

### **Tossed Away for Being Gay: Why Can Parents Do This?**

Our state is committing legislative warfare against some of our most vulnerable, Floridian children. How? The recent Parental Rights to Education bill, also known as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill.” Though it masquerades as protecting parental rights, the bill includes the clause that prohibits classroom instruction or discussion on sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3 education and in “a manner that is not age-appropriate for students.”

But, which sexual orientations are considered not “age-appropriate”? I’m sure your children have read “The Princess and the Pea” or “The Gingerbread Man,” both which feature straight relationships or gendered characters. Unless Florida schools start banning those books, it’s evident that this bill is targeting select sexual orientations and gender identities.

As a Floridian who did PreK-12 in the Florida school system, I am deeply concerned about these anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, and their very real consequences. As Pierse states, LGBTQ youth are severely overrepresented among homeless youth; they comprise 7% of the general youth population, but around 40% of the homeless youth population. The top cause of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, as reported by Durso and Gates, is family rejection.

However, in the United States, child abandonment is illegal in all 50 states (May and Yordy, 2012). So, then, how are so many parents kicking out their LGBTQ+ children?

In the existing literature done on homeless children, Judge notes distinct terminology used by the US Department of Justice; there are “runaway youth” and there are “throwaway youth.” From the US Department of Justice, the definition of a runaway youth is “an individual under the age of eighteen who has left home without parental or a legal guardian’s permission for more than twenty-four hours” (Judge 261). In contrast, according to youth.gov, a US government website about youth programs, throwaway youth is “a youth who has been asked, told, or forced to leave home by parents or caregivers with no alternate care arranged.”

When thinking of “leaving home,” I picture a sixteen year old getting into a situational argument with their parents, and in a storm of emotions, staying over at their friend’s place without informing their family. What I don’t picture is “why is she trying to be a man” and “that’s so gay of you idiot” cropping up family dinners, discussions about political news on TV, and as insults between siblings, constantly undercutting a child’s self of being.

Some parents create a home environment that’s so antagonistic to their children’s existence that children feel running away is their only option. However, child abandonment doesn’t have the same meaning for runaway versus throwaway children. Though it’s not illegal in Florida, it’s a status offense for a minor to run away in nine states (Stacy Barret, 2020). Additionally, police

can take minors into custody, regardless of whether running away is illegal or not (Stacy Barret, 2020). Decisions the police can make, such as putting children in shelters or reuniting them with their parents, are often not viable options for LGBTQ+ children. They left their homes because of the discrimination they faced, going back means to continually face the ridicule and hatred of who they are. But, leaving home does not mean they'll be free from discrimination. 56% of LGBT foster youth surveyed spent time on the streets because they felt safer there than in their group or foster home (Fernstein, 2001). On the streets, LGBTQ+ youth still face higher rates of sexual assault, substance abuse disorders, and exploitation than non-LGBTQ+ youth (Fraser, 2019).

I'm chilled by the prospect of children around my age, who could've been my younger siblings and former schoolmates, facing these conditions simply because they are LGBTQ+. The Parental Rights to Education bill isn't just a bill; it's a reflection of the values of the Florida legislature. These are the sentiments that build, morph, and rear its ugly head to push LGBTQ+ children out of their homes and into the streets. And this is fully enabled by our legal system - "runaway" children can be left without any viable options, and consequently, thrown away more readily than throwaway youth.

No child should be thrown away. If you agree, use the Find my Representative tool on the Florida government website and write to your local representative opposing the Parental Rights to Education bill. This bill packages homophobic sentiments under the guise of parental rights, terrifying school officials into silence. As Floridians, we need to take off the muzzle around LGBTQ+ discrimination and speak out, because there are dire outcomes for not doing so.

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