

## Protecting & Affirming LGBTQ+ Young People in Foster Care

*Note: The acronym LGBTQ+ is used in this tip sheet as an umbrella term as it specifically pertains to youth in foster care and the demographics surveyed in the studies noted. And in some places, the acronyms used are meant to highlight the higher impact on those specific demographics.*

All children deserve to grow up in a safe, loving, permanent family. Too many youth, however, experience mistreatment, hostility, and rejection at home simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Unfortunately, many face the same treatment or worse in foster care. This tip sheet will take a deep dive into the unique and daunting challenges facing LGBTQ+ youth in foster care, as well as what caregivers need to know to provide supportive and affirming care.

### Challenges Faced by LGBTQ+ Youth

- Family Mistreatment & Rejection*  
While reunification is the goal of foster care, this is often not the case for many LGBTQ+ youth. Forty-four percent of LGBQ youth and 57% of transgender youth in foster care were removed, kicked out, or ran away due to family mistreatment or rejection. Imagine losing your family, not because of anything

you've done but because of who you are. Unlike families of non-LGBTQ+ youth who are working toward reunification, many LGBTQ+ young people are not welcome at home. Many will age out of care. As one young man shared, "My dad said I can't come home as long as I'm 'gay.' And I'm not allowed around my brothers and sister. It hurts so much. This is killing me."

- Over-Representation and Disparities in Foster Care*



Research consistently shows that the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in foster care is considerably larger than the percentage of LGBTQ+ youth in the general population. On any given day in the U.S., LGBTQ+ youth account for 30% of the foster care population.

This is due, in part, to the high rates of abuse and rejection by family. Additionally, they face disparities in care and treatment while in the foster care system. This includes a higher number of placements, mistreatment while in care, higher levels of mental health-related hospitalizations, and a greater likelihood of being placed in a group home or other institutional setting due to a lack of homes willing to accept LGBTQ+ young people. These settings make them more vulnerable to harassment or physical assault.

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- *Lack of Placement and Permanency Options*

Traditionally, child welfare systems struggle to find foster homes for older youth, resulting in placement based on availability, not the youth's needs. As mentioned, this can mean that youth are not placed in a family setting. This is especially true for LGBTQ+ youth for a variety of reasons.

- Misconceptions about what it means for a youth to be LGBTQ+
- Perceived threats to other children in the home
- Fear of what "others might think" if there is an LGBTQ+ youth in the home
- Religious reasons
- Political beliefs
- Confusion regarding whether trans youth should be sharing space based on gender identity or gender assigned at birth
- Unwillingness or unpreparedness of caregivers to provide affirming care

Some families are willing to accept LGBTQ+ youth with either an intent to "fix" them or under the condition that they do not live as their authentic selves. Sixteen-year-old Shaunte explained, "I had a nice room, and the foster mom was nice enough, but I was told, 'You're not going to be a lesbian and live in this house.' I wasn't allowed to have friends over, go to any Pride events, listen to 'gay' music ... or even watch TV shows with LGBT characters! I felt like I had to sneak around or lie just to be myself."

In addition to a lack of resource families for youth who identify as LGBTQ+, there are children and youth who may not disclose before placement, or they may not identify at the time of placement. They may be placed in a home where the foster family would not have accepted placement if they'd known, or

the youth is exposed to anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments. In coming out, youth face the risk of placement disruption or mistreatment.

- *Negative Outcomes*

LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to have adverse experiences in care, including harassment, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This is particularly true of youth of color and trans youth.

Additionally, they face worse outcomes than their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

These include elevated risk for:

- Suicide
- Sex trafficking
- Adverse mental health outcomes
- Poor school functioning and bullying
- Homelessness
- Substance abuse

- *Health and Safety Concerns*

In 2023, the ACLU was tracking 510 anti-LGBTQ bills in the United States, most aimed at taking away rights and protections. In 2024, Wisconsin introduced 15 bills targeting LGBTQ+ youth, including healthcare barriers and school restrictions. All the Wisconsin bills were defeated, but there is still damage done. According to a poll by the Trevor Project, these bills have a dramatic impact on the mental health and safety of LGBTQ+ youth.

- 86% of transgender and nonbinary youth say debates concerning anti-trans bills have negatively impacted their mental health
- 45% of trans youth experienced cyberbullying
- Nearly 1 in 3 trans youth reported not feeling safe to go to the doctor or hospital when they were sick or injured.
- 75% of LGBTQ youth say that both anti-LGBTQ hate crimes and threats of violence often give them stress or anxiety.

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Not surprisingly, these bills coincide with “staggering record highs in 2023” of violent hate crimes against LGBTQ+ people, according to the FBI. People of color and black trans women, in particular, are most targeted for violence.

