

Together Facing The Challenge



Newsletter



Spring Newsletter 2022

We are excited to once again bring to you stories and experiences shared by a number of folks from our TFTC agency partners. The focus of this edition is on what we are doing or can do to become a more welcoming and inclusive community for all.

This newsletter specifically addresses the needs of the LGBTQ+ community and how we offer ongoing education, training, and resources to support these needs. We are very appreciative of staff and youth who contributed to this newsletter. We hope our readers will reflect on what they are already doing to promote and develop best practices. Creating a safety net for youth to explore who they are within the context of a unique sense of self and identity is crucial to our work.

We are planning our TFTC conference to be held in person in the Fall of 2022. We will keep you posted as we finalize the date and location of this event.

Finally, I want to add that although our project with The Duke Endowment is coming to a close, we are working to create a sustainable infrastructure to fully support TFTC in the future.



A Very Special CONGRATULATIONS to the following agencies:

Certification

Granville County Department of
Social Services
Family Preservation Community Services of
South Carolina
Boys and Girls Homes of North Carolina

Children's Home Society of North Carolina
Crossnore Communities for Children
Family Services of America
Life Opportunities Therapeutic
Home Services
Unity Home Care
Alberta Professional Services
Easterseals UCP
Firm Foundation
Precious Haven

Recertification



Three Considerations in Gender-Affirming Foster Care

Jasmine Gomez-Gadd and Jenny Gadd, LCSW

Approximately 11% of youth in the United States identify as LGBTQ, yet youth in the foster care system are over two times more likely to identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, (LGBTQ+). This poses many challenges and requires an increased understanding and acceptance of what LGBTQ+ identified youth experience in foster care, in their families, at school, and in the community. This is coupled with what has already happened to them to bring them into care. All youth need nurturing and loving families to help them navigate their way to adulthood. LGBTQ+ identified youth are no different.

In preparing to care for LGBTQ+ youth in your home and agency, consider these ideas as a basic foundation to your engagement and ongoing relationship with them. The most important things you can provide are protective safe space, privacy to explore their gender expression, and a sense of Pride and love for who that youth is.

Protection: *Safety should be given first consideration in all situations. The youth in your care are minors who will likely need your support to advocate for themselves at school, church, and the community; for their voice to be heard; and for them to stay safe.*

- **Providing loving, affirming, safe spaces** in your home, office or agency common areas will increase the likelihood that youth will feel comfortable and safe seeking your help. LGBTQ+ youth are at risk for suicide, self-harm, bullying, cyber bullying, discrimination, hate crimes, difficulties at school and mental health issues, all of which are heightened by being in foster care. Safe spaces lower these risks.
- **Maintain open communication** so that LGBTQ+ identified youth feel comfortable telling you when they are in situations and environments where they feel unsafe or need an advocate.
- **Reduce the risk of suicide by supporting positive mental health.** More than half of all transgender and non-binary youth attempt suicide because of mistreatment and stigmatization by society. LGBTQ+ identified youth of color are at an even higher risk. To reduce their risks of suicide, contact a hotline, develop a safety plan, make sure they have access to gender-affirming mental health care, and work with their school to be gender-affirming.

Privacy: *Privacy is a basic human right and should not be seen as a privilege to be given and taken away. This is important and true for every child. Youth in foster care have the additional protection of confidentiality, which should be maintained and respected. LGBTQ+-identifying youth are incredibly vulnerable to having their rights of privacy stripped away from them.*

- **Respect their confidentiality.** Don't talk about your youth's gender identity and sexual orientation without their expressed permission, whether they identify as LGBTQ+ or not.
- **Allow youth to express their gender authentically.** They should have the privacy to explore and understand their own bodies, at their own pace. There are many types of gender-affirming activities that gender non-confirming youth might need, such as, chest binding, wearing wigs, experimenting with makeup, changing their pronouns, legally changing their name, seeking hormone replacement therapy, or surgical affirmation. Make sure the appropriate resources are available to present as more masculine or feminine in a safe way. Some youth use ace bandages, household tape, or other constricting materials that are damaging and unsafe when they first start exploring.
- **LGBTQ+ identified youth should be allowed to use whichever bathroom feels appropriate to them.** Whether the bathroom they choose is for safety or comfort, they should be free to make the decisions themselves.

