

Heidi Breaux Consulting, LLC

**Supporting
LGBTQIA+ Youth
in Foster Care**

Objectives

Learn Definitions, Basic Terminology

Learn “at risk” concerns for LGBTQIA+ in foster care

Overview of state and federal policies

Provide clinical considerations

Next steps: How to you plan to take your allyship further?

About Me

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Master of Social Work, New York University, 2005

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Teaching Philosophy

It is important to foster an environment not only of learning, but unlearning.

Unlearning provides an understanding that society has caused us to see the world in a particular way or even view one way as “normative.”

This may or may not be true, and more importantly may or may not be helpful.

Unlearning is a gentle process that recognizes sometimes people act in ways consciously or unconsciously that they experience an internalized conflict with, whether or not they verbalize their own anguish about it.

Unlearning can also lead to a path of self-discovery regarding identities that are both fixed and unfixed.

Changing rules or norms that we once thought were acceptable or normative is highly encouraged.

Definitions

Let's go over some simple terminology

Sexual Identity & Gender Identity are different things

Sexual identity

- How someone identifies their own sexuality

Gender Identity

- How someone identified their gender, gender presentation, gender identity, and/or expression

Sexual identity and orientation are commonly seen as gendered

Overly simplified –

Gender identity is who you wake up as.

Sexual orientation is who you wake up with.

Gender is a social construct!

Acronyms

Sometimes people use LGBT, GLBT, or LGBT+ to mean "LGBT and related communities"

The most current term is LGBTQIA+

This stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual. The + represents many other terms, such as non binary and pansexual, just to name a few.

People self identify in the LGBTQIA+ community. So anyone who says they are in the community – is!

For example, you may meet someone who is a heterosexual cisgender man, and his partner identifies as a pansexual gender queer woman.

When to use LGBTQIA+

ALWAYS!!! It may seem like acronyms in the LGBTQIA+ community are always changing - They are!

As different parts of the community gets more political and social rights, their voice gets louder, and the landscape of the entire community shifts to become more inclusive.

Being an ally is a lifelong process.

True allies understand that it is important to learn the newest most socially acceptable acronym and say ALL of the letters ALL of the time when all identities are meant to be included.

If you are just talking about sexual orientation, then include those letters and same for gender identity.

This is being inclusive, accepting, showing great effort, and not “othering” marginalized identities.

Queer

Once an offensive word used as a slur, the word queer has been reclaimed by the community.

It is used as an umbrella term to bridge both sexual minority identities as well as gender diverse ones.

Someone may describe their sexual orientation as queer, or their gender identity as queer, or both, or neither.

It is also okay for anyone (including straight people) to use the term queer in the place of LGBTQIA+ as long as it's done in a way that is well intended.

Queer should never be used with a negative connotation or in a disapproving way.

Intersex

Human's biological sex is not determined by the outside appearance of their genitals. Science is actually more complex than that!

The term "sex assigned at birth" should be used because doctors assign a baby their sex based on the appearance of their outward genital appearance.

Intersex people are individuals born with any of several variations in sex characteristics including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones or genitals that typically fall outside of a pre-determined scale for male or female sex characteristics.

This can impact the appearance of their genitals, or it may not.

Many people are intersex and don't know it.

Being intersex is statistically as common as having red hair.

Two Spirit

Two Spirit is an umbrella term used by Indigenous Native American communities to describe members who fulfill a traditional third-gender role. This refers to both gender and sexual orientation.

A third and fourth gender role when one individual fulfills the social, romantic, cultural, family and tribe needs of both men and women has always been embraced and included within Indigenous Native American culture.

Colonialization and White Supremacy has brought about the transphobia we have in American culture today.

Some people include a number 2 in the acronym for Two Spirit identities, such as LGBTQ2IA+.

Agender

Agender often means that someone self-identifies as neither a man, nor, woman, or both.

They often describe their gender as gender-neutral, genderfree, or genderless.

This does not mean they do not or lack a gender. Agender is their gender.

Agender people may use gender neutral pronouns, a combination of pronouns, both or neither.

Agender people may identify as transgender, or non binary, both or neither.

Cisgender/Transgender

Cisgender people identify with (or are on the same side of) the gender assigned to them at birth.

Transgender is a term often used to describe an individual whose gender identity does not necessarily match the sex assigned to them at birth.

