

# beFIERCE!

A Toolkit for Providers  
Working with LGBTQ  
Foster Youth

Written by Stephanie Perron, LCSW

OUR SPACE

where it is safe to be yourself  
A BAYC PROGRAM / A DIVISION OF SUNNY HILLS SERVICES



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## A Toolkit for Providers Working with LGBTQ Foster Youth

by Stephanie Perron, LCSW  
published June 2015

beFIERCE! was made possible by the generous support of the Walter S. Johnson Foundation.

The Walter S. Johnson Foundation

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Photography by Kelly Puleio, [kellypuleio.com](http://kellypuleio.com)  
Graphic design by Micah Bazant, [micahbazant.com](http://micahbazant.com)



You are fierce,  
you are fabulous,  
you are brilliant  
and you are  
survivors.

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## Appreciations

It is with a heart full of gratitude and, as we say at Our Space, fierce love, that I thank and appreciate the following people for their contributions to beFIERCE!. Without your support, this project would not have been possible. To Rozayy and Madison for your fearlessness, passion, and leadership in ensuring youth voice and perspective are centered in beFIERCE!. To the LGBTQ youth and providers who participated in the beFIERCE! focus groups and national survey to help ensure beFIERCE! reflects the expertise, feedback and needs of these populations. To Carolyn Reyes, Shannan Wilbur, Joel Baum, Natalie Ortega, Kevin Bunch, Dania Saks March, Eb Brown, Briana McGeough, and Alison Larkin for your thoughtful and earnest feedback on beFIERCE! drafts, and for being fierce comrades in the journey to create safe, holistic and affirming services for young people. To Lanz Bañes, Alex Volpe and Jess Wallace for providing copy edit support. To Jorge Hernandez for your leadership and for creating a beautiful and informative webinar. To Calvin Fammons for bringing beFIERCE! to life through the creation of the webinar. To Yali Lincroft and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation for your commitment to supporting LGBTQ foster youth and their providers. Finally, to the queer and trans foster youth with whom I have had the privilege of knowing: you are fierce, you are fabulous, you are brilliant and you are survivors. Thank you for building community with me. My life is changed because I know you.

# Information About Our Space

**Our Space: where it is safe to be yourself** is an LGBTQ youth community center that works in partnership with LGBTQ youth, adults and allies to create safe and affirming space where LGBTQ youth can socialize, build community, develop leadership skills and access culturally relevant mental health services. Our Space holds the experiences, strengths and needs of young people impacted by poverty, homelessness and the child welfare and juvenile (in)justice systems at its core, and recognizes these youth as fierce and fabulous change-agents in our communities.

Our Space services include: LGBTQ youth community center programming four days per week; LGBTQ affirming case management and mental health services; and targeted support services to LGBTQ foster youth and their caregivers/families via the Youth Acceptance Collaborative, a collaboration between Our Space, Family Builders by Adoption, and Alameda County Social Services.

Our Space is located in Hayward, California and is a program of Bay Area Youth Center, a division of Sunny Hills Services.



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# About the Author

Stephanie Perron is the Director of LGBTQ Services at Bay Area Youth Center (BAYC). Stephanie joined the BAYC team in 2009 as a clinician in their transitional housing program. In 2010, under Stephanie's leadership, BAYC opened the Our Space LGBTQ youth community center and, a few years later, launched the Youth Acceptance Collaborative. Prior to her work with BAYC, Stephanie worked at Ozone House, a Michigan-based nonprofit that provides housing and therapeutic services to transition age youth, and co-founded their program for LGBTQ youth: PrideZone. Stephanie's daily work is guided by a belief in the ferocity and resilience of young people and queer and trans people, and a commitment to community-building for justice and holding intersectionality at the heart of her work. Stephanie is a queer, femme mama who, in her spare time, enjoys impromptu dance parties with her kids and spending time by the ocean. Stephanie holds an MSW from the University of Michigan and a BA from Antioch College.

# Dear Provider,

Welcome to **beFIERCE!**—a publication that invites you to actively engage in supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) foster youth. As providers, we have the power to make an impact in the lives of LGBTQ foster youth. We have the incredible opportunity to **beFIERCE!**—to bravely do what many others have not: to show LGBTQ foster youth unconditional positive regard; to see them for more than the files that may be written about them, than the behaviors they may be showing us; to see the bigger picture; and to see their lives through an intersectional and trauma-informed lens. It is my hope that **beFIERCE!** will support you in this journey.

In creating **beFIERCE!**, it has been important to Our Space that the wisdom, power and voice of LGBTQ foster youth are held at the heart of this project, and heard throughout the publication. It has also been important to us that **beFIERCE!** represents and responds to the needs of the provider community. Our Space hired interns from the LGBTQ foster youth community to help us create the foundation for **beFIERCE!** and help us stay accountable to LGBTQ foster youth throughout the publication. We also facilitated several youth and provider focus groups, consulted with LGBTQ foster youth providers we respect and admire, and administered a national survey to gather more community input to guide the content of **beFIERCE!**

A consistent theme voiced by LGBTQ foster youth throughout this process is that they often feel invisible to their service providers—that service providers talk only about their symptoms and their behaviors instead of seeing their full humanity. **beFIERCE!** was intentionally created to support providers in learning how to take a holistic view of LGBTQ foster youth. **beFIERCE!** is here to help you shift your frame so you see LGBTQ foster youth as whole and complex, and honor and appreciate the intersections of their identities and experiences.



**beFIERCE!** is divided into six sections, each focusing on one of the letters in “FIERCE:” Frames, Intersections, Engagement, Resources, Critical Conversations, and Exploring Self.

- ▶ **Frames:** What frames do providers use to view LGBTQ foster youth? What impact do these perspectives have in providers’ work with LGBTQ foster youth?
- ▶ **Intersections:** How do the intersections of all aspects of an LGBTQ foster youth’s identity impact their experiences? How must providers account for these as they support LGBTQ foster youth?
- ▶ **Engagement:** Why does authentic engagement with LGBTQ foster youth matter? What does it look like to create the powerful relationships upon which it depends?
- ▶ **Resources:** What are the various resources available to support providers in their work with LGBTQ foster youth?
- ▶ **Critical Conversations:** How do providers raise challenging subjects with their colleagues and others supporting LGBTQ foster youth?
- ▶ **Exploring Self:** Why is it necessary for providers to engage in self-reflection and explore their connection to LGBTQ foster youth?

