Creating Safe and Affirming Programs for LGBTQ Youth

For training, support or coaching on implementing best practices, contact

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WeAreCoachingLeaders.com
Best Practice Guide: LGBTQ Youth

Training in and of itself is only helpful until life gets in the way, unless we put mechanisms in place to reinforce the learning and to put the ideas into action. This tool is designed to identify concrete steps and actions you might take immediately and in the long run to ensure that the programs and support you provide is safe, affirming and culturally competent.

This best practice guide includes:

- Creating a Welcoming Environment
- Intake Forms and the Use of Inclusive Language
- Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Youth
- Coming Out

Boxes below sections are intended for notes on potential action steps.

Actions Steps:

- *For me personally*
- *Within my agency*

This tool reflects recommended best practice from the leading organizations and researchers in the field and can be found at the following sites:


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Create a Welcoming Environment

LGBTQ youth often scan an office and program space for clues to help them determine to what extent the, staff, programs, agency, or school is affirming of their sexual orientation, gender expression, and/or gender identity. You may want to implement some of the following suggestions as appropriate to your setting.

- Hang posters showing racially and ethnically diverse, same-sex couples or families.
- Post LGBTQ friendly stickers and symbols in offices, classrooms, and on doors (e.g., safe zone stickers, rainbow, etc.).
- Post supportive materials such as quotes from famous LGBTQ icons, information about the LGBTQ community or materials from LGBTQ organizations. Along with signs for national holidays and months of celebration already in the space (e.g., Black History Month or Women’s History Month), display information about LGBTQ History Month in October, LGBT Pride Month in June, etc.
- Post visible non-discrimination statement that explicitly includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression.
- Provide at least one universal, gender inclusive or gender neutral restroom, so people are not faced with the issue of choosing the right or wrong bathroom.
- Provide LGBTQ-specific media, such as movies, books, local or national magazines or newsletters.
- Make yourself visible by wearing a supportive button or wristband or even a simple rainbow bracelet. These will let students know you are safe and supportive without saying a word.
- Make no assumptions when engaging with youth, or even other staff and parents, do not assume you know their sexual orientation or gender identity. Don’t assume that everyone is heterosexual or fits into your idea of gender roles – be open to the variety of identities and expressions. In our society, youth constantly receive the message that everyone is supposed to be straight and cisgender. Show youth that you understand.
- Respond to anti-LGBTQ behavior when it occurs or when you hear about it. This will let all youth know you do not tolerate homophobia or transphobia. It sends a strong message that anti-LGBTQ behavior is not acceptable to you and not allowed in your program, office, program, agency, or school.

Creating a Welcoming Environment Actions Steps:

Forms and the Use of Inclusive Language

Filling out forms gives youth their first, and most important, impressions of the extent to which their identity and families systems are recognized and affirmed. Review your forms for inclusive language regarding sex, gender, relationship status and family structures. The Williams Institute provides best practices for asking about gender and sexual orientation on intake forms and other forms.

- When talking with youth, it is important to reflect their language and terminology about their partners and their behavior. Many people do not define themselves through a sexual identity label, yet may be
attracted to persons of their same sex or gender or with more than one sex or gender. If you identify an individual as “gay” when they don’t self-identify in that way, you can damage rapport and trust.

- Respect transgender and non-binary youth by using the name and pronouns they ask you to use. If you are unsure, ask in a gentle, respectful way. Some youth explore different names and pronouns until they find what is most authentic for them. If a youth asks you to use a name and/or pronoun one week, and asks you to use another name and/or pronoun the next week, respect the youth’s request, even if you find it challenging. Remember, it is not about you, it is about the youth.

- When talking about intimate and/or relationship partners, use gender-neutral language such as —partner(s) or —significant other(s). Ask open-ended questions and don’t assume the gender of a youth’s partner(s) or people they are attracted to. Don’t assume current and past behaviors are the same. Look for ways in which stereotypes can impact the questions you ask and those you don’t ask (for example, not asking a gay man about children; or not asking a woman who identifies as lesbian about STD risks).

- In your schools or programs, some forms may have been updated to include gender-neutral language and others may not. Practice using inclusive language. If the form terminology is not neutral, practice asking the question in a way that is. For example, one school updated their forms to include questions about birth sex and current gender, a respectful way of recognizing and including transgender individuals.

Forms and the Use of Inclusive Language Actions Steps:

Transgender and Gender Non-binary Youth
Discrimination often affects transgender and gender non-binary youth in ways that prevent them from fully participating in youth programs and school environments and impacts their ability to learn. Discrimination can take forms such as ignoring or failing to respond to ongoing bullying and harassment, holding the youth to strict or unreasonable applications of a dress code that results in discipline, preventing youth from using appropriate restrooms, harassment by teachers and staff, and even expulsion from programs and schools. Below are some recommended best practices that accommodate both transgender and gender non-binary youth without resorting to discrimination.

Privacy/Confidentiality
All persons, including youth, have a right to privacy, and this includes the right to keep one’s transgender status private in youth programs and schools. Information about a youth’s transgender status, legal name, or gender assigned at birth also may constitute confidential medical information. Disclosing this information to other youth, their parents, or other third parties may violate privacy laws, such as the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Youth Providers should not disclose information that may reveal a youth’s transgender identity to others, including parents, coworkers, and school staff, unless legally required to do so or unless the youth has authorized such disclosure. Transgender and gender non-binary youth have the right to discuss and express their gender identity openly and to decide when, with
whom, and how much to share private information. The fact that a youth chooses to disclose their transgender identity to staff or other youth does not authorize program staff or school staff to disclose information about the youth. When interacting with the guardian of a transgender youth, use the youth’s legal name and the pronoun corresponding to the student’s gender assigned at birth unless the youth or guardian has specified otherwise.

