


# Caring for LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care


*Work with a teen, foster a  
dream. WI Annual  
Statewide Foster Care  
Coordinators Conference.*

September 20, 2013

[www.nrcpfc.org](http://www.nrcpfc.org)



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER  
FOR PERMANENCY AND  
FAMILY CONNECTIONS  
at the Hunter College  
Silberman School of Social Work



a service of the Children's  
Bureau – ACF/DHHS and  
member of the T&TA Network



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# About NRCPFC

The National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC) is a training, technical assistance, and information services organization dedicated to help strengthen the capacity of State, local, Tribal and other publicly administered or supported child welfare agencies to: institutionalize a safety-focused, family-centered, and community-based approach to meet the needs of children, youth and families. NRCPFC is a service of the Children's Bureau and member of the T&TA Network.



# Agenda

- Introduction
- Part 1: Foundational Knowledge
- Break
- Part 2: Strategies for Working with LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care and their Families and Foster Families



# Agenda

## Part 1: Foundational Knowledge

- Importance of Competence in Working with LGBTQ Youth
- Affirming Language
- Experiences of LGBTQ Youth
- Coming Out



# Agenda

## Part 2: Strategies for Working with LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

- LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care
- Working with Birth Families of LGBTQ Youth
- Tips for Child Welfare Professionals
- Tips for Foster Parents



# What do the letters “LGBTQ” represent?

**L**esbian

**G**ay

**B**isexual

**T**ransgender

**Q**uestioning



*Why do child welfare professionals need to be prepared to work effectively with LGBTQ youth?*

- You work with LGBTQ youth.





*Why do child welfare professionals need to be prepared to work effectively with LGBTQ youth?*

- It is our professional responsibility to meet the safety, permanency, and well-being needs of children and youth in care, including LGBTQ youth.
- LGBTQ youth have the same needs as other youth, and some needs specific to being LGBTQ.



## Jimmy's NRCPFC Digital Story:

[www.nrcpfc.org/digital\\_stories/YP\\_John\\_J/](http://www.nrcpfc.org/digital_stories/YP_John_J/)





**National Resource Center for  
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*Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College*



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# Language and Terms



**Sexual orientation:** One's sexual, romantic, and affectional thoughts, feelings, attractions, and behaviors. Can be to same gender, different gender, or more than one gender. (SO)

**Sexual identity:** Refers to the label one gives oneself in light of their sexual orientation. (Reflects a person's understanding of his, her or their own sexual orientation.) Examples include: lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight.



# Sexual Orientation Terms

**Gay:** A person whose sexual orientation is toward the same gender. (Ex. A man whose sexual orientation is toward men.)



# Sexual Orientation Terms

**Lesbian:** A woman whose sexual orientation is toward women.



# Sexual Orientation Terms

**Bisexual:** A person whose sexual orientation is toward men and women / more than one gender.



# Gender Terms

**Gender:** Gender is the internal experience of maleness, femaleness, both, neither or somewhere in between. Understandings of gender and gender categories and norms are socially constructed.





# Gender Terms

**Gender norms:** A set of behaviors and attitudes approved and expected by society based upon one's perceived gender.

**Gender roles:** The set of social and behavior roles men and women are expected to fill.

In a male dominated culture, men who exhibit traditionally female behaviors and women who exhibit traditionally male behaviors threaten the status quo.



# Gender Terms

**Gender identity:** One's self-label regarding gender. (Ex. man, woman, transgender man, transgender woman. May choose another label or not to label.) Does not necessarily correspond with sex. (GI)

**Gender expression:** The way in which one presents their gender. Can be thought of on a continuum from extremely feminine to extremely masculine.



# Gender Terms

**Transgender:** An umbrella term for people whose gender identity or expression is different from those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth (e.g. the sex listed on their birth certificate).

Reference: Transgender FAQ. Human Rights Campaign.  
<http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/transgender-faq>



# Gender Terms

**Gender non-conforming:** Having or being perceived to have gender characteristics and/or behaviors that do not conform to traditional or societal expectations. Gender-non-conforming individuals may or may not identify as LGBTQ.