**beFIERCE!** is a starting point—an invitation to action, self-reflection and continued growth. LGBTQ foster youth need providers to step up as fierce allies because they continue to slip through the cracks in our service delivery systems and therefore have worse outcomes for well-being than heterosexual and gender conforming foster youth. This needs to stop. As providers, one of the most powerful tools we have to offer young people is ourselves. Ultimately **beFIERCE!** is a call to action for providers to increase our awareness of what LGBTQ foster youth really need and build our capacity to show up for them as safe and trustworthy adults.

It is a privilege to be a part of this process and bring **beFIERCE!** to you.

In community,  
Stephanie Perron, LCSW  
Director of Our Space

# Frames

What frames do we use to see LGBTQ Foster Youth? What impact do these perspectives have on our work with them?

Frames help us make meaning and order from what we are seeing. When we take a photograph, we frame the image so that we can see it fully. Frames literally shape how we perceive and understand the things happening to and around us. We all have different frames through which we see the world. Often these frames are influenced by many of our life experiences and by our identities including, but not limited to, our:

- Racial, ethnic and cultural identities
- SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression)
- Socio-economic class background and current class status
- Family history
- Trauma history
- Support networks
- Religion/spirituality
- Immigration status
- Disabilities, both perceived and experienced
- Mental health
- Involvement with different systems
- Work history and current job or employment status
- Experiences with discrimination and oppression
- Age
- Size and shape
- Educational level
- Language
- HIV status

The same is true for LGBTQ foster youth. Their world view is framed by their life experiences and identities. By virtue of being a part of the foster care system, LGBTQ youth have experienced some familial trauma (what brought them into foster care and/or the experience of being removed from their family), but their trauma typically doesn't end there. LGBTQ foster youth often continue to experience trauma on a regular basis.

Frames are powerful. Not only do they influence how we see the world, but they also influence how we engage with the world, how policies are made and how practices are created. Frames impact our work as providers because, whether we like to admit it or not, we put frames around the youth we work with and those frames often influence the decisions we make related to these young people.

Some of the traumas that frame the experiences of LGBTQ foster youth include:

- (Chronic) Homelessness
- Interactions with the police
- Death of friends and family
- Assault
- Moving frequently and lack of control over foster care placement
- Bullying in and out of school
- Abuse from family/caregivers
- Community violence
- Isolation from family and community
- (Commercial) sexual exploitation
- Rejection from family/caregivers
- Discrimination and violence, or threat of violence, in response to perceived and/or experienced identities
- Being misgendered/lack of respect for preferred gender pronoun (PGP) and/or preferred name
- Never seeing themselves positively reflected in the larger community
- Poverty
- Invisibility/not being seen for their full selves

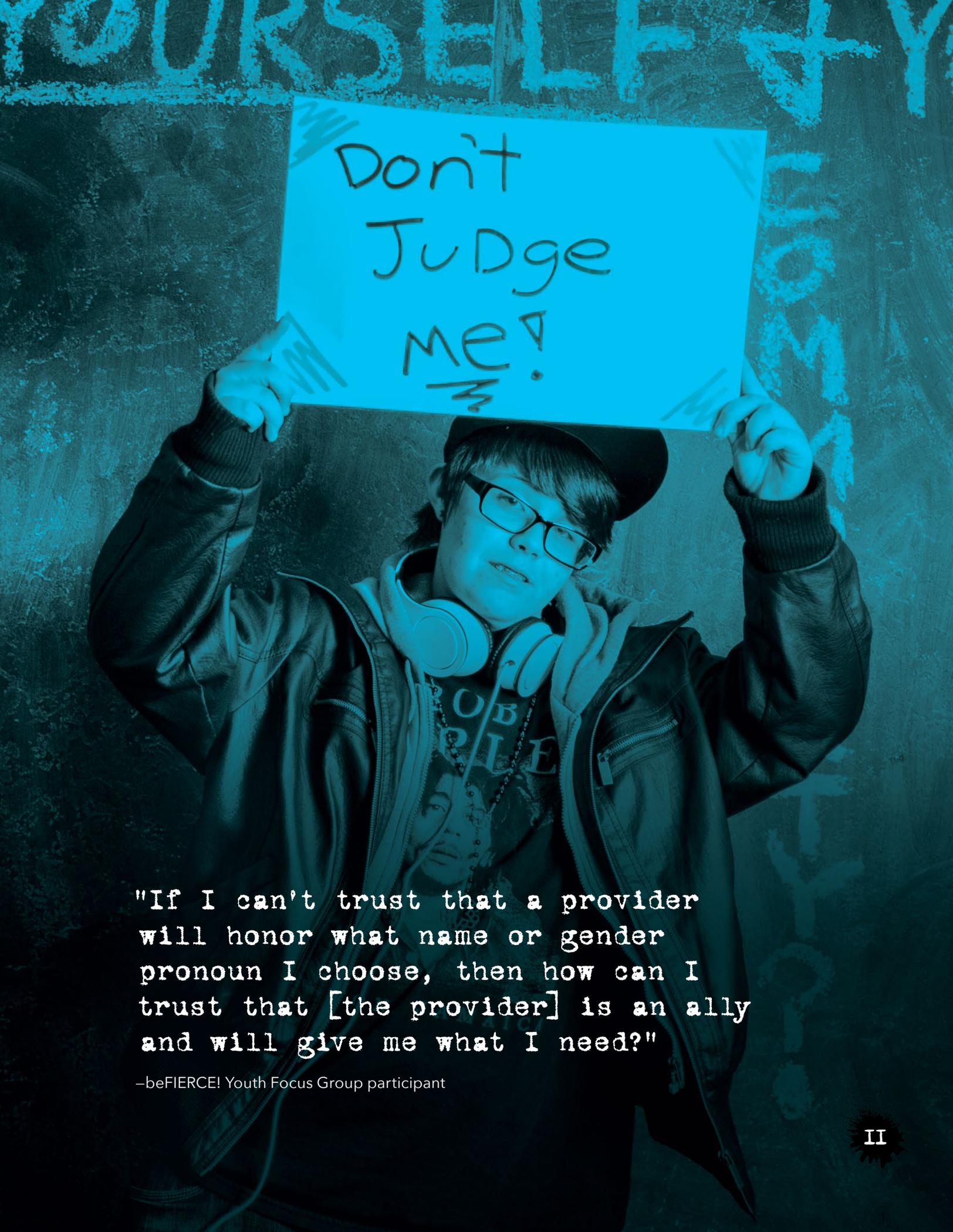
**TRAUMA** describes an experience that is emotionally painful and distressing to a person, and that which a person does not have the internal or external resources to cope with, leaving them powerless.<sup>1</sup>

