

Standards of Care for Improving Behavioral Health Outcomes for LGBT Youth



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ABSTRACT

Extensive research indicates that children/youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) experience a higher risk for behavioral health challenges, including substance use, depression, and suicide attempts, as compared to the general population. These children/youth are frequently underserved by professionals in child- and youth-serving systems (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice). They also experience other challenges including bias, family/peer rejection, and negative outcomes such as homelessness, which can affect their well-being. Professionals in youth-serving systems and organizations, (e.g., psychologists and social workers) have a critical role in providing appropriate, culturally responsive care to LGBT youth and mitigating challenges they experience—while also building protective factors and fostering LGBT youth resilience.

A rich literature has focused on appropriate services and supports for LGBT youth. This information was synthesized as 10 standards of care in a chapter of a 2012 publication, *Improving Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes for LGBT Youth: A Guide for Professionals*. The 10 standards are framed by four principles grounded in best practice guidance: 1) foster shared responsibility and a common commitment across service systems, 2) create an inclusive organizational culture, 3) implement a family-centered approach, and 4) promote positive youth development outcomes. These provide an important framework for implementing services and supports for LGBT youth.

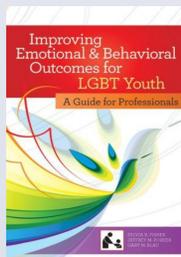
The 10 standards and related strategies can facilitate more effective services and practice with youth who are LGBT, or questioning their sexual/gender identity, and improve their well-being. The standards can also guide individuals, organizations, and communities as they address stigma and bias associated with sexual and gender diversity. In addition to informing organizational improvement efforts, these 10 standards can be the basis for future research efforts. Researchers can apply these standards in their efforts to evaluate and identify best practices, for example.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, *Improving Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes for LGBT Youth: A Guide for Professionals*, was published by Brookes Publishing Co. The volume, co-edited by Sylvia Fisher, Jeffrey Poirier, and Gary Blau, synthesizes key research and information related to LGBT youth populations. The publication is part of the Brookes system of care series in children's mental health and is intended to inform efforts of youth-serving organizations and professionals to deliver more culturally and linguistically competent services. The standards are grounded in four principles of service delivery including system of care values along with recommended practices from the literature:

- Foster shared responsibility and a common commitment service systems to supporting LGBT youth well-being
- Create an inclusive organizational culture that respects and affirms LGBT identity
- Implement a family-centered approach
- Promote positive youth development outcomes

The 10 standards of care in the guide were developed by senior AIR staff, Kim Helfgott and Simon Gonsoulin, who have deep knowledge of child welfare, juvenile justice, and other youth service settings. The standards are intended to support youth development in positive ways and address their needs in an affirming manner. This includes building protective factors and reducing risks to their well-being.



Standard 1: Ongoing Assessment & Improvement

Youth-serving organizations regularly assess their capacity to serve LGBT and their families using multiple information sources—and use current data on this capacity to guide improvement efforts.

It is important to assess organizational practices related to serving LGBT youth—and determine the knowledge, skills, ability, and development needs of staff to provide culturally and linguistically competent services and supports to LGBT youth.

Standard 2: Non-Discrimination Policies

Youth-serving organizations have policies that prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression—as well as clearly defined practices for preventing, reporting, and addressing infractions.

Related policies and practices should, for example, prohibit all forms of harassment and discrimination, inform youth and staff about formal grievance procedures, and preclude contracting with service providers who discriminate or do not have similar protections.

Standard 3: Professional Commitment & Knowledge

Youth-serving organizations foster a culturally and linguistically competent service setting through workforce recruitment and development strategies—and professionals working in these settings should be dedicated to treating all LGBT youth equitably and building their capacity to do so.

Agencies should follow recruitment, hiring, and workforce development processes that ensure staff and volunteers are dedicated to and able to respectfully serve LGBT youth.

Standard 4: Data Collection & Information Sharing

Youth-serving organizations follow culturally and linguistically appropriate processes related to intake, data collection, and information sharing.

Forms and screening procedures should be in gender-neutral language and reflect options for various sexual orientations, gender identities, and same-sex parents.

Standard 5: Safe, Supportive Environments

Youth-serving organizations provide safe, supportive, and culturally competent environments for LGBT youth.

LGBT youth should be able to interact with their peers and staff without fear of harassment or violence. Foster a supportive environment by, for example, displaying symbols that positively represent the LGBT community (e.g., rainbows) and affirming images/resources.

Standard 6: Identity Affirmation

Youth-serving organizations effectively support the coming out process of LGBT youth and ensure that professional practices and language affirm LGBT identity and expression.

Organizations should have clear guidelines for staff around how to respond when youth disclose information regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Policies and practices should also ensure, for example, that youth are able to express their gender identity (e.g., clothes, hair,) and are referred to by their preferred pronoun (e.g., he, she).

Standard 7: Healthy Peer Connections

Youth-serving organizations foster supportive, caring peer relationships for LGBT youth—with both LGBT and non-LGBT peers.

To experience mutual support, caring, and personal development, all youth, including LGBT and questioning youth, should have opportunities to participate in social support groups and recreational activities with their peers. This can help reduce isolation and stigma, while creating opportunities for LGBT youth to discuss their LGBT identity openly.

Standard 8: Strong Family Connections

Youth-serving organizations strengthen the connections between LGBT youth and their families.

Family acceptance and support are critical to the positive development and overall well-being of LGBT and questioning youth. Providers can strengthen the connections between youth and their families by increasing family knowledge about the needs, interests, and perspectives of LGBT youth and the importance of family connections—and by promoting nonjudgmental family attitudes and behaviors that demonstrate respect and support.

Standard 9: Affirming Community-Based Services & Supports

Youth-serving organizations connect LGBT youth with other services and supports in the community that affirm LGBT identity—and collaborate with community partners to expand the availability of these resources where lacking.

Youth-serving agencies should assess whether LGBT youth have access to appropriate housing, job placement, and educational and mental health supports. Where there are service gaps, collaboration across youth-serving systems and advocacy for community development can identify opportunities and resources necessary to increase the array and access to services needed to meet youths' individualized needs.

Standard 10: Community Outreach and Engagement

Youth-serving organizations build awareness in the community about the experiences and needs of LGBT youth as well as available resources to support them—and meaningfully involve LGBT youth in these outreach efforts.

Identify and distribute local and online resource lists and community contacts for LGBT services and educational materials. Engage youth in conducting community outreach and promoting awareness of issues such as bullying, self and social acceptance, identity formation, depression, and suicide.

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Within AIR, the Human and Social Development Program promotes youth and family well-being by strengthening systems so children, youth, and families—especially those in tough circumstances—can thrive. We develop knowledge and understanding about LGBT youth through research and needs assessments. AIR also enhances opportunities for their healthy development, well-being, and safety by providing workforce training and technical assistance to service providers across systems addressing behavioral health, child welfare, education, juvenile justice, and homelessness. Please learn more about AIR at www.air.org.

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