



STRATEGY BRIEF

SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

October 2025

How can child protection agencies recruit and train supportive families for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care?

Children belong with [families](#) but LGBTQ+¹ youth face some unique challenges when it comes to family.² More than half of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing a [negative reaction](#) to their identity from a parent. LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in foster care, in part, because negative parental reactions to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity result in abandonment, rejection, violence, or other serious harms. LGBTQ+ youth also are overrepresented in congregate care, which is an indicator that many child welfare jurisdictions are struggling to recruit and maintain safe and supportive family-based placements for LGBTQ+ youth. Some [evidence](#) suggests these challenges and concerns may be compounded for LGBTQ+ youth of color.³

Federal law requires state and tribal child protection agencies to ensure all children in foster care receive “safe and proper” care that addresses their health and well-being needs.⁴ For LGBTQ+ youth, that means placement with kin or a non-kin foster caregiver who supports their identity, has the knowledge and skills required to meet their developmental needs, and is committed to helping them access affirming services.

“People sometimes think LGBTQ+ youth are going through phases, but they’re on a journey. They’re figuring themselves out; it’s not always going to be clear-cut. It’s invalidating and harmful to say to someone, ‘No, you’re wrong,’ when they tell you who they are. Instead, ask questions with openness and humility. That’s how we can learn and better understand queer youth.”

—Rowan Grae, Former Foster Youth, Indiana

Recruitment strategies

Child protection agencies must employ a combination of [diligent family finding and targeted family engagement](#) to ensure every LGBTQ+ youth who enters foster care is placed in a safe and supportive family environment. For more information on how child protection agencies can support the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth, see: [What are some safety considerations for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care?](#)

Before engaging in a population-specific recruitment strategy, such as for LGBTQ+ youth, agencies should conduct a **review of internal policies and practices** to ensure that licensing, staff development, community engagement, messaging, and other areas are welcoming and supportive of both kin and LGBTQ+ caregivers. Many resources are available to help:

- The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation's [Promising Practices in Adoption and Foster Care](#) is a comprehensive guide to policies and practices that welcome, affirm, and support LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents.
- HRC's All Children All Families initiative outlines considerations for conducting LGBTQ+-inclusive and affirming [home studies](#).
- The University of Connecticut offers a concise [self-assessment tool](#) to help agencies identify areas of related needs and strengths.

Like all children entering foster care, LGBTQ+ youth deserve every opportunity to be **placed with kin**. In addition to conducting family search and engagement, agencies should ask youth directly how safe they feel with specific relatives. Evidence-based strategies like the Family Acceptance Project's [Family Support Model](#) can help potential and actual kinship caregivers confront potential biases and learn more supportive behaviors. It also can be important to explore placement options among fictive kin — those who the LGBTQ+ youth considers as family but are not related by blood. A [free training](#) from the SOGIE Center provides more information on how to support LGBTQ+ youth in building lifelong supportive connections.

Targeted **marketing and outreach** can help grow the availability of safe, supportive resource families. Community organizations that serve and advocate for LGBTQ+ people are a good place to find potential foster parents who identify as LGBTQ+ or allies (although identity alone does not ensure a youth's safety). Some agencies have made a point of including words and images that are welcoming and inclusive in their outreach materials, such as [Children's Home Northern Kentucky](#), and [Children's Home + Aid](#) in Illinois.

"Potential foster or adoptive parents should be open and accepting of LGBTQ+ children. That's how we keep them safe."

—Susan Langenfeld, Foster and Adoptive Parent, New York

Training strategies

Kinship caregivers and foster parents should have both pre-service and ongoing training specific to the experiences, needs, and concerns of LGBTQ+ youth. While training content will vary depending on state law, jurisdictional policy, and community resources, agencies should consider the following aspects:

- **Inclusion of LGBTQ+ youth and adults with lived expertise.** Where possible, include LGBTQ+ people who have experienced — or are experiencing — foster care in developing, selecting, and/or reviewing training content. Hire them as trainers and invite them to speak on live panels or through video clips.
- **Be inclusive.** Represent the breadth of sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions within trainings and help caregivers recognize that LGBTQ+ youth's identities are diverse and may develop over time.