Often we don't know what kind of trauma young people have experienced or are experiencing because they aren't talking about it with us, or don't have the understanding or words to name what is happening to them as trauma. But our young people give us clues through their behavior nonetheless. Trauma shows up in a young person's behavior in many disguises: **as distrust; readiness to fight; AWOL'ing or running away; disengagement or withdrawal from programs and/or relationships; self-sabotage; unsafe choices; "having an attitude"; substance use; skipping school; and self-harming behaviors.**

When LGBTQ foster youth demonstrate these behaviors, we run the risk of only applying a **behavioral frame** to these youth. We react to the behavior being displayed and seek to reduce or eliminate it. The "problem" to be solved rests with the actions of the young person we are seeking to support.

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2. What is Trauma? (n.d.). Retrieved April 21, 2015, from <http://www.nonviolenceandsocialjustice.org/FAQs/What-is-Trauma/41>

A young person with glasses and a cap is holding a white sign that says "Don't Judge ME!". They are wearing a dark jacket and headphones. The background is a wall with graffiti, including the words "WURSE" and "BY".

Don't  
Judge  
ME!

"If I can't trust that a provider will honor what name or gender pronoun I choose, then how can I trust that [the provider] is an ally and will give me what I need?"

—beFIERCE! Youth Focus Group participant

## A BEHAVIORAL FRAME: "WHAT DID YOU DO?"

Under a behavioral frame the question to LGBTQ foster youth is, "What did you do?"  
It focuses on the young person's behavior and assigns blame to them.

### Labels frequently assigned to youth under this frame

bad    defiant  
trouble-maker  
out-of-control  
dangerous    deviant  
hypersexual  
doesn't care  
aggressive  
oppositional  
acting out  
damaged    broken  
will never amount to anything  
could change if they wanted to

### How young people often feel when this frame is applied to them.

judged  
invisible  
ashamed  
angry  
sad  
hurt  
alone  
worthless  
misunderstood  
powerless  
hopeless  
distrustful

A behavioral frame represents a fragmented view of a young person, and is often deficit-based. When this frame is used, we often see young people respond with more extreme versions of the same behavior.

In contrast to a behavioral frame, a trauma-informed frame allows us to view LGBTQ foster youth as more than their behaviors. We are able to see them more fully for who they are and who they want to be.

## A TRAUMA-INFORMED FRAME: "WHAT HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE BEEN?"

Under a trauma-informed frame the question to LGBTQ foster youth is, "What has your experience been?" It assumes there is more to a young person's story than their behaviors.

### Labels frequently assigned to youth under this frame

whole  
survivor  
fighter brave  
resourceful  
complex smart  
powerful  
fierce  
strong

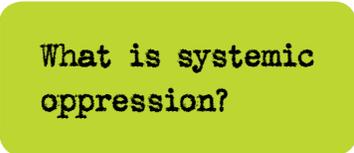
### How young people often feel when this frame is applied to them.

seen safe  
understood  
connected grateful  
relieved trusting  
like they are worth something  
listened to  
empowered  
trusted believed

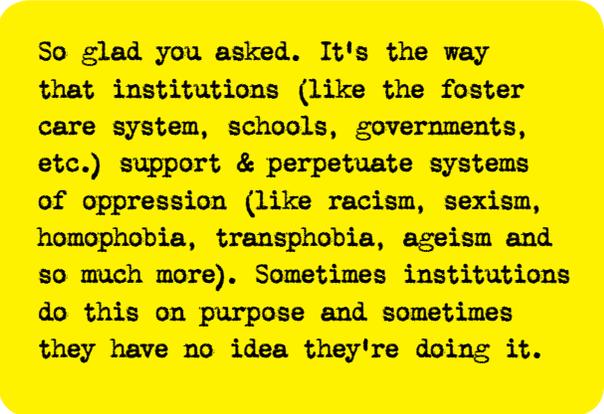
A trauma-informed frame is strengths-based and client centered, and recognizes systemic oppression and its impact on people's lives. A trauma-informed frame recognizes that people are more than their experiences and the things they have been through.

When we use a **behavioral frame** to view LGBTQ foster youth, we run the risk of negatively labeling young people and institutionally defining them through charting and the writing of reports. Our conversations with judges, potential placements and other providers create reputations which follow young people while they are in the foster care system, and **have a direct impact on their experience in care and beyond**. Because of the inherent power difference between youth and adults, it is nearly impossible for young people to challenge this reputation on their own. It is the provider's narrative, rather than the young person's, that is the ultimate arbiter of their experience within our care.

When we use a **trauma-informed frame** to view LGBTQ foster youth, we are able to see young people as whole and complex individuals. We understand that young people's lived experiences and identities, as well as institutionalized factors and systemic oppression, impact their lives. We are able to see that the behaviors young people show us do not stand in isolation - they are pieces of a larger puzzle, framed by the traumas young people experience. Using a **trauma-informed frame** can help us better understand the roots of these behaviors, and give context to them. It can change how we feel about young people and how they feel about us. It allows us to use our power as providers to help create meaningful, positive change in the lives of LGBTQ foster youth.



