shohreh: Ah-mazing. Yeah, I immediately thought of you when I was thinking about this topic because something that happens to me a lot is that I have random parents reach out to me. And they'll be like, hey, my child just came out to me as gay, or trans, or any other number of things in

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the LGBTQ umbrella. And they're like, I don't know what to do [laughs lightly]. So they're like, do you do coaching around this? Like, can you help me? And it's not that I don't, it's just that I do more limited work in that area. And I'm always like, let me refer you to my friend Erica because she has a lot of experience with this that I don't have and does consultations around this.

Erica: Yes. You have sent work my way. You've sent some pretty amazing families my way.

Shohreh: I know and it just makes me so happy because I want nothing—like, because for myself, growing up, you know, with the parents that I had and the family that I had, where the LGBTQ competency wasn't so much there, um, with my experiences growing up and even now as an adult, it makes me so happy when I hear from parents who are like, I wanna do the right thing. Like, I wanna support my kid. I just—no one ever taught me how so I'm not sure what to do. And I'm like, that's fair. There's no handbook for this.

Erica: No. I mean, increasingly, there are resources, but when it—especially when it happens in a family, and this is something I see a lot. Say a family where the parents are used to being pretty normative, so you have a straight, cis couple, a lot of times they have never been the "other" in any situation, especially if they're, like, a straight, cis, white couple.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Erica: So sometimes you get parents who are like, I don't know what—I don't know what the experience is like to be a minority in any way. And,

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[notices Shohreh's water bottle] oh! I have the same exact thing I'm drinking out of right now. [Light laughter]

Shohreh: Gotta hydrate.

Erica: Yes. But yeah, there's resources online, but a lot of parents just really wanna hear it directly from a person or have someone kinda hold their hand through it, which is absolutely necessary.

Shohreh: Yeah, and I think especially for parents, like, there's a lot of fear around it, like, for their child, and, like, what is going to happen, and, like, are they going to be bullied? Are they gonna have a "normal" life? Like, all these very natural fears that they, like, need someone to talk them through that. And I think it's also really important because parents can accidentally, like, project that shit onto their kids and make the children's experience worse without realizing that, like, that's not the place for that. Like, we need to go outside of the parent-child relationship or caregiver-child relationship to express those feelings and those fears without, like, scaring your kid accidentally.

Erica: Yes. And another thing that's super relevant here is depending on how old the parents are, the way that the world is for queer people now is very different than the way it was when the parents were young. Um, and I can say that, you know, a lot of times, the parents I work with are around the same age as I am. And I was a teenager in the '90s. So the fear that parents who may have been teens in the '90s have, may not even be relevant for the queer youth experience nowadays. Because things change drastically with time and really, really have in this area.

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Shohreh: Yeah. No, that's a very good point. So, okay, so, I think, maybe let's start by talking about kind of, like, queer identity development in terms of, you know, timeline, and, like, what you might expect. Like, if you're having kids and your kids might come out to you as queer, trans, something like that, like, what that could actually look like.

Erica: Yeah. So, I will start with, um, sexual orientation. So by the time children are preschoolers, they understand relationship roles. So they might see, like, oh, there's a mom and a dad in this family, or there's two moms in this family, and two people are a couple. Like kids—kids figure that stuff out quite young.

And by the time kids are seven, they can begin identifying, like, who they are attracted to. And when I say that, I am very careful to say I'm not talking about sexual attraction in the ways adults experience it; not at all. What I'm referring to is just who we feel drawn to. Who we want to spend time with. Who we feel like makes us feel good. So we can probably all think about, like, first crushes in elementary school. Those aren't about sex. There's, like, who do I wanna be around? Who is, like, good looking and makes me feel kinda giggly? [Shohreh laughs lightly] So kids can identify those experiences, um, around age seven.

And then, by age ten, kids know what sexual orientation words mean and probably more often before age ten, depending on the family that they live in. Um, maybe if they're being raised in a family that is extremely, um, conservative and doesn't want to talk about that stuff, they might not know. But the way that the world is in 2022 in America, a

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lot of kids are getting that information early, so they know what different sexual orientations are.

Which is why it is not unusual to have children knowing and coming out sometimes when they're around ten years old. Um, I know, and you know, as people who did not come out as ten-year-olds [Shohreh laughs lightly], that that's not everybody's experience.

Shohreh: Right.

Erica: Um, it used to be that the average age that a person came out as queer—and I'm not talking about trans, I'm talking about queer. The average age that a person came out as queer used to be in their early twenties, and that's because that was the time that people broke away from their families, maybe went to school. And now people are coming out at younger and younger ages, precisely because of the visibility.

Um, one of the things that I think it's important to emphasize is that, um—god, I really lost my train of thought on that one [laughter]. Hold on a second. Oh yeah, one of the things that I think it's important to emphasize is that if a child says when they're ten—say you have a female-assigned child, cisgender kid, says, you know, I'm into girls. I know I'm into girls. A lot of people's initial response will be, you can't know that. There's no way you know that.

