



BraveLife Intervention (BLI)
Practice Brief
Trust, Authenticity, and Affirmation: Voice for
LGBTQIA2-S Youth in Foster Care

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Trust, Authenticity, and Affirmation: Voice for LGBTQIA2-S Youth in Foster Care

Introduction

This brief captures the lived experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and two-spirit (LGBTQIA2-S) youth served by community agencies in Westchester County, New York. Based on these experiences, the brief offers guidance for practitioners in collaborating with LGBTQIA2-S youth in foster care and highlights the importance of empowering youth. Also, it is important to acknowledge that LGBTQIA2-S youth are a diverse group of people who may have some perspectives and needs in common but also may differ widely in their needs and experiences based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and other characteristics.

Estimates on the percentage of youth in foster care who self-identify as LGBTQIA2-S vary substantially, ranging from 5 to 30% (Baams, Wilson, & Russell, 2019; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Wilson, Cooper, Kastanis, & Nezhad, 2014). The research underscores that LGBTQIA2-S youth are often an “invisible population,” with their needs and concerns often going unmet (Gallegos, Roller White, Ryan, O'Brien, Pecora, & Thomas, 2011).

Approach

The information for this practice brief was created from material across the following sources: (1) a comprehensive LGBTQI2-S literature review; (2) quantitative cross-sectional survey gathered from LGBTQI2-S youth in Westchester County; (3) qualitative focus groups held with LGBTQI2-S Westchester County youth in foster care and young adults who were previously in foster care.

With respect to the literature review, we accessed six large databases (e.g. Social Work Abstracts, Medline), as well as governmental publications and resources from leading community agencies. We then presented a literature review to a group of Westchester County youth and agency representatives. The literature review provided valuable information to guide a qualitative cross sectional study for LGBTQI2-S youth and qualitative focus groups to provide information about the strengths and challenges youth experienced. In both the quantitative and qualitative components we recruited youth from community agencies that provide services to LGBTQI2-S youth and young adults. To be eligible to participate in the data collection, youth needed to be at least 14 years of age and under 30 years of age and reside in Westchester County, New York. We invited youth and young adults to participate in the survey if they felt they wanted to take part and provide information on their experiences. All youth who participated in the focus groups identified as part of the LGBTQI2-S community.

Practice Focus

Based on the themes that were found in the literature and confirmed by the cross-sectional quantitative study and focus groups narratives, the following guidance was derived to provide six focal points for strengthening clinical practitioners' collaborative work with LGBTQIA2-S youth. It is important to underscore that the experiences of each youth is unique and requires an individualized approach to meet the youth where they are:

- Building Trust
- Being Authentic
- Providing Affirmation & Validation
- Using Respectful Language
- Applying Active and Reflective Listening Skills
- Providing Continuous Education and Training

Building Trust

Youth in foster care or with foster care histories emphasize that trust is often challenging because of the many broken relationships and difficulties they have experienced. Some LGBTQIA2-S youth describe similar life experiences regarding trust and relationship building.

Critical to building trust is to recognize that LGBTQIA2-S youth need to be visible, respected, and have their voices heard. As cited by youth participating in the focus groups, the feeling of not being seen has created many challenges of feeling isolated and uncared for. LGBTQIA2-S youth expressed that coming out exposed them to rejection, microaggressions,¹ bullying, lack of safety, and poor treatment.

With this in mind, creating a sense of safety that encourages openness leads to sharing and trust-building. Engaging the youth includes developing a trusting relationship that encourages opening up lines of communication. This process of building trust involves creating a safe space for the youth to share their stories. Building a trusting relationship includes spending time and using active listening to let the youth know you are interested. While this has also been identified for all youth, many LGBTQI2-S youth underscored their personal experiences and concerns regarding trust at home, community and in the school. For example, in one of the focus groups a youth expressed an experience of being bullied in school resulting in feelings of shame and that they could not trust some of the school staff. When working with youth who may have similar situations, it is essential for practitioners to listen and respond empathetically to what the youth is saying about their particular experience. This creates an atmosphere that builds a trusting collaboration between youth and practitioners. This process is important, and it is critical to take the time for it develop.

¹ Nadler (2020) defines macroaggression as “the everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups.”