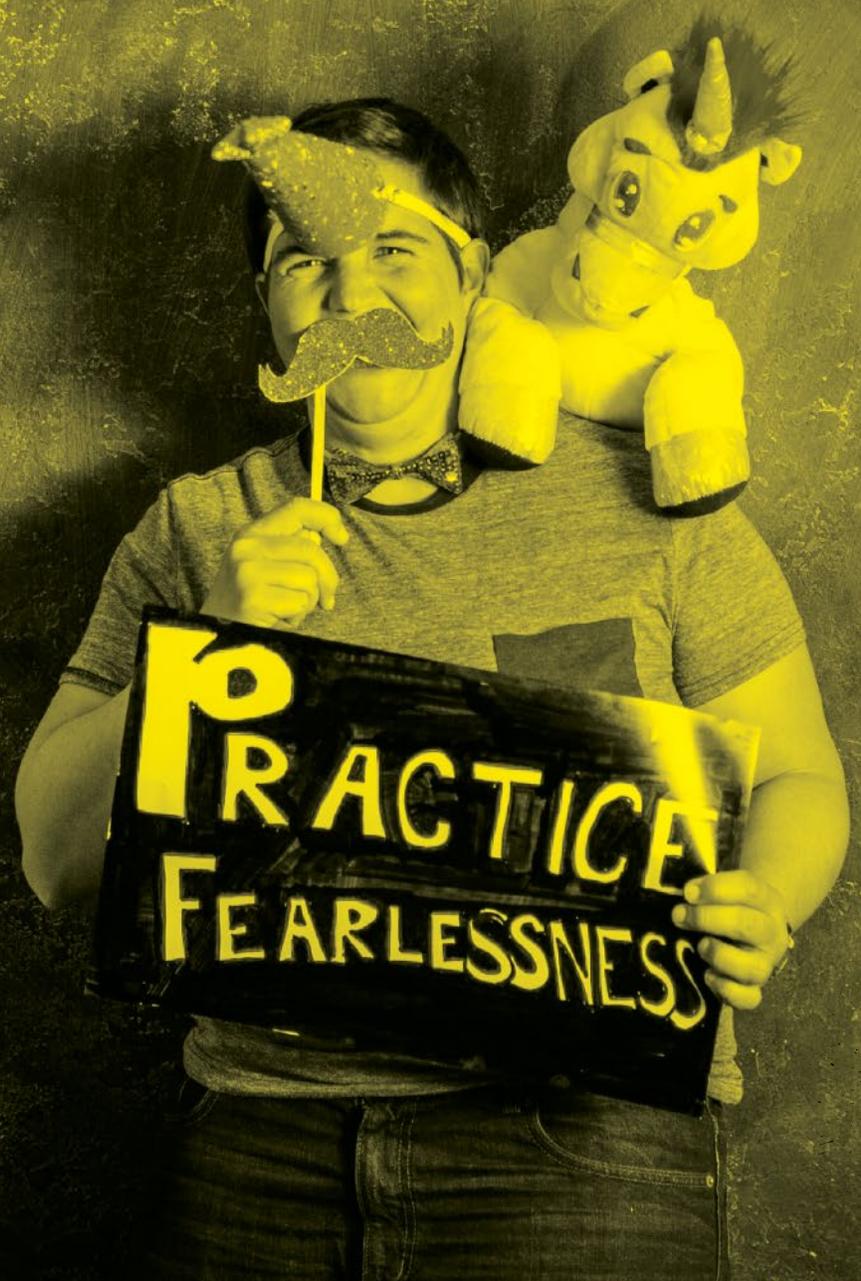
What is systemic oppression?



So glad you asked. It's the way that institutions (like the foster care system, schools, governments, etc.) support & perpetuate systems of oppression (like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ageism and so much more). Sometimes institutions do this on purpose and sometimes they have no idea they're doing it.



HOW DO YOU SHOW  
LOVE 4 YOURSELF



# INTERSECTIONS

How do the intersections of all aspects of an LGBTQ foster youth's identity impact their experiences? How must providers account for these as they support LGBTQ foster youth?

LGBTQ foster youth, like all of us, have intersecting identities that impact who they are and how they see the world. It is our job, as providers, to recognize and respond to LGBTQ foster youth as whole human beings, not as problems or symptoms. When we view young people as one-dimensional, we don't really see them. We end up missing who they are. There is no cookie cutter approach to knowing and understanding a young person's experience, because each young person is unique.

"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

--Audre Lorde



I am influenced by all of these parts of me, and so much more. Do you see me? All of me?

Racial, ethnic & cultural identities • SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity & expression)

Socio-economic class background and current class status • Trauma history • Age

Support networks • Religion/Spirituality • Involvement with different systems

Work history and current job or employment status

Immigration status

Disabilities, both perceived and experienced

Mental health • Language

HIV status • Size and shape

Educational level

Experiences with discrimination and oppression



Youth with intersecting identities are often forced to choose which part of themselves they can show at certain times, reducing them to a single identity, and creating a high level of stress in their lives. Youth of color often report that race is left out of conversations focused on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. In our **beFIERCE!** focus groups, youth of color reported feeling that mainstream LGBTQ culture is for “white gay people.” In learning about LGBTQ youth, providers are largely learning about white LGBTQ youth and the intersection of race, sexual orientation and gender is ignored. LGBTQ youth often report that providers never ask them about their identity; in this process their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression becomes invisible in the foster care system.

Yet the experiences of LGBTQ youth **in and out of the foster care system** are often significantly shaped by the intersections of race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

- LGBTQ youth are estimated to represent just 5 to 7 percent of the nation’s overall youth population, but 13 to 15 percent of young people currently in the juvenile justice system. Of these youth, 60 percent are Black or Latino.<sup>2</sup>
- The life expectancy of a Black trans woman is 35 years old.<sup>3</sup>
- There are between 1.5 to 2 times as many LGBTQ youth living in foster care as LGBTQ youth estimated to be living outside of foster care.<sup>4</sup>
- LGBTQ foster youth are disproportionately placed with group homes and congregate care facilities as opposed to foster homes or family based settings.<sup>5</sup>
- Up to 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ.<sup>6</sup>

Providers must keep in mind that LGBTQ foster youth are not just LGBTQ. They are not just foster youth. They are both, and they are also so much more. A critical part of our job as service providers is to seek out and understand the multiple layers of identity and oppression that LGBTQ foster youth experience. Only in this way can we learn how to be allies and safe adults in their lives. The essence of LGBTQ foster youth is frequently lost as they are reduced to stereotypical caricatures based on our assumptions, which have been formed (in part) by the frames with which we see the world, and the systems we are a part of. We must make conscious choices as providers to be intersectional in our thinking **all of the time**, so as to interrupt these cycles of oppression.