But the thing is, if you say to an adult straight person, when did you know you were straight? They're like, oh, actually, it's just a thing I always knew. And I'm like, so did you know you were straight when you were 10, 11, 12? And they're always like, well yeah. Because to them, to all of us, it's just a normative thing to, like, be attracted to, you know, if

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you're straight, what you perceive to be the opposite gender as you. And that's something that people really have a hard time wrapping their head around, that kids could identify attraction to others so early. But it's absolutely a possibility.

So if you do have a 10-year-old or a 12-year-old that says, mom, I know that I like, you know, girls, or I know I like boys, or I know I like all different kinds of genders. That's not your kid acting older than their age. That's not your kid making shit up. It's a real experience. Um, and I know that's a new thing in this world because it didn't used to be that people had the language or the space or the room to make those assertions when they were as young as they are now.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Erica: Before I go into gender identity development, do you have any, like, questions about that part? Or do you want to talk about that part at all?

Shohreh: So it was funny when you were saying that. One of the things I just want to point out for anyone who is watching, especially for those of us who are adults, and many of us who came out later, like, there's this idea of you can't know who you're attracted to until, like, you've had sex with that gender, right? And so I just want to point out what you just said, again, which was that we don't have the same expectation or requirement for straight people.

Erica: Never.

Shohreh: We do not tell straight people, oh, well you didn't know you were straight until you actually had sex and confirmed that, right? No. It's just

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because that's what we see as normative and we see queer people as other, that we're like, oh, we need to have some requirements to make sure that you're really sure you fit into that category.

Erica: Right, right. Because, like, yeah, we need proof. Um, but there is no tangible proof. It's just, like, ya feel it, ya know it. I mean, I know it, you know it, queer kids know it.

Shohreh: Right.

Erica: And also, I think it's also important to give people room to grow and change. I know a lot of parents wanna know, but if my kid is telling me they're gay at ten, like, what if they don't know? Are they gonna be the same forever? And the truth is, we don't know that about any human being.

I mean, when I was ten, I probably assumed that I was straight. I mean, even though I, like, loved my best girlfriends more than any other people. Um, but it wasn't even an option to not be straight. So I think that asking and wondering, is this gonna be my kid's identity forever, is kind of missing the point. Um, it might be, it might not be. What's my identity now in my forties might not be my identity in ten years.

So, I think that with any human, regardless of their age and regardless of whether they are children or not, we have to give them the room to understand things about their identity as they begin to understand those things themselves. And it's okay if maybe in five years, your 15-year-old is like, you know what? Actually, I think I'm bi. Like, okay, then go with that, you know? Fluidity is a real thing, and understanding more about yourself as those kind of windows and doors open to you is really

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normal. So, don't get caught up in wondering if your kid is going to stay the same sexual identity that they shared they are with you when they're in, like, middle school or high school.

Shohreh:

Mhm. Well, I know we're gonna get into some of the practical ways that parents can, like, be affirming and supportive. But just to that point, I think as a parent, or anyone who works with or spends time with kids, like, it's important to let them know that, like, it's okay if they— whatever they feel now, if it changes, that's fine. Like, if they find a different label fits better for them later, or, like, if at this point, they're attracted to this group, but maybe that shifts, that's okay.

It would have meant the world to me and so many queer people I know to have heard that growing up. That, like, you know, you don't have to put yourself into these boxes. Like, you're allowed to change, you're allowed to grow. Like, keep checking in with yourself, and whatever you tell me is true for you, like, I'm gonna believe that. Instead of, like, I have to question it because it's different from what it was before. Like, I just want more of that messaging out in the world.

Erica:

Yeah, totally. And honestly, that's the experience I had with my family even though I didn't come out as queer to my family until I was in my mid-twenties. Since that time, I came out as, first it was, like, a lesbian, and then it was bi and queer, and, like, I brought home all different kinds of partners of all different kinds of genders. And never once did my parents ask me to make up my mind. Never once did they say, are you sure? They never fucking cared. They were always just like, is this person cool to you? Cool. [Shohreh laughs lightly]

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And as a woman, as an adult, that's the kind of love and support I need from my parents. And young kids need it just as much, if not more. They need to know they have that safe place to land.

Shohreh: Absolutely. Okay, so let's go into, um, gender identity then.

Erica: Yeah. So, okay, so I want to state that I work at a gender clinic for youth. Um, and I am not a medical person. My role is as a support person for families and young people. Um, but these are the things that I have observed in my years of working at what is one of the best gender clinics for young people in the country, in the United States.

So, at this point, our gender clinic has been opened since, I don't know, 2014, and we have over 3,000 families that have come to us. And yeah, it's immense. We've had to open, like, other locations, hire new people, expand. There's so many folks bringing their young people to us.

So, gender identity development in children—by the time kids are toddlers, like, two, they understand that there are physical differences between sexes. So they would see, like, say they're in a mother-father household, or they have a brother, they're a cis-girl—they know that, like, people that are boys are supposed to have a penis. People that are girls are supposed to have a vulva. Like, we know that there are differences between boys and girls.

And by age, let me see, so that's happening by, like, toddlerhood. Um, then, children understand that gender identity is, like, a stable thing. They know that, like, if someone's a girl, they're a girl the next day, they're a girl the day after that. It's, like, a permanence thing.

