

WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR WORK WITH YOUTH

Research shows that LGBTQ* youth are overrepresented in foster care and face increased risk of both negative experiences and outcomes. They have a higher average number of placements; are more likely to report harassment, discrimination, and violence; experience higher rates of health and mental health challenges and lower self-esteem; and are less likely to achieve permanency.¹ Child welfare systems must do better by ensuring that SOGIE* is included in considerations of the best interests of children and youth and that all youth receive services free of discrimination based on SOGIE. This means developing the competency and infrastructure for working effectively with youth in ways that are inclusive and affirming for all.

Now — as some lawmakers work to legalize discrimination against LGBTQ youth — it is perhaps more important than ever for child welfare systems to take action to ensure LGBTQ youth receive the services they deserve free from discrimination. This is not only the right thing to do. It is necessary work in order to ensure compliance with federal standards around LGBTQ non-discrimination and the best

practice recommendations of leading professional associations.

Every single child welfare professional — from frontline workers to administrators and executives — has a role to play and this Beginner's Guide to LGBTQ Inclusion is designed to give you ideas of where to start.

WHERE DO I BEGIN?

- » **Assume that there are LGBTQ youth in foster care in your system** even if you do not know any young people who openly identify as LGBTQ. One study found that 1 out of every 5 young people in foster care is LGBTQ.²
- » **Seek out resources to educate yourself on SOGIE and LGBTQ issues**, including information on the common experiences of LGBTQ youth in foster care, new or evolving terminology related to SOGIE, the specific best practices for working with transgender and gender-expansive youth, and what this new program instruction means for your role.

TERMS TO KNOW:

***LGBTQ:** Acronym for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning."

Lesbian: Describes women who are attracted to other women.

Gay: Describes people who are attracted to members of their same gender.

Bisexual: Describes people who are attracted to more than one gender.

Transgender: Describes a person whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth.

Queer: Describes fluid identities and orientations, sometimes used interchangeably with "LGBT."

Questioning: Describes people who are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

***SOGIE:** Acronym for "sexual orientation, gender identity and expression." Everyone has SOGIE, not only LGBTQ people.

Sexual Orientation: A person's emotional, romantic and sexual attraction to other people.

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense of being male, female, or, for some people, a blend of both or neither.

Gender Expression: The ways people show their gender to others through clothing, haircut, roles and activities, etc.

- » **Scan your agency's environment.** Are you and your team creating a welcoming and affirming space for all youth, including LGBTQ youth? Even seemingly small changes in the language we use and the simple addition of LGBTQ-inclusive visual cues (e.g., rainbow stickers or HRC's equality logo) can go a long way in transforming an environment.
- » **Remember that the LGBTQ community is just as diverse as society as a whole.** Listen and learn about the experiences and perspectives of LGBTQ people across all races, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, etc. Consider the impact of living at the intersection of homo/bi/transphobia, racism and/or classism.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MY ROLE?

No matter your role, there are things you can do to support LGBTQ youth in foster care and to help ensure that youth are not discriminated against on the basis of their SOGIE. Below are just a few ideas. For more, see *HRC's Supporting & Caring for LGBTQ Youth* guide.

FRONT-LINE WORKERS

- » **Avoid making assumptions about the SOGIE of any youth you are working with.** Examine the language you use for opportunities to be more inclusive. For example, ask youth open-ended/gender neutral questions about their important friendships and relationships (e.g., "Are you seeing anyone special?" rather than "Do you have a boyfriend?").
- » **Take every opportunity to make it safe and comfortable for youth to talk to you about SOGIE, self-identify as LGBTQ and/or express their gender authentically.** A big part of this work is demonstrating respect for and acknowledging the diversity of experiences and identities that youth have when it comes to SOGIE. Avoid language or behavior that enforces strict gender roles or stereotypes (e.g., "That shirt is for girls not boys.") and intervene when you witness this from others. Also honor confidentiality in all of your interactions with youth so they develop a trusting relationship with you.
- » **Don't require or expect that youth will feel comfortable disclosing their LGBTQ identity to you.** Many LGBTQ young people

fear the negative reactions that may come from revealing this part of who they are. Some may have been rejected by their families of origin after coming out and are reluctant to risk further rejection from the professionals charged with protecting them. Young people should be in control of whether to share information about their SOGIE. Keep in mind that a young person's SOGIE may change over time as they develop a deeper understanding of their own identity.