*“I remember wishing I would wake up a boy.”*

August Faustino and his friend Chris Elardo talk about being transgender men.

<http://storycorps.org/listen/august-faustino-and-chris-elardo/>



## Questioning

- An active process in which a person explores their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and questions the societal assumptions that they are heterosexual and/or gender conforming.
- Can relate to gender identity, sexual orientation, or both.
- Can be supported and normalized as a healthy part of identity development.



# Power and Privilege

**Cisgender privilege:** The set of unearned advantages that individuals who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth accrue solely due to having a cisgender (non-transgender) identity.

**Heterosexual privilege:** The set of unearned advantages that straight people have because of a societal assumption that all people are straight, and that straight is the only legitimate, or superior, way to live one's life.



**Heteronormative:** A belief system that assumes heterosexuality is normal and that everyone is heterosexual.

**Heterosexism:** Belief system that assumes that heterosexuality is inherently preferable and superior to other forms of sexual orientation.





**Homophobia:** Fear, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against people attracted to people of the same gender, LGBTQ-identifying individuals, those perceived as LGBTQ, and anyone associated with LGBTQ persons.

**Transphobia:** Fear, hatred of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender individuals, or those who are gender non-conforming.



# Questions About Terms

?????



# Review Activity

With a partner, identify one example for each category:

- Sexual orientation / sexual identity
- Gender identity
- A form of gender expression
- Heterosexual privilege

Which word that we've discussed is the hardest for you to say or understand? Why?



# Experiences of LGBT Youth

LGBT youth (compared with non-LGBT youth) were:

- More likely to report that they do not have an adult they can talk to about personal problems;
- More likely to experiment with alcohol and drugs;
- More likely to have been: 1) verbally harassed and called names at school; 2) physically assaulted, kicked or shoved at school; 3) excluded by their peers because they are different.

Reference: *Growing up LGBT in America*. HRC Youth Survey Report Key Findings. Human Rights Campaign. [http://www.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America\\_Report.pdf](http://www.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America_Report.pdf)



# Experiences of LGBT Youth

- 92% of LGBT youth hear negative messages about being LGBT.
- Nearly half chose their family among a list of places where they most often hear negative messages about being LGBT.

Reference: *Growing up LGBT in America*. HRC Youth Survey Report Key Findings. Human Rights Campaign.

[http://www.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America\\_Report.pdf](http://www.hrc.org/files/assets/resources/Growing-Up-LGBT-in-America_Report.pdf)



# Impact of Family Rejection

Higher rates of family rejection were significantly associated with poorer health outcomes. Compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection, LGB young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were:

- 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide,
- 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression,
- 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, and
- 3.4 times more likely to report having engaged in unprotected sexual intercourse

*Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults.* Ryan, C.; Huebner, D.; Diaz, RM; Sanchez, J. *Pediatrics*, Vol. 123, No. 1. (2009)

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/123/1/346.full?ijkey=NrncY0H897IAU&keytype=ref&siteid=aapjournals>



# Coming Out as LGB

- A life-long process of exploring one's sexual orientation and lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity and sharing it with family, friends, co-workers, the world.
- Recognizing, accepting, expressing, and sharing one's sexual orientation with self and others.
- A significant developmental process in the lives of LGB people.
- The experience of coming out is very different for different people.



# Stages of Coming Out as LGB / LGB Identity Development

## Stage One

"Could I be gay?"  
No, I am NOT gay

## Pre-Stage One

No thought about  
sexual orientation. Presumed  
heterosexuality.

## Stage Three

"I think I might be gay or  
bisexual."  
Maybe I need to tell one safe  
person.

## Stage Two

"Suppose I was gay..."  
Some exploration, but tell no one,  
possibly online exploration.





# Stages of Coming Out as LGB / LGB Identity Development

## Stage Five

"I am gay."

Out to safe and important people in life.

## Stage Four

"I think I am beginning to deal with the fact that I am gay. " In my own time, I will start to share this news with other safe people

## Stage Six

"I am gay. It is an integrated part of my identity." I am out in environments where I feel safe, and to people with whom I feel safe.



