

# Getting Down to Basics

*Tools to Support LGBTQ Youth in Care*

## Caseworkers with LGBTQ Clients

If you work with young people in foster care, you probably have clients who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQ). These young people are at high risk of harassment, abuse and self-destructive behaviors, and too often suffer from misunderstanding and mistreatment by the child welfare systems that should protect them. LGBTQ young people, like all of your clients, deserve to be treated with respect and sensitivity. There is much you can do to help your LGBTQ clients make healthy transitions from foster care to adulthood.

### **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE ARE IN YOUR MIDST.**

Don't assume that all of your clients are heterosexual. Even if you think you do not have clients who are LGBTQ, you most likely do. Many LGBTQ young people fear the negative reactions that come from revealing who they are and carefully hide that they are LGBTQ.

### **EXAMINE YOUR OWN BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES THAT MIGHT AFFECT YOUR PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES TO YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS.**

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 you owe a professional duty of care to your LGBTQ clients. For example, licensed and certified members of the National Association of Social Workers are bound by a code of ethics that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and requires a client's express consent before the release of confidential information.

### **TREAT YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS WITH THE SAME DIGNITY AND EXPECTATIONS AS YOU DO ALL OTHERS.**

Don't assume that all the problems your LGBTQ clients have are related to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Don't address sexual orientation or gender identity questions or concerns as deviant or pathological. By the same token, don't allow an LGBTQ young person to be subjected to so-called conversion or reparative therapy for the purpose of changing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. Such "therapies" have been

shunned by the leading national professional counseling organizations as unethical and potentially dangerous. Establish ground rules for behavior by LGBTQ clients, including standards for acceptable sexual behavior, that are the same as for heterosexual youth. Always respect and maintain an LGBTQ young person's privacy and never disclose confidential information about sexual orientation or gender identity without the client's permission.

### **BE AWARE OF YOUR LANGUAGE.**

Eliminate antigay slurs from discussion. Use gender-neutral language with all of your clients. For example, rather than asking a teenage boy if he has a girlfriend, ask if he has "someone special" in his life. Learn the difference between "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" and use the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning in appropriate contexts.

### **DON'T STEREOTYPE LGBTQ PEOPLE.**

Don't assume that you can identify LGBTQ people based on stereotypical mannerisms or characteristics. Also avoid the assumption that all LGBTQ people "are the same" or necessarily share a common sense of community. Although LGBTQ people are in every corner of the country, the cultural responses to sexual orientation and gender identity may vary a great deal even within a particular community. The diversity of society in general is reflected within LGBTQ communities.

### **CREATE A POSITIVE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT IN YOUR OFFICE THAT WELCOMES AND AFFIRMS LGBTQ PEOPLE.**

Display recognizable symbols of support such as pink triangles and rainbow flags to let all your

## FOSTERING TRANSITIONS

A CWLA/Lambda Legal  
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clients know that you are a sensitive, safe and welcoming person for LGBTQ people to go to. You can post Lambda Legal's Youth in Out-of-Home Care poster, included in this tool kit and available in English and Spanish from the Lambda Legal website, as a sign that your LGBTQ clients are safe to be open with you.

### **KNOW WHAT TO DO IF A CLIENT DISCLOSES TO YOU THAT HE OR SHE IS LGBTQ.**

Use the disclosure as an opportunity to show unconditional support for your client. Be willing to have an in-depth discussion, and allow your client to process her or his feelings. The goal in working effectively with LGBTQ young people is to create a safe, supportive and nurturing environment within which they can find the resources they need. Assist LGBTQ young people in deciding to whom, where, when and how to come out in order to ensure safety while maintaining privacy. If you lack knowledge on LGBTQ issues don't be afraid to admit it, but commit to learn what you need to know to provide competent supportive services.

