

Working With LGBTQ+ Families in Foster Care and Adoption

During the last decade, child welfare professionals and agencies in the United States assisted an increasing number of families headed by parents who identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, questioning, or other diverse identity (LGBTQ+)/Two-Spirit¹ community (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020). More public and private agencies have established supportive practices, and many are proactively recruiting LGBTQ+ families to provide resource or adoptive families. This means a larger pool of highly motivated and qualified parents for children and youth who need loving, nurturing homes.

¹ Future use of the acronym LGBTQ+ is inclusive of Two-Spirit individuals.

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Acronyms and Terms: Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, and Expression (SOGIE)

Language is always evolving and so are acronyms used to represent diverse sexual and/or gender identity. Many acronyms describe Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression, also known as "SOGIE." Acronyms associated with SOGIE include the following:

- "LGBT" and "LGBTQ:" These are the most common acronyms in research literature and Federal and State adoption laws.
- "LGBTQI" and "LGBTQIA:"
 - "I" stands for *intersex*.
 - "A:" "A" stand for *agender*, *asexual*, or *ally*.

Intersex: This term refers to individuals born with variations of sex anatomy resulting in bodies that do not fit typical definitions of male or female. Roughly 1 to 1.7 percent of the general population identify as intersex.

To learn more about intersex, see ["Not Invisible: Debunking 10 Intersex Myths,"](#) and the InterACT webpage, [Intersex Resources](#)

Two-Spirit: This term refers to a person of a culturally and spiritually distinct gender exclusively recognized by Native American/Alaska Native nations. Originating from the Anishinabe language, Two-Spirit means having both male and female spirits in one person. Today, the term has a different meaning among various Native societies. For more information on the Two-Spirit community, see [Mending the Rainbow: Working With Native LBGT/Two Spirit Community.](#)

Other acronyms include the "+" sign (e.g., "LGBT+" or "LGBTQ+") as an umbrella to acknowledge the multiple identities, orientations, and expressions that are not explicitly recognized by the acronym but may fall under it, such as "gender nonconforming," "gender fluid," "gender queer," "gender expansive," or "nonbinary."

This bulletin uses the acronym "LGBTQ+" in the most inclusive sense of recognizing people with diverse SOGIE. Research, products, or services use different versions of the LGBTQ+ acronym or the same letter in the acronym to represent different identities or expressions. For example, some use "Q" for *questioning*, while others use it for *queer* or *both*. Although all identities and expressions may not be recognized explicitly in the acronym, some of the information and resources also may be relevant or helpful to people who identify as belonging to the broader LGBTQ+ community. As language continues to evolve, it is important to respect the changes reflected in that evolution. Ignoring these changes is a form of disrespect and may involve biases and behaviors based on stereotypes. As other similar acronyms become more common in the research literature and in programs and services meant to serve members of this community, child welfare professionals must check their biases and respect all aspects of the LGBTQ+ community. (See the Language and Terminology section for definitions.)

However, in many parts of the country, laws, agency policies, and professional biases continue to present obstacles for some LGBTQ+ individuals and couples who are interested in pursuing adoption and for LGBTQ+ youth waiting for permanent families. Despite the landmark 2015 Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*² ensuring marriage equality nationwide, misinformation, lack of support, and inexperience in working with LGBTQ+ families prevent many child welfare and adoption professionals from providing meaningful and quality services to adoptive or foster care families who identify as LGBTQ+ and with LGBTQ+ youth. This bulletin is designed to help you expand your cultural responsiveness, competence, and professional skills when working with LGBTQ+ individuals and same-gender or gender-diverse couples. It also examines laws and policies and provides tips to effectively engage this vital community.

GETTING TO KNOW THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

The LGBTQ+ community includes all races, ethnicities, socioeconomic levels, and educational backgrounds as well as rural, suburban, and metropolitan dwellers. Among different ethnic groups, religious traditions, and cultures, the elements of SOGIE are viewed and addressed differently. Child welfare professionals can anticipate significant variation among members of LGBTQ+ resource families. For example, people who identify as LGBTQ+ may differ in the level of acceptance they experience among their families of origin and the extent to which they disclose their own identities or relationship status to others.