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2. Hunt, J. & Moodie-Mills, A.C. (2012, June 29). The Unfair Criminalization of Gay and Transgender Youth. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2012/06/29/11730/the-unfair-criminalization-of-gay-and-transgender-youth>.
  3. Black Lives Matter (2014, Oct. 20). About us. Retrieved from <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about>
  4. Wilson, B., Cooper, K. Kastanis, A., & Nezhad, S. (August 2014). Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Assessing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles. Retrieved from: <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/safe-schools-and-youth/lafys-aug-2014>
  5. Ibid.
  6. Ray, N. (2006). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth: An Epidemic of Homelessness. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless. Retrieved from <http://www.thetaskforce.org/lgbt-youth-an-epidemic-of-homelessness/>

# CYCLES OF OPPRESSION:

A tool to understand and explore ways to change individual, cultural, and institutional systems of inequity.

**Grain of truth:**  
a small amount  
of truth that is  
used to substan-  
tiate a sweeping  
generalization

## STEREOTYPES:

**A belief about a  
group of people**

We learn stereotypes from friends, family, media, schools, government and other institutions from the time we are born. Stereotypes can be positive or negative and are maintained and reinforced through lack of exposure, and internalization.

## SOCIAL POWER:

Access to resources that enhance chances of living a happy, healthy life. Resources can be basic needs like food, shelter, or safety. They can also be positive media depiction, beneficial laws, or being seen as the norm.

Groups with social power influence and control culture impacting the stereotypes created and maintained about oppressed or target groups. Challenge oppression by admitting to the social power or privilege you have (i.e. heterosexual privilege or cisgender privilege) and using it for positive social change.

## OPPRESSION:

**Prejudice + Social Power**

Target groups do not have access to resources necessary to influence the individual, cultural and institutional components of our society. i.e. women cannot be sexist or oppress men and young people cannot oppress adults. Young people can discriminate against adults but do not have the resources or institutional power to oppress them.

## PREJUDICE:

### Pre-judgements based on the stereotypes we hold

Sometimes we consciously pre-judge, but frequently this happens unconsciously. Challenge unconscious prejudice by admitting that it occurs and by taking time to unearth and challenge it when it arises.

## Internalized Oppression:

When members of an oppressed group believe myths and stereotypes about their identity. Due to internalized oppression, LGBTQI2S youth can have low self-esteem, negative feelings about the LGBTQI2S community, or self-hate.

## DISCRIMINATION:

### Prejudice + action

Acting on our prejudice is something we all do. It can happen consciously/intentionally but like the prejudice that it is based on it frequently happens unconsciously/unintentionally. We all discriminate and this does not make anyone a bad person however be sure to invite receive feedback about your behavior in order to learn from unconscious acts of discrimination.

## P+A=D but often Pu+A=Du

A=Action

P=Prejudice

U=Unconscious

D=Discrimination

Du=Unconscious discrimination (otherwise known as a "duh" moment)

When we use an intersectional frame to think about LGBTQ foster youth we can break through stereotypes and hold the truths of their lives at the center of our work together. We can recognize the painful impacts of (systemic) oppression on LGBTQ foster youth, and also recognize LGBTQ foster youths' strengths and resiliency in the face of oppression. We can make powerful choices to act against this oppression in our every-day interactions with, and on behalf of, LGBTQ foster youth.

**A few tips on keeping intersectionality at the center of our work with LGBTQ foster youth:**

- Stay up-to-date on world events that impact LGBTQ communities and communities of color, such as the killing of unarmed people of color by the police and the high murder rate of transgender women of color. Know that young people are impacted by this violence and create intentional space for them to talk about and process these events.
- Understand the cycle of oppression and reflect on your role in this cycle.
- Use a multi-issue or multi-dimensional frame when thinking about LGBTQ foster youth.
- Reflect on your own intersecting identities and how they show up in (and perhaps interfere with) your work with LGBTQ foster youth.
- Think about the power and privilege you hold as an adult service provider, and how this impacts your relationships with LGBTQ foster youth.
- "Nothing about us without us." Recognize and acknowledge LGBTQ foster youth as experts in their own lives and find ways to partner with them so their expertise is at the center of any decisions that need to be made regarding their care.
- Let go of any defensiveness you may feel if you are "called out" by an LGBTQ foster youth; listen to them with an open mind and heart so you can hear and be present with what they are saying. It is okay to make mistakes, as long as you are willing to own, learn and grow from them.

**"The people showing up to lead this [Black Lives Matter] movement are young, and they are black, queer, trans, disabled, poor, middle-class, students. And they're bringing their whole selves—all of their converging identities—to the movement. To have multiple oppressed identities in this country used to mean learning to create an internal hierarchy where identities vied for the need to be witnessed and loved by the community. . . Now, love is the language of the movement—self-love, and loving the wholeness of our comrades. . . All black lives matter, every single one. And that truth necessitates a society in which all lives matter: queer, trans, disabled, multiracial, elder, writers, artists, teachers, healers, workers, parents. All of them.<sup>7</sup>"**

**—Adrienne Marie Brown**

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7. Brown, Adrienne Marie (2015, February 24). We're Young, Passionate, and Bent on Justice: Why #BlackLivesMatter Is Irresistible." yes! magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/together-with-earth/were-young-passionate-and-bent-on-justice-why-black-lives-matter-is-irresistible/>

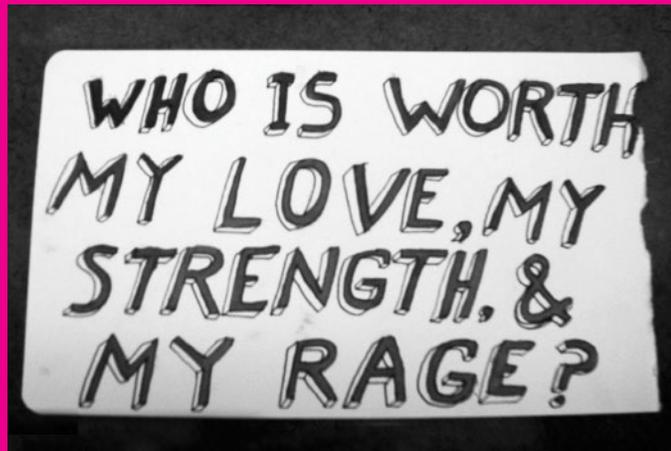


# ENGAGEMENT

Why does authentic engagement with LGBTQ foster youth matter?  
What does it look like to create the powerful relationships upon which it depends?

Relationships and relationship-building is at the heart of our work with LGBTQ foster youth (and youth in general). Because many LGBTQ foster youth have learned to distrust and distance themselves from providers as a way to survive their time in the foster care system, relationship-building takes time.