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They also understand which one they're supposed to be. Because we give that messaging to kids super early. I mean, we are now giving it before they're even born with, like, a gender reveal party [Shohreh groans]. So we're immediately coding them, sometimes from the fetal stage, right? Like, this baby has a vulva, that to us means the baby is a girl and we're gonna immediately start treating the baby like a girl, even if we're not conscious that we're doing that. Um, a lot of people are very conscious of it, like pink, blue, all that stuff.

But children know very early. Like, if you were to go to a room of preschoolers and say, line up boys on one side and girls on the other, kids know—they know which line they're supposed to be in.

So some children do start expressing a gender that's different than their assigned sex when they're very little. Sometimes when they're two. This is not every trans person's experience, so I want to make it clear that, like, just like sexuality, an understanding of your gender can change throughout your lifetime as the information becomes available to you, as you're able to receive that information, depending on where you are in your life. But it's absolutely possible for a very small child to express that they are not the sex they were assigned, that their gender identity does not align with that sex.

So, when we have young people, um, whose parents bring them to the gender clinic at the children's hospital, that usually means that their parents listened to them and that they're affirming them in some way. It might not mean that they're affirming them in every way, but it at least means that the parents are at least like, oh, okay, like, I had a baby that

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I thought was a girl, and now at age four, this baby is really telling me, um, mom, I'm not a girl. Mom, I'm not a girl. So they bring the child to the gender clinic.

Um, and when a kid is that little, there's really not much to do about it except for just let them express their gender in a way that's comfortable for them. So depending on the kid—yeah, gender expression. So what are they comfortable wearing? What kind of hairdo do they want? Letting them explore gender expression regardless of assigned sex.

Um, and some parents—some parents have trouble with that, not because the parents are shitty, but because, again, like I said, if we're talking about a cisnormative, heteronormative couple that has no experience with queerness, sometimes they're like, well, if my girl is saying she's a boy, then why does she wanna sometimes wear girl things? So we really have to get parents to think critically about gender and deconstruct everything they know about gender. Because their kids are probably gonna be way more advanced than them at having an open mind about gender. Because that's how things are headed, you know?

A thing that's really interesting to me is that when we see studies that are saying now one in six Gen-Z people are queer, those studies are not about Gen-Z teens and they're not about small children that are around, alive now. They're about Gen-Z adults. So people that are ages 18-23. So if you take into account what is the sexuality and gender of people

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younger than 18, we don't even have those numbers yet. And things are trending queerer and queerer and queerer [laughs lightly].

Shohreh: Amen [laughs].

Erica: I don't know if you've ever seen—there's, like, a graph that I use when I do presentations that shows the amount of adult Americans who openly identified as LGBT based on generation. And it goes back as far as folks that were the parents of boomers, so, like, people like my grandparents, who are no longer with us.

The amount of folks in that generation that were comfortable openly identifying as LGBT was like 1.8% of the population. And then every generation since, it's increased. It would, like, double with boomers, and then double again with Gen-X, and then millennials were even more, and then Gen-Z is, like, even more people identifying as queer. But like I said, that's only Gen-Z adults.

So when we look at young people that are under the age of 18, there's no doubt that once there is finally some kind of research, we're gonna see that the numbers just keep going up.

Shohreh: Mhm. Yeah, which is very exciting. [Laughter]

Erica: It is very exciting.

Shohreh: The more of us who are out there, the better. And as both you and I know, it's not that people weren't queer before. It was far less safe to be queer, to be openly queer, that you would not want to respond to a survey saying that you were. You wouldn't want to act on it.

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Erica:

Mhm. And I mean, I think of all of the people who are—who are no longer alive, who were various shades of queer in previous past generations who did not have the language we have now for identity. Who did not have the luxury of thinking that deeply about their gender and sexuality because it was like—I mean, it's fascinating to me as someone who works in the sexuality world and studies sexuality, is that our modern conceptualizations of gender identity and sexual orientation are so different than what was available to people in past generations. So, like, we can say things now, like, I'm non-binary and I'm ace and I'm demi-sexual and I, you know, sometimes flirt with being, I don't know, other identity words that had not even been created or thought of.

So we're like, there's so many reasons why there are more openly queer people now, especially children, and it has to do with the internet, the connectivity we have. So, like, when I was a teenager—say it's like, 1995 and I'm here in rural Pennsylvania—I didn't know where to find queer people. It was like, the internet was a baby, you know? [Shohreh laughs lightly] There wasn't social media. I mean, that's, like, before I even had AOL, you know? Nowadays, we are all so connected that the access to that information has really, really changed the way people are able to see themselves and see themselves reflected in the world around them.

Shohreh:

Absolutely. The representation is—I mean, we obviously still need more of it, we always will, but it is so much more than it used to be. And I think of that for myself, too. As someone who didn't come out as bi until my late twenties and didn't come out as a lesbian until my thirties,

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like, how different it would be to grow up in the world today with, like, all of these things—

Erica: [Dog barking] Oh my gosh. Do you hear the dog? [Laughter]

Shohreh: Yes.

Erica: Cooper. Golden retrievers on alert. [Dogs barking] Excuse them.