Many LGBTQ+ individuals and couples may choose to share very little of their personal lives with their families of origin, professional colleagues, or neighbors in fear of being stigmatized, rejected, fired, or physically abused. Their cultural norms and traditions may dictate that one's personal life should be kept private. Many LGBTQ+ adults who are pursuing parenthood have solid networks of support from their parents, extended family, community, and friends.

Also, LGBTQ+ resource families often have nontraditional families comprised of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, etc., who are not relatives but live together as a way to establish a support network. It is especially important to be sensitive to this when these parents explore fostering and in the home study process.

Professionals who make assumptions about the LGBTQ+ people whom they serve may limit their ability to be a trusted resource and support. To learn more about LGBTQ+ parents and families, you can visit the Human Rights Campaign's [Parenting](#) web section.

While there is opportunity for more research in the field of LGBTQ+ adoption and parenting, existing research upholds three important findings that support LGBTQ+ individuals as parents:

- Children raised by LGBTQ+ parents do not experience a difference in outcomes compared with children raised within other parenting arrangements (Adams & Light, 2015).
- No evidence has been found that having a transgender parent affects a child's gender identity or sexual orientation, and it does

² On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court held, in a 5–4 decision, that "[T]he Fourteenth Amendment requires a State to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out-of-State." Read the [complete Court ruling, *Obergefell v. Hodges*](#).

- not negatively impact other developmental milestones (Stotzer et al., 2014).
- The gender identity of youth is not influenced by having LGBTQ+ adoptive parents (Farr et al., 2018).

For more on research and best practices, see [Youth With Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression in Child Welfare: A Review of Best Practices](#) and the [National Quality Improvement Center on Tailored Services, Placement Stability, and Permanency for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Two-Spirit Children and Youth in Foster Care \(QIC-LGBTQ2S\)](#), a project funded by the Children's Bureau to develop, integrate, and sustain best practices and programs that improve outcomes for children and youth in foster care with diverse SOGIE.

Resources about Two-Spirit identity include the following:

- [LGBTQ2S+ Identities and Child Welfare, Two-Spirit Identities](#) provides resources on gender and sexual identities that originate in traditional understandings.
- [Sharing Our Lived Experiences: Eight Tips for Understanding the Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Journey for Native Youth in the Child Welfare System](#), which is intended, among other purposes, to support families and Native youth who may be Two-Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ achieve healthy identity and development and reduce their risk for adverse mental health outcomes and substance use.

- [Sharing Our Lived Experiences: 22 Tips for Caring for Two-Spirit and Native LGBTQ Youth in the Child Welfare System](#) offers valuable information for families and child welfare professionals working with families and LGBTQ+ youth. Both *Sharing Our Lived Experiences* publications are products of the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Tribes.

LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

The terms, expressions, and ways of defining oneself are often tied to cultural understandings of sexuality and gender and can be influenced by popular culture, generational experience, religious upbringing, and/or region of the country. Additionally, like languages associated with most groups, the language and terminology used within and about the LGBTQ+ community have evolved and will continue to do so over time. For example, many younger LGBTQ+ Americans have reclaimed the term "queer" and may choose to self-identify as such. Other terms might include being "same-gender loving" (a term more commonly used by some people of color), having a "fluid" sexuality, or identifying as "Two-Spirit" (for American Indian and Alaska Native individuals).

To learn the basic terminology to use when working with diverse LGBTQ+ prospective parents, watch the animated video, ["Learning About Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity & Expression \(SOGIE\)"](#).

For a more comprehensive list of terms and definitions, see the [glossary](#) prepared by the QIC-LGBTQ2S.