Being Authentic

Authenticity is the reality of what the youth has truly experienced. Practitioners that create a safe space for the youth to share painful experiences assist in building a strong working relationship. The ability to be present to hear the lived experience of cumulative pain experienced by LGBTQIA2-S youth can take place only in an atmosphere of respect and recognition. Mindfulness and being completely present for the youth are essential to developing a collaborative working relationship.

Providing Affirmation and Validation

Participants often spoke to the need for their sexual or gender identity to be affirmed by others at home, school, and with foster care placements and agencies. Affirmation is declaring that something is true— for example, an LGBTQIA2-S youth sharing their sexual or gender identity and having other people at home, school, and at service agencies acknowledge that identity. It is important because it promotes self-efficacy and acknowledges the truth of the lived experience of the youth.

Offering a safe, neutral atmosphere, and creating a safe place will encourage individuals to be involved in decision making that supports personal truth for LGBTQIA2-S youth. Validation comes from other individuals acknowledging and accepting the LGBTQIA2-S youth's feelings, beliefs and experiences. It is helpful in promoting emotional regulation for the youth. While affirmation provides emotional support, validation is about recognizing and appreciating youths' feelings and beliefs. For example, if a youth is sharing their story about being bullied in school, the professional listens fully and acceptingly.

Validation of youth's lived experiences is critical. This includes validating positive feelings youth share about the constructive experiences and relationships they have had. For example, many LGBTQIA2-S youth expressed that individuals in their lives have helped them grow, including adoptive parents, foster parents, peers, teachers, and mentors/role models. These supports frequently played a significant role in their lives, reinforcing their subsequent gains. Validating the feelings and experiences of LGBTQIA2-S youth works toward increasing a sense of well-being and feelings of self-esteem.

Using Respectful Language

Language matters! Language matters because it communicates and builds respect. Language is essential to the collaborative relationship being built. First and foremost, practitioners need to be mindful and respectful of the language they use when working with youth. This starts with respect for youth identity. One way to do this is using youth selected pronouns such as he/she/they. Additionally, in certain situations a youth may experience feeling disrespected and invalidated by terminology used at home, schools or in the community. For instance, when some families or communities use language that hurts, it is significant. This needs to be addressed in practice. Practitioners can work with LGBTQI2-S youth and discuss how language impact their feelings, emotions and overall well-being.

As part of this, LGBTQIA2-S voice needs to be heard so they can express their struggles and challenges. Giving voice and choice to youth so that their decisions are part of the collaborative process. Language matters!

Applying Active and Reflective Listening Skills

One important role for practitioners is to support LGBTQIA2-S youth and their families during challenging points in time. Some youth may have concerns about sharing difficult and sensitive topics, fearing further rejection. One of the most important skills to counter this fear is active listening.

Active listening focuses on and tunes into the feelings and words of LGBTQIA2-S youth. Acknowledging the words and expressions the youth are using to communicate is important. This will shine a light on what the youth is trying to express and encourage deeper and more expansive collaborative thinking between the youth and practitioner. Reflective listening involves clarifying and rephrasing what the youth is sharing. This ensures that the practitioner understands what the youth is saying. Summarizing the discussion reinforces what the youth said. It begins with a way of thinking and collaboration between the youth and the practitioner. It includes being present and focusing on what the LGBTQIA2-S youth is conveying.

Research with LGBTQIA2-S youth and young adults have documented repeated rejection and stress experienced throughout their lives (McCormick, Schmitdt, & Terrazas, 2016). Some youth in the focus groups also spoke about feeling rejected by their birth parents and family members due to their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Applying active listening and reflective listening skills is essential to help address youth's emotional and psychological needs. The practitioner should demonstrate an authentic desire to understand the complexity of the youth's perspective about their lives and the painful life experiences that informed it. Training practitioners about diversity, equity and inclusion is critical. Continuous discussion of cultural competence and cultural response approaches need to be in place.

Providing Continuous Education and Training

Diversity training about LGBTQIA2-S issues can enhance knowledge, skills and practice. Using role plays and sample case studies about a range of topics, such as sexuality and gender identity issues, including coming out, bullying, and microaggressions can strengthen skills. Participation in educational and training programs is vital to strengthening practitioners' skills.

Summary

Creating a collaborative relationship between LGBTQIA2-S youth and practitioners is vital to the overall wellbeing of youth in foster care. To help achieve this outcome, practitioners can provide a safe environment built on mutual understanding, use language that respects and acknowledges the youth, and apply other practices that are especially supportive for LGBTQIA2-S youth.

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