- » **Ask every young person what they are looking for in resource parents.** When making placement decisions for youth in foster care, talk with each youth about what will help them feel safe to be themselves and welcomed in a family. Assess the readiness of resource parents to provide safe and affirming placements for LGBTQ youth. See *What It Means For Your Work with Parents* for more information.
- » **Respect the privacy and confidentiality of youth** and be mindful of how you record and use information about SOGIE just as you are with other private information about young people in your care.
- » **Explore potential family dynamics related to SOGIE** that may play a role in your cases when discussing decision points with your supervisor.

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- » **Ask youth whether they feel safe in their school** when working to meet the educational needs of young people in your care. Given the high rates of bullying and harassment that LGBTQ youth experience in schools, ask specifically about this issue.
- » **Provide LGBTQ-inclusive, age-appropriate information about romantic and sexual relationships.** LGBTQ youth in care, like all

young people, need developmentally appropriate information and resources about healthy relationships, sexuality and sexual health, including the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Also advocate for the same standards to be applied for LGBTQ youth as their non-LGBTQ peers. For example, if foster parents allow straight teens to have their different-sex significant others over to visit, then teens in same-sex relationships should be allowed to do so as well.

SUPERVISORS

- » **Develop your staff members' knowledge and skills** so they are equipped to work effectively with LGBTQ youth and to understand how to discuss SOGIE with youth they work with.
- » **Create ongoing learning opportunities** (e.g., in team meetings or supervision) to help your staff understand what best practice looks like in various scenarios when working with LGBTQ youth and in discussing SOGIE.
- » **Seek out LGBTQ expertise among your staff and local partners** to help fill any of your own knowledge gaps and assist your team's efforts to best serve LGBTQ youth.

LEADERS AND MANAGERS

- » **Demonstrate your agency's commitment to LGBTQ inclusion** by implementing affirming policies and practices for working with all youth. This includes non-discrimination policies, visual cues within the agency, staff training, and more.
- » **Empower managers and supervisors** to build their teams' competency and skills for working with LGBTQ youth.
- » **Provide a clear vision to your staff and partner agencies** for what LGBTQ inclusion looks like in practice by outlining clear goals and benchmarks.

- » **Set expectations for LGBTQ non-discrimination with your partners when establishing and overseeing contracts.** Discuss how partners will ensure non-discrimination for LGBTQ youth and create welcoming environments for all youth regardless of their SOGIE.
- » **Pay attention to how information on SOGIE is included—or not—as you review reports about youth in foster care.** Help your staff understand how this information can and should be included in considerations for the best interests of youth and how it assists them in case planning.

HOW DO I CONNECT THIS TO EXISTING YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS?

Your agency likely already has strong approaches for engaging and empowering youth in foster care. Consider expanding these existing strategies when building capacity to serve LGBTQ youth rather than creating a stand-alone initiative. This could include:

- » **Work with any existing youth advisory panels/foster care alumni groups** (or other similar groups) to get their input on how to work effectively with LGBTQ youth.
- » **Review and update—or develop—your foster youth bill of rights** to add information about the rights of LGBTQ youth and the rights of all youth to have their SOGIE respected and affirmed.

LEARN MORE

This tip sheet shares a few examples of things you can do to build your—and your agency’s—capacity to work effectively with LGBTQ youth and with all youth on SOGIE-related topics. Download the additional tip sheets in this series for more detailed information and ideas on next steps. Also check out the HRC Foundation’s All Children - All Families project’s innovative self-assessment tools, staff training offerings, and technical assistance for child welfare agencies at www.hrc.org/acaf

- 1 Annie E. Casey Foundation. LGBTQ in Child Welfare: A Systematic Review of the Literature. September 2016.
- 2 Wilson, B.D.M., Cooper, K., Kastanis, A. & Nezhad, S. Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles. (Los Angeles: The Williams Institute. 2014). Report.

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