ADVANTAGES OF ENGAGING AND RECRUITING LGBTQ+ FAMILIES

Extensive research has shown that LGBTQ+ individuals exhibit myriad capacities as parents and establishing agency policies and practices that welcome and support LGBTQ+ families come with numerous benefits. According to AdoptUSKids, LGBTQ+ families bring particular strengths to parenting children in foster care, including an ability to identify with difficult feelings of isolation or with a sense of being "different" (McRoy et al., 2010). Children who were adopted, even as infants, often go through periods of questioning their identity, an experience with which most LGBTQ+ parents can identify.

The approximately 424,000 children and youth currently in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2020) have diverse backgrounds, identities, and needs that require child welfare agencies to recruit an equally diverse pool of families to provide them with loving, nurturing, and stable homes. LGBTQ+ parents may be potential placement options for LGBTQ+ youth, who are often overrepresented in the foster care population compared with their peers in the general population. The recent Cuyahoga Youth Count report showed that 32 percent of youth in out-of-home care in Cuyahoga County, OH, identified as LGBTQ+. This is the first study of its kind in a Midwestern city. A recent study from Columbia University indicates that 34 percent of youth in foster care identify as something other than 100 percent heterosexual.

LGBTQ+ individuals and couples represent an often-untapped resource of prospective parents for the thousands of children and youth in the foster care system who need loving, permanent homes. Not all prospective LGBTQ+ parents want to or should be matched with LGBTQ+ children or youth, however, and the reverse is also true. Professionals should keep in mind that every prospective resource parent should be considered on a case-by-case basis for a possible placement.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

For public agencies, expanding the pool of qualified resource families is a high priority and essential for meeting the permanency goals of children and youth in foster care. Targeted recruitment within the LGBTQ+ community is an important part of this process and can be folded into existing efforts. Agencies interested in expanding recruitment and implementing best practices in retaining LGBTQ+ families may consider the following:³

- Continue to match with the best interest of the child in mind. LGBTQ+ parents can be great parents to all children, not just children and youth who identify as LGBTQ+. Often, they are inappropriately matched with LGBTQ+ children when another match may have been better suited.
- Provide staff training to help them navigate placing children in the best home and to ensure transparency and understanding.
- Create or update a policy of inclusion and respect as your first step toward expanding recruitment and implementing best practices.

³ Adapted from Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012; National Resource Center for Adoption, the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections, & the National Resource Center for Recruitment and Retention of Foster and Adoptive Parents at AdoptUSKids, 2012.

- Ensure that staff and volunteers receive proper training, are respectful when talking about diverse families, and speak directly to and about the LGBTQ+ resource families who are part of your program.
 - Educate staff on cultural responsiveness and competence, provide opportunities for those who lack experience working with the LGBTQ+ population to gain experience, and address bias before conducting a home study or family assessment. See the Personal Bias section below (page 9) for more details.
 - Ensure that a resource parent's or family's first interaction at the front desk is welcoming, that proper pronouns are used, and that anyone who comes in contact with potential recruits extends sincere support for their desire to become parents.
 - Develop new materials, or modify existing materials, to reflect your agency's policy regarding LGBTQ+ resource families. Update forms that involve legal information with "Name you would like to be called;" "Pronouns;" and options for sex, gender, and sexuality.
 - Include photos of diverse families and specific language and images that resonate with the community.
 - Reach out to local LGBTQ+ communities or advocacy centers, media, and key LGBTQ+ leaders to establish partnerships.
 - Host a recruitment activity or event at a local LGBTQ+ venue or in a neighborhood that is LGBTQ+ friendly.
 - Ask current LGBTQ+ resource families to speak at events and to network in their own communities. Word of mouth is often the most effective recruitment method.
 - Ensure that LGBTQ+ families and all resource families remain informed of changes to legislation and local, State, and Tribal codes that provide support for LGBTQ+ families and LGBTQ+ children in care.
 - Ensure LGBTQ+ resource families are aware of training and leadership development opportunities that can assist their growth as effective advocates and supports for others.
 - Assess the congregation for bias by visiting the church and talking with the leadership and members about their values and policies regarding LGBTQ+ youth and families if you decide to recruit from religious congregations.
 - Ensure that the "waiting" families group is inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals and couples and that there is ongoing communication with these families while they are in the adoption process.
 - Ensure LGBTQ+ representation in workgroups and other opportunities for their voice to be heard, much like the lived experience.
- Additionally, the former National Resource Center for Diligent Recruitment at AdoptUSKids (NRCDR)⁴ developed several resources on targeted recruitment and supportive services for the LGBTQ+ community that you may find helpful:
- ["Recruiting and Retaining LGBT Foster, Adoptive, and Kinship Families: Sending a Welcoming Message"](#)
 - [LGBTQ Supplement to the Diligent Recruitment Navigator](#)

