



Working with LGBTQ+ Youth and Families in Child Welfare

Purpose

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) plays an integral role in ensuring the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other identified LGBTQ+ youth in the state of Wisconsin, particularly those who are involved in or at risk of involvement in the child welfare system via child protective services and youth justice. National data indicates that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately overrepresented in the out-of-home care population.¹ These children often do not receive affirming care and services that are necessary for their safety and well-being. LGBTQ+ youth are at a heightened risk for family rejection, victimization, school bullying, sex trafficking, substance abuse, suicidality, hospitalization, and homelessness.

Lesbian
Gay
Bisexual
Transgender
Queer/Questioning
+ All Other Groups

Commitment

The Division of Safety and Permanence (DSP) acknowledges and commits to meeting the needs of these youth and their families within our systems and is dedicated to ensuring our policies and programs advance the priority of building affirming and inclusive environments and communities for LGBTQ+ youth and their families to thrive.

Background

National estimates indicate that of children aged 12 and over in out-of-home care, 19.1% identify as LGBTQ+.² Using this calculation, DSP would estimate that of the 2,024 Wisconsin youth aged 12+ in out of home care, approximately 386 of those youth may self- identify as LGBTQ+ (estimates as of February 2022). This evaluation is a conservative approximation as these numbers only reflect youth 12 and older currently placed in out-of-home care. Furthermore, data about a youth's sexual orientation, or gender identity is not consistently captured in eWiSACWIS, the state's child welfare case management system; therefore, the actual number of youth who identify as LGBTQ+ is not known in our current system and any estimation provided is likely to be an underestimation.

Background and Areas of Focus

19.1%
of youth in foster care
nationally identify as
LGBTQ+¹

386
Wisconsin youth over 12
in out-of-home care who
may identify as LGBTQ+

At various points during their time in the child welfare system, LGBTQ+ youth interact with child welfare professionals, foster parents, congregate care facility employees, and other foster youth. In these interactions, LGBTQ+ youth may experience discrimination and stigma unique to their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. LGBTQ+ youth would benefit from our workforce and care providers, having explicit training and guidance on how to best meet their needs.

Numerous workstreams within DSP have unveiled anecdotal reports of problematic practice, trends, and outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth in our system. Governor Tony Evers has issued executive orders which work to protect LGBTQ+ individuals and government employees ([Executive Orders 1, 120 & 121](#)). The Department of Children and Families (DCF) is further committed to advancing best practice in an effort to protect and serve LGBTQ+ youth and families in the child welfare system.

Areas of Focus

DCF is committed to the safety and well-being of all LGBTQ+ individuals receiving child welfare services across the state of Wisconsin. To that end, DSP will work to provide guidance and support best practice for child welfare professionals and care providers working with LGBTQ+ children and family members, focused on ensuring safety and well-being, fair and respectful treatment, and affirming practices. Special consideration will be given for LGBTQ+ children in out-of-home care. Areas of focus will include:



Safety & Well-Being

LGBTQ+ youth often do not receive affirming care and services that are necessary for their safety and well-being and are at a heightened risk for family rejection, victimization, school bullying, sex trafficking, substance abuse, suicidality, hospitalization, and homelessness. They experience high rates of violence, physical threats and harassment which makes them particularly vulnerable. In school settings where a youth is “out” to their peers, **35% have experienced physical assault and 76% report feeling unsafe in public.**³ Some LGBTQ+ youth may experience similar harm at home.

Information concerning an individual’s sexual identity, orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) is often referred to as SOGIE data. An individual’s SOGIE can be very personal and sensitive information and should be treated as such. Many LGBTQ+ youth continue to face stigmatization, harassment, discrimination, and violence related to their SOGIE. In child welfare, maintaining privacy about their sexual identity, orientation, gender identity and expression can be paramount to ensuring their safety and well-being.



Fair & Respectful Treatment

It is common for LGBTQ+ youth to feel depressed, isolated, and alone. Whenever possible, connecting these youth with community resources or support groups benefits their overall well-being. These resources can often help LGBTQ+ youth form healthy and positive relationships and build a strong connection to a community.