Genderqueer, and non binary, is a catch-all category for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine—identities which are outside the gender binary and cisnormativity.

Genderqueer people may express a combination of masculinity and femininity, both or neither, in their gender expression.

GENDER IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT!

Social and Legal Transition For Transgender and Non Binary Youth

Social and legal transition: May or may not include any of the following: Change of name, pronoun selection, cosmetic modifications to appearance, dress, changes to an individual's vocal tone, etc.

This may entail legal changes to their name and gender marker on identification documents like driver's licenses and passports.

It is strongly encouraged to always refer to the person in the gender they identify for themselves regardless of medical or legal transition steps.

Some people for various reasons are unable to take medical or legal steps. So, these should never be required – even in medical settings.

It is important to consider how local and state laws may impact these practices. Where this is no law prohibiting affirming practice, someone's gender identity they identify for themselves should always be respected.

Unique Experiences of the LGBTQQIA+ Community

Stigma

The impact of stigma and discrimination effects self-esteem and self worth. This includes the lack of access to affirmative healthcare and disease prevention resources in society.

Multiple oppressions

The impact of multiple stigmas and problems including concurrent poverty, racism, HIV/AIDS related issues and/or other concerns.

Lack of social spaces

Reliance upon the bar scene for socialization and identity affirmation.

Disconnection from family

Family, religious and social intolerance. Rejection and thrown out of homes due to sexual orientation/gender identity. This can be even more difficult for youth.

Violence

The threat and/or experience of anti-gay or anti-trans violence. Feeling unsafe due to laws passed that restrict access to healthcare and affirming spaces and fosters an environment where prejudice and discrimination has no legal consequences.

Surrounded by culture that is not our own

Adapted from Nealy, E. (2006)

Disconnection

LGBTQIA+ youth often find themselves surrounded by a heterosexual and gender-conforming history and culture that is not their own.

- Rituals such as courtship, engagement, bachelor parties, wedding showers, marriage, etc. are made for cis straight people.
- Relationships – language such as boyfriend/girlfriend, husband/wife, mom/dad, are made for cis straight people.

Unlike ethnic immigrants, LGBTQIA+ people often experience that even their own families are different. This dynamic that creates an even more profound sense of being a stranger or “other” in their community, schools, camp, etc.

Why is This Topic Important?

Anywhere from 0.7% to 2.7% of high school youth in the U.S. and 1.4 million adults identify as transgender or gender diverse.

When compared to their peers, transgender and non binary have 2-3x increased risk for anxiety, depression, self-harm (sometimes protective), suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.

Most often young adults are treated by society of as members of their assumed gender and this may not always be accurate and can cause a variety of negative impacts on ego development and self-esteem.

LGBTQIA+ Youth

Nationally, LGBTQIA+ students face greater difficulties than their cis and heterosexual counterparts in school.

Being in the foster care system for LGBTQIA+ youth can magnify this.

This can be due to the need to adjust in another setting that is not made with them in mind.

To avoid harassment, discrimination, or violence, many feel pressured to “blend in” with the mainstream environment and dismiss thoughts of their true identity which can have negative social and emotional health consequences.

Many LGBTQIA+ youth experience a higher level of stress, in addition to stress indicators that are already associated with being a student.

There are few resources and/or social spaces serving the needs and interests of LGBTQIA+ young people.

It is important to realize the factors as well as the lack of acceptance of peers and family contribute to rates of depression and suicide **far greater** than students feeling “bad”, shame, or “unsure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Foster Care in Louisiana

According to a report in 2017, of the almost 443,000 youth in foster care in the U.S., 4,460 of them resided in Louisiana, 1,378 of whom were waiting to be adopted at the end of the fiscal year.

In 2017, 766 children were adopted from the foster care system in Louisiana.

A 2007 report by the Williams Institute, concluded that if Louisiana were to ban lesbians and gays from serving as foster parents, it would cost the state between \$958,000 - \$1.4 million per year.

Foster Care and Adoption Laws in Louisiana

Louisiana law allows any adult or a "married couple jointly" to petition to adopt. La. Ch. C. Ann. Art. 1198.

With nationwide recognition of the marriages of same-sex couples, same-sex spouses should be able to adopt jointly. However adopting independently as a LGBTQIA+ person certainly poses multiple challenges.

State law permits any married person to adopt the child of their spouse via stepparent adoption. La. Ch. Ann. Art. 1243. Because marriages of same-sex couples are recognized nationwide, an individual should be permitted to adopt the child of their same-sex spouse via stepparent adoption.

