PRACTICE BRIEF 1

Providing Services and Supports for Youth who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex or Two-Spirit

Purpose of This Brief

This Practice Brief is for policymakers, administrators, and providers seeking to learn more about (1) youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, or two-spirit (LGBTQI2-S) and (2) how to develop culturally and linguistically competent programs and services to meet their needs and preferences.

Needs of Youth Who Are LGBTQI2-S

An estimated 2.7 million adolescents who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual live in the United States. Other youth identify themselves as transgender, intersex, two-spirit, or questioning, or use other terms (see Box 1).[1] These youth frequently encounter numerous challenges and may feel isolated, alienated, depressed, and fearful as they attempt to navigate their emerging awareness of their sexual and/or gender identity.

Studies indicate that youth who are LGBTQI2-S are at risk for a number of negative experiences and outcomes associated with how others react to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.[2,3] Compared with other youth, youth who are LGBTQI2-S are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide.[2] They are more likely than their peers to suffer from depression and use or abuse substances.

Youth who are LGBTQI2-S may also be more likely to experience harassment from other youth and significant adults in their lives, and to be subjected to verbal, sexual, and physical abuse and other forms of trauma. Further, they are more likely to drop out of school and become homeless.[3]

Finally, bullying and rejection by peers and family members due to a youth's LGBTQI2-S identity may exacerbate mental health challenges.

Addressing the needs of youth who are LGBTQI2-S presents many challenges to child-serving agencies. Challenges stem, in part, from limited knowledge and/or stereotypes about these youth. Providers can benefit from acquiring a better understanding about the experiences of

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1 Harris, K. M., Florey, F., Tabor, J., Bearman, P. S., Jones, J., & Udry, J. R. (2003). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health [Online]. Available at: http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth.

2 Gibson, P. (1989). Gay male and lesbian youth suicide. In M. R. Feinleib (Ed.), *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide: Vol. 3. Preventions and interventions in youth suicide* (pp. 110-142). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

3 Ragg, D. M., Patrick, D., & Ziefert, M. (2006). Slamming the closet door: Working with gay and lesbian youth in care. In R. Woronoff and G. P. Mallon (Eds.), LGBTQ youth in child welfare [Special issue]. *Child Welfare, 85*(2), 109-438.

BOX 1

DEFINITIONS OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Lesbian	Females who are emotionally and sexually attracted to, and may partner with, females only.
Gay	Males who are emotionally and sexually attracted to, and may partner with, males only. "Gay" is also an overarching term used to refer to a broad array of sexual orientation identities other than heterosexual.
Bisexual	Individuals who are emotionally and sexually attracted to, and may partner with, both males and females.
Transgender	Individuals who express a gender identity different from their birth-assigned gender.
Questioning	Individuals who are uncertain about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
Intersex	Individuals with medically defined biological attributes that are not exclusively male or female; frequently "assigned" a gender at birth, which may differ from their gender identity later in life.
(2-S) Two-Spirit	A culture-specific general identity for Native Americans (American Indians and Alaska Natives) with homosexual or transgendered identities. Traditionally a role-based definition, two-spirit individuals are perceived to bridge different sectors of society (e.g., the male-female dichotomy, and the Spirit and natural worlds).
Sexual Minority	The term "sexual minority" is inclusive, comprehensive, and sometimes used to describe youth who are LGBTQ2-S. However, it may have a negative connotation because minority suggests inferiority to others.
Other Terms	Youth also may use other terms to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity, such as homosexual, queer, gender queer, non-gendered, and asexual. Some youth may not identify a word that describes their sexual orientation, and others may view their gender as fluid and even changing over time. Some youth may avoid gender-specific pronouns.

youth who are LGBTQI2-S, including discrimination and stigma. The limited availability of programs and services that are tailored for these youth and their families also presents a challenge. These youth may fear disclosing their identities and, as a result, may be inhibited from seeking the supports and therapeutic resources they need. Youth who are afraid to be open about their identity, or "come out," may be less likely to report their experiences and needs to providers and others in a service system.

Youth who are LGBTQI2-S are part of a distinctive cultural group. They may share a larger cultural identity, which includes a defined set of norms, social events, styles, and use of language. These youth also come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Given these factors, youth who are LGBTQI2-S can be doubly stigmatized because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and their cultural, racial, or ethnic identity. The potential for dual discrimination can further deter these youth from accessing resources. Thus, it is important to provide services in a culturally and linguistically competent manner (see Box 2).

System-Level Approaches for Helping Youth Who Are LGBTQI2-S and Their Families

Services for youth who are LGBTQI2-S can be improved by implementing service- and agency-level interventions that include families and communities. A comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of these youth includes:

- integrating services and supports across child- and youth-serving systems, including health care providers;
- ensuring appropriate services and supports are available;
- facilitating access to services;
- delivering culturally and linguistically competent services and supports;
- delivering quality care without bias or prejudice; and
- monitoring and assessing outcomes.

BOX 2

WHAT IS CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE?

To be **culturally competent**, systems and organizations are required to:[4]

- have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively with people of diverse backgrounds; and
- have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) adapt to the diversity and cultural contexts of the communities they serve.

To be **linguistically competent**, systems and organizations must:[5]

- have the capacity to communicate effectively and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences, including persons of limited English proficiency, those with low literacy skills, and individuals with other communication challenges; and
- have policies, structures, practices, procedures, and dedicated resources to support the linguistic needs of diverse populations.

The application of the principles of cultural and linguistic competence by administrators and providers is especially important because this population of youth is frequently misunderstood and underserved. Cultural and linguistic competency for this population of youth and their families requires inclusion of appropriate values, principles, policies, structures, behaviors, and attitudes throughout the entire service delivery system at all levels.