The process of relationship building may feel intimidating to you, especially if you believe you know nothing about LGBTQ foster youth and have nothing in common with them. To help you in your journey, the beFIERCE! youth focus group participants created a list of qualities possessed by providers who are easy to engage with. This list is paired with examples of how providers can bring these qualities to life in their work.



Art by Mark Aguhar (1987–2012)

It is also important to note that most, if not all, of these tips can be applied to your work with all youth. The needs of LGBTQ foster youth are not inherently unique; what is unique is that LGBTQ foster youth have to navigate a world and systems where they experience discrimination because their identities are stigmatized.

Tips on  
relationship  
building from  
LGBTQ youth.

Bringing these tips to life in your work  
as a provider.

Approach youth  
non-judgmentally,  
and with an open  
mind. Ask questions  
and do not make  
assumptions.

As a provider you may receive information about a youth before you meet them via school records, court reports, referral forms, social services charts and files, stories from other providers and more. It is important that you get to know youth and build your own relationships with them, rather than assuming what is written or said about them to be true.

Be vulnerable.

Be willing to answer questions about yourself. Show emotion. Show empathy. Name your feelings. Say when you don't know something or don't have an answer. be**FI**ERCE! youth focus group participants reported feeling that they were expected to share deep and personal details about their lives with their providers, while their providers could remain private about their own lives. While youth did not want providers to overshare or talk about their personal lives in depth, they did want providers to be real about who they are as opposed to a "blank slate." As providers, it is entirely possible to be relatable while still holding true to our individual and professional boundaries.

Engage with youth  
as participants in  
their own care, not  
simply as recipients  
of care. View youth  
as the experts of  
their own lives, and  
show trust in them.

Ask young people for their opinions and their feedback. "What do you think you need?" "What do you know is best for you?" Talk with youth about the decisions you need to make, the options they have, and the barriers that may exist. Involve youth in the decision making process. Don't assume you know what is in the best interest of the young person.

Actively listen to  
what youth are say-  
ing to you.

Make eye contact. Leave room for silence—don't rush the conversation or rush to give an answer or "fix" something. Give your undivided attention to the youth. Minimize distractions and interruptions. Meet with youth in confidential spaces so other people cannot hear what you are talking about.

Tips on  
relationship  
building from  
LGBTQ youth.

Bringing these tips to life in your work  
as a provider.

Be real with youth.

Do what you say you're going to do. Keep your word. Give young people the full story/real deal about what's informing your decisions. Be transparent without judgment. Be real about the options a youth has and help them understand the likely outcomes of each decision that could be made.

Solicit, and be open  
to, feedback from  
youth.

Ask young people what you can do to be a safer adult for them/better help them. Don't get defensive when youth offer feedback. Instead, thank youth for their feedback and let them know if/how you are going to incorporate it. Don't ask for feedback unless you are committed to hearing it and being responsive to it.

Create space for  
youth to talk.

Find a confidential space to talk. Let youth know ahead of time what you are going to talk about. Give youth the right to pass/not to talk. Don't dominate the conversation. Instead, be curious and ask questions about what the youth wants. Actively listen and let youth know you are genuinely interested in what they have to say. Check in to see how they are doing throughout the conversation. Let youth know they can take breaks as needed during the conversation. Let young people know how they can access you (i.e. When are your office hours? Do they need an appointment to meet with you or can they just drop in? When will you answer your phone and when can youth expect a call back from you?). Be available during hours that youth are typically available.

Be a resource.

Know what kind of resources are available and affirming to LGBTQ youth and foster youth in your community. Have these resources printed and readily available. Build relationships with these resources so you know that the referrals you offer are current and affirming of LGBTQ and foster youth.

Tips on  
relationship  
building from  
LGBTQ youth.

Bringing these tips to life in your work  
as a provider.

**Be persistent.**

Do not give up on youth if they give you the cold shoulder or avoid you. Expect this at first. Let young people know you will continue to help them regardless of their behavior. Continue to call and show up to support young people.

**Use affirming body language.**

Smile. Keep your body and face open and relaxed. Avoid clenching your fists, tensing your body, flinching, furrowing your brow, or frowning. Remember that young people are skilled at reading non-verbal cues and can sense when you are being inauthentic with them.

**Have a positive attitude.**

Inspire hope in young people. Believe and communicate that difficult situations can be worked through and that positive outcomes for LGBTQ foster youth are possible.

**Be visible as an ally.**

Post visible cues, such as LGBTQ affirming posters and ally stickers, in areas where you will meet with youth (such as in your office) or on items you typically carry when meeting with youth (such as a clipboard or your name badge). When talking with youth, use language that doesn't carry an assumption about a young person's sexual orientation, gender identity or expression expression such as, "Who are you dating?" or "What is your preferred gender pronoun?" Intervene immediately when you witness homophobia or transphobia. Apologize if you say/do something that is hurtful or offensive to a young person. Ensure that your agency's forms/brochures are inclusive and affirming of LGBTQ people. Educate yourself on issues impacting LGBTQ youth.

Tips on  
relationship  
building from  
LGBTQ youth.

Bringing these tips to life in your work  
as a provider.

Treat youth with  
respect for their  
personal choices  
and knowledge of  
themselves.

You may not always agree with the choices young people make, but commit to being respectful of a youth's choice and interested in understanding their choice. Recognize that young people may know more about their situation than you do. Ask questions that help a young person make the best choice for them. Avoid shaming language and questions such as, "That was a bad choice." or "Why did you do that?" or "What were you thinking?" Use affirming language such as, "You know yourself better than anyone." or "I want to support you in making the best choice for yourself." or "I trust you."

Be kind.

Be warm and friendly in your communication. Be respectful and thoughtful with young people.

Respect young  
people's gender  
identity and  
expression.

Ask and use a youth's preferred gender pronouns (PGP) and preferred name. Respect a young person's self-determination regarding their clothing choices and hairstyle. Do not make assumptions about a young person's gender identity or sexual orientation based on their gender expression.

Do not "out" youth  
by disclosing their  
sexual orientation  
and gender identity  
to others.

Ask youth who they are out to regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity. Know that some youth may use different pronouns and names with different people, and may be out with some people and not others. For example, a youth may be out as transgender to their social worker or therapist, but not with a potential foster placement. It is the youth's right to disclose this personal information, not the provider's right.

