

16 Ways to Create Safe Spaces for LGBTQ Identified Foster Youth

1. **Use passive advertising.** Create a welcoming environment using posters, books, magazines, TV shows or movies, or through generally LGBTQ-affirming comments, which can communicate that your home (for parents/care providers) or office (for staff) is a safe space.
2. **Do not make assumptions** regarding a foster child's sexual orientation or gender identity. There is no one way to look or act like a given identity. Instead of assuming what pronoun a youth uses, for instance, create space where they feel confident and safe disclosing that to you.
3. **Maintain a youth's confidentiality.** Many youth in foster care have experienced violations of their confidentiality. You can build trust with a youth and decrease their vulnerability to experiencing a myriad of risk factors by maintaining youth confidentiality. Be up front and clear with a youth about your dedication to confidentiality, as they may not assume it to be the case.
4. As a foster care provider/parent, if there are multiple youth in your home, **ensure that there is an expectation that everyone respects one another in light of their differences.** Do not allow youth to harass one another around sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
5. As a foster care staff member, **if parents/providers are harassing or rejecting an LGBTQ youth because of their identity or expression, reach out to them with education and support resources.** Harassment/rejection can look like not using a youth's name or pronoun, shaming a youth around their identity, pressuring them to conform to homophobic and transphobic expectations, or treating them differently than other youth in the home. If necessary, attempt to locate an LGBTQ affirming family for placement. Ensure the youth is aware that you, the staff member, are safe and affirming. Work on safety planning with the youth and connecting them to LGBTQ affirming resources outside the home.
6. **Youth should be able to express their gender authentically and should be placed in gendered housing and/or programs that are consistent with their gender identity** regardless of their transition status (surgery, hormones, legal documents, etc).
7. **LGBTQ youth should not have unique rules applied to them in the home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity** that are not applied to the heterosexual and cisgender youth. Examples would be LGBTQ youth who are not allowed to share a room or go on dates when the similarly aged, heterosexual and cisgender youth, are allowed to.
8. **A youth, simply because they are LGBTQ, does not present a danger for other children in the home.** Do not assume that a youth who identifies as LGBTQ is a sexual predator or identifies with the community because of previous abuse. These are very damaging, harmful and inaccurate stereotypes.
9. **Do your own homework.** Educate yourself about LGBTQ and LGBTQ-friendly resources in the community. Don't depend on your LGBTQ youth to do the work for you; it is a lot to ask of a youth to self-advocate all of the time and to have all the answers about how to best support

them. Seek out books, reports, and videos online, support groups for families of LGBTQ youth, and community-based organizations serving LGBTQ people.

10. **Be understanding as youth process their gender identity and/or sexual orientation at their own pace.** Pronouns and names may change a number of times and sexual orientation may shift between a number of identities. Coming out is not a one time event. Work on understanding that there is flexibility in identity, even if it is confusing to you, and attempt to shift your language to meet them where they are at as quickly as possible.
11. **Use appropriate language through listening** to your youth describing their sexual orientation and gender identity in their own words. Use the pronouns and name the youth uses for themselves, regardless of legal identification. They may only want to use that name/pronoun with you, in which case you should help them navigate different spaces by changing the name and pronoun you use for them in different spaces. This will build trust through maintaining confidentiality.
12. **Listen to LGBTQ voices.** Become familiar with diverse and varied LGBTQ experiences through appropriate and respectful films, documentaries, books and magazines. Seek out media created by and for LGBTQ people, rather than popular culture's often stereotypical representations.
13. **If a youth comes out to you,** help them identify other safe and unsafe people to come out to. Thank them for trusting you and being honest, celebrate their identity, but help them create realistic expectations of the society we live in. Do not out them to others without the youth's consent.
14. **When referring to other services, do "warm hand-offs", meaning call first to confirm referral source is a safe space** for LGBTQ youth. If you are struggling to find an LGBTQ affirming services provider, contact a local LGBTQ organization for a referral.
15. **Avoid using heteronormative and cisnormative language during conversations.** For example, when you would normally use words such as "boyfriend/girlfriend" or "husband/wife," try using the word "partner" or "significant other". Instead of assuming folks use particular gendered language based on their appearance, do the work to find out what language that person uses for themselves.
16. **When it's safe, interrupt problematic language using your own strategies.** Try to be as respectful and constructive as possible when reclaiming the safety of a space. Your goal is to let all youth in your care know that you respect all people at all times, and expect the same from them. Model appropriate language and encourage them to consider the impact of their words.