Shohreh: They're great allies.

Erica: [Laughs] They are great allies [Dog barks]. But to your point, sometimes I think, like, if lesbian TikTok had been a thing that I could scroll as a 15-year-old...

Shohreh: Right?!?

Erica: Holy shit! Holy shit.

Shohreh: Yes! You know how many people have told me that lesbian TikTok was, like, their freakin; gay awakening? Myself included, like, over the pandemic, I was like, I'm way more into women than I realized.

Erica: Yes, yes. And that is, like, just one tiny piece of all of the things people are experiencing now. They can see themselves reflected in—so, I mean, social media creates the ability for us to not only see your people, but it allows us to create content where we can put our image out there. And so it's not just, like, famous people. We're not just having access to, like, people that want to be known. We're having access to all kinds of different identities, and that is really, I mean, it just opens people's minds.

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So—[dog barking] sir! I'm so sorry. I know that this will go up on our Instagrams and then people are gonna be, like, what the hell? But everyone knows we're dog ladies, okay?

Shohreh: Yeah. Anyone out there with dogs is like, yeah, this is par for the course.

Erica: Right, and they know that you and I are both from multiple-dog households, so.

Shohreh: Exactly.

Erica: This is what happens. It's kind of like how children interrupt people on lives.

Shohreh: Yes.

Erica: It's life.

Shohreh: It's the same. Um, yeah, so social, I think that, um, one of the things that's interesting, too—not to take us off topic further, but with people being able to make their own content, right? You kind of made that difference between celebrities, people who want to be seen, versus, like, the average person who wants to make their own content. Um, that allows them to be seen by their own gaze as well. Because I think a lot of the representation that we did have, and even still have, is, like, queerness through the lens of, like, still the male gaze and still, like, a writers' room that is not queer people.

Erica: Exactly. It's predominantly cis for sure.

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Shohreh: Right, and a lot of cis people. So if you're a queer or trans person and that's the representation, you still might be like, oh, maybe I don't, you know, identify with that. I don't see myself in that. Uh, because it's still not quite the right lens. Versus when people are creating their own content and they're just showing off as themselves authentically, there can be a much stronger connection with that kind of content.

Erica: Absolutely.

Shohreh: Because they're real people! And you're like, ooh, this is very different from this other version of queerness that, like, was painted for me.

Erica: Absolutely, yeah. And the thing that I was about to say is very related. Um, there was an article in the Washington Post last year about how now, like, 1 in 6 young adults identify as LGBT. And it used the example of one person that, um, was, like a, I don't know, a 13-year-old or a 14-year-old non-binary person that they interviewed. And that kid was like, oh yeah, gay marriage got legalized when I was eight, and I just grew up around queer people, and they taught about gender identity at my school, and most of my friends are queer in some way. So it's like, that is not the environment that I grew up in.

Shohreh: Nope.

Erica: Um, it's not the environment you grew up in. And it's not turning people gay; it's allowing people to see and conceptualize themselves in ways that were unavailable to you and I.

Shohreh: Mhm. Yeah, I mean, there is a gigantic community of late-bloomer lesbians on the internet. Of people who married men, had children with

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men, all these other things, because they, like, just never realized it was possible for them to be anything else but that life. Like, that was given to them. You know, I'm a living example of that as well.

Erica: I swear, like, eight out of ten people that work with me fit into that example as well. I'm always like, y'all are in really good company.
[Laughs lightly]

Shohreh: Yes! I mean, when you go through it initially, you're like, how did I miss this? I'm the only one. And then you go on the internet, and you're like, there are communities of thousands of people going through the exact same thing. Because, like, patriarchy is strong. Compulsory heterosexuality is strong. Like, all these things were so much stronger for our generation because we didn't get what kids today are getting. Nobody in my school was talking about any of that stuff. I went to public school in Texas. You know what we had? Abstinence-only sex education and literally zero mention of queerness.

Erica: Yep. Honestly, one of the first things I start with when I do a presentation to adults about LGBTQ kids is I say, um, anyone want to volunteer when you were in high school? Like, what decade were you in high school? And, you know, usually the oldest person in the room will be like, I was in high school in, like, the '70s, or something. And I'll say, okay, were there any out queer people in your school? Were there any out trans people in your school? Did you know the word non-binary in the '70s? And, you know, that shit works even if you talk to someone that was in high school in, like, 2010.

Shohreh: Yeah. All of those I'd answer the same way, so. [Laughs lightly]

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Erica: Yeah, yeah. And it's just, I mean, queer youth are a lot of the population. And this population is gonna continue to grow. Um, yeah. So it's like, a thing that young people—or a thing that parents can't ignore. Which is why I think it's so important to think, like, if you wouldn't support a queer kid, then you're probably not—not making a good decision about being a parent.

Shohreh: Mhm.

Erica: 'Cause the chances of having a queer or trans child are growing [laughs lightly]. And they're not stopping any time soon. And you can't make a kid straight. You can't make a kid straight. You can't just think your kid's gonna be straight because you and your husband are straight or because you are raising them in a conservative environment. Let me hear it from all the fuckin' queer people raised in evangelical religions out there, like [laughs lightly] ...

