



Scenarios/Questions from Session on Caring for LGBTQ Youth 9/20/13

There were some really great real-life issues that were raised during the session, and I wanted to provide some follow up information to support your continued work with LGBTQ children/youth and LGBT-headed families. My intent was to capture the main challenges identified in summaries of the issues raised and to provide information, suggestions, and additional resources.

1. *How to best serve LGBTQ youth when living in a rural location where the community does not offer many LGBT-affirming services? This person specifically mentioned that there was not a therapist/mental health professional experienced in serving LGBT people and the school is not an affirming environment for LGBTQ youth.*
 - The agency can be involved in recruiting an affirming therapist.
 - The agency could support someone from their staff who has an interest in these issues in becoming trained in working with LGBTQ people so that they can provide the therapy/mental health services.
 - The agency could also offer a group for LGBTQ youth.
 - In addition to these supports, online resources can be helpful.
 - It may also be possible to connect the youth with a supportive mentor (in addition to affirming services).
 - The agency, child welfare worker, and foster parent should be prepared to advocate and work with the school to ensure a safe and affirming environment for the youth. If issues come up at school, be careful that the youth is not blamed (i.e. if they are a victim of bullying), and that these situations are addressed appropriately.
 - Human Rights Campaign has a project called "Welcoming Schools." It provides information about steps you can take as a parent or caring adult. <http://www.welcomingschools.org/>

2. *How to handle the situation when assessing two individuals who live together (possibly a gay couple) where these prospective foster parents do not share the nature of their relationship. In this scenario, the agency does license gay couples as foster parents and has done so many times in the past.*
 - Just as not all straight couples should be foster parents, not all lesbian or gay couples should be foster parents. If the couple or individual is not telling you something you think you absolutely need to know, don't license them.
 - Consider what is in the best interest of the child: Is it in the child's best interest to be placed with these foster parents? This question should be central in licensing any foster parents.
 - The worker could try probing a bit for more information or directly addressing the issue (i.e. "I hope you are aware that we license lesbian and gay couples as foster parents. I am sensing that you are not sharing information about the nature of your relationship that could be important to helping you prepare to be foster parents if you are licensed. Could you tell me more about your relationship?") See what they say. Maybe they are a couple, maybe not.

Maybe they used to be a couple and are not anymore, which would be very important to discuss.

- Written materials, trainings, and conversations should be inclusive of LGBT foster parents. This will help prospective foster parents to know that they are welcome and that it is safe to be out about their relationship. Be aware that LGBT prospective foster parents may fear being discriminated against if they are open about their relationship (and sexual orientation or gender identity).

Additional Resources from NRCPPFC

- Strategies for Recruiting LGBT Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families (Brief 1) http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/download/Strategies%20for%20Recruiting%20LGBT%20Foster,%20Adoptive,%20and%20Kinship%20Families.pdf
 - LGBT Prospective Foster and Adoptive Families: The Homestudy Assessment Process (Brief 2) http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/wu/Brief2_TheHomestudyAssessmentProcessWithLGBTProspectiveFosterAndAdoptiveFamilies.pdf
 - Supporting and Retaining LGBT Foster and Adoptive Parents (Brief 3) http://www.nrcpfc.org/downloads/wu/Brief3_SupportingRetainingLGBTFosterAdoptiveParents.pdf
3. *What should we do when an LGBTQ youth is in a foster home where the foster parent is not affirming of their identity? Does the youth need to move? In this scenario, the youth was out as gay. The worker provided the foster parent with information and resources, but they still were not accepting of the youth's identity.*
- There is no one "right" answer in this situation (i.e. moving the youth or keeping them in the home). It is absolutely important that the youth is safe. It is important to consider what the youth wants to have happen and what is best for the youth.
 - First, meet with everyone and hear them out. It may be possible that the foster parent can provide an affirming home with support from the agency, and it is just that they are initially nervous. (If they can't, it may be important to consider how well this person is equipped to be a foster parent to teenagers.) Find out what the youth wants and what is important to them (i.e. staying in their school, etc.), if they are happy in the home, whether they want to move or not. Include the youth in making the decision.
 - If the youth does end up moving because of a non-affirming home, emphasize to the youth that the issue is with the foster parent, and not the youth being LGBTQ. A move for this reason may be experienced as a rejection of their identity, so it would be important to explicitly address this.
4. *When one youth came out to his foster family as gay, they remained committed to being his foster parents, but changed all of the rules and became very strict (i.e. earlier curfew, no sleepovers) and suggested that this was based on concerns about his safety.*
- Help the foster parents to explore this response and their concerns. Help the foster parents to avoid having a double standard around rules or being overly

protective. Rules for LGBTQ youth should be the same/similar to rules for non-LGBTQ youth, so the youth should not experience a drastic change in rules because they are out.