⁴ The NRCDR project ended in 2017. Its resources, including tools, tip sheets, and webinars, were moved to [AdoptUSKids for Professionals](#).

CHALLENGES FACED BY LGBTQ+ PROSPECTIVE PARENTS

While inclusive policies and practices have increased in both public and private agencies, prospective LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents continue to face some unique challenges. These include inconsistencies in receiving follow-up services, lack of reasonable recruitment efforts, and unintended or potential biases in case notes and court reports. Also, agency support is often delivered by staff who lack diversity training and knowledge of social networks. Research indicates that biases and discrimination against people with diverse SOGIE may lead them to forgo foster care and adoption as ways to build their families (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Child welfare and adoption agencies have come a long way, but agencies must strive to maintain an environment that is inclusive, nonbiased, and strengths-based and in which each person or couple is assessed independently and objectively. More information and guidance about the home study and assessment process for LGBTQ+ prospective foster and adoptive families can be found in [LGBT Prospective Foster and Adoptive Families: The Homestudy Assessment Process](#).

Additionally, the following tips are important to keep in mind while building an inclusive and welcoming agency:⁵

- Like all prospective adoptive parents, LGBTQ+ individuals and couples have varying ideas about the age, race, and background of children they feel they are able to adopt. Listen to and respect their fears, hopes, and concerns.
- Do not assume that prospective LGBTQ+ parents want to or are best suited to raise LGBTQ+ youth. Likewise, do not assume that LGBTQ+ or straight children or youth want to or are best suited to be placed with LGBTQ+ or straight parents, respectively. In some cases, this may prove to be an effective match, but best practices dictate that matching prospective parents with waiting children should be done on a case-by-case basis. [Sharonell Fulton V. City Of Philadelphia, Brief Of Fosterclub And Former Foster Youth As Amici Curiae In Support Of Respondents](#) (beginning on p. 24) provides many powerful stories on the negative results of agencies refusing LGBTQ+ adoptive parents.
- Prospective LGBTQ+ parents often fear that they will be more highly scrutinized or held to different standards than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. Make it clear that your agency does not discriminate and ensure that this is truly the case. Provide realistic information about the adoption process, the home study and what it entails, the waiting period, and any fees or subsidies. If possible, provide this information to families together, so they hear consistent information at the same time.
- Encourage LGBTQ+ families to connect with other waiting families or support groups for adoptive parents. The ability to talk to other families—no matter the sexual or gender identity—is essential.
- Talk to your supervisor or manager if you are aware of discrimination in placement decisions within your agency or among the agencies with which you routinely work; the agency should have a plan for effectively

⁵ Adapted from Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012.

addressing such concerns. It may be helpful to provide educational materials to your colleagues, such as the research on LGBTQ+ parenting provided on page 2.

The [Family Equality Council](#) connects, supports, and represents LGBTQ+ parents across the country. It may be helpful to connect current or prospective LGBTQ+ parents to support groups or LGBTQ+-friendly networks that are able to help them through the process.⁶

HELPING LGBTQ+ FAMILIES NAVIGATE CHALLENGING SYSTEMS

Some unique challenges may arise while working with prospective LGBTQ+ parents. Organizational and systemic attitudes and biases can affect follow through and support from managers and supervisors. Depending on the jurisdiction and work setting, these challenges could include laws, policies, or misperceptions regarding the LGBTQ+ community.

