

Positive Identity Development of Youths who are LGBTQ

Purpose: To further educate participants regarding 1) the needs of LGBTQ youths who are in foster care, and 2) ways to support LGBTQ youth in their development of a healthy and positive identity as a LGBTQ person.

Recommended Icebreaker: What's in a name? Ask participants to share their name, and anything they want to add about it. Who named them? What does their name mean? Where does it come from? Do they like their name? *This helps participants to begin exploring their own identity.

Activity 7.3 Identity/Expression Activity, learning what it feels like to hide who you are by Caroline Gould (as used by the MA Department of Education's Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students)

TIME: 20 minutes

General purpose: help participants identify with the pain, frustrations and consequences of hiding and denying one's identity

Speaking Point: All of us in this room have multiple identities... mother, social worker, race car driver, pet owner. A big part of the task of adolescence is trying on identities and forming the foundation for the adult you become. We are going to start today by exploring different types of identities, and how those identities are expressed. For example, if someone identified as an athlete, this may be expressed by the uniform they wear, the time spent practicing and feelings of loyalty to the team.

Instructions:

Draw two columns on flip chart paper, labeling them "Identity" and "Expression".

Encourage discussion and input from participants as to what kinds of things constitute the many identities we have. Write them down as people call them out under the "Identity" column. Consider the following list and prompt your audience only when they get stuck: gender, race, age, educational background, profession, class, ethnicity, religion, relationship to others (parent, sibling, spouse, etc), geography, ability/disability, health, sexual orientation and gender identity. Often the categories of identity known as sexual orientation and gender identity do not come up. You may make a point of the fact that you usually have to solicit this identity category.

Next, ask participants to brainstorm the various ways in which those identities can be expressed. Responses can include things like food, music, art, literature, clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, pace of life, professions chosen or available to you, who you relate to, language/dialect, daily routine, type of home you live in, the way you relate to others, the way in which your religion is expressed, holidays celebrated, who you talk to or about, etc.

Next, ask participants to choose two of their own identities that are important to them. Ask them to break into pairs, and do a three or four minute share each on their identities and ways they express them. Suggest that they help each other think of additional ways in which they express their identities as this can be a very subtle and unconscious process that we take for granted. Once you come back together in large group you may invite anyone who would like to share their information with the larger group.

Inform the participants that a proclamation has been issued. Let them know that they have no choice but to abide by this proclamation. Failure to do will result in the loss of their jobs, their homes and jeopardize the physical safety of themselves and their families. The proclamation is that the participants may not – in any way, shape or form- express the two identities they have chosen today. They must hide all aspects of expression that would reveal either identity. NOTE: Participants may try to resist this piece of the exercise. It may be necessary to acknowledge that this is a difficult and uncomfortable task. Ask them to “dig deep”.

Draw two columns on flip chart paper, labeling them “Do” and “Feel”. Ask for responses to the question, “What would you do? Possibilities for this category include move/leave, refuse or rebel. These can be accepted and acknowledged as an understandable first response. But, ask them to move deeper. What if they have no choice but to comply, no power enabling them to move? What if they were eight years old? What if to refuse or rebel meant the possibility of death, at least the probability of harassment, violence and discrimination? Further responses can include hide, isolate, seek out like-minded people in secret, do or become the opposite of who I am, change my appearance, stay away from others like me in public, deny my identity, repress my feelings.

Next, ask for the responses to the question, “What would you feel?” Responses can include sad, angry, lonely, depressed. It may be helpful to point out that anger turned inward becomes depression and depression can lead to suicide and other risky behaviors. This may lead to other items on the “do” list, such as abuse alcohol and other drugs, engage in risky sexual behavior, suicide, etc.

Next, prompt discussion by asking, “What does this exercise have to do with gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender youth, or kids who have a loved one who is gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender?” Participants are often sobered by this exercise and must be coaxed to talk a little more. Another prompt for discussion could be, “How likely is it that a GLBT kid or someone who has a GLBT loved one will get a good education if she/he has to DO this and, as a result, FEELS this?”

SPEAKING POINT:

This list we just generated together is sobering. It represents what may happen when children are in rejecting environments, whether that be home, school, faith community or foster care. The Family Acceptance Project found that gay and transgender teens who were highly rejected by their parents and caregivers were at very high risk for health and

mental health problems when they become young adults (ages 21-25). Young people who are highly rejected because of their gay or transgender identity were:

- More than 8 times as likely to have attempted suicide
- Nearly 6 times as likely to report high levels of depression
- More than 3 times as likely to use illegal drugs, and
- More than 3 times as likely to be at high risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases

compared with gay and transgender young adults who were not at all or only rejected a little by their parents and caregivers.

