

## Supporting LGBTQIA+ Youth in Your Care

We all know that children and youth who enter out-of-home care are dealing with complicated feelings of grief and the complexities of trauma. For LGBTQIA+ youth, however, there are often additional fears and anxieties related to gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Study after study has shown LGBTQIA+ youth in out-of-home care systems, such as foster care or group homes, are disproportionately represented and face higher rates of verbal harassment, placement disruption, physical violence, and discrimination. They also experience worse outcomes than their non- LGBTQIA+ peers, such as homelessness, substance abuse, and higher suicide rates.

### Important Youth Voices

Like all young people, LGBTQIA+ youth need a safe place to live, the loving guidance of supportive adults, and the freedom to express themselves as they develop a self-identity. Those who work closest with these youth, such as foster parents and adoptive parents, have the greatest opportunity for impact not only with the youth but also with systemic change. What is crucially important is listening to and advocating for what LGBTQIA+ youth are telling us they need.

A great example of listening to and meeting the needs of LGBTQIA+ youth is [Courage MKE](#)'s Courage House, Wisconsin's first licensed group home established specifically

for displaced LGBTQIA+ youth. Here's what one resident wants foster parents, potential foster parents, and adoptive parents of LGBTQIA+ to know:

*"I have encountered discrimination and ignorance. Please keep in mind that the foster system is traumatic as it is. No kid wants to go from home to home trying to find a 'family.' With that stated, please understand that patience will be your best friend. Children of any background need patience and to take time to adjust. When you are patient, you will notice much more from the child. Those small smiles, those glowing eyes, and even the shivers of excitement or sometimes fear that come with a new environment.*

*"You need open-mindedness, the ability to listen, understand, and be willing to experience and research with an open mind. Your children come from different backgrounds; your child is experiencing a whirlwind of opinions. Gender, sexuality, religion, political views, etc., are not up to the parent. Unless your child is hurting themselves or others, please don't bind them to any set ideology.*

*"Support is shown from the biggest acts to the smallest, like smiling or saying, 'I am proud of you, kid.' What makes me feel supported is the ability to have space. I*

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*want to have my own space, but I don't like to be alone. Adults must understand that it is absolutely fine to give space to their kids. Just remember that at some point, we want to be invited and noticed, too.*

*“Allow us to have bad days, to have mood swings, to understand change. A home is a place that adapts to everyone equally. Be willing to educate yourselves about your children's interests.*

*“I want parents to know that sexuality, gender, gender expression, etc., is not bound by just one straight view, one specific color, or just one social group. The LGBTQIA+ community and those who identify or fall under it will look different. Don't expect your child to look a certain way because they are gay; don't expect your child to only be bound by he/she/they pronouns. There is more to the LGBTQIA+ than we can imagine or see.*

*“To this day, I am still not sure where I fall under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella but, I am surely bound to figure that out. Parents, this will happen eventually, too. We, as kids, don't ask for perfection. You, as well as us, will make mistakes. But it's a journey—we will learn to praise and love as we grow. Therefore, be patient and stay strong.”*

Courage MKE co-founder Nick adds, *“When an LGBTQIA+ child comes into care, as foster parents, we need to be sure to let them know that our home is a safe space for them to live authentically. At the Courage House, we have a philosophy that ‘You can't begin to work on yourself until you can be yourself.’ Creating safety could be a quick conversation while asking some gentle*

*questions. It is important not to push it as it could be very off-putting to be drilled with questions right off the bat. It is their story, and it is their timeline. Let them lead you.”*

In addition to giving voice to needs, we can support LGBTQIA+ youth by:

- Identifying trusted, affirming health care and other service providers
- Allowing space for youth to be their authentic selves
- Affirming identity and promoting well-being
- Educating ourselves and showing interest in the youth's interests
- Asking for and using preferred pronouns
- Opening our minds and hearts for youth to feel safe in talking to us
- Establishing and enforcing a zero-tolerance policy for bullying and harassment
- Seeking out opportunities for youth to connect with LGBTQIA+ resources and supports
- Looking for opportunities to educate and cultivate affirming supports

### **LGBTQIA+ Youth in Schools**

LGBTQIA+ youth need to feel safe, welcome and included in classrooms as well as at home. As parents, we can help advocate by inquiring with school administrators, teachers, or staff about school policies regarding safety and inclusion. For example:

- What are school policies regarding bullying?
- Is the school's sex education program LGBTQIA+ inclusive?
- Are school dress codes nondiscriminatory?



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- What about policies regarding school dances or prom?
- Does the school offer opportunities for LGBTQIA+ clubs or organizations?
- Do LGBTQIA+ students have safe spaces to report issues, and will they be addressed?

If the school the youth in your care attends is not a safe space, you may need to decide what action can be taken. This could be anything from ensuring the school puts policies in place to moving the child to a new school if necessary. Inaction can have devastating long-term effects on the child's

self-esteem, mental health, ability to learn, and overall well-being.

### Working Together

It is only in working collectively, giving voice to youth in care, and pushing for protective policies, laws, and standards that we can ensure that LGBTQIA+ youth find safety and healing in out-of-home care. As Nick of Courage MKE put it, *“As we know, children that come into care have a lot of emotions and trauma to unpack. Let them trust you, and they will guide you the rest of the way.”*



## Glossary of Commonly Used Terms/Acronyms

This is a *general* guide of commonly used terms. Note that terminology and meanings can vary even within the LGBTQIA+ community. A more expansive glossary from the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) is included in the resources section.

- **LGBTQIA+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning/Queer, Intersex, Asexual, or Ally
- **Ally:** Someone who is actively supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community
- **Asexual:** The lack of a sexual attraction or desire
- **Bisexual:** A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity
- **Cisgender:** Gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth
- **Gay:** A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to the same gender. Men, women, and non-binary people may use this umbrella term to describe themselves.
- **Gender identity:** One's concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves
- **Intersex:** Born with a variety of differences in sex traits and reproductive anatomy
- **Lesbian:** A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women
- **Non-binary:** An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. It can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing a variety of gender identities.
- **Queer:** A catch-all term often used to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Previously used as a slur, it has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQIA+ movement.
- **Sex assigned at birth:** The sex (male or female) given to a child at birth, most often based on the child's external anatomy
- **Sexual orientation:** An inherent emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people (independent of gender identity)
- **Transgender:** Umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

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## Resources

### *Additional Resources*

- [Human Rights Campaign Glossary of Terms](#)
- [Keeping Transgender and Gender-Expansive Youth Safe in Out-of-Home Care](#)
- [Nearly All Fifty States are Failing Transgender, Gender-Expansive, and Gender-Nonconforming \(TGNC\) Youth in Out-of-Home Care](#)
- [Resources for LGBTQ+ Youth by State](#)
- [Protections for LGBTQIA+ Youth in Foster Care By State](#)
- [Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents](#)
- [STOMP Out Bullying—LGBTQ Bullying](#)