Be upfront and clear  
about the limits of  
confidentiality.

Inform youth at the outset of your work with them when, why, how and to whom you may need to disclose their personal information. Give youth examples of situations where this may occur. Many of the beFIERCE! youth focus group participants reported they were not told the limits of confidentiality and did not understand when and why their providers would disclose their personal information.

At *Our Space* one of the things we have learned is that how we respond to LGBTQ youth is very important. Young people arrive at *Our Space* with a complex set of roots and histories that can impact their relationship with us. As providers, we don't usually have any control over these roots, but we do have control over how we choose to respond to a young person's needs and build relationships with them.

We have learned that when we use interventions that are rooted in acceptance, affirmation and love, we create an environment where young people feel safe, and ultimately we see more positive outcomes for youth. If we use interventions that are rooted in shame, rejection, and judgment, we see an increase in negative outcomes for youth. As providers we have the power to influence what the future looks like for LGBTQ foster youth by building safe, healthy, and trusting relationships with them.



"See what strength we  
have... We are a force  
in the world, see us  
like that."

—beFIERCE! Youth Focus Group participant

**OUTCOMES:** Roots + Interventions = (in large part) the resulting experiences of LGBTQ foster youth.

Positive outcomes

- Working and/or in school
- Linked to resources/needs being met
- Healthy coping skills
- Trusting their providers
- Taking on leadership roles
- Asking for help when they need it
- Dreaming about their life and what it can be
- Connected to their communities and (chosen) families
- Loving themselves

Negative outcomes

- Self-harming behavior, suicidality, and suicide attempts
- Under-utilization of mental health & physical healthcare services
- Involvement in criminal (in)justice systems
- Over-represented in group homes
- High rate of placement changes and moves
- Disproportionate rates of homelessness
- Unsafe sex
- AWOL'ing/Running away
- Substance use
- Dropping out of school

**INTERVENTIONS:** How providers care for and attend to the roots of young people. This is where the magic can happen.

Interventions supporting positive outcomes

- Acceptance
- Affirmation
- Holistic view of a youth's experiences and needs
- No judgment or shaming
- Kindness
- Safety
- Resources
- Being an ally
- Trauma-informed
- Interested in a youth's well-being
- Fierce love (unconditional love)



Interventions often leading to negative outcomes

- Bias
- Labeling
- Ignoring a youth's experiences and needs
- Distrust and Disbelief
- Fear
- Violence
- Assumptions
- Lack of knowledge
- Focusing only on a youth's behavior
- Rejection
- Apathy and Disinterest



Systems involvement

Family history

Oppression

Trauma

Communities

Discrimination

Identities & Values

**ROOTS:** Things that shape us, that we may have little to no control over. Roots help create our frames for the world.

# RESOURCES

**What are the various resources available to support your ongoing development as a provider who works with LGBTQ foster youth?**

When Our Space administered the **beFIERCE!** survey, the overwhelming response we heard from providers was a desire for more resources to help support their work with LGBTQ foster youth, and resources they can share with their young people. This list is by no means comprehensive, but it is a start. Enjoy!

## TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE & RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

- Fostering Relationships, a project of A Home Within, [www.fosteringrelationships.org](http://www.fosteringrelationships.org)
- Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association, [www.ifapa.org/resources/trauma-informed-care.asp](http://www.ifapa.org/resources/trauma-informed-care.asp)
- Relationships Beget Relationships, <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov/docs/pdf/HYP-Report.pdf>
- The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, [www.acestudy.org](http://www.acestudy.org)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)
- The Trauma Center, [www.traumacenter.org](http://www.traumacenter.org)
- Trauma-Informed Practice With LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care, <http://nrcpfc.org/is/downloads/LGBTQ.Trauma.pdf>
- Trauma Smart: A Trauma Informed Practice Model for Working with Pre-School Aged Children, <http://traumasmart.org>
- Vicarious Trauma Fact Sheet from the American Counseling Association, [www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf?sfvrsn=2](http://www.counseling.org/docs/trauma-disaster/fact-sheet-9---vicarious-trauma.pdf?sfvrsn=2)

## INFORMATION, STATISTICS & REPORTS ABOUT LGBTQ (FOSTER) YOUTH

- National Center for Lesbian Rights, [www.nclrights.org/explore-the-issues/youth/youth-resource](http://www.nclrights.org/explore-the-issues/youth/youth-resource)
  - A Place of Respect: A Guide for Group Care Facilities Serving Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Youth
  - Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBT Youth in Out-of-Home Care
  - Guidelines for Managing Information Related to the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression of Children in Child Welfare Settings - 2013
  - Hidden Injustice: LGBT Youth in Juvenile Courts
  - National Recommended Best Practices for Serving LGBT Homeless Youth
- AB458: The California Foster Care Non-Discrimination Act, [www.nclrights.org/legal-help-resources/resource/ab-458-fact-sheet-the-california-foster-care-non-discrimination-act](http://www.nclrights.org/legal-help-resources/resource/ab-458-fact-sheet-the-california-foster-care-non-discrimination-act)

- Getting Down to Basics: Tools to Support LGBTQ Youth in Care, [www.lambdalegal.org/publications/getting-down-to-basics](http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/getting-down-to-basics)
- GLSEN School Climate Survey, [www.glsen.org/nscs](http://www.glsen.org/nscs)
- How to Improve Mental Health Care for LGBT Youth, [www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2010/12/09/8787/how-to-improve-mental-health-care-for-lgbt-youth](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2010/12/09/8787/how-to-improve-mental-health-care-for-lgbt-youth)
- LGBTQ YOUTH OF COLOR: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline, [www.gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/LGBTQ\\_brief\\_FINAL-web.pdf](http://www.gsanetwork.org/files/aboutus/LGBTQ_brief_FINAL-web.pdf)
- National Council on Crime and Delinquency - LGBTQ Youth Projects, [www.nccdglobal.org/what-we-do/major-projects/lgbt-youth-projects](http://www.nccdglobal.org/what-we-do/major-projects/lgbt-youth-projects)
- San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Intersex Violence Prevention Needs Assessment, <http://sfcenter.org/sites/default/files/Violence%20Report%20%28Final%29.pdf>
- Seeking Shelter: The Experiences and Unmet Needs of LGBT Homeless Youth, <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/LGBTHomelessYouth.pdf>
- Sexual and Gender Minority Youth in Foster Care: Addressing Disproportionality and Disparities in Los Angeles, [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/pii\\_rise\\_lafys\\_report.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/pii_rise_lafys_report.pdf)
- Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex, [www.urban.org/publications/2000119.html](http://www.urban.org/publications/2000119.html)