Some LGBTQ youth are rejected to the point where they end up homeless. Approximately 20%-40% of all homeless youth are LGBTQ identified. LGBT youth, once homeless, are at higher risk for victimization, mental health problems, and unsafe sexual practices. LGBTQ Youth Statistics from the National Alliance to End Homelessness shows that LGBT youth are 7 times as likely to experience acts of sexual violence than heterosexual homeless youth.

The Family Acceptance Project identified behaviors that contribute to a rejecting environment:

Avoid Behaviors that Increase Your LGBTQ Foster Child's Risk for Health and Well-being Problems:

- Hurting your foster child (including verbal harassment or name-calling) because of their LGBTQ identity
- Excluding your LGBTQ foster child from family and family activities
- Blocking access to LGBTQ friends, events and resources
- Blaming your foster child when/if they are discriminated against because of their LGBTQ identity
- Pressuring your foster child to be more (or less) masculine or feminine
- Telling your foster child that God will punish them because they are LGBTQ
- Telling your foster child that you are ashamed of them or that how they look will shame the family
- Making your foster child keep their LGBTQ identity a secret in the family and not letting them talk about it

*[Based on information from ©2009, Caitlin Ryan, Family Acceptance Project.
For more information go to <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>]*

Activity 7.5 The LGBTTSQQIA Alphabet Soup Exercise Time: 15 Minutes

Preparation: Write down LGBTTSQQIA across a piece of flip chart paper.

General purpose: to ensure participants have an understanding of basic terminology

Speaking Point: Let's take a step back and make sure we have a working definition for commonly used terms. This acronym, LGBTTSQQIA, is from a youth organization in Springfield, MA. Adolescents are often creating new ways of defining themselves, while at the same times resisting labels.

Instructions:

Ask participants what each letter stands for, and elicit a basic definition from them. Write down the correct response (i.e. “lesbian” for L). Read the following definitions and speaking points to the group. If a participant guesses a term that is not the one used in this exercise (such as Androgynous for A, instead of Ally), refer them to the glossary of terms in Section K of the *LGBTQ: A Guide for Working with Youth and Families*.

- **Lesbian:** a woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to other women Speaking point: Let’s think about this a moment... emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted. How many of you remember having a crush in elementary school (ask for a raise of hands, generally at least half the participants raise hands)? Were any of you were thinking about sex with that person (participants y respond no)? Exactly, it was a crush, a heart pull. A, “I hope she likes me as much as I like her. He is so cool, I hope he wants to sit with me at lunch. I want to be their best friend.” Many people are reluctant to talk to youth about their sexual orientation because they think it is talking about sex, but it is not.
- **Gay:** a man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to the same gender Speaking point: It is important for you to be aware that if you use the term “homosexual”, it may trigger youth and LGB people to see you as an unsafe person. The term “homosexual” is often used by anti-gay activists and in negative media stories. Using the term “gay” is preferred.
- **Bisexual:** a man or woman who is emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to both men and women
- **Transgender:** umbrella term used to describe those whose gender identity or expression is different than that typically associated with their assigned sex at birth. May identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual or questioning.
Cisgender: identifying with or experiencing a gender the same as one’s biological sex or that is affirmed by society (e.g. being both male-gendered and male-sexed)

Speaking point: Here’s a bonus question! If you know someone is transgender, what do you know about who they would want to date? The correct answer is “Nothing!” A person’s sexual orientation (who they are emotionally, romantically and sexually attracted to) is completely separate from their gender identity. **Pass out the Identity Illustrated worksheet.** Speaking point: Each one of us has a biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation! Our socially constructed expectation is that men occupy the extreme left categories of all four scales (male, man, masculine, attracted to women) and women occupy the extreme right categories. Nature, however, is diverse. We find that people identify at all points along the continuum and not just the extreme ends. Also, these identities operate independently of each other. (If participants have more questions regarding the terms on the Identity Illustrated worksheet, refer them to the glossary of terms in Section K of *LGBTQ: A Guide for Working with Youth and Families*.)