Shohreh: Yep, it doesn't change anything, just makes you have a lot of shame about yourself.

Erica: Yeah, and you've gotta claw your way up harder to come out on the other side.

Shohreh: Mhm. Okay, so for parents, caregivers, anyone listening, we wanna give them some, uh, ideas of how they can best support and be affirming to the children in their lives who are queer and trans. So I think let's start with just, like, if a kid comes out to you, if they tell you they are queer in some way, or they tell you they're trans, they don't feel like they are, you know, the gender that you think they are, where do we go from there?

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Erica:

Yes. So, first of all, I want folks, if you're a parent or a caregiver, to know that it takes a lot of guts, usually, for a child to come out to their parents. Um, there's even been a study that came out last year, I believe, that showed that trans youth experience the most distress in the six months leading up to when they come out to their families. So, like, it's not a small thing if a child comes out to you; it's an honor. It means they want you to know this information. Um, it's important to them that you know this information.

And the way that my parents reacted when I came out was ideal. They were like, we love you no matter what. And that's what people need to hear. That's what kids need to hear. And I also think it's really important to emphasize, especially when it comes to parents of young children, you know, you might be in your forties, thirties, and your kids are coming out and they're using language that wasn't something you even knew existed. You don't have to understand your kid's gender and sexuality to support them. Even if you're like, it makes no sense to me why my kid is sometimes expressing their gender in this way and then sometimes expressing it in a different way. You don't have to know exactly what that means. You just have to support your child no matter what, even if you don't understand them.

So I think it can be really powerful to say, like, I love you no matter what. You will always be my child. Um, I will protect you, I will support you, you can be yourself with me. You are safe with me. Um, even if you don't understand your child's gender. Even if you don't completely—I mean, how can we understand, truly understand, any identity but our

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own, in a way? But just letting your kid know that your home is always gonna be the safe place for them to land.

And the reason that's important is because, I mean, decades of statistics will show that young people that come out to supportive families have more positive, like, health and social outcomes than people that experience family rejection. And we see that in mental health, we see that in homelessness, we see that in contact with the criminal justice system, we see that in poverty, like, we see that in substance abuse.

So, like, a protective factor for queer people is having a supportive family. And you want your kid to know that no matter what they face out in the world, that you are home, that it's safe for them.

Shohreh:

Yes. That is, like, seriously, like, number one. I've had this conversation with a lot of clients who have kids who have come out to them. Where I'm like, at the end of the day, if you do nothing else, like, that is the most important thing to express to your kid because you can't control what happens outside of your house. As a parent or caregiver, you really want to, but you can't. They're gonna face some shitty things and some wonderful things and all kinds of stuff. But it is so much easier for them to face those things and go through those things if they know that you have their back.

So you can find whatever way you can to let them know you will always have their back, it doesn't matter how they ultimately identify or what labels they use that, like, you're gonna love them and you're gonna support them. Just knowing that one person, and especially someone

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as important as a parent or a caregiver has your back in that way truly makes all the difference.

Erica:

Absolutely. Um, yeah. You don't have to be in, you know, like I said, you don't have to be a queer parent yourself to support a queer kid. You don't have to know everything about the queer community to support a queer kid. What we need is you to respect us, even if you don't understand, and support and love us. I mean, it truly boils down to that.

Um, another thing that I wanted to share—hold on, I'm like losing track. I have so many thoughts, which is why I keep getting them jumbled.

Oh! I think that all parents should know that it's—and this is maybe kind of a hot take. I know it's a hot take for some people. But if you experience a sliver of disappointment, you're not a terrible person. If you experience a brief flash of being like, ugh, this is hard. Or, even if you mourn, if you have to mourn the idea that you had about your child's future that might not look the way you thought it would, that doesn't mean you're a shitty parent. I think those feelings are valid and you need to deal with them, but not at your child. Which is a thing that you already said.

Um, but like, I run support groups for parents of queer youth, and one of the things that we tell them is, like, this group is where you can say that stuff. You know, you're not supposed to come in this group and pretend that you've never felt an ounce of grief over your child's gender or sexual identity. This group is where you can say, like, I have grief. And having that grief doesn't make you a shitty parent. I think it makes you human. 'Cause then, if you experience grief that your kid is

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queer, you're gonna heap shame on top of that grief, and that's not helpful either.

So, like, if you do have a moment of being, like, this is gonna be hard. Now I'm losing the idea of my child I thought I had, just fuckin' own those feelings. Talk to your therapist. Talk to your friends. Talk to your partner. Talk to other parents of queer kids. Just don't tell your kid. That's the difference. Um, but you can't be expected to not feel any kind of struggle. Um, maybe some of us don't. Maybe some of us are like, oh, wonderful! But a lot of parents are gonna feel conflicted, and they are gonna feel some difficult feelings. And I don't think that that means that you're a bad parent. I think you just have to deal with those.

Shohreh: And we all grow up in the same world with, you know, the same influences and systems in place and expectations and ideas of, like, what a good life is for a child and what, like, an easier life would be for a child. You know, nobody goes into parenting without all of those—

Erica: Ah! Sorry, the dog's eating my sock [laughter]. A golden retriever is eating my sock [Erica chases after the golden retriever].