#### **RESOURCES FOR LGBTQ YOUTH, THEIR CAREGIVERS AND FAMILIES**

- El/La Para TransLatinas, [www.ellaparatranslatinas.yolasite.com](http://www.ellaparatranslatinas.yolasite.com)
- Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement, [www.familiatqlm.org](http://www.familiatqlm.org)
- Family Acceptance Project, [www.familyproject.sfsu.edu](http://www.familyproject.sfsu.edu)
- Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)
- Gay Straight Alliance Network, [www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)
- Gender Spectrum, [www.genderspectrum.org](http://www.genderspectrum.org)
- Get YR Rights, [www.getyrrights.org](http://www.getyrrights.org)
- Inter/Act Youth Group (for intersex youth), [www.interactyouth.org](http://www.interactyouth.org)
- National Center for Lesbian Rights, [www.nclrights.org](http://www.nclrights.org)
- Somos Familia, [www.somosfamiabay.org](http://www.somosfamiabay.org)
- The Trevor Project, [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
- Transgender Law Center, [www.transgenderlawcenter.org](http://www.transgenderlawcenter.org)
- Youth Resource, [www.youthresource.org](http://www.youthresource.org)

# CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS

How do providers raise challenging subjects with their colleagues and others supporting LGBTQ foster youth?

One of the most powerful tools we carry with us as providers working with LGBTQ foster youth is our ability to speak up and advocate for the needs of young people. This is called being an ally. One of the ways that providers can be allies to LGBTQ foster youth is by having critical conversations with other providers. Critical conversations are brave conversations that have the power to positively change the experience of an LGBTQ youth in the foster care system.

As providers, we have the privilege of deciding whether to speak up or remain silent about difficult issues. We have an opportunity and responsibility to share (with permission) the stories of the young people we serve towards raising consciousness about their experiences. This does not mean simply reporting about the challenges faced by LGBTQ foster youth. In fact, it may be even more important to share stories about their strength, resilience and vitality.

Critical conversations are a tool for creating change within the foster care system, because this kind of change often comes through our relationships with one another. **beFIERCE!** was created to help you feel equipped and empowered to have critical conversations in your life—with your colleagues; your supervisors and supervisees; a youth's family, foster parents or providers; judges; school personnel; and your community at large. It is quite possible that some of these people will be in a different place than you with regards to their acceptance and affirmation of LGBTQ foster youth. You have the opportunity to be a bridge between them and LGBTQ foster youth. This can feel scary, difficult, and isolating at times. To support you in having critical conversations with others, we offer you these reminders:

- Remember your purpose. Why are you choosing to have a critical conversation? What do you want the outcome to be?
- Think about your relationship with the person with whom you are having a critical conversation, and hold it at your center during the conversation. See this person in all of their humanity, and not as “other” or “opposite” of you. We are all at different stages in our journey to support LGBTQ foster youth, and we all have the ability to change
- Be aware of your own growing edges/areas in which you are still learning.
- Be humble.
- Ask clarifying questions instead of making assumptions.
- Find common ground.
- Think about timing and location. Is this the best time and place to have a critical conversation? If not, commit to having the conversation at another time and place, but do not let too much time pass by.
- Use “I-statements” to help ensure that a critical conversation, not a verbal attack, takes

place. When people feel defensive they are less open to learning and less likely to change their behavior.

- Share your own experience, when applicable, towards working on being an ally to LGBTQ foster youth.
- Share facts and data about outcomes and system conditions for LGBTQ foster youth.
- Be non-judgmental and non-shaming.
- Remember that we all make mistakes.
- Practice using an intersectional frame to talk about LGBTQ foster youth during your critical conversation.
- Have critical conversations with trusted colleagues and allies before having them with individuals who may be challenging to engage.
- Take care of yourself. Having critical conversations, especially when you are having them often, can be exhausting and can take a toll on your own well-being. It is important that you have safe spaces and people with whom you can debrief and access support so you can sustain yourself in this work.



BEING  
OPEN MINDED  
AND hella  
QUEER

**THINKING ABOUT PERMANENCY:  
An example of why critical  
conversations matter**

“Jane Doe” is a 17-year-old, transgender woman of color in the foster care system in Connecticut. Jane entered foster care at age five and experienced abuse from her caregivers both in and out of the foster care system. In April 2014 Jane was placed in adult prison, without charges, because the foster care system alleged they could not find an appropriate placement for her. The last known public information about Jane was that she was being held in solitary confinement in a boys’ facility. While horrific, the story of Jane Doe is not unique. LGBTQ youth are often placed in group homes, congregate care and/or locked facilities, and moved out of their communities and across county lines in response to their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or expression. One of the most critical conversations we can have as a provider is with the people who make decisions regarding where LGBTQ foster youth are placed. LGBTQ foster youth need providers who understand that they deserve to be placed in foster homes. They deserve to be and feel a part of a family. They deserve to have providers who will advocate for their permanency needs so they can be connected to family rather than age out of the foster care system alone. They need providers who can speak eloquently about the authenticity of their asserted gender identity and/or expression. Above all, LGBTQ foster youth deserve to feel safe, affirmed, and accepted in every placement they encounter.



Jane Doe representation by Molly Crabapple, [mollycrabapple.com](http://mollycrabapple.com)







LISTEN his HUGS  
Love EVERYONE  
HUGS

Desy  
ONE LOVE  
Fierce  
Love  
Respect



12. What is a critical conversation I want to have with another provider? When and how will I have it? What might inhibit my ability and/or willingness to have it?

13. How can I engage with caregivers/families and work towards permanency for LGBTQ foster youth?

14. What questions do I still have about working with LGBTQ foster youth? Where can I get support in answering them?

15. What are some local LGBTQ youth resources in my community?





Don't Judge Me

Don't Judge Me

Fighting For Racial Justice

Create Your Future

With Love Comes

BY SPEAK

There Love

There Love

LOVE

COMMON