

### Three Considerations in Gender-Affirming Foster Care

By Jasmine Gomez-Gadd and Jenny Gadd, LCSW

Youth in the foster care system are [2.3 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 by 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 2019, a study showed that **30% of youth in foster care identified as LGBTQ+**

Only 11% of youth in national populations identify as LGBTQ+, making youth in the foster care system 2.3 times more likely to identify as LGBTQ+.

In preparing to care for LGBTQ+ youth in your home and agency, consider these ideas as a foundation to your engagement and on-going 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 in 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 mistreated and stigmatization by society. LGBTQ+ identified youth of color are at 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+ identified 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](#), 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 with. 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/>

About the authors:

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.