Louisiana has regulations prohibiting discrimination in foster care based on a child's sexual orientation or "any other non-merit factor." La. Admin Code. tit. 67, pt. V., § 7311(E)(5); La. Admin Code. tit. 67, pt. V, § 7115(A)(5).

Although there are many stories of LGBTQIA+ couples and families who have applied to become foster parents and just never hear back.

Nationwide LGBTQIA+ Youth in Foster Care

10 states – Virginia, North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan, Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Kansas, Oklahoma and South Carolina – have passed laws permitting child welfare agencies to discriminate against children and potential parents based on moral or religious objections.

19% percent of foster youth over the age of 12 identify as LGBTQIA+.

13 states have no protections against discrimination for LGBTQIA+ youth receiving foster care and adoption services; an additional 11 states do not protect transgender youth receiving these services.

Only 3 states require placement of transgender youth in facilities based on their gender identity.

9 states require LGBTQIA+-inclusive cultural competency training for child welfare staff and/or foster parents.

Added Stressors

All foster youth experience emotional harm and often trauma when they are moved to different homes. For LGBTQIA+ foster youth this may be more severe and more often.

Frequently foster youth do not get to keep all of their belongings when they move homes, which for LGBTQIA+ youth may be very important to their identity and gender expression.

Foster families may be hesitant to foster LGBTQIA+ youth if there are other children in the home.

Often foster parent(s) may think the youth's LGBTQIA+ identity is due to trauma or may not believe them.

LGBTQIA+ youth in the foster care system may be less likely to be connected to community events and role models.

Trauma Within Foster Care

Foster parents may seek out LGBTQIA+ youth to try to “change” their identity or make them go to conversion “therapy”

Over 90% of LGBTQIA+ people who receive conversion “therapy” attempt suicide in their lifetime.

LGBTQIA+ youth may be less likely to speak about abuse in foster times if the family is affirming or somewhat affirming in any way and/or they have worries about not being placed with a family again.

LGBTQIA+ foster youth very often do not find foster families, get adopted, or have long term placements.

Frequently they age out of the foster care system into homelessness, then encounter more disparities such as job discrimination, low wages, etc.

Long-Term Difficulties

Some LGBTQIA+ youth were in foster care, while others entered into foster care specifically because they were kicked out by their parents due to their LGBTQIA+ identity.

Transgender and non binary youth have a hard time finding foster families and in school.

Typically LGBTQIA+ youth end up at homeless shelters long term rather than foster families. This can be due to homelessness or particularly homelessness and housing insecurity based due to their LGBTQIA+ identify.

Some homeless shelters have affirming practices, while others do not.

There have even been known incidents of shelters rejecting LGBTQIA+ foster youth due to their identity.

Hate Crimes

Federally, LGBTQIA+ people, including youth, are ***twice*** as likely to experience hate crimes as compared to any other minority group.

The most common types of hate violence towards LGBTQIA+ people are verbal harassment, discrimination, physical violence, and threats/intimidation.

Un-Seen populations

All incidents of hate and violence are known to increase exponentially in BIPOC communities and for immigrants who rarely report incidents to legal authorities due to constant real threats of systemic discrimination and oppression.

Reports by LGBTQIA+ members community are known to commonly not be taken by law officials. This is especially true for LGBTQIA+ youth where the officer may be discriminatory, not believe them, or refuse to not right the report due to the victim's gender presentation or not having a photo ID.

A LGBTQIA+ youth in a foster home is more likely to be just returned to that home if they don't have documentation for their address or simply returned to their housing facility, (falsely) assumed to be instigating a problem.

Partners of LGBTQIA+ youth people are known to have collectively endured significant incidents of hate and violence, including from family members. However, research on these incidents has never been quantified.

The Cost of Trauma

LGBTQIA+ youth in the U.S. are 4x more likely than their peers to attempt suicide.

When families reject LGBTQIA+ youth – they are 8.4x more attempt suicide as compared to LGB peers with low or no levels of family rejection.

For transgender or non binary people including youth, the suicide attempt rate reaches up to 42-46%.

LGBTQIA+ youth who are victimized are also at greater risk for developing PTSD later in life.

Intersectionality

People are complex and have multiple identities that all intersect at any given moment to shape their experience in the world.