- Why would the curfew be different because the youth is gay? It seems it could remain the same.
 - For sleepovers, consider whether the son be allowed to have his girlfriend sleep over if he were straight. No. The same should apply to a boyfriend. But a friend -- yes. If there are concerns about having a friend over, how can they be addressed (i.e. leave the door to your room open, etc.). The worker can help the foster parents establish rules that they are comfortable with and still allow the youth to be social in age-appropriate ways.
 - In terms of safety, all youth, including LGBTQ youth, need support to learn about how to be safe/minimize risk in the community, in dating situations, online, etc. and to have access to sexual health education.
5. *In a group home setting, a girl (1) was caught in another girl's bedroom at night. The second girl (2) said that the first was making unwanted sexual advances.*
- Be thoughtful about exploring what happened in this situation and give girl 1 a chance to provide her side of the story. In Dr. Mallon's research, he found that sometimes a straight-identified or questioning youth would express interest and encourage the LGB youth to do something like this and may even initiate it, but then when they got caught, blame the LGB youth to avoid consequences. In this way, sometimes, the LGB youth may become the victim in these circumstances. (In this scenario, the person said that girl 1 was questioning, not necessarily LGB-identified, but the importance of finding out what happened is still relevant in any circumstance. In any case, the focus does not need to be on either of the youth's sexual orientation or identity.)
 - If that is what happened (girl 1 made unwanted sexual advances), consider how you would deal with this in another situation (involving non-LGBT youth). It makes sense that there would be a consequence of some kind with girl 1, and safety planning for girl 2. Supportive counseling might be helpful for either or both girls (separately). Girl 1 could be moved, but does not necessarily have to be moved (and this could be positive or detrimental). The specific situation should be assessed and also agency policy should be consulted.
6. *There were challenges expressed around the need for qualified foster parents and not wanting to turn foster parents away, while recognizing the fact that not all foster parents are supportive of LGBTQ youth. We may not know which youth are LGBTQ. Fears were expressed about unknowingly placing LGBTQ youth with foster parents who are not affirming.*
- The focus does not need to be on identifying LGBTQ youth, which can be a sort of patchwork solution by individual workers to the lack of attention to this issue on a system-wide level. It is important to have a broader approach, which addresses practice, policies, training, recruitment, etc. (Establishing affirming policies also takes some of the risk and responsibility off of the individual worker. For example, in the session, one participant mentioned placing a transgender girl first in a boys group home based on her birth sex,

which went badly and she was not treated well, and then in a girls home, based on her identified gender, which was a much better fit. The girls home worked out well and was a supportive decision on the part of the staff. However, what if this did not work out well? If agency policies are in place, it can provide for greater consistency and decisions will not be based on the personal beliefs of a worker, and policies also offer some protection to the worker.)

- For this particular challenge, it will be helpful to have mandated training for all foster parents around issues of sexuality and caring for LGBTQ youth. Agencies can have policies for foster parents that state, if we place an LGBTQ foster youth with you, you are required to provide a safe and affirming home, and to work with us to do so. Most foster parents who can care for teenagers effectively and openly can be supported in caring for LGBTQ youth. If they cannot, it says a lot about the foster parent and it may be worth considering whether they are equipped to parent teens.
- NRCPFC is available to provide comprehensive TA on working with LGBTQ youth. We are currently working with some states to completely revise all of their foster care, adoption, and prevention/protection policies, practices, training curricula, and contract agency RFP processes to be LGBT affirming and inclusive. NRCPFC can provide in depth consultation to support changes in all of these areas to make them more inclusive and affirming of LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system.

For additional resources, please visit the NRCPFC website: www.nrcpfc.org.

- Resources on LGBTQ Children and Youth in Child Welfare:
<http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/LGBTQ-Children-and-Youth-in-ChildWelfare.html>
- Resources on LGBT Parents and Child Welfare:
<http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/lgbtq-issues-and-child-welfare.html#parents>
- Link to PowerPoint from the session on Caring for LGBTQ Youth:
http://www.nrcpfc.org/WI_LGBTQ.pdf

Thank you for your time and participation in the session. Please feel free to contact me with additional questions! tserdjen@hunter.cuny.edu