Pride: *Though last on this list, that does not make Pride any less life-saving than protection or privacy. Providing acceptance and celebration of who that person is can be one of the most powerful tools in your toolbox to make a positive difference for youth in your care.*

- **One of the best ways to be supportive of LGBTQ+ identified youth is simply educating yourself.** Learn about the difference between gender and sexuality and seek out the resources for the LGBTQ+ in your area. The best place to start is with the basics.
- **Respecting and using preferred pronouns are an important way of celebrating youth.** Asking about pronouns is a priority. If you ever accidentally mess up pronouns, simply apologize and correct yourself.
- **All children should have access to love, and a safe space to be themselves.** Finding even one person who is loving and supportive, and who validates their gender identity can change a life. LGBTQ+ identified youth are fully capable of being a part of a loving household and lovingly give back to that household, if given a chance (Resources for families.)
- **Give youth access to LGBTQ+ resources in your area.** LGBTQ+ centers have plenty of events from Pride parades to book clubs. They have family activities and resources just for your youth, and even resources to educate yourself. Do not be afraid to take advantage of the resources that they provide.

Foster parents can play an important role in reducing the risks and challenges facing LGBTQ+ identified youth simply by providing safe spaces, allowing them to be themselves and celebrating them for who they are. We hope that you have found this list helpful in readying yourself to provide gender-affirming care.

The resources referenced in this article can be found at <https://albertakids.com/online-resources/lgbt-resources/>

Jasmine Gomez-Gadd (she/he) is a high school senior, who will be studying social work at UNCG in the Fall of 2022. Jasmine has known she is a part of the LGBTQ+ community since the 6th grade and has been an outspoken advocate ever since. She aspires to be a gender affirming therapist, knowing what a difference validation can make. She is always willing to answer questions and teach those who ask about the LGBTQ+ experience. She currently identifies as gender queer and appreciates the safe space the LGBTQ+ community provides her in questioning her own gender expression.

Jenny Gadd (she/her) is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Together Facing the Challenge (TFTC) trainer at Alberta Professional Services in Greensboro, NC. In her 23 years as a social worker, she has worked in all aspects of residential care with multiple populations. She is the proud mother of Jasmine Gomez-Gadd. She has learned much watching Jasmine's journey and has felt the levels of discrimination facing Jasmine and other LGBTQ+ identified youth. Jenny is constantly amazed by Jasmine's confidence and loving attitude that she brings to this work. She looks forward to seeing Jasmine incorporate this into her social work practice.



Stories from

Life isn't always a bowl of cherries: I am one cherry that "changes its color" every day. I have several genders to choose from as I like to change on a daily basis. While Mom and I don't see eye to eye on this gender thing, she's been helpful to register me in our local LGBTQ group. She also buys me male and female clothes. I have also changed my name a couple of times. Even though my Mom still calls me "_____", I know in my heart that I can always be whoever I want to be, whenever I want to be. In the end, I know she'll always be there as I explore these changes. Because one thing is for certain, I have the freedom to be the "cherry" I choose to be. She will go on loving and supporting the ever-changing me!!

Written by a youth in care

We have two foster parents who currently foster children who identify as transgender. Each parent respects their respective youth's gender identity and accepts each youth where they are. Both parents value the youth's beliefs and have learned to advocate for them due to personal experiences from their immediate family members identifying as LGBTQ+

**Written by Tonya Pone, Director
Life Opportunities Therapeutic Home Services**

I currently have a foster parent on my caseload with a female youth that identifies as bisexual. The foster parent regularly has open discussions with the youth reassuring her that it's okay if this how she identifies. The foster parent stated that she discussed with the youth that she has an open-door policy and that if she ever needs to talk about anything she can come and talk to her. The foster parent uses daily check-ins as an avenue to create a safe space for the youth to ask questions or share concerns. As the caseworker, I have been supportive of both the child and the foster parent, helping the foster parent develop skills, and using videos as a coaching tool. The foster parent exemplifies an understanding of meeting the youth where she is, stating "if this is where she currently is, this is where I will work with her."