LAWS

Foremost among the challenges you may face in working on behalf of LGBTQ+ families will be the laws and policies that govern your practice. While Obergefell v. Hodges established marriage equality in all 50 States, it did not specifically address foster care or adoption practices. Laws pertaining to child welfare and adoption are governed by each State and can vary widely among agencies.

In approximately 25 States, the District of Columbia, and Guam,⁷ statutes, regulations, and/or agency policies prohibit discrimination in adoption by couples based on their genders. Regardless of whether an LGBTQ+ couple is married or in a civil union or domestic partnership, it is widely recommended that nonbiological and nonadoptive parents (second parent or stepparent adoption included) obtain an adoption, even if the second parent is named on the child's birth certificate, to provide the child with necessary legal protection. An individual social worker, attorney, agency, or judge may interpret State laws differently because the laws are often vague on this issue. For example, in some States, a joint adoption by a same-gender couple may be approved in one county, but a social worker in a neighboring county must submit a home study listing the primary applicant and their same-gender partner as "other member of household."

In March 2016, a U.S. District Court judge declared Mississippi's ban on adoption by same-gender couples unconstitutional, citing Obergefell v. Hodges. That said, the State's statute still includes language that makes it very difficult for same-gender couples to adopt.

The statutory laws in most States are largely silent on the issue of adoption by gay and lesbian single adults.⁸ See Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Who May Adopt, Be Adopted, or Place a Child for Adoption?](#) summary of State laws for more information.

⁶ Visit Information Gateway's [Advocacy and Support Organizations for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning \(LGBTQ\) Communities](#) for a list of additional national organizations that support, represent, and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community.

⁷ California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia.

⁸ [Connecticut § 45a-726a](#), which allowed the commissioner of human services to consider the sexual orientation of the prospective adoptive parent, notwithstanding provisions in the State's laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, was repealed on July 1, 2013. [Florida § 63.042\(3\)](#), which prohibited adoption by a gay or lesbian person, was deleted from the statute on June 11, 2015.

It is recommended that agencies review their State's relevant laws and understand how they may affect prospective LGBTQ+ parents.

In the case of intercountry adoption, the adoption process is more complex for all families—heterosexual and cisgender, LGBTQ+ couples, and single adults—as the laws of other nations determine who can and cannot adopt. For LGBTQ+ families, some countries have policies, cultural norms, and/or expectations that make it very difficult or entirely prohibitive for LGBTQ+ couples and individuals to adopt internationally. The U.S. Department of State maintains a database of written laws and policies for each country from which U.S. citizens can adopt. Visit the [Country Information](#) web section, and select a country for country-specific information.

In the case of adoption of an American Indian/Alaska Native child, States and State child welfare agencies are required to follow the placement preference requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. For more information, see Information Gateway's [The Indian Child Welfare Act: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals](#).

For the most current law information, including legal protections for LGBTQ+ people and their families, use the following resources:

- [In Your State](#) (Lambda Legal)
- [State-by-State Analysis of Child Welfare Systems](#) (Lambda Legal)
- [Foster and Adoption Laws](#) (Movement Advancement Project)
- [State Equality Index 2020](#) (Human Rights Campaign)

PERSONAL BIASES

Some professionals have personal bias, misinformation, or fears about working with the LGBTQ+ community. Too often, they base their judgment on mannerisms or perceptions rather than the responses of the youth. The [Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers](#) outlines that a social worker has a responsibility to be "sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and [to] strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice."

