

## TOPIC:

## Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents

October 2019

Material is excerpted from the Child Welfare Information Gateway. Available online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth> <https://www.childwelfare.gov>

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOSTER PARENT TRAINING CREDIT:**

- \*Read through this self-study
- \*Fill out the “CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING” Questionnaire
- \*Return to ACRF for 1.0 hour of training credit.

Like all young people, LGBTQ youth in foster care need the support of a nurturing family to help them negotiate adolescence and grow into healthy adults. However, LGBTQ youth in foster care face additional challenges. These include the losses that brought them into care in the first place, as well as traumas they may have suffered while in foster care. They also include stressors unique to LGBTQ youth, including homophobia or transphobia, and the need to evaluate (often with little or no support) the safety of their communities, schools, social networks, and homes in order to decide whether to disclose their LGBTQ identity, when, and to whom. Despite these challenges, LGBTQ youth— like all youth in the child welfare system— can heal and thrive when families commit to accepting, loving, and supporting them as they grow into their potential as adults.

“The most important thing is to allow any youth to feel safe enough to blossom into whoever they are meant to be.”

— Foster parent

**DEFINITIONS:** The acronym LGBTQ is a general term used to describe people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual describe a person’s sexual orientation—emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. Lesbian refers specifically to women who love women, while gay can refer to any person who is attracted to people of the same sex. (The term homosexual is considered outdated and offensive by many gay people.) Bisexual people are attracted to men or women regardless of their anatomy. People do not need to have any particular sexual experience (or any sexual experience at all) to identify as bisexual, gay, or lesbian, because sexual orientation and sexual behavior are not the same thing. Transgender refers to a person’s gender identity—an internal understanding of one’s own gender. A transgender person’s gender identity does not match the sex (a biological characteristic) assigned to them at birth. Many, but not all, transgender people choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/ or surgically to match their gender identity. Some people’s experience, perception, or expression of their gender evolves and changes over time. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate aspects of a person’s identity: A transgender person may be bisexual, gay, or straight (or may identify in some other way).



Some youth (and adults) identify as questioning when they start to recognize that they may be part of the LGBT community. This does not mean that sexual orientation or gender identity is a choice. These youth may need time to process what being LGBT means for them; to reconcile any anti-LGBT stereotypes they have internalized; and to decide if, when, and how they should identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender to others. Some people’s gender expression (meaning, the ways in which they express their gender identity to others) does not conform to society’s expectations for their sex. This might include choices in clothing, mannerisms, names, hairstyles, friends, and hobbies. It is important to understand that society’s gender expectations

are cultural, not biological, and they change over time (for example, women used to be expected to wear only dresses; now teens of both genders wear jeans, sweatshirts, and tennis shoes). In any case, not all gender-variant (or gender nonconforming) youth will continue to express themselves this way into adulthood, and many will never identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. In other words, it is best not to make assumptions. Respecting your youth's self-identification is very important. As youth grow to trust their foster families, many will eventually share their feelings about gender identity or sexuality more openly.

### **Creating a Welcoming Home for Youth**

All youth in care need nurturing homes that provide them with a safe place to process their feelings of grief and loss, freedom to express who they are, and structure to support them in becoming responsible, healthy adults. Creating a welcoming foster home for LGBTQ youth is not much different from creating a safe and supportive home for any youth. In fact, youth in care may have difficulty trusting adults (many with good reason), so you may not know a youth's gender identity or sexual orientation until he or she has spent some time in your home and has grown to trust you. Avoid making assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation. Any steps you take to make your home welcoming to LGBTQ youth will benefit all children and youth in your care— both by giving LGBTQ youth the freedom to express themselves and by helping heterosexual and gender-conforming youth learn to respect and embrace diversity. Behaviors that openly reject a youth's LGBTQ identity must be avoided and not tolerated. This includes slurs or jokes about gender or sexuality and forcing youth to attend activities (including religious activities) that are openly hostile or unsupportive of LGBTQ people. Well-meaning attempts to protect youth from potential harassment, such as "steering" them toward hobbies more typical for their sex (football for boys, for example) or isolating them for the sake of safety, also are experienced as rejection by LGBTQ youth and can have devastating consequences for their self-esteem and well-being. Consider the following suggestions to make your home a welcoming one, whether or not a youth in your care openly identifies as LGBTQ:

- Make it clear that slurs or jokes based on gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation are not tolerated in your house. Express your disapproval of these types of jokes or slurs when you encounter them in the community or media.
- Display "hate-free zone" signs or other symbols indicating an LGBTQ-friendly environment (pink triangle, rainbow flag).
- Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships. For example, instead of, "Do you have a girlfriend?" ask, "Is there anyone special in your life?"
- Celebrate diversity in all forms. Provide access to a variety of books, movies, and materials—including those that positively represent same-sex relationships. Point out LGBTQ celebrities, role models who stand up for the LGBTQ community, and people who demonstrate bravery in the face of social stigma.
- Let youth in your care know that you are willing to listen and talk about anything.
- Support your youth's self-expression through choices of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decoration.
- Insist that other family members include and respect all youth in your home.
- Allow youth to participate in activities that interest them, regardless of whether these activities are stereotypically male or female.

FOR MORE RESOURCES:

Check out our  
teleconference Training:  
[SOGIE 101 \(Sexual  
Orientation, Gender  
Identity and Expression\)](#)

- Educate yourself about LGBTQ history, issues, and resources. Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents If a youth in your care discloses their LGBTQ identity, you can show your support in the following ways:
- When a youth discloses their LGBTQ identity to you, respond in an affirming, supportive way.
- Understand that the way people identify their sexual orientation or gender identity may change over time.
- Use the name and pronoun (he/she) your youth prefers. (If unclear, ask how he or she prefers to be addressed.) (Note: For more information about pronouns and definitions, go to <https://itgetsbetter.org/blog/lesson/glossary/>.)
- Respect your youth’s privacy. Allow them or her to decide when to come out and to whom.
- Avoid double standards: Allow your LGBTQ youth to discuss feelings of attraction and engage in age-appropriate romantic relationships, just as you would a heterosexual youth.
- Welcome your youth’s LGBTQ friends or partner at family get-togethers.
- Connect your youth with LGBTQ organizations, resources, and events. Consider seeking an LGBTQ adult role model for your youth, if possible.
- Reach out for education, resources, and support if you feel the need to deepen your understanding of LGBTQ youth experiences.
- Stand up for your youth when he or she is mistreated. LGBTQ youth in foster care need permanent homes; they do not need additional disrupted placements. If you are being asked to consider providing foster care to an LGBTQ youth and you feel—for any reason—that you are not able to provide a safe and supportive environment, be honest with your child welfare worker for the sake of both the youth and your family. If you are able to provide an affirming environment, remember that you can talk with your child welfare worker about any questions you may have or support you may need.

For the rest of this article go to: <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/LGBTQyouth>

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