**Written by Deidre Neely, Case Manager
Family Services of America**

Agency Partners

CTShealth requires staff to be well equipped when working with consumers who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

We partnered with Time Out Youth center (<https://www.timeoutyouth.org/>) to provide staff with training that covered the following topics; Identify issues LGBTQ+ consumer face, LGBTQ+ terminology, and increasing comfort and skill level supporting LGBTQ+ consumers. Our operational and compliance team met with this organization to discuss how CTSHealth could become a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ consumers. We are using the knowledge and information provided to start to make some policy and procedure updates. Also, we inputted visual cues around the office to reinforce it is a safe place. One of our biggest takeaways is to work together to create an internal organizational culture of acceptance for our LGBTQ+ consumers and staff. Time Out Youth will provide individuals with resources, information, and support to persons to cultivate inclusivity, gender affirmation, and community support regarding mental health and day-to-day living.

CTShealth Staff

One of our TFC families accepted a male in April of 2021 who identifies as gay. The parents were supportive and addressed his mental health, therapy, medical, dental, social, educational, and vocational needs. The parents did not discriminate against the youth and provided a supportive caring environment where the youth felt included in the family, community, and at his school. The youth returned to the home of his adoptive family and is now working in the community and doing well. Since discharge, the youth has maintained contact with his foster family and has included them as an informal support in his Circles of Support.

**Written by Doris Small, Case Manager/
Intake Specialist
Family Services of America**





A Seat at the Table

**Stephanie Parker—
Crossnore Communities for Children**

“Do we disrupt placement since the foster parents aren’t supporting the youth’s identity?” This question came up about four years into being a supervisor and it made me pause on how to respond. The obvious answer was yes, right? But, like most things in foster care, it’s not always that simple. The foster parents excelled in supporting this youth in so many ways—her grades had drastically improved, she had learned to regulate her emotions instead of responding with anger, and she was actively working towards repairing relationships with her siblings. The family even worked to expand their own family culture by embracing her racial and ethnic background into their own. The one component of identity they didn’t support, however, was her sexuality.

The youth came out to them a few months prior as bisexual and the family struggled to understand. They spoke with their worker about this regularly but didn’t make much progress. The youth’s team felt stuck because this placement seemed “right” in all ways but this one. Ultimately, the family made the decision to request a placement change and the youth transitioned successfully into an independent living facility while maintaining a positive connection with the family for many years afterwards. While this youth’s situation worked out fairly well after coming out in a foster home, there are many others within foster care that don’t end in success stories.

How do licensing agencies find families that will be supportive of a child’s full identity—even ones that the youth may not yet even fully know themselves? How do licensing agencies better support the children and youth that we work with to ensure their sexual orientation and gender identities/expressions (SOGIE) are supported and affirmed?

As an agency, we have evolved significantly over the past several years to better serve foster families and kids/youth that identify as LGBTQ+. This is a snapshot of the work we have done as a program and an agency to better support our kids/youth, coworkers, and foster/adoptive families.