Names and Pronouns
Every youth should be addressed by a name and pronoun that corresponds to their identity and who they know themselves to be. A court-ordered name or gender change is not required, and the youth need not change their official records. The intentional or persistent refusal to respect a youth’s gender (for example, intentionally referring to the youth by a name or pronoun that does not correspond to their identity) creates a hostile environment.

Access to Gender-Segregated Activities and Areas
To the extent possible, reduce or eliminate the practice of unnecessarily segregating youth by gender. In situations where youth are segregated by gender, include youth in the group that corresponds to their identity.

- **Restroom Accessibility:** Allow youth to have access to all restrooms that correspond to their gender identity. Any youth who has a need or desire for increased privacy, regardless of the underlying reason, should be provided access to a single user restroom. However, no youth should be required to use a single user restroom because they are transgender or gender nonconforming.

- **Locker Room Accessibility:** Assess the use of locker rooms by transgender youth on a case-by-case basis with the goals of maximizing the youth’s social integration and equal opportunity to participate in physical education classes and sports, ensuring the youth’s safety and comfort, and minimizing stigmatization of the youth. In most cases, transgender youth should have access to the locker room that corresponds to their gender identity consistently asserted, like all other youth. Any youth – transgender or not – who has a need or desire for increased privacy, regardless of the underlying reason, should be provided with a reasonable alternative changing area such as the use of a private area (e.g., a nearby restroom stall with a door, an area separated by a curtain, a P.E. instructor’s office in the locker room, or a nearby health office restroom), or with a separate changing schedule (e.g., using the locker room that corresponds to their gender identity before or after other students). Any alternative arrangement should be provided in a way that protects the student’s ability to keep his or her transgender status private. In no case shall a student be required to use a locker room that conflicts with the student’s gender identity.

- **Physical Education Classes, Intramurals Sports, and Interscholastic Athletics:** Allow all students to participate in physical education classes and intramural sports in a manner consistent with their gender identity.

Dress Code
Students have the right to dress in accordance with their gender identity consistently asserted at school and youth program, within the constraints of the dress codes adopted by the school or youth organization. Do not enforce a dress code more strictly against transgender and gender non-binary students than other students.

Transgender and Gender Non-binary Youth Action Steps:
Coming Out
When a youth comes out to you and tells you they are LGBTQ your initial response is important. The youth has likely spent time in advance thinking about whether or not to tell you, and when and how to tell you. Here are some tips to help you support them.

- **Offer support but don’t assume a youth needs any help.** The youth may be completely comfortable with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and may not need help dealing with it or be in need of any support. It may be that the youth just wanted to tell someone, or just simply to tell you so you might know them better. Offer and be available to support the youth as they come out to others.

- **Recognize risk in coming out.** There is often a risk in telling someone something personal, especially sharing for the first time one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity, when it is generally not considered the norm. Consider someone’s coming out a gift and thank them for giving that gift to you. Sharing this personal information with you may mean the youth respects and trusts you.

- **Listen, listen, listen.** One of the best ways to support a youth is to hear them out and let the youth know you are there to listen. Coming out is never ending and there’s a good chance you’ll be approached again to discuss this process, the challenges and the joys of being out at home and school.

- **Assure and respect confidentiality.** The youth told you and may or may not be ready to tell others. Let the youth know the conversation is confidential and that you won’t share the information with anyone else, unless they ask for your help. If they want others to know, doing it in their own way with their own timing is important. Respect their privacy.

- **Ask questions that demonstrate understanding, acceptance and compassion.** Some suggestions are:
  - Who else have you come out to? If out at home, what is it like at home? What supportive adults do you have in your life?
  - What have your experiences been in school? Do you feel safe in school? Do you feel safe in this program? Supported by the adults in this school?
  - How can I support you? Resources or someone to listen?

- **Remember that the youth has not changed.** They are still the same person you knew before the disclosure; you just have more information about them, which might improve your relationship. Let the youth know that you feel the same way about them as you always have and that they are still the same person. If you are shocked, try not to let the surprise lead you to view or treat the student any differently.

- **Challenge traditional norms.** You may need to consider your own beliefs about sexual orientation, gender identity and gender roles. Do not expect people to conform to societal norms about gender or sexual orientation.

- **Be prepared to give a referral.** If there are questions you can’t answer, or if the youth does need emotional support, be prepared to make appropriate and affirming referrals.

**What NOT to say when someone comes out to you:**

- “I knew it!” This makes the disclosure about you and not the youth, and you might have been making an assumption based on stereotypes.

- “Are you sure?” “You’re just confused.” “It’s just a phase – it will pass.” This suggests that the youth doesn’t know who they are.

- “You just haven’t found a good woman yet” said to a male or “a good man yet” said to a female. This assumes that everyone is straight or should be.

- “Shhh, don’t tell anyone.” This implies that there is something wrong and that being LGBTQ must be kept hidden. If you have real reason to believe that disclosing this information will cause the student harm, then make it clear that is your concern. Say “Thanks for telling me. We should talk about how tolerant our system, community, etc. is. You may want to consider how this may affect your decision about who to come out to.”
• “You can’t be gay – you’ve had relationships with people of the opposite sex.” This refers only to behavior, while sexual orientation is about inner feelings.

Coming Out Action Steps:

Remember, training, alone, is only helpful when mechanisms are in place to support and sustain the learning and ability to practice these behaviors. This tool is designed to identify concrete steps and actions to take immediately and in the long run to ensure that the programs and support you provide is safe, affirming and culturally competent.

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Actions Steps you want to take, overall, include:

• For me personally:

• Support within my agency:

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