# Coming Out

**Disclosure:** The point at which a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person openly acknowledges their sexual orientation or gender identity to another.



# Coming Out as Transgender

Transgender people may also come out, or disclose information about their gender identity and experiences as a transgender person. When someone transitions from living in one gender to another gender, it often involves disclosure. This may involve changes in name, pronoun, dress, speech patterns, variety of forms of expression. It can, but does not necessarily, involve medical treatment.

**Resource:** **Transgender Visibility Guide.** Human Rights Campaign. Updated April 2013. <http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/transgender-visibility-guide>



# Reasons for Coming Out as LGBT

Coming out (particularly at earlier ages) allows the person to develop as a whole individual, and is empowering by promoting self-esteem and decreasing negative health outcomes.

Hear the statement that they are okay.

Ending the "hiding game".

To get support and services.

What do you think LGBTQ foster Youth want from the people they come out to?

Feel that they have integrity.

Be true to themselves.

Feel closer to family and friends.

To hear that they will be supported.



## Found Out

- When a person is not prepared to come out
- A surprise/unplanned disclosure
- This can occur via phone calls, letters, LGBT related materials
- The family system may go into crisis

Professionals need to prepare to preserve/work with this type of family.



# Tips for Child Welfare Professionals

- The goal is not necessarily to identify LGBTQ youth, but to create a safe and affirming environment. Create opportunities for the youth to share this information or talk about gender identity or sexual orientation, if they choose.
- Any steps you take to make your agency and foster homes/group homes welcoming to LGBTQ youth will benefit all children/youth— both by giving all youth, including LGBTQ youth, the freedom to express themselves and by helping them learn to respect and embrace diversity.
- Accept that no matter what you do, some LGBT youth may choose not to disclose to you.



# **If a youth comes out to you...**

- You have done good work! The youth trusts you and feels you will be supportive. (They have probably given this a lot of thought.)
- Thank them for sharing that information/trusting you. Be supportive and non-judgmental in your response.
- Talk about it! Don't just move on. Talk about what it means to them to be an LGBTQ person, feelings, concerns, needs... whatever they want to talk about!
- Conduct conversations with LGBTQ youth about relationships and sexuality the same way you would with non-LGBTQ youth (with appropriate information).
- Respect confidentiality to the greatest extent possible.



# Role Play

With a partner – one as LGBTQ youth, one as child welfare professional. Youth comes out and child welfare professional responds in a supportive and affirming way. Youth might express particular needs or concerns.





# LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

Three groups of LGBTQ youth in foster care:

- 1.) Youth rejected by family of origin because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SO/GI) – enter foster care because of this;
- 2.) Youth who leave home; experience abuse/neglect; rejected by family for reasons unrelated (or seemingly unrelated) to SO/GI;
- 3.) Youth already in foster care who then disclose their SO/GI.



# LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

- Mallon documented negative experiences of LGBTQ youth in foster care placements, which frequently are group care facilities where permanency is not a focus.
- Studies found: LGBTQ youth are often targets of discrimination, harassment, and violence from peers, group care facility staff, and other caregivers, resulting in LGBTQ youth running away from group homes.
- Mallon found LGBTQ youth experienced multiple, unstable placements; non-affirming placements that neglected needs or actively discriminated against them.



# LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

Frequent moves experienced by LGB youth attributed to 4 factors:

- 1.) Staff members do not accept youth's sexual orientation
- 2.) Youth feels unsafe because of sexual orientation
- 3.) Youth's sexual orientation is seen as a "management problem"
- 4.) Youth is not accepted by peers because of sexual orientation.



## Working with Families of LGBTQ Youth

- Family Preservation: Community-based, family support, family preservation efforts to prevent placement and preserve relationships. Need to know how to keep loving and caring for their LGBT child.
- Reunification: Skilled intervention, education, counseling and support to accept their child's SO/GI so that the youth can safely return home. If youth have been in care for a long time, can revisit reunification with attention to the youth's needs as an LGBT youth and the family's support of their child.