Shohreh: This is the most, like, dog moment ever that's happening now.

Erica: [Speaking to the dog] Excuse me. Excuse me. Oh my god.

Shohreh: We all needed a golden retriever sock-stealing moment.

Erica: This golden retriever just ate my sock.

Shohreh: [Laughing] Oh my god! How rude!

Erica: Yeah. Sir.

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Shohreh: Look, as a lab parent, I can tell you that golden retrievers and labs are, like, the demons of the dog world. They're adorable, they're so sweet, but they are the problem children.

Erica: They're sneaky. I'm not paying attention to you for, like, one minute and you eat my sock.

Anyhow, I feel like we were about to make a really good point.

Shohreh: Um, yeah, what was I saying? Um...let's see. We were talking about...uh, oh, yes! I was talking about how all of the—we all grow up with all of that same stuff. And so, I, too, would be surprised if a parent didn't have a mix of feelings, you know, when a child is, again, coming out to them as queer, coming out to them as trans. Especially if that parent is not queer or trans themselves, maybe hasn't had much interaction with queer or trans people, and don't know anything about the community. Like, all of the sudden, it's like, this is a whole new world.

Erica: It is a whole new world.

Shohreh: And especially as adults, we like to be competent. And so, basically, being told, hey, you're actually gonna be incompetent in this right now. That's scary! That's, like, well, what the fuck am I gonna do with this? I'm used to at least having some sense of what to do and what's going on, and now we're here.

Erica: You're absolutely right on all of that. And I would also add that if you are concerned about what the grandparents are gonna say, um, that's extra layers of hard. So I've worked with a lot of clients who are

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deconstructed from evangelicalism—and they're like, well, I support my non-binary 11-year-old, but how do I tell my grandparents? Or, I'm sorry, how do I tell my parents that are still very conservative that my child is non-binary and that I support my child? Um, and that can be one of the most challenging things for people, is, like, 'cause some of them know that if I tell my parents that I support my child's non-binary gender, my parents are gonna say that I'm being a bad parent.

Um, and so what that usually requires is setting a lot of boundaries with your own parents. So, telling them, like, I am raising my child, you've already raised me [Shohreh laughs lightly], and I support my child in whatever they tell me that their gender identity is. And I cannot, you know, have you as grandparents not supporting them and not supporting me. So you need to think about, as grandparents, if you still want to have a relationship with us. And hopefully it does not come to that, but I have seen that kind of dynamic play out before.

Shohreh:

Mhm. Well, and this is going back to what you were saying about how the parent/caregiver in question here, like, needs to be the safe place to land. Because sometimes those dynamics do happen. I've also had them happen with clients where they're like, I'm really worried about other family and what they're going to do. And, you know, if I should just kind of remove us from the situation.

And I'm like, well, you need to do whatever is the thing that champions your child and their identity, whatever. Because you can't control how these other people react. But, like, your child needs to see that you're

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fighting for them. And that, like, you're doing whatever you can to keep them safe. That's the most important thing.

And that sucks. It sucks when, like, some other relationships in the family may be negatively affected. Or, like you said, may even have to be cut off. But, like, it is this kid's well-being that should be the number one priority in those situations.

Erica: Yes. You're totally right. And I hate when it has to come to that for people. Um, but sometimes, you know, the kindest and most protective thing you can do for your [dog barking] LGBTQ child is make sure that the folks around them that, you know, in the family, are showing them the respect and love that you are showing them. And that can also mean—I mean, I have a friend that recently had to send an email to her family that was like, hey, my 11-year-old uses they/them pronouns. Um, it doesn't matter if you understand, but you need to know this is happening.

And grandparents might not always understand. But also, I wanna give them credit: a lot of them really have the capacity to love and understand their grandchildren better than they could have loved and understood their own kids. Um, at the gender clinic, we have a support group for grandparents of transgender youth, and they are the most fierce, loyal allies. They get together and they call themselves the Trans Grans, which is the cutest thing in the world.

Shohreh: Oh my god!

Erica: And these grandparents are, like, I mean, we're talking people that are in their, I mean, you can become a grandparent young, but a lot of

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these are folks that are in their sixties, seventies, even eighties. And they didn't have a lot of—it's not like they had a lot of knowledge about trans folks before their grandchild came out. And they are such fierce, like, fighters for their grandkids 'cause they know what love is and they know what care is. And they love these kids no matter what. And they will be the first person at their church to be like, my grandchild is trans and I support them.

And so, you know, I don't wanna discount that there are a lot of folks from previous generations that really have the capacity for love and understanding of, like, gender diverse and queer kids. 'Cause there absolutely are.

Shohreh:

Mhm. So beyond kind of that initial coming out, the first stages of things, do you have any other thoughts about supporting your queer kids, like, you know, as they're getting older? Um, maybe moving into, like, middle school, high school age years, what does good support look like from parents?

