

Advocating for and Supporting LGBTQ Youth

Like all young people in foster care, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ) need the support of a nurturing family and caring adults to help them navigate adolescence and grow into healthy adults.

Research has shown that youth who identify as LGBTQ are overrepresented in the foster care system. Many youth who experience foster care, and who also identify as LGBTQ, suffer an added layer of trauma, stemming from rejection or discrimination due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Studies show they are more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers, feel unsafe or be threatened or harassed at school, turn to substance misuse to cope, and experience homelessness in their lifetime.

A youth's CASA should exercise cultural humility and while considering their own beliefs about sexual orientation and gender identity, seek to understand the issues facing a young person who identifies as LGBTQ and advocate for what is in the youth's best interest the same as any child in the foster care system. As a youth's advocate and trusted adult in their life, a CASA must recognize and appreciate how their words and attitude could impact youth who identify as LGBTQ and ensure they are safe and treated with dignity and respect.

Building Rapport

If/when youth discloses his or her LGBTQ identity, respond in an affirming, supportive way and display compassion and respect

Reserve judgment and project a positive, supportive attitude

Create a safe space and convey to youth a willingness to listen and talk about anything of significance in their lives

Become familiar with LGBTQ terminology and definitions and purposeful in their usage

Refrain from disclosing information regarding youth's sexual orientation or gender identity without good reason, and avoid defining a youth by this aspect of their lives alone - understand that other areas of their lives also take priority

Understand that an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity may be fluid and change and evolve over time

Use youth's name and pronouns of choice

Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships (for example, instead of do you have a girlfriend, ask, is there anyone special in your life?)

Avoid double standards by allowing youth who identify as LGBTQ to discuss feelings of attraction and engage in age-appropriate romantic relationships just as a straight youth would, and ensure all youth have access to appropriate sex education

Advocacy

Identify any services and opportunities for social support that will respect youth's sexual orientation and gender identity

Ensure that youth has an opportunity to connect with friends and others in their social communities

When applicable, encourage youth to participate in activities that interest them, regardless of whether these activities are stereotypically male or female

Encourage caregivers/parents to participate in activities that will increase awareness and understanding of youth identifying as LGBTQ

Consider whether the youth exhibits or expresses self-hatred or negative emotions such as anger or aggression due to conflicts with gender and identity and advocate for appropriate services

Verify that youth's medical and mental health professionals offer guidance and access to information regarding possible medical interventions, therapy, and other treatment options available to support youth

Acknowledge youth's gender expression and advocate for their preferred choices of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, room decorations, etc.

Call attention to any unfair or discriminatory treatment by providers or individuals involved in the case

Help ensure youth have the ability to advocate for themselves and stay connected to/make connections with trusted adults as they transition to adulthood