## What do families of LGBTQ youth need?

- Families need accurate information about SO/GI within the context of normal adolescent development; supportive guidance to help them adjust to their child's identity; and empathic counseling to address their negative and positive feelings, attitudes, and behaviors towards their child's sexual orientation/gender identity/gender expression. Families may need help with navigating conversations with others and supporting youth in the extended family/community. May need support adapting to child's new gender identity.
- Information and interventions to reduce rejecting behaviors and increase accepting behaviors by families.

**Resource: Family Education Booklet: Supportive Families, Healthy Children.** Family Acceptance Project. <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>



## What do families of LGBTQ youth need?

- Time to process information.
- Referral to LGBTQ-affirming therapists, services, faith organizations, and groups such as PFLAG (for parents, friends, allies, etc.)

Resource: <http://community.pflag.org/>

Under no circumstances should youth be subjected to practices intended to change their sexual orientation or gender identity. Families should be informed that these practices are harmful.



# **Permanency for LGBTQ Youth**

LGBTQ youth have the same permanency needs as other youth. All young people need the love, nurturing, stability, commitment, and unconditional acceptance offered by a family of origin or choice.



When reunification with a parent, family member, or relative is not possible:

- Maintain connections to extended family members, siblings, and other important people.
- Pursue other permanency options: legal guardianship with kin/fictive kin, adoption.
- Mentors can also be a wonderful connection.
- Include the youth as a leader in actively identifying resources and important present and former relationships. Youth likely will be able to identify accepting and affirming people.





# Tips for Working with LGBTQ Youth

1. Acknowledge that LGBTQ children/youth are your clients!
2. Start with you! Self education and self awareness. Child welfare professionals should begin by educating themselves about LGBTQ people and issues affecting the LGBTQ community. Learn about LGBT history and role models/celebrities who are LGBT or support LGBT rights/people.



3. Show that you are willing to listen and open to talking about anything.
4. Use affirming language. Use gender neutral language (ex. when talking about dating).
5. Use youth's preferred gender pronoun and name. If unsure, ask how they prefer to be addressed.
6. Understand that the way people identify their sexual orientation or gender identity may change over time.



11. Intervene! Make it clear that it is unacceptable to use homophobic/transphobic slurs and put-downs, even if they are not directed at a specific person. Create an agency culture where this is not tolerated. Address misconceptions! Provide accurate information when you hear myths and stereotypes.

Wanda Sykes – That's so gay!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNnR6jmoRXE>

12. Work with birth and foster families to support and care for LGBTQ youth. Provide accurate information about LGBTQ youth within the context of adolescent development. Educate about accepting and rejecting behaviors and their impact.



13. Work to achieve permanency for LGBTQ youth.
14. Be prepared to advocate for LGBTQ youth.
15. Research resources and LGBT-affirming services in the community. When there is a lack of services, consider how the agency can make changes in order to provide affirming services (i.e. training for a therapist, offer a group for LGBTQ youth).



16. Learn about transgender youth and be prepared to meet their needs (legal documents/identification that reflects their gender identity, support with finding employment, advocacy so they can live in the gender they are – sports teams, bathrooms at school, room/housing).



17. Remember that sexual orientation/gender identity is just one part of who a person is. LGBTQ youth are likely to have concerns unrelated to their sexual orientation/gender identity.



18. Treat youths' sexual orientation and gender identity the way you handle any other confidential information. If disclosure is necessary to protect or secure a benefit for the youth, disclosure should not occur without actively engaging the youth in a discussion about risks and benefits and securing the youth's permission.

**Resource: Guidelines for Managing Information Related to the Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity and Expression of Children in Child Welfare Systems.** *Wilber, S. Putting Pride into Practice Project, Family Builders by Adoption.* (2013)

<http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/Guidelines-for-Managing-Information-Related-to-the-Sexual-Orientation-Gender-Identity-and-Expression-of-Children-in-Child-Welfare-Systems.pdf>



19. Create a welcoming physical environment: signs, literature, all gender bathroom. LGBTQ youth are scanning the environment to assess whether it is safe, affirming, etc.
20. Ensure that policies, forms, and public materials are LGBT-inclusive and affirming and do not reinforce the gender binary.