Erica:

Good support looks like not only championing them in your home, but sometimes depending on where they go to school can look like paying close attention to the school that they're in. Sometimes, I mean, parents of trans youth already know this stuff, but it might require, like, having a conversation or a meeting with school personnel, you know, so that the people that are in charge of your children's education are affirming and supportive.

Um, it also means being open to your children's gender identity and sexual identity evolving and changing as their own knowledge about

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themselves evolves. So like we said at the very beginning of this, for folks that might just be joining us, if your ten-year-old comes out to you, sure, it might not mean that they're always gonna have the identity that they told you when they were a kid. But it doesn't matter. You just have to be kind of open to hearing them, um, and growing with them.

[Shifts camera to three happy golden retrievers]

Shohreh: [Laughs] Dog therapy for everybody!

Erica: Dog therapy for everybody.

Shohreh: Even if you have been stealing socks and causing a ruckus.

Erica: This isn't the sock stealer. That's the sock stealer over there. This is the good girl.

Shohreh: The stock stealer has put themselves in timeout.

Erica: Mhm. Um, yeah, so that means, like, expanding the—so, like, you support your kid in your home. And it also means kind of extending that support outwards to where your children spend their time. Um, making sure that, like, you know, they're finding queer friends and community. Depending on where they live, that can be difficult. But a lot of places now have supportive groups for, um, children who are, especially trans youth, or maybe just consider themselves LGBT in any shade of the rainbow. Um, yeah.

Also making sure they have access to good sex education that's inclusive of their identities. 'Cause if they're in Texas public school, they're not gonna get that. If they're in Pennsylvania public school,

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they're not gonna get that probably, depending on the district. So giving your kids education about their bodies and their relationships that includes them.

Shohreh:

Yeah. Yeah, you know, one of the things that I was thinking about when it comes to kind of supporting your kids, especially growing into teenagers, is how most parents have these, like, ideas and assumptions about, like, how they'll raise their kids during those years on the assumption that they will be cis and straight, right? In terms of, like, dating, and, like, what the rules are gonna be and, like, the sex and these other things we were talking about. And how parents actually, like, especially now, knowing that we do have so many people who are queer and trans, like, this is something to be thinking about if you're gonna become a parent or if you have young kids right now.

Like, if you take away the heteronormative dating and sex expectation, what does it look like to parent around that, you know, for your kids if they're gonna be dating a variety of genders? If they might be having sex with a variety of genders? If, you know, they are going to be trans themselves and how that can affect dating in the world that we live in? Like, just things I think parents, when they assume their kids are going to be straight, just ignore all of that.

Erica:

Right. Especially things like sleepovers, you know, having friends stay at their—I've done so many parent consultations about, like, sleepovers. Parents will be like, well, I don't know, my kid is queer, and they have a little queer friend. And I'm like, are they in a romantic relationship? If your kid is in a romantic relationship with another person, treat them,

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you know, they don't get a special pass to have, like, overnight visitors just because they might be a queer kid. Like, how would you parent a straight cis kid in this situation? Sometimes that can be your answer.

Um, but yeah, a lot of parents are going to be entering new territory. Um, and that can be very scary. But you will figure it out as you go. 'Cause isn't that how a lot of parenting works anyways? Like, people just figure shit out as they go?

Shohreh:

Yeah, it is. I think some of it is just, like, the awareness piece is what's important, is, like, the realization of, like, oh, there are things I didn't plan for, that I didn't know, and now I need to go get the resources or talk to somebody, like we've said, find support. Thankfully, we're living in a world now where that stuff is available. Like, the internet is full of things that could be helpful for you. There are a lot of professionals who you could work with who could help you if you're like, I don't know. The same way that you would hire somebody for something else you were dealing with as a parent, like, you can hire somebody. Or buy a book or a resource about something like this, too, to just make sure, like, doing that versus ignoring it is what I feel like matters the most.

Erica:

Totally. And, like, nobody teaches you this stuff when you go to your, like, birthing classes. Nobody is like, well, what's gonna happen when your child comes out as non-binary when they're ten? Um, you're gonna be on a learning curve like all the other parents were. Um, but increasingly, like you said, there are more and more resources out there from people that have already walked this path. And Sex-Positive Families is always an incredible resource that I promote. Like, I will

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promote them forever. Um, there's also a website called MyKidsGay.com.

Shohreh: Ooh.

Erica: It's specifically for, like, Christian parents, or parents that were raised Christian, and it's written by, like, really wonderful, loving, affirming, um, Christian parents. And I send people to that website a lot. Like, there will be articles that are like, you know, my kid is trans, my kid is non-binary, this is what I've learned. And, you know, that kind of—those voices are really important and they're already out there.

Shohreh: Okay, awesome. I didn't know that existed. And I'm filing that away into my brain because I think it could be a very important resource to send to people. Um, any other ones that you wanna mention? Any books or anything that you've found helpful with your parents and caregivers you've worked with?

Erica: Um, I wanna promote a book that is a puberty education book that is fully inclusive of various genders and sexual identities. It's called the "Every Body Book" by Rachel Simon. Rachel Simon is a colleague of mine and a friend of mine. And she wrote this book, it came out last year. It's an incredible book. Um, and if you are, you know, wanting to teach children about bodies and puberty and you don't want to do it from an entirely, like, cis-normative, heteronormative perspective, that is the book.