- **Attend to language.** Provide information and definitions of common terms used among LGBTQ+ youth, including language related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Offer caregivers opportunities to become comfortable talking in these terms. Language evolves. Stay open to learning from LGBTQ+ youth what language is most affirming to them.
- **Address conscious and unconscious biases.** Caregiver attitudes can stem from societal, cultural, or religious beliefs, as well as misinformation, lack of understanding, and fears about the children's futures. Clinical models like the National SOGIE Center's [Youth Acceptance Project](#) can help caregivers explore how their values and beliefs might impact a youth.
- **Provide concrete examples of affirming behaviors.** Research confirms that LGBTQ+ youth with high levels of family support have improved mental health and significantly reduced risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts. Lists of specific [supportive behaviors](#) can help caregivers translate their knowledge and understanding into action. The National SOGIE Center's [AFFIRM Caregiver](#) model has been shown to improve caregivers' attitudes, behaviors, and confidence with LGBTQ+ youth.
- **Offer follow-up coaching and support.** A one-time training is less effective than training combined with mentorship, coaching, or other forms of ongoing support that allows the learner to apply and adopt the new knowledge and skills over time.

"Agencies should do a better job of utilizing gender-neutral language instead of specific terms like 'foster mothers' or 'foster fathers' to be queer friendly. It really matters."

—Brittany Lee, Former Foster Youth, Washington

Questions to consider

Ensuring LGBTQ+ youth feel safe, supported, and affirmed requires more than policy. It takes reflection, collaboration, and engagement with those most impacted. The following questions aim to help child protection agencies assess current practices, address gaps, and strengthen supports for LGBTQ+ youth.

- *What supports are available within our agency or community to promote greater family acceptance for LGBTQ+ youth and prevent entries into foster care or placement disruption?*
- *How might our agency policies and practices, including family search and engagement, home studies, and licensing requirements, be adapted to be more welcoming and supportive of LGBTQ+ caregivers and allies?*
- *What placement preferences and considerations do we employ to ensure all LGBTQ+ youth are in safe and supportive families? What procedural guardrails prevent unsafe placements?*
- *How do we ensure that the concerns of LGBTQ+ youth are heard and heeded when they express that they are feeling unsafe in a placement?*
- *How are we engaging with community partners to better support LGBTQ+ youth?*
- *How are we engaging LGBTQ+ youth and adults with lived experience in training development and delivery?*
- *What resources and services do we provide caregivers to help meet the medical and mental health needs of LGBTQ+ youth, including gender-affirming care for trans youth?*

"If we focus only on getting the words right, we can miss the point, which is to show up in loving, connected ways that deeply listen to young people wherever they are in their process. The fundamental question is, how are we treating people?"

—Gwendolyn Forrest, Resource Caregiver, Maine

¹ The abbreviation LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning, with + representing additional diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, or expressions, including (but not limited to) asexual, intersex, and two-spirit.

² Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Brittany Lee; Divina Cordeiro; Gwendolyn Forrest; Rowan Grae; and Susan Langenfeld.

³ Richter, B. E., Lindahl, K. M., & Malik, N. M. (2016). [Examining ethnic differences in parental rejection of LGB youth sexual identity](#). *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31(2), 244–249.

⁴ A federal regulation that went into effect on July 1, 2024, [Designated placement requirements under Titles IV-E and IV-B for LGBTQI+ children](#), clarifies that pre-existing federal law requires that every child in foster care receive “safe and proper” care and placement in the “most appropriate setting available.” Agencies must “ensure *all* placements, including those for LGBTQ+ youth, are free from harassment, mistreatment, or abuse. The rule further requires that agencies ensure ‘designated placements’ are available for, and may be requested by, any child in foster care who identifies as LGBTQ+.

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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