### **SEEK OUT SAFE, AFFIRMING PLACEMENTS FOR LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE.**

People who are perceived as LGBTQ are at a significantly higher risk of harassment and violence than their peers. Don't put your LGBTQ clients into placements, services, schools or neighborhoods where they will be unsafe or misunderstood. If seeking a foster or adoptive home placement, be sure that the home is accepting of LGBTQ people. Do outreach to LGBT and LGBT-friendly adults who can provide safe and nurturing homes for LGBTQ youth. If placing an LGBTQ young person in a group home setting, make sure that explicit nondiscrimination policies are in place and enforced. If such group homes do not exist in your community, inquire of a prospective home whether an LGBTQ person has ever been placed there and what the experience was like. Also inquire if the training provided to staff includes information about working with LGBTQ youth. Trust the instincts and observations of your LGBTQ clients when it comes to feeling safe and welcome. Respond promptly to anti-LGBTQ slurs and attacks. Be prepared to advocate for fair and equal treatment of your LGBTQ clients.

### **BE PREPARED TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH TRANSGENDER YOUTH.**

Transgender youth may have unique medical and housing needs. They also often face serious risk of harassment and violence. It's important that you seek out additional resources, if necessary, to provide appropriate services and placements to transgender youth. Allow all of your clients to express their gender identities in ways that are most comfortable for them, including allowing transgender clients to dress in the manner that they choose. Support transgender young people's gender identity and expression by referring to them by the names and pronouns they prefer.

### **BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO LGBTQ YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.**

Many LGBTQ young people benefit from attending a community-based peer support group. Those that require professional therapeutic intervention need access to supportive professional services. Your agency should develop and distribute an up-to-date list of LGBTQ community resources. If you don't know where to

find such resources, contact us, your nearest LGBTQ community center ([www.lgbtcenters.org](http://www.lgbtcenters.org)) or a local chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG, [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)), or look online for national and community resources. Lambda Legal maintains a list of state and national resources that can be found at [www.lambdalegal.org/publications/fs\\_resources-for-lgbtq-youth](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/fs_resources-for-lgbtq-youth).

### **PROVIDE SUPPORT AND RESOURCES TO OTHERS IN THE LGBTQ YOUNG PERSON'S LIFE.**

Be prepared to provide members of the birth, foster or adoptive families of LGBTQ clients with relevant resource materials on sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as with opportunities to discuss and process issues of concern.

### **ENSURE THAT YOUR LGBTQ CLIENTS RECEIVE DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES.**

Provide developmentally appropriate information and resources to all your clients about sexuality and sexual health, including about LGBTQ issues and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Encourage your agency to adopt written policies providing clients access to free and confidential HIV testing without guardian consent or notification, if not already in place. Protect the privacy of your clients' HIV status, with disclosure only on a need-to-know basis. For more information, visit the Center for HIV Law and Policy's page on the rights of youth in state custody to comprehensive sexual health education at [www.hivlawandpolicy.org/public/teensense](http://www.hivlawandpolicy.org/public/teensense).

### **ADVOCATE FOR SUPPORTIVE, COMPETENT CARE FOR LGBTQ YOUTH AT YOUR AGENCY.**

Take an inventory of the policies and training at your agency. Are LGBTQ people included in nondiscrimination policies? Are LGBTQ clients included in your best practice guidelines and standards? Are LGBTQ issues included in pre-service and in-service training curricula? Be prepared to advocate for changes at your agency to make the environment more LGBTQ-inclusive.

### **SCHEDULE A TRAINING FOR YOUR ORGANIZATION.**

In 2009, Lambda Legal partnered with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) on a Train-the-Trainer initiative designed to build the capacity, awareness and skills of out-of-home care professionals serving LGBTQ youth in foster care, juvenile justice centers and homeless shelters. Master Trainers are available to facilitate trainings throughout the country. To find Master Trainers in your area or to order copies of the NASW-Lambda Legal curriculum entitled *Moving the Margins: Training Curriculum for Child Welfare Services with LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care*, by Diane Elze, Robin McHaelen, NASW & Lambda Legal (2009), contact Lambda Legal at 1-866-LGBTeen (1-866-542-8336) (toll-free) or 212-809-8585, or download it for free at [www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org).

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