Um, that's actually the reason—so you probably saw a couple of weeks ago, Representative Marjorie Taylor Green was like, straight people are

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being bred out of existence. There's not gonna be straight people. She said it in response to the existence of my friend's book.

Shohreh: What?!?

Erica: [Laughing] Yeah.

Shohreh: Um, your friend is doing incredible work in the world.

Erica: She is.

Shohreh: Clearly, if you've gotten Marjorie Taylor Green's attention.

Erica: I know. Yeah. Um, so that book is incredible. And also, like, the thing about Sex Positive Families is on their website they have resources and books that you can look at and find, um, based on topic. So, books to talk to children about gender and sexuality, to help your children see themselves in the stories that they're reading, um, when they're kids. I know that organizations, like big organizations like the HRC, they have a lot of resources about being a supportive parent.

That's what PFLAG was made for. Um, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Even though the acronym is old, they are still, um, keeping up to speed on gender stuff. So it's not just for parents of lesbians and gays. I would say parents of gender and sexual minorities. Um, and even if it's hard to find people in your area, that's the wonder of being connected online, is that you will be able to find parents of, um, young people who are going through the same thing and maybe who have experience that you don't have.

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Shohreh:

Yeah. The one thing I wanna add here too is I know this is about supporting queer youth specifically, but also if you're someone who is regularly around children, whether it's your own kids' friends, or you work with people, you don't necessarily know who is queer in that group of people. And you should operate on the assumption that at any point, you may be around queer children.

And so, in the language that you're using, in, like, you were saying, the children's books that you're reading where you're offering up different perspectives of what different families can look like and what relationships can look like, in the toys that you offer to kids. Like, all of these different things, like, you can do to be affirming of queer identities, even if it's not your own child who has come out to you or ever comes out to you. Like, your kid is probably gonna have queer kids around them. This is just a statistical reality.

And so I think any parent, even if it's not your own child, or anybody who works with kids, even if you don't know for sure that somebody is queer, that somebody is trans, chances are you're working with people who are. So if you can be someone who is affirming of their identities because you have no idea how affirming other adults in their lives are being of their identities, it makes such a big difference.

Erica:

Absolutely. Um, I'm so glad you said that. That's one of the things that I emphasize when I do trainings with folks about, like, supporting queer and trans youth is like, ideally a parent or guardian or caregiver fills the role of supportive adult. But especially if a kid doesn't have that, other adults step in to fill that role. And that can be teachers, coaches, um,

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other family members, elder siblings. Like, every young queer person needs a supportive adult. Um, ideally, it's a family member, but if it can't be, I think we all have an opportunity as adults to be that person. And that makes such a difference for kids.

Shohreh: Mhm. Awesome. Well, thank you so much for joining me for this, Erica.

Erica: You're welcome.

Shohreh: I'm so glad we got to talk about this. Is there anything you want to rep or say about your work or where people can find you before we sign off?

Erica: Yeah, so my Instagram account, which is right here, is probably, like, the hub of all of my business. My website is PurityCultureDropout.com. Um, my work with trans youth is pretty specific to my region and area in Philadelphia, but I also do, like, one-on-one work with parents, um, virtually anywhere. So, yeah. Happy to support people in whatever way that I can.

Shohreh: Yeah, and as someone who has sent people to you who all had wonderful experiences and were like, thank you so much for hooking me up, I can vouch for Erica as a consultant if you are, like, just have questions or want to speak more deeply about this stuff or to your specific situation with your kid or a kid in your life, Erica is wonderful for that. So, please don't hesitate to reach out to her.

Erica: Thank you so much for having me on this lovely evening.

Shohreh: Of course. Thank you.

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- Erica:** Wednesday, last week of Pride month.
- Shohreh:** Yeah, I know. It's been—we're in the home stretch. The gays are tired.
- Erica:** Home stretch! Especially the gays like you who have really been keeping up the energy for the rest of us.
- Shohreh:** Ugh, yes, I love it, but it's a lot.
- Erica:** Aw, thank you. Someone just said something very sweet in the comments.
- Shohreh:** Aww I see that.
- Erica:** Thank you so much, Kelly.
- Shohreh:** Yay! Alright, well, for anyone who came on late [Erica shows the dogs on her camera]—yeah, a last dog view. And this whole conversation is gonna be posted after, so if you missed the beginning and you wanna go back and watch it, you can. I'm also gonna get a transcript made of our conversation and I'll put the video and the full transcript on my blog so that people can read it as well if they'd like to.
- Erica:** Thank you. That's really awesome, even though I sometimes stumbled over my words as we do on a live, but I think it's great that you're marking a transcript available for folks.
- Shohreh:** Absolutely. My favorite part will be describing the dog shenanigans that are happening in the transcript.
- Erica:** "A dog just ate a sock!"

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Shohreh: Alright, Erica. Well, I hope you have a wonderful night. Thank you so much for doing this, and thank you everyone who joined us.

Erica: Thank you so much, Shohreh. I'll talk to you soon. Bye!

Shohreh: Sounds good. Good night!