- **Two-Spirit:** a person whose body simultaneously houses a masculine spirit and a feminine spirit (Native American origins). In some Native cultures, Two-Spirits

- had a special role in society as being the caretakers of orphaned children due to having both masculine and feminine spirits.
- **Queer:** historically a derogatory term, widely reclaimed as a positive social and political identity, sometimes used as umbrella term for all LGBT people
Speaking point: Queer is a good example of “in-crowd” language, in other words, certain terms or slang may be used by people who consider themselves LGBTQ, but are not generally advised for use by others. Other examples include dyke and fag.
 - **Questioning:** anyone who may be unsure or still exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, also used by those concerned about applying a social label to themselves for various reasons
 - **Intersex:** "Intersex" is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male. For example, a person might be born appearing to be female on the outside, but having mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside. Or a person may be born with genitals that seem to be in-between the usual male and female types--for example, a girl may be born with a noticeably large clitoris, or lacking a vaginal opening, or a boy may be born with a notably small penis, or with a scrotum that is divided so that it has formed more like labia. Or a person may be born with mosaic genetics, so that some of her cells have XX chromosomes and some of them have XY. Though we speak of intersex as an inborn condition, intersex anatomy doesn't always show up at birth. Sometimes a person isn't found to have intersex anatomy until she or he reaches the age of puberty, or finds himself an infertile adult, or dies of old age and is autopsied. Some people live and die with intersex anatomy without anyone (including themselves) ever knowing. How common is it? The most thorough existing research finds intersex people to constitute an estimated 1.7% of the population*, which makes being intersex about as common as having red hair (1%-2%). The term “hermaphrodite” is not an appropriate term and is considered offensive.
 - **Ally:** a term for people who are supportive of LGBTQ social movements and people, but do not identify as LGBTQ

Activity 7.6 How do we help support LGBTQ Youth?

Time (10 Minutes)

Speaking Point: DCF does not tolerate homophobia or transphobia, in the same way it does not tolerate racism. As in any birth family, there is the possibility that the child you are parenting may one day share with you their identity as a LGBTQ person. It is important that you have a base knowledge of how to be supportive of a LGBTQ Youth so that you can avoid responses or reactions that may be potentially harmful. LGBTQ Youth need the same love, support, acceptance, consideration and help as any other child/youth that comes into care. It is our role as social workers, foster parents and pre-adoptive parents to be sensitive to the needs of children/youths who are LGBTQ. For youths who identify as LGBTQ, they may be constantly trying to figure out how to act, what to do, who will care for them, who will hate them, etc. They may be wondering if “this” is a safe place and if those around them are safe people.

Provide participants with LGBTQ: A Guide for Working with Youth and Families, and direct participants to Section I of the Guide, Foster Parents Caring for LGBTQ Youth. Highlight the following (page 39):

Promote Your LGBTQ Foster Child's Well-being with Family Behaviors that Help:

- Talk with your foster child about their sexual orientation and gender identity questions and tell them they are normal and healthy
- Express your affection when your foster child tells you or when you learn that your foster child is gay or transgender
- Support your foster child's LGBT identity even though you may feel uncomfortable
- Allow your foster child to use their clothing check to buy clothing that they are comfortable with, even if it is gender nonconforming
- Advocate for your foster child if they are mistreated because of their LGBT identity
- Require that other family members respect your LGBT foster child
- Bring your foster child to youth-oriented LGBT support groups, organizations and events (They're beneficial!)
- Talk with your clergy and help your faith community to support LGBT people
- Connect your foster child with an LGBT adult role model to show them options for the future
- Welcome your foster child's LGBT friends and partners to your home
- Support your foster child's gender expression
- Assure your child that they can have a happy future as an LGBTQ adult
- Get help for yourself by calling or attending a meeting of PFLAG (Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays) or other parental support group