"I will never forget the moment I saw my binder of notes at my group home that labeled me as 'probably gay' to all the staff. It was hurtful in many ways and prevented my comfortability to share my status with the system." —Louie

Child welfare and adoption agencies and professionals should be prepared for possible issues that may arise, both professionally and personally, while working with LGBTQ+ prospective parents. Professionals may need to examine their personal beliefs or fears to ensure their work is not negatively affected and to be able to explore openly with each individual or couple their background, experience, and skills as they relate to caring for a child or youth. The following tips can help in addressing some of the challenges mentioned above:⁹

- Research the local and regional laws that may impact your LGBTQ+ prospective parents.

⁹ Adapted from Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012.

- Develop a referral list of experienced LGBTQ+-competent family attorneys in your jurisdiction and seek out consultation, as needed.
- Develop a list of LGBTQ+-affirming agencies outside of your State or region that can provide support and resources for families when their State of residence or local laws present challenges to their adoption process.
- Ensure that agency directors put this issue before their boards of trustees and are prepared to present evidence about the benefits of working with LGBTQ+ families.
- Become familiar with the local family or probate court having jurisdiction over adoption. The agency administration can engage the judge or their staff in discussions to determine how the court may treat cases of adoption of children by parents who are LGBTQ+.

TIPS FOR REPRESENTING LGBTQ+ FAMILIES AS PROSPECTIVE FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Professionals in public and private agencies may fear that birth families will object to LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents for their children. Learning how to talk to adults and to children at various developmental stages about different kinds of families, including LGBTQ+ families, is a good skill to develop. The following suggestions for conducting these conversations may assist:¹⁰

- Be direct and honest when presenting a couple or a single applicant, who has self-identified as LGBTQ+, to older children,

who have a more evolved understanding of sexuality and physical relationships. It is best to know up front if they have negative feelings or biases about LGBTQ+ people.

- Address birth parents' fears and concerns by sharing key talking points, factual information, and handouts about the positive findings from research on children raised by LGBTQ+ parents.
- Inform birth families, when meeting them for the first time, that your agency works with diverse resource/adoptive families and include examples such as two-dad or gender-diverse couples; do not make assumptions about what families they will consider. Provide opportunities within your agency or community for LGBTQ+ prospective parents to participate in orientations, parent panels, and training/licensing classes.
- Focus initially on what the birth family has expressed an interest in—for example, that the couple lives in the city, has pets, or that they are teachers or athletes—when representing family home studies to an expectant parent.
- Point out the family structure (e.g., "This family has two dads" or "This family has one mom, a dog, and a cat") with younger children, rather than discussing sexual orientation. They are most interested in who will be in their family and do not have a formulated concept of sexuality.

In most cases, children and youth do not have rigid ideas or beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity and are open to different families. If a child or youth is reluctant to the idea of being placed with an

¹⁰ Adapted from Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012.

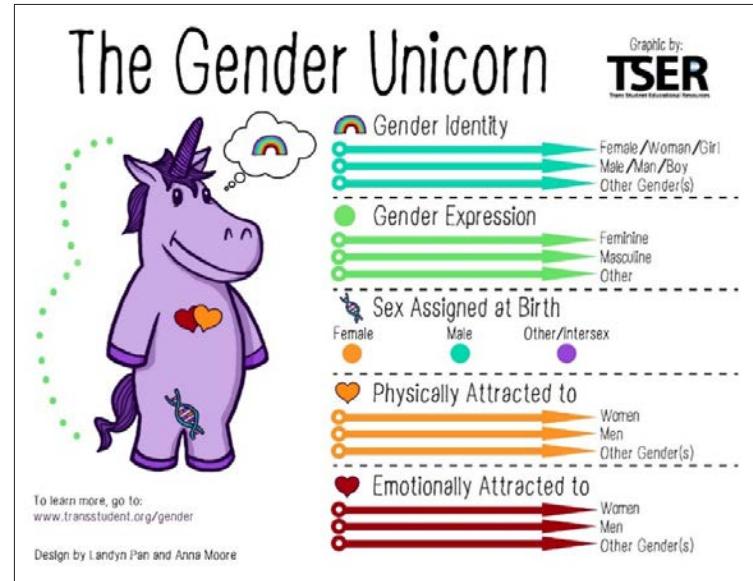
LGBTQ+ individual or couple, be prepared to engage them in a discussion about their concerns, keeping in mind that the youth may hold views based on myths, stereotypes, or misinformation. It is important, however, to respect their position, even if you disagree, which may ultimately necessitate the need to identify other families to ensure the best placement choice for that particular child or youth.

