



## Being an Ally for LGBTQ Youth

It really is unknown how much of the general population is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQ). What is known, is that LGBTQ adolescents make up a disproportionate share of the youth who are in foster care, according to the Child Welfare League of America and the Lambda Legal Joint Initiative.

All youth rely on their parents for guidance, support, nurturance, and unconditional acceptance. Foster and adoptive parents are important allies and advocates for youth. Providing guidance, support, nurturance, and advocacy for LGBTQ youth can be instrumental in their successful development.

When a child enters your home, you may or may not know whether he or she identifies as LGBTQ. They may not even know their orientation. And, if they do, they may not feel comfortable sharing that information with you just yet. If you are unsure about a child's sexual orientation, it may be best to err on the side of caution just in case.

### Fear Factor

Many young people who identify as LGBTQ live with fear every day. Some fear the negative reactions that come from revealing

that they are LGBTQ. LGBTQ youth are often victims of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse, and often have a high rate of suicide attempts, binge alcohol use, and drug use. They often experience insecure feelings and emotional trauma due to being subjected to bullying.

### Allies and Advocates

An important aspect of advocating for all youth is acceptance with an open heart and mind when a young person instills their trust

by informing you of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Barbara Jones, an experienced Wisconsin foster parent, has had placement of LGBTQ children. She suggests that, often, we lack knowledge or exposure to LGBTQ issues, so we may shut down or have prejudice toward

LGBTQ foster youth. She goes on to suggest that we educate ourselves, becoming more open to and accepting of working with children and adults of varying sexual orientations.

As a foster parent, it is important to be "open, accepting, and a good listener," according to Barbara. Create an atmosphere within your home that allows the child to feel safe and comfortable to speak to you about any subject, including sexuality. "Kids need a



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6682 West Greenfield, Suite 310  
Milwaukee, WI 53214  
800-762-8063  
info@coalitionforcofyf.org

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chance to talk openly,” says Barbara. “We also need to be sensitive to their need for privacy.”

### Supporting Youth in Care by Educating Ourselves

Education is the key to becoming more knowledgeable about the needs of youth. By attending workshops, reading books, and watching videos, you can learn about the issues that LGBTQ youth and adults often face. You may also benefit by meeting with other foster or adoptive parents who care for LGBTQ Youth. Find a local support group through organizations such as Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), or LGBT community centers.

If there is not a local organization, you might consider creating and developing one. See the [Gay-Straight Alliance Network](#) for tips to get started. You may also want to encourage your licensing agency to provide training to foster and adoptive parents about LGBTQ issues.

### How to Support LGBTQ Youth in Care

Our own family, personal histories, and experiences can affect our ability to work with or be sensitive to the needs of others. Take the time to explore your own personal beliefs and values about LGBTQ issues. For example, you might ask yourselves, “*Will our thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward LGBTQ people have a positive or negative impact on our relationship with the youth?*”

Following are some additional tips and guidance for supporting LGBTQ youth:

- Appreciate diversity and accept individuals for who they are.
- Be aware that your reaction to the child’s orientation will have a major impact on their life—be it positive or negative.
- Examine your beliefs and attitudes that might impact your ability to support LGBTQ youth in your care.

- Offer support to the child who is questioning their orientation.
- Educate yourself about the realities of LGBTQ individuals and avoid unfounded myths and negative stereotypes.
- Choose and use inclusive language, such as “partner” and “significant other.”
- Respect and be sensitive to the youth’s right to privacy and confidentiality.
- Advocate for the youth in care by informing and educating the community about LGBTQ issues.
- Create an open, accepting, and safe home environment for the youth, emotionally, physically, and spiritually.
- Protect young people from verbal, emotional, and physical harassment and mistreatment in your home, school, and community.
- Respect a transgender young person’s choice of name and gendered pronouns that best reflects their sense of self as female or male.
- Become familiar with the resources available to LGBTQ young people in your community

### Successful Connections with LGBTQ Youth

By identifying our attitudes and beliefs toward LGBTQ youth, and educating ourselves as well as others, foster and adoptive parents can have an incredible and affirming impact on the lives of LGBTQ young people. Remember that you have the opportunity to make a positive connection with youth who need you to be their ally and their advocate.



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Milwaukee, WI 53214  
800-762-8063  
info@coalitionforcf.org

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## Resources Available from the Coalition Lending Library

- *Breaking the Silence: Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Foster Youth, (DVD)* by the National Center for Lesbian Rights
- *Survival Guide for Queer and Questioning Teens*, by Kelly Huegel
- *In the System and in the Life*, by Youth Communication
- *Born This Way: Real Stories of Growing Up Gay*, by Paul Vitagliano
- *America's Most Unwanted (DVD)*



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