Our program has evaluated all aspects of how we do our work to ensure we are supporting and affirming LGBTQ+ families. We updated our licensing forms to include more inclusive language with the removal of “foster mother” and “foster father” and other gendered relationship and gender/sex fields. It is not uncommon for our licensing team to field calls from families where their first question is if our program licenses folks that identify as LGBTQ+. Staff need to affirm their identities and assure them the agency supports families that look like theirs from the first point of contact. Families that identify as LGBTQ+ often share with us that they have called multiple foster and/or adoption agencies in their search before finding one that is willing to work with

Our agency leadership had to set clear expectations that we are an agency of openness and support the LGBTQ+ community through the youth we serve and the families we license to support them. This has not been an easy road since there are often moments of intersectionality that conflict. Our agency commonly partners with donors and religious institutions that do not hold the same beliefs and values. This has also applied to staff on our own team and we have had to navigate how to match staff to assigned families. At times, this has also meant a loss of staff members. To better serve our children and youth, staff have learned to identify community resources (LGBTQ+ community centers, GSA at the youth's school, mentors, etc.), attend trainings to increase their own competency in working with this population, and learn how to talk with foster families about supporting the youth in their home who may come out or be questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity or expression. Staff have also learned how to advocate for children's needs within the child's team (such as schools, GALs, SWs, pediatricians, etc.) as it relates to their SOGIE.

Additionally, our agency has worked on how to assess SOGIE as part of the matching process for placements. This has been a difficult process that we are continuing to refine. For some families, they are clear that working with a child/youth that identifies as LGBTQ+ is a deal breaker, while other families express the exact opposite and wish to primarily work with kids that identify as part of this population. As the opening story illustrates, this sometimes isn't even known until after placement has occurred. Our program continues to evaluate how to balance everyone so they have a "seat at the table" regardless of their beliefs and opinions on SOGIE while also trying to best match folks for successful outcomes for the all involved.

With these changes, our program and agency have continued to evaluate how to better support our families and children. Our agency created a new position about a year ago that solely focuses on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). This DEIB manager's work is extensive and ongoing to address how our agency can grow and change. Additionally, the use of our agency's trauma-informed model of care, the Sanctuary Model®, has been instrumental to our commitment to be an anti-racist organization and a space for inclusion. Our foster care team partnered with a local LGBTQ+ community center so all Foster Care and Adoptions staff could attend a Safe Zone training. We also provided two in-depth trainings to foster parents on how to support LGBTQ+ youth.

But the work doesn't stop here-there are still more ways that our program and Crossnore can grow to be more inclusive, affirming, and welcoming. With the use of social media and other external communications, our recruitment strategies could be more explicit and consistently reflect our commitment to working with and welcoming LGBTQ+ families and children. We need to continue to provide LGBTQ+ inclusive ongoing support and education to both staff and foster parents. Continual review of our agency's and program's policies and procedures would ensure that our practices and policy language are reflective of inclusivity. Our program should continue to partner and connect with local community resources across western North Carolina that are supportive to LGBTQ+ families and youth to better support our kids in care. At the core of this child welfare work is our commitment to supporting the well-being of the young people in our care. Being loved, fully accepted, and having support for their identity development is something that every child and youth deserves. It is a privilege to help grow those safe spaces in foster care.

Additional Resources

A special thank you to Kalie Giovanni for the additional resources provided.

https://sites.duke.edu/tftc/files/2022/06/Trans_-Gender-Expansive-Youth.pdf

<https://sites.duke.edu/tftc/files/2022/06/LGBTQ-Resources-Supports.pdf>

A Special Thank You to our TFTC Guest Trainers!

During our last regional training we were privileged to have two guest trainers from partner agencies.



Lisa Smith

Child Placement
Coordinator
Easterseals UCP



Silvia Gardner

Certified Trainer,
Intake Supervisor,
Safety Officer

Save The Date

Tuesday, October, 25, 2022

For our final Together Facing the Challenge conference, hosted at The Conference Center at Guilford Technical Community College .

7908 Leabourne Rd. Colfax, NC 27235

TFTC Team Update:

We feel it' is important to keep our partner agencies updated with changes to our team. Recently, Shaneka has joined the Youth Advocate Program, Inc. as their National Director of Employee Development. As of April 1st, she only works with our partner sites regarding the recertification process. We are so excited for the impact Shaneka will continue to have for youth and families, and wish her well in her newest endeavor.