Many LGBTQ+ youth have accepted stereotypes and biases regarding the LGBTQ+ community and may develop more open minds as they mature. Some may also be in the early stages of questioning. Make sure that you follow up with youth throughout their time in foster care to see if they are open to or enthusiastic about the prospect of having LGBTQ+ parents. This may lead to conversations or support systems that allow youth to feel more comfortable in owning their identity at a younger age.

SUPPORTING TRANSGENDER PARENTS

The transgender community is more visible each year in news events, social media, and the entertainment industry. Dr. Rachel Levine, an openly transgender medical doctor, is the U.S. Assistant Secretary for Health. Transgender musicians, influencers, film celebrities, and high-level professionals are part of our daily lives, and transgender and gender-diverse people are our neighbors, teachers, and coworkers.

Many transgender people still face challenges with discrimination and social biases. Although more research is needed specifically on transgender and gender-diverse people



who pursue adoption, it is likely they face similar discrimination and social stigma as people with diverse sexual orientation (Farr & Goldberg, 2018). As an adoption and foster care professional, it is important to understand the experiences transgender people might face and avoid acting on personal bias. To see firsthand accounts of the importance of supporting foster and adoptive transgender parents (and youth), watch these two videos provided by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation: "[Once Denied, LGBTQ Couple Finds Joy in Foster Parenting](#)" and "[Supporting LGBTQ Youth & Parents in Child Welfare Systems](#)".

The following suggestions will help you to fully support prospective adoptive and foster care transgender parents:

- Understand the basic concepts of "gender identity," "gender expression," and "transgender," as explained in this bulletin and on the [Trans Student Educational Resources](#) website and simplified by The Gender Unicorn.

- Address people by their correct names and pronouns. If you are not sure, it is polite to ask, "What are your pronouns?" See [The Trevor Project Research: Pronoun Usage Among LGBTQ Youth](#) for more information.
- Understand the specific experiences of individuals who undergo gender-affirming medical care through medical/hormonal and/or surgical support.
- Contact your local LGBTQ+ community center or advocacy organization to request resources related to the transgender community. If possible, request an expert on transgender identities as a guest speaker at a professional in-service training.

BASICS OF CREATING A WELCOMING AND AFFIRMING AGENCY

When prospective LGBTQ+ parents begin their journey toward fostering or adoption, they often look for an agency that sends a clear message of affirmation and respect. That message must go beyond providing relevant brochures and fliers and include images of same-gender couples throughout the agency. If staff do not create a welcoming and affirming environment, that information will be relayed in the LGBTQ+ community. Prospective parents will look for agencies that are known to be good to work with, and it can be difficult to rebuild that trust.

Several assessment tools are available to help raise awareness and sensitivity when working with the LGBTQ+ community:

[Toolkit to Support Child Welfare Agencies in Serving LGBTQ Children, Youth, and Families](#) provides links to knowledge and resources, such as articles, videos, tools, training

curricula, and other products. (Capacity Building Center for States)

["Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to LGBTQ Youth and Their Families"](#) provides clear examples of policies and practices that promote a diverse and culturally and linguistically competent service delivery system for children, youth, and their families who belong to the LGBTQ+ community. (National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development)

[All Children, All Families: Benchmarks of LGBTQ Inclusion](#) recommends inclusive policies and affirming practices that agencies should implement to best serve children, youth, and families who identify as LGBTQ+. (Human Rights Campaign Foundation)

["Moving Toward Cultural Competence: Key Considerations to Explore"](#) provides a useful framework for building cultural competence in your agency. (AdoptUSKids)

["Safe Spaces, Safe Places: Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Environments for Traumatized LGBTQ Youth"](#) is a video that features interviews with youth who have experienced trauma and how trauma has affected their lives and what factors they consider when seeking a safe and affirming space. (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

In addition, agencies that wish to convey a welcoming philosophy may want to consider the following:¹¹

- Have an explicit nondiscrimination statement that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status.