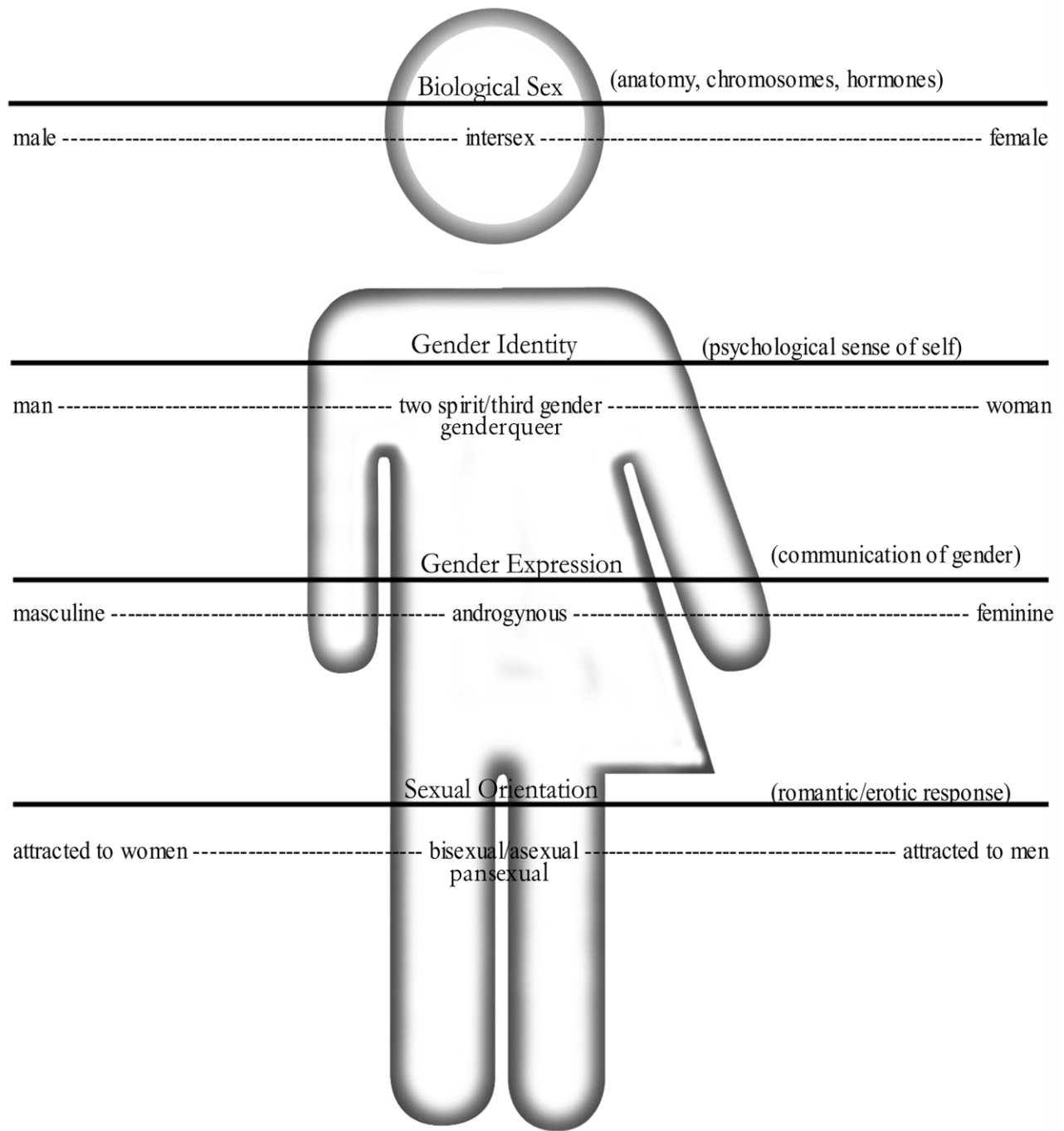
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For more information go to <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>]***

Other Tips:

- Encourage youth to participate in LGBTQ youth support groups. Consider them treatment, and do not make the youth's being able to attend contingent on behavior.
- Household rules should be consistent for all teens in the home. For example, if heterosexual teens are permitted to hold hands while watching TV, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth should be able to as well.
- Allow for personal expression. Allow youth to use their clothing money to purchase clothes they feel comfortable in.
- Use gender neutral language (is there someone special in your life, rather than assume heterosexuality).
- Use chosen names and pronouns.
- Become aware of resources available to LGBTQ Youth. Point out Section L, Information about LGBTQ Resources of LGBTQ: A Guide for Working with Youth and Families.
- Contact the child's social worker, your family resource worker, or the area office LGBTQ liaison with any questions or concerns.

Speaking Point: If you are interested in fostering a LGBTQ child/youth, please let your Family Resource Worker know! If you are interested in attending further trainings, or becoming involved with the LGBTQ Liaisons, please contact the LGBTQ Liaison in your area office so you may be added to an e-mail list regarding meetings, trainings and events.

Identity Illustrated: A journey of sexual orientation, gender, and sex



Alexander Pangborn, 2006. <http://phoenixrisingftm.net>
Adapted from an activity by T. Aaron Hans & T. Sangrey: <http://riseconsulting.org/>