21. Training for staff to work with LGBTQ youth, their families of origin, and foster/adoptive families. Use LGBTQ when talking about diversity. Include LGBT youth and LGBT-headed families as examples in trainings that are not LGBT-specific.
22. Training for prospective foster and adoptive families to support LGBTQ youth.



21. Build relationships with community organizations that provide affirming services to LGBTQ youth, including but not limited to health and mental health services.
22. Be strengths-based! Recognize the youth's unique strengths and the strengths of the LGBTQ community. Help LGBTQ youth envision and plan for a positive and productive future.



# Tips for Foster Parents of LGBTQ Youth

1. Educate yourself about LGBTQ history, issues, and resources.
2. Make clear that homophobic/transphobic slurs or jokes are not acceptable in your home. Express disapproval when you encounter them in the community or media. Address misconceptions held by family members.
3. Display signs indicating an LGBTQ-friendly home.



4. Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships.
5. Celebrate diversity in all forms.
6. Let youth know you are willing to listen and talk about anything.
7. Support LGBTQ youth's self expression through choices of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decoration.
8. Insist other family members include and respect all youth in your home.



9. Allow youth to participate in activities that interest them (not based on gender).
10. Respect youth's privacy. Allow them to decide when to come out and to whom.
11. Avoid double standards: Allow LGBTQ youth to discuss feelings of attraction and engage in age-appropriate romantic relationships as you would with heterosexual or cis-gender youth.
12. Welcome LGBTQ friends or partner at family get-togethers.
13. Connect LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ organizations, resources, events. Be willing to go with them if they are nervous. Consider seeking an LGBT mentor for your youth.



14. Reach out for education, resources and support you need to understand LGBTQ youth experiences and support LGBTQ youth in your care.
15. Stand up for your LGBTQ youth if they are mistreated.
16. Support LGBTQ youth in accessing needed services. Advocate for them in the school and community as needed. Know their rights.



# **Resources for Transgender Children/Youth, their Families, and Child Welfare Professionals**

- **Working with Transgender Youth in Foster Care and Runaway and Homeless Youth Programs.** NRCPCF Webcast.

\*Includes practice tips, a resource on facilitating discussion of transgender issues and supporting emergence of transgender identity in adolescence, and other materials.

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/webcasts/22.html>

- **Child Welfare Information Gateway: Resources for Families of Transgender Youth**

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/casework/children/lgbtq\\_families.cfm#resources](https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/casework/children/lgbtq_families.cfm#resources)



## **Resources for Transgender Children/Youth, their Families, and Child Welfare Professionals**

- **Welcoming our Trans Family and Friends: A Support Guide for Parents, Families and Friends of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People.** PFLAG.  
<http://community.pflag.org/Document.Doc?id=202>
- **Working with Transgender Youth.** Lambda Legal.  
[http://data.lambdalegal.org/publications/downloads/gdt\\_b\\_working-with-transgender-youth.pdf](http://data.lambdalegal.org/publications/downloads/gdt_b_working-with-transgender-youth.pdf)





# Resources

Visit the NRCPCFC website  
to access free child welfare resources on  
LGBTQ children and youth and LGBT parents:

[www.nrcpfc.org](http://www.nrcpfc.org)





# **NRCPFC Weekly Update**

Sign up for NRCPFC's free e-newsletter, Weekly Update to learn about child welfare news, resources, webinars/webcasts, from NRCPFC, the Children's Bureau's T&TA Network, and collaborating organizations.



# Primary References

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- *Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents*. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2013)  
<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth.cfm>
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<http://www.americanhumane.org/assets/pdfs/children/protecting-children-journal/pc-26-1.pdf>
- *Working with LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care Settings*. Adolescent Services Resource Network Professional Development Program; SUNY Research Foundation; Rockefeller College; University at Albany. New York State Office of Children and Families and Adolescent Services Resource Network.

\*Additional references for specific slides are noted throughout the presentation.



# Questions

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Access this PowerPoint at:

[www.nrcpfc.org/WI\\_LGBTQ.pdf](http://www.nrcpfc.org/WI_LGBTQ.pdf)