Action Steps

Action Steps

| Who | Action Steps |
|---|---|
| <p>Local Child Welfare Agencies</p> <p>Child Placing Agencies</p> <p>Congregate Care Providers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update their non-discrimination statement and policies to include gender identity and gender expression as well as sexual orientation. The non-discrimination statement should be included in all orientation materials and handbooks provided to the staff, volunteers, youth and parents or guardians. Evaluate and update policies and practice to ensure an affirming and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ youth and families. Provide staff training on working with LGBTQ+ youth and families, starting with outlining agency policies and procedures for the above recommendations. Consider adding evaluation procedures related to adherence to LGBTQ+ policies and procedures to ensure compliance and to protect the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth. Provide staff opportunities for external training and resources to further educate them on the issues that LGBTQ+ youth and families face. |
| <p>Child Welfare Professionals</p> <p>Other Care Providers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respond appropriately to any harassment or aggression towards LGBTQ+ youth. This can include name-calling, not using the youth's correct pronouns or name, denying the youth's right to groom and dress consistent with their identity, ridicule, or physical and emotional harassment. Do not share individuals' SOGIE information unless legally obligated to do so, if it achieves a specific benefit for the youth (medical, mental health, etc.), or when given explicit permission by the youth. Having open and honest conversations, normalizing terminology such as pronouns, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression can be useful in helping to educate others. Model respect and openness and to foster a supportive and respectful environment for all youth. Make LGBTQ+ youth aware of local resources and support and encourage their participation. |

Definitions

Definitions

To ensure that child welfare professionals and care providers are well versed in terminology they may encounter while working with LGBTQ+ individuals, the following definitions will be used to form a basis for common knowledge. These definitions, primarily taken from the website for *The Human Rights Campaign*⁴, are meant to be a general overview of terms. Please understand that they are always evolving as we continue to learn. It is also important to have open communication with the youth and families that we serve about the pronouns and terms that work best for them.

Asexual: Often called “ace” for short, asexual refers to a complete or partial lack of sexual attraction or lack of interest in sexual activity with others. Asexuality exists on a spectrum, and asexual people may experience no, little, or conditional sexual attraction.

Bisexual: A person emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one sex, gender, or gender identity though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with pansexual.

Cisgender: A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Gay: A person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to members of the same gender. Men, women, and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

Gender-Affirming Health Care: Individualized care provided by a medical professional or team of medical professionals that may include any or all of the following services: support services, mental health counseling, gender-affirming hormone therapy, hormone/puberty suppression, and gender affirmation surgery.

Gender dysphoria: Clinically significant distress caused when a person’s assigned birth gender is not the same as the one with which they identify.

Gender-expansive: A person with a wider, more flexible range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the binary gender system. Often used as an umbrella term when referring to young people still exploring the possibilities of their gender expression and/or gender identity. Gender expansive people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all gender expansive people do. Gender expansive can also be used as an umbrella term that encompasses identities such as gender fluid.

Gender expression: External appearance of one’s gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

Gender-fluid: A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender or has a fluid or unfixed gender identity.

Definitions

Gender identity: One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.

Gender non-conforming: A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit neatly into a category. While many also identify as transgender, not all gender non-conforming people do.

Gender transition/Transitioning: A process some transgender people undergo to match their gender identity more closely with their outward appearance to live more fully as their true gender. This can include social transition, such as changing name and pronouns, and changing clothes and other forms of gender expression to fit their gender identity. It may also include gender-affirming healthcare needs, which may include hormone therapy or gender affirming surgeries. Legal transition may include changing legal name and sex on government identity documents. Transgender people may choose to undergo some, all or none of these processes.

Intersex: Intersex people are born with a variety of differences in their sex traits and reproductive anatomy. There is a wide variety of difference among intersex variations, including differences in genitalia, chromosomes, gonads, internal sex organs, hormone production, hormone response, and/or secondary sex traits.

Lesbian: A woman who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to other women. Women and non-binary people may use this term to describe themselves.

LGBTQIA2S+: An acronym used for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, two spirit, plus.

