

Supporting LGBTQ Youth

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or who are questioning their identity (commonly known as LGBTQ), are overrepresented in the foster care system. While 5–10% of the general US population is estimated to be gay, 22% of youth in out-of-home care identify as LGBTQ, and 57% of LGBTQ youth in care are youth of color.

LGBTQ youth in care face unique stressors. Some youth may come into care because they have experienced neglect or abuse from their primary families because they identified as LGBTQ, and unfortunately some experience abuse while in care because they are LGBTQ. Additionally, youth in care who identify as LGBTQ will need support as they assess the safety and security of their new home life, school, community, and social network. They also need support while deciding if they should come out, when, and to whom. Caregivers add to the stressors of LGBTQ youth when they express disapproval, fail to provide support, or reject the youth outright.

Without a supportive family, children and teens who identify as LGBTQ are at elevated risk for depression, suicidal behavior, and substance abuse. However those youth whose parents support and affirm them experience greater well-being, better general health, and significantly decreased risk for negative outcomes.

Like all young people, individuals who identify as LGTBQ need supportive and affirming families to help them negotiate childhood and adolescence as they grow into healthy adults. The following tips will help resource parents support and affirm youth in their families who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or who are questioning their identity.

Tips for Resource Parents

Supporting all youth, whether or not they have identified as LGBTQ

- Examine your own personal attitudes and actions around sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity; consider how stereotypes may influence your thoughts and actions.
- Since many youth in care have difficulty trusting adults, you may not know a youth's sexual orientation or gender identity until he/she has grown to trust you. Additionally, there is no way to tell if a baby or young child will grow up to identify as LGBTQ. Resource parents who commit to a baby or child need to be open to accept the child's SOGIE as he or she develops.
- Do not assume that children are heterosexual or that their gender identity matches their anatomical sex. Take steps to make your home welcoming to all youth regardless of the assumed sexual orientation or gender identity of the youth in your family.
- Insist that all family members, living both inside and outside the home, include and respect all youth in your family.

- Let youth in your family know that you are willing to listen and talk about anything.
- Make it clear that jokes or slurs based on sexual orientation or gender identity are not tolerated.
- Be conscious of what you say. For example, don't ask if someone has a "girlfriend" or a "boyfriend," instead use gender-neutral language and ask if they are "seeing someone" or if there is "anyone special" in their life.
- Allow your children to participate in activities that interest them, regardless of whether these activities are stereotypically of any gender or are LGBTQ-focused (such as joining a "Gay-Straight Alliance" at school).

Supporting individual youth who identify as LGBTQ

- Be aware that when youth in care have reached the point that they come out about their sexual orientation or gender identity to their foster parents, most likely they have given their identity a great deal of thought.
- Be honored your child trusted you enough to disclose, and be supportive and affirming in your response. Accept his or her identity and don't assume it is a "phase."
- Recognize that other children in your home will not be negatively influenced because a sibling identifies as LGBTQ.
- Be aware that therapies which attempt to change your child's identity are harmful and unlawful.
- Respect your child's privacy and let him/her decide when to come out about sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, and to whom.
- Support your child's self-expression through clothing, hairstyle, jewelry, room decoration, and friends. At the same time, let your child play and experiment to find an expression that fits how they see themselves. For example, if a young boy dresses up in his sister's clothes it does not necessarily reflect his gender identity or expression.
- Support your child's desire to learn more about his/her identity and to have friends who identify as LGBTQ.
- Include and encourage your child and your child's LGBTQ friends to come to your home, and attend family events and activities.
- Avoid double standards; let your child who is LGBTQ be in age-appropriate romantic relationships and discuss feelings of attraction just as you would with your other children.
- Connect your child with LGBTQ organizations, resources, and events.
- Make sure your child knows that you fully support and affirm him or her.
- Stand up for your child when he or she is mistreated. When needed, be an advocate and make sure your child receives appropriate education, health care, mental health, and child welfare services which will promote his/her healthy development and self-esteem.
- Use the name and pronoun ("he" or "she") your child identifies with. If you aren't sure, ask.

- Give gifts that affirm your child's gender identity. If your child would obviously prefer more feminine or masculine gifts or colors, make that change. And, remember the basics, like boxers for trans boys or hair ties for trans girls.
- Seek support. Parents and caregivers are naturally concerned and anxious about their child's health and safety. Find someplace where you can get support and talk about your experiences, hopes, and concerns.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>

Family Acceptance Project: <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>

PFLAG: <https://www.pflag.org/>

References

Angello, M. (Aug. 1, 2016). 5 invaluable tips for parents of trans kids. *Advocate*. Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013). *Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents*.

Olson, K.R., Durwood, L., DeMeules, M., & McLaughlin, K.A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics*, 137(3): e20153223

Ryan, C. (2010). Engaging families of support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: The Family Acceptance Project. *The Prevention Researcher*, 17(4), pp. 11-13.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). *A Practitioner's Resource Guide: Helping Families to Support Their LGBT Children*. HHS Publication No. PEP14-LGBTKIDS. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.