Many LGBTQIA+ foster youth have more than one marginalized identity that impacts their everyday life.

This can impact all facets of their life including: finances, access to education, healthcare, neighborhood and living arrangements, and social environment.

Victim Blaming

Occurs frequently with LGBTQIA+ youth.

Examples:

- Maybe if you said it in a different way, your parents would have reacted differently?
- Maybe your foster parents will be more accepting if you have a partner? Or dress differently?
- Perhaps if you didn't "act so gay" or kept that your own business, it' wouldn't be such a problem in your home.

This puts the ownership of the wrongdoing onto the victim and away from the discriminatory person. It implies, if you did something different their reaction would have changed.

Conversion Therapy

Also known as “reparative” or “sexual reorientation” therapy is a practice that has been proven to be dangerous by “changing” someone from LGBTQIA+ to straight and cisgender.

Instead of changing the person, it actually psychologically trains them to commit or want to commit suicide if they participate in any LGBTQIA+ related practices including thoughts, relationships, and more.

There has never been substantial and valid research to support the claims Conversion Therapy makes.

Many people who have undergone Conversion Therapy have reported life-long anxiety, trauma, and suicidal ideation as a result of the treatment.

Conversion Therapy takes place in individual counseling, groups, camps, schools, and more.

LGBTQIA+ youth should NEVER be sent to Conversion Therapy.

Subtle Conversion Therapy

Saying things like:

- “It’s a hard sad life to be gay.”
- “I think you are bisexual because you met someone (of the same gender) who was so nice and able to provide you with what you wanted, you just felt comfortable and taken care of.”
- “I think you are having trouble with your male teacher because you are a lesbian and don’t like men.”
- “Maybe you are gay because you never had a father figure in your life.”

Are all subtle examples of sentiments (intentionally or unintentionally) rooted in the context of Conversion Therapy. This includes: blaming the victim, thinking someone or something knows better about the person or what’s good for the person than they do, and implying they want/need to/should change.

NASW Position Against Conversion Therapy

In May of 2015, NASW released a position statement against Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) which said: “NASW supports the adoption of local, state, federal, and international policies and legislation that ban all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity” (NASW 2008), and further adds -

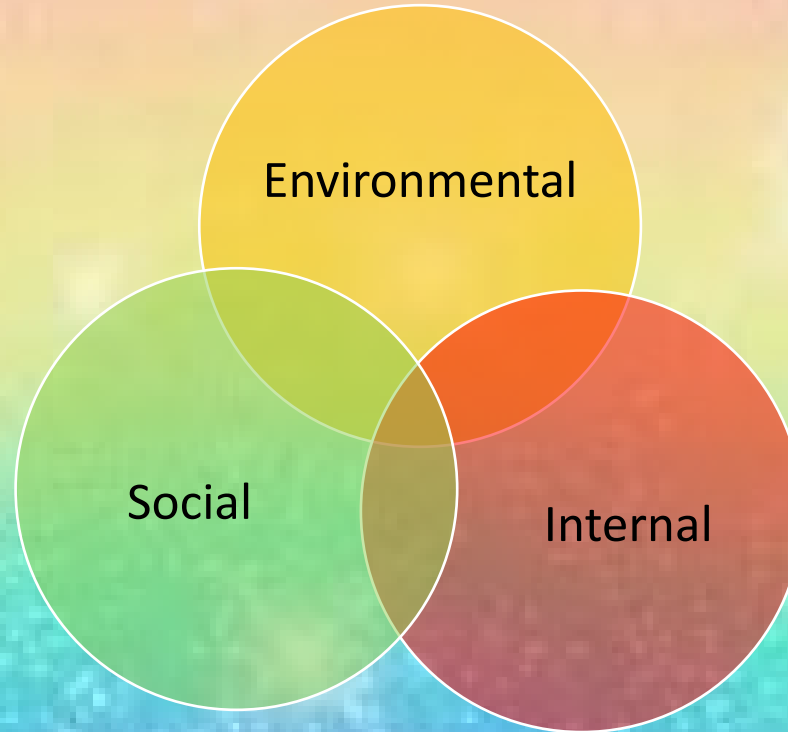
“NASW condemns the use of SOCE or so-called reparative therapy by any person identifying as a social worker or any agency that identifies as providing social work services. Public dollars should not be spent on programs that support SOCE.” (NASW, 2014)

“The National Association of Social Workers reaffirms its stance against therapies and treatments designed to change sexual orientation or gender identity and against referring clients to practitioners or programs that claim to do so (NASW, 2014).