Outing: Exposing someone's lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, gender expansive, intersex, asexual, or two spirit identity to others without their permission. Outing someone can have serious repercussions on employment, economic stability, personal safety or religious or family situations.

Pansexual: Describes someone who has the potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any gender though not necessarily simultaneously, in the same way or to the same degree. Sometimes used interchangeably with bisexual.

Plus: This signifies all of the gender identities and sexual orientations that are not specifically covered

Pronouns: This is a word used to describe another person. Examples include he, she, they, ze, etc. Some pronouns are considered feminine (she/her), some are masculine (he/him), and others are gender neutral (they, ze).

Queer: A term people often use to express a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to the mainstream. Queer is often used as a catch-all to include many people, including those who do not identify as exclusively straight and/or folks who have non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term was previously used as a slur, but has been reclaimed by many parts of the LGBTQ+ movement.

Definitions

Questioning: This refers to individuals who may be unsure of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Sex assigned at birth: The sex, male, female, or intersex, that a doctor or midwife uses to describe a child at birth based on their external anatomy.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual's sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity.

SOGIE: An acronym meaning sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression.

Transgender: An 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.

Two-Spirit: This is a third gender found in some Native American cultures, often involving birth-assigned men or women taking on the identities and roles of the opposite sex. A sacred and historical identity, two-spirit can include but is not limited to LGBTQ identities.



Resources and References

Resources to Support Youth and Families

WISCONSIN

Children's Gender Health Clinic – <https://childrenswi.org/medical-care/endocrine/gender-health-clinic>
Diverse and Resilient – <https://www.diverseandresilient.org>
Fair Wisconsin – <https://fairwisconsin.com/>
LGBT Center of SE Wisconsin – <https://www.lgbtsewi.org/>
LGBT Community Center of the Chippewa Valley – <http://cvlgbt.org/>
Milwaukee LGBT Community Center – <https://www.mkelgbt.org/programs-and-services#youth-programs>
The Center: 7 Rivers LGBTQ Connection – <https://7riverslgbtq.org/>
OutReach LGBT Community Center – <http://www.lgbtoutreach.org/>
UW Health Path Clinic – <https://www.uwhealth.org/treatments/PATH-clinic-for-pediatric-gender-identity>
UW System LGBTQ Resources – <https://www.wisconsin.edu/lgbtq-resources/lgbtq-directors/>
Wisconsin Transgender Health Coalition – <https://witranshealth.org/>

NATIONAL

Equity Project – www.equityproject.org
Family Acceptance Project – <https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>
Gender Services, UW Health, Madison – <https://www.uwhealth.org/services/gender-services>
GLSEN – <https://www.glsen.org/>
GSAFE – <https://gsafe.org/resources/>
Human Rights Campaign – <https://www.hrc.org/resources/transgender>
All Children - All Families: Training Program -
<https://www.thehrcfoundation.org/professional-resources/all-children-all-families-training-program>
It Gets Better – <https://itgetsbetter.org/>
National Youth Advocacy Coalition – www.nyacyouth.org
PFLAG – <https://pflag.org/>
Sylvia Rivera Law Project – www.srlp.org
The National Center for Transgender Equality – www.transequality.org
World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) – www.wpath.org
StopBullying.gov: LGBTQI+ Youth – <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/lgbtq>

References

¹ Cook, M. & Cohen C. (2018). 20 Years of Advocating for LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care. American Bar Association. <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/childrens-rights/articles/2018/spring2018-20-years-advocating-lgbtq-youth-out-of-home-care/>

² Bianca D.M. Wilson, et al. (2014). Sexual & Gender Minority Youth in Los Angeles Foster Care. The Williams Inst. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LAFYS_report_final-aug-2014.pdf

³ Perry, J.R. & Green, E.R. (2014). Safe & Respected: Policy, Best Practices & Guidance for Serving Transgender & Gender Non-Conforming Children and Youth Involved in the Child Welfare, Detention, and Juvenile Justice Systems. New York City, NY: New York City's Administration for Children's Services. https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/acs/pdf/lgbtq/FINAL_06_23_2014_WEB.pdf

⁴ Human Rights Campaign. (n.d.) Glossary of Terms. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/glossary-of-terms>