

Foster Parents Caring for LGBTQ Youth

Whether you are aware of it or not, youth in your care may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity (“LGBTQ”). These young people are dealing not only with the challenges of life in foster care but also with the risk of harassment and mistreatment because they are LGBTQ.

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FOSTER YOUTH IN YOUR CARE MAY BE LGBTQ.

Don't assume that every young person in your care is heterosexual or comfortable in their assigned gender. Many LGBTQ young people fear the negative reactions that may come from revealing this aspect of their identity and carefully hide that they are LGBTQ. Indeed, some may have been abused by their families of origin or thrown out after coming out and are reluctant to risk harassment and rejection from the child welfare system charged with protecting them.

EXAMINE YOUR BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES THAT MIGHT IMPACT YOUR ABILITY TO SUPPORT LGBTQ YOUTH IN YOUR CARE.

Be aware of your own beliefs, prejudices and gaps in knowledge surrounding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Regardless of your personal beliefs, remember that above all it's your responsibility to provide a safe, nurturing and nonjudgmental environment for the LGBTQ young people in your care.

EDUCATE YOURSELF ON LGBTQ ISSUES.

You don't have to be an expert or LGBTQ yourself in order to support an LGBTQ youth. There are plenty of resources available to help you better understand these issues. Seek out the support and information

you need to feel comfortable engaging young people in frank and age-appropriate discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity.

UNDERSTAND THAT BEING LGBTQ ISN'T A “CHOICE” OR SOMETHING A YOUNG PERSON CAN CHANGE.

The leading mental health and child welfare associations have long recognized that a lesbian or gay sexual orientation is a normal variation on human sexuality and no more susceptible to change than is a heterosexual sexual orientation. A young person should never be subjected to “conversion” or “reparative” therapies for the purpose of changing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Such “therapies” have been shunned by national professional counseling organizations as unethical and potentially dangerous.

KNOW THAT YOUR ACCEPTANCE OR REJECTION AFFECTS THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF THE LGBTQ YOUTH IN YOUR CARE.

Research shows that family acceptance is an important predictor of how well an LGBTQ youth will fare as an adult. As a foster parent, don't compound the rejection an LGBTQ youth may have suffered from his or her

FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

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family of origin by exhibiting the same rejecting behaviors. The National Foster Parent Association has adopted a formal policy urging sensitivity and support for LGBTQ youth in foster care (see www.nfpainc.org/aboutNFPA/positionStmnt.cfm) and the Family Acceptance Project offers resources for families of LGBTQ young people (see <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>).

RESPECT THE PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY OF LGBTQ YOUTH.

Most LGBTQ youth are aware of this aspect of their identity long before they disclose it to others. Some LGBTQ people report having been aware of their identity as young as at five-years-old, long before they were sexually active, while others were much older before they realized it. Understand that coming out is often a lifelong process and that LGBTQ youth may not be out in every context of their lives. Keep in mind there are many factors LGBTQ people consider before disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity, including that they may be exposing themselves to discrimination and harassment by revealing this information to others. Respect the confidentiality of the foster youth in your care, while helping them to decide whether or not to come out and to whom.

APPLY THE SAME STANDARDS TO LGBTQ YOUTH THAT YOU APPLY TO OTHERS FOR AGE-APPROPRIATE ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC BEHAVIOR.

It's important for LGBTQ youth to be able to engage in developmentally-appropriate romantic behavior and to feel as validated and respected in this area as other young people. LGBTQ youth in your care should be held to the same standards you apply to non-LGBTQ youth regarding age-appropriate dating, displays of affection and romantic relationships. LGBTQ youth in care, like all young people, need developmentally appropriate information and resources about sexuality and sexual health, including about the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

KNOW THE DANGERS AND RISKS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH.

Research reveals that LGBTQ youth may be at a higher risk for substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, running away and suicidal ideation and behavior because of the social stigma and harassment they face from their peers and adults. As a caregiver, it's critical that you be aware of the warning signs and behaviors that may mean someone is struggling. If you provide a safe, supportive and bias-free home environment where young people can be themselves, they will be less likely to engage in these risky behaviors.

BE AN ADVOCATE FOR LGBTQ YOUTH.

LGBTQ youth often face verbal and physical abuse from their peers, families and the adults in their lives. Make sure the young people in your care know that you're there for them and will be their ally. Ensure that your foster child is safe at school and in the community. Advocate for your child and demand that they receive respectful treatment.

ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THERE'S MORE TO AN INDIVIDUAL THAN SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY.

Sexual orientation and gender identity are only part of what makes an individual a whole person. Avoid making assumptions about a young person based entirely upon these particular characteristics. In fact, you may find that some LGBTQ

“ My foster family took away my clothes, called me a 'dyke,' and tried to remake me. ”

— Youth in Care

youth are very outspoken about their identities and feel that this is a defining part of who they are, while others may not give it much thought at all. Don't assume that every struggle faced by an LGBTQ young person is the result of this aspect of their identity. Understand that many of their struggles are in fact a result of the *lack of support* they have received from their caretakers and peers.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR YOU AND YOUR LGBTQ FOSTER CHILD.

Know where to look for LGBTQ resources in your community. A good place to start is PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) at www.pflag.org. PFLAG offers a variety of resources to help you be an effective and supportive parent or caregiver. It also lists local chapters and support group meetings where you can meet other parents of LGBTQ youth. Help your LGBTQ foster child find peer support groups in your community as well.

The many other components of Getting Down to Basics offer additional support.

To order free copies of the *Getting Down to Basics* tool kit, contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTeen (toll free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at www.lambdalegal.org or www.cwla.org.

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