### Best Practices for Affirming and Supportive Care

The challenges facing LGBTQ+ youth in care can be overwhelming and debilitating. But having just one accepting adult in their life can make a huge difference, like reducing the risk of suicide by 40%. Below are guidelines and suggestions for how you can provide accepting, affirming, and supportive care to help LGBTQ+ youth thrive.

- *Willingness to Learn and Advocate*

You don't need to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community or know every term or pronoun to support and advocate for LGBTQ+ youth. What is important is an openness to learning and providing the love, safety, and acceptance every youth needs. You're going to make mistakes, and that's okay. Take advantage of opportunities to learn. Reach out to LGBTQ+ organizations. Talk with LGBTQ+ friends and coworkers. Listen to podcasts. Watch webinars. But most importantly, come to caregiving with an open mind and heart.

- *Use Preferred Name and Pronouns*

Asking and correctly using someone's preferred name and pronouns is one of the easiest ways to show respect for them and their gender identity. This has been shown to improve mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth and save lives! What if you make a mistake? It's the sincere effort that counts. Correct yourself, apologize, and move forward.

- *Get Youth Connected*

Belonging matters. According to a 2021 Centers for Disease Control survey, 75% of LGBTQ+ high school youth had persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness, and only 37% felt close to someone at school.

Hope and healing happen in relationships. Caregivers can help identify, encourage, and support opportunities for connection. Is there an LGBTQ+ resource or community center nearby? Social groups? Support groups? Student organizations? Events? Safe online communities? You can't make the connections for them, but you can help by offering suggestions or practical help like transportation to a group or event.

- *Caregiver Engagement*

You don't need to know who Nitori Shuichi is or listen to Girl in Red, but showing an interest in the youth's interest can make them feel seen and heard. Let them know you are a safe space for listening to things that are important to them or that they have questions or concerns about. Carve out time to do something they want to do, to learn more about them, even if it isn't something you wouldn't ordinarily be interested in doing.

- *Find an Affirming School*

When the youth is transitioning schools, research to identify the most affirming choice. Does the school have any LGBTQ+ organizations or social clubs? Do they have an LGBTQ+ safe space? What is the school's stance on discrimination & bullying? Do they have specialized services for marginalized groups of students like LGBTQ+ young people? Do they have policies regarding using a youth's correct name and pronouns? Do they have LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculums? Again, the presence of even just one trusted adult at school can make a dramatic difference for LGBTQ+ young people.

- *Find Affirming Healthcare*

As is the case with so many other systems, there are significant disparities for LGBTQ+ youth in health care. Below are some questions to ask in finding the right healthcare provider:

- Is the provider equipped to support LGBTQ+ people? Have they provided care to LGBTQ+ patients?

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- How knowledgeable is the provider about affirmative care and resources? Are they willing to learn?
- How comfortable are they discussing the unique healthcare needs of LGBTQ+ patients?

You can also find several online directories that indicate whether a provider is LGBTQ+ friendly or specializes in related healthcare issues. (Please see the Resource section.)

### Conclusion

LGBTQ+ young people need and deserve the same loving, affirming care as any other youth who has experienced trauma and separation from family. Love heals trauma. Love heals people. If you feel you have what it takes to help LGBTQ+ youth feel loved and accepted, please check out the resources included below or contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center for more information.



## Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- [Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Foster Youth](#), by the National Center for Lesbian Rights
- [In the System and in the Life](#), by Youth Communication
- [Born This Way: Real Stories of Growing Up Gay](#), by Paul Vitagliano

Tip Sheet

- [Supporting LGBTQIA+ Youth In Your Care](#)

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Introduction to Supporting LGBTQIA2S+ Foster Youth](#)

Additional Resources

- [Working with LGBTQ+ Youth and Families in Child Welfare](#)
- [LGBTQIA2S+ Resource Hub](#)
- [The Trevor Project Research Brief: LGBTQ Youth with a History of Foster Care](#)
- [LGBTQ+ Youth in Foster Care 2023 Fact Sheet](#)
- [Safe Schools for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students](#)
- [LGBTQ+ Youth in Crisis Best Practices Webinar](#)
- [LGBTQ Youth in the Foster Care System](#)
- [For LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care, Finding Home Is Hard](#)
- [LGBTQ foster kids have a harder time finding permanent homes](#)
- LGBTQ+ Healthcare Directories
  - [FORGE in Wisconsin](#)
  - [LGBTQ Health: Health Care Provider Resources](#)
  - [Froedert & Medical College of Wisconsin: Health Care for the LGBTQ Community](#)
  - [Aurora Health Care: LGBTQ+ Health](#)
  - [Group Health Cooperative: LGBTQIA+ Primary & Behavioral Health Care](#)