NASW joins the American Psychiatric Association (APA), American Academy of Nursing, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Medical Association (AMA), and many more health organizations who have asked for a national ban on Conversion Therapy.

Disparities

Mental health disparities for all LGBTQIA+ youth are most often:



External Stressors

For LGBTQIA+ youth this may include:

- Gender based discrimination
- Rejection
- Victimization
- Parental including foster parental disclosure
- Explicit and implicit messaging about gender acceptance including from a young age
- Not being affirmed in their identity including:
 - Lack of access or safety in bathrooms
 - Lack of access to legal documentation supporting their identity
 - Not being called by their appropriate name or pronoun
 - Lack of access to a safe and affirming school environment
 - Misguided beliefs that their identity is a phase, a sin, or “they’ll grown out of it”
 - Not being allowed to wear clothes that match their gender identity or expression
 - Local laws that impact their healthcare, school environment, and more
 - Not seeing positive role models represented in history, books, sports, media, and literature
 - Fear tactics used against youth who have “come out” to influence other kids not to do so, like sending them to another school or making them meet with the school psychologist

Internal Stressors

For LGBTQIA+ youth this may include:

- Gender dysphoria
- Puberty
- Identity development
- Fear or expecting:
 - Discrimination
 - Rejection
 - Victimization
 - Religious punishment

LGBTQIA+ youth may have some, none, OR all of these internal and external stressors, and these may change over time.

Social Identity in the U.S.

Many people, have been brought up to believe that “people are people”, that we all have “differences”, and that despite those we should not treat one another differently.

This notion, while often well-intentioned and can stem from a person’s desire to not discriminate but can be hazardous to good cross-racial/cultural practice.

Statements that seek to “equalize” us by ignoring differences, minimize and devalue the experiences of many clients and many groups in this country.

Saying things like “I just wouldn’t let it bother me” is not strengthening a person’s ego; it’s being not supportive and reminding them of all the privilege you have that they don’t.

Body Language

Don't read or draw meaning from queer and trans people's body language.

LGBTQIA+ people should not be held accountable to cis heterosexual people's standards for body language.

Some (not all) trans and non binary people experience gender dysphoria.

Many people in the LGBTQIA+ community, including youth, have experienced trauma, including LGBTQIA+ foster youth, and stand, sit, talk, in ways that feel comfortable and authentic for themselves.

There are many reasons why LGBTQIA+ people have different body language.

Taking "cues" from a person's body language is pathologizing them and should never be done.

Remember

Not all transgender and non binary people experience gender dysphoria.

LGBTQIA+ identities should always been seen as “normative.”

ALL LGBTQIA+ youth should always be encouraged to live authentically, on their own path, without attributing well-being to a particular outcome or seeking to find a particular result.

Not every “it gets better story.” Expecting these narratives has done harm to the LGBTQIA+ community. Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst just in case.

Always take special care to consider the impact of the intersectionality of multiple identities for LGBTQIA+ foster youth, including systemic oppression, and notions of privilege, power and control.

Cultural norms may also impact communication patterns from LGBTQIA+ foster youth with adults, authority figures, peers, and family members.

Other Considerations

Foster parents of LGBTQIA+ youth may also experience their own discrimination from friends, family, school officials, etc.

The intersectionality of their own identity should also be taken into consideration.

Connecting LGBTQIA+ foster youth to history, role models, community groups, elders, and other peers can be an important pathway towards building resilience, self-esteem, and support.

Looking Ahead

LGBTQIA+ youth, including foster youth, are profoundly impacted by state, federal, and local policy on many levels including legalized and government supported discrimination.

Continued education needs to be consistent and ongoing to work effectively with LGBTQIA+ foster youth.

Forming meaningful connections to LGBTQIA+ people and advocacy groups is another very beneficial way to continue to gain awareness as well as explore a greater understanding on how to move away from generalizations and implicit bias, and towards supportive individualized best practices.

Now It's Your Turn

- How do you plan to take your actions further?
- What is one commitment you would like to make to create an affirming environment starting today?
- What is one thing you will do in the future to become a more vocal ally or member of the community?

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Thank you!

A big thank you for attending today, having me at this conference, and for all that you do for the LGBTQIA+ community, including foster youth.

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