¹¹ Adapted from Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2012.

- Use inclusive language in your written materials, on your website, and in your general external communications. For example, forms should say "Applicant 1/ Applicant 2," rather than "Mother/Father." All images, language, materials, and events should include and affirm all families.
- Invite LGBTQ+ parents from your local community to serve on an advisory board, participate in a focus group, or be a guest speaker at staff meetings. Consider LGBTQ+ youth and families as partners in your work as you would others with lived experience.
- Talk about your inclusive policies at orientation/training meetings and use examples of families that convey the wide range of diversity within your client base.
- Include photos of diverse families and single-parent families in your marketing materials and on your website.
- Ensure that training for all staff includes cultural competence, if you are an agency leader, or request that your supervisor/administrator provide training opportunities.
- Hire staff who are experts on LGBTQ+ identities or in serving LGBTQ+ populations when possible, including those with lived experiences. Make it clear to all prospective employees that you have a policy of welcoming LGBTQ+ adoptive parents, and be sure your team is fully supportive of and compliant with these policies.
- Have your supervisors use their leadership to promote positive, culturally competent language and models and ensure workers receive appropriate resources and training.
- Work in partnership with LGBTQ+ institutions, advocacy organizations, and community groups to maximize your ability to connect with LGBTQ+ families.
- Explore the [All Children-All Families: Training Curriculum from QIC-LGBTQ2S](#), which provides expert LGBTQ+ competency support that can be customized based on the needs of the organization.
- Visit the [Center of Excellence: LGBTQ+ Behavioral Health Equity](#), which provides hours of free courses focused on LGBTQ+ identities and topics.

AGENCY POLICIES

Welcoming and affirming agencies should have explicit policies that are both written and enforced. Oftentimes, informal policies, such as agency culture and expectations, are implicit. To ensure that practices are consistent and that staff know the expectations, policies that describe appropriate practices with LGBTQ+ clients should be written. When an agency has no policies that expressly prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, members of the LGBTQ+ community may be disqualified or misled regarding the potential for placement. Inconsistent laws and policies can make it difficult to apply best practices in some situations.

If your agency is more advanced or has a greater capacity to support LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents, consider conducting a [barrier analysis](#) to see how these families are recruited, retained, and supported throughout their engagement with you.

Agency staff should research the local and regional laws that may affect prospective LGBTQ+ families and be advocates for these families. Agency administrators

and/or supervisors may develop referral lists of experienced family attorneys who have an understanding of and expertise in legal issues that affect the LGBTQ+ community and seek consultation, as needed. Consult the following resources for help locating an LGBTQ+-friendly attorney in your area:

- [Legal Help Desk](#) (Lambda Legal)
- [The National LGBTQ Bar Association](#)
- [Find Legal Help](#) (American Bar Association)
- Your local LGBTQ+ center or community organization

CONCLUSION

A person's sexual orientation or gender identity is part of a much larger story than any one prospective foster or adoptive family could tell. Working with people who have diverse SOGIE as adoptive families opens opportunities for more children and youth to find permanent, loving homes. To serve and engage prospective LGBTQ+ adoptive and foster parents, adoption and child welfare professionals must develop cultural competencies to build trusting and successful relationships within the LGBTQ+ community. There is much more to a person's story than their sexual orientation or gender identity. When child welfare professionals see a prospective parent's full story, they are more likely to make good matches for youth who struggle to find caring homes and face dire outcomes if they do not. Fully serving the LGBTQ+ community opens new possibilities for children and youth to experience safety and security and to thrive in new caring forever home.

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