Recommendations & Strategies

Creating a "Welcoming Environment"

- ☑ Assess your community or agency at all levels to identify needs, barriers, challenges, strengths, and readiness to develop a welcoming environment and appropriate services for youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families.
- ☑ Develop mission and vision statements indicating your community's or agency's commitment to address the needs of youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families.
- ☑ Develop a plan to create a resourced infrastructure that includes policies, structures, practices, and services that meet the needs and preferences of youth who are LGBTQI2-S.
- ☑ Ensure that staff and volunteers possess the necessary knowledge and appropriate attitudes and behaviors to provide services and supports. A high level of awareness of LGBTQI2-S issues will improve the ability to provide needed services to these youth and their families.
- ☑ Provide opportunities for youth who are LGBTQI2-S to discuss experiences and exchange ideas in a confidential, nurturing, safe and supportive environment.
- ☑ Provide services and resources to youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families that are linguistically competent (e.g., welcoming and nonjudgmental, respectful of preferred terms for sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and offered in sign language and in languages other than English).

[4] National Center for Cultural Competence. (n.d.). Cultural Competence Definition and Framework. Retrieved January 13, 2008, from http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc.

[5] Goode, T., & Jones, W. (2004). National Center for Cultural Competence. Linguistic Competence Definition. Retrieved January 13, 2008, from http://gucchd.georgetown.edu/nccc.

- ☑ Give voice to the experiences of youth who are LGBTQI2-S by encouraging them to express their needs, preferences, and interests. Elicit their input and meaningful involvement in service design and evaluation.
- ☑ Display symbols of support for LGBTQI2-S issues within offices and public areas. Hanging rainbow flags or pink triangles on agency walls and in windows lets youth who are LGBTQI2-S know that the community or agency welcomes and provides a "safe space" for youth and families.
- ☑ Ensure that the agency's location and service delivery hours, to the extent possible, are accessible for youth who are LGBTQI2-S. These youth may seek services alone because they are not open with their families about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; therefore, accessing services may require considerable effort on their part.

Protecting Youth Who Are LGBTQI2-S

- ☑ Include protections for the sexual orientation and gender identity of youth and their families in agency nondiscrimination policies.
- ☑ Maintain confidentiality and privacy of all youth self-disclosures (particularly when youth share their LGBTQI2-S identity) to protect them from victimization, stigma, abuse, and discrimination.
- ☑ Carefully assess foster care families to ensure that they are supportive of youth who are LGBTQI2-S. Youth report that sometimes "coming out" in foster care can create conflicts and challenges.
- ☑ Offer youth who are LGBTQI2-S safe places to identify resources within their communities, such as information about sexually transmitted diseases and infections and preventive measures. Online resources are helpful; however, youth also benefit from having direct contact with a supportive individual.

Strengthening Staff and Supports

- ☑ Ensure that agencies have nondiscrimination policies for employees and volunteers that address LGBTQI2-S issues.
- ☑ Promote positive attitudes in staff working with youth who are LGBTQI2-S; staff may need periodic and updated training about LGBTQI2-S issues.
- ☑ Provide resources, information, and training on issues associated with youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families to service providers. Consider partnering with LGBTQI2-S organizations for staff training. Internet and community resources with this information are readily available.
- ☑ Encourage staff to conduct self-assessments to determine their current level of cultural and linguistic competence, including sensitivity, awareness, and knowledge about youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families.
- ☑ Ensure youth advocates are available as support for youth who are LGBTQI2-S. Ensure that the advocates are aware of, and sensitive about, issues affecting these youth.

Working With Youth Who Are Transgender

- ☑ Provide training for staff who work with youth who self-identify as transgender, particularly regarding health and medical issues. These youth should not have to educate agency staff about their needs, preferences, and issues to receive effective therapeutic services. Therapeutic gains may be compromised if these youth function in a teaching role, rather than receive the help they need.
- ☑ Design or revise agency forms with gender-neutral language, and allow youth to identify gender as "other" if they wish. Requiring youth who are transgender or non-gender to identify their sex or a male-female gender identity is especially problematic when youth are in crisis.

- ☑ Have safe, non-gendered bathrooms for youth who are transgender or do not identify as male or female.

Enhancing Practice and Service Delivery

- ☑ Discuss sexual orientation and gender identity issues with youth in a supportive manner. It may be helpful to ask older youth how they define their identity. A safe and open environment allows youth to comfortably explore their sexual or gender identity.
- ☑ Do not assume that youth are heterosexual. Similarly, do not assume that youth are distressed or troubled because of their LGBTQI2-S identity.
- ☑ Demonstrate an open and positive attitude about youth who are LGBTQI2-S because this approach is likely to promote a positive therapeutic relationship. It is also important to understand that some mental health challenges experienced by youth who are LGBTQI2-S are independent of their identity, not caused by their LGBTQI2-S status.
- ☑ Offer services and supports to the entire family unit. Families of youth who are LGBTQI2-S may be struggling with either understanding or accepting their child's sexual orientation or gender identity and may also be seeking resources or supports.

Engaging Communities

- ☑ Develop an understanding of how LGBTQI2-S identities are perceived within the community. Associated beliefs and norms about persons who are LGBTQI2-S differ significantly based on both cultural and geographic factors. Such knowledge is a prerequisite to service planning and implementation efforts.
- ☑ Provide information to youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families about alternative services and supports outside of their local community.
- ☑ Provide a community center or other "safe" meeting place for youth who are LGBTQI2-S to obtain needed information and interact socially.
- ☑ Build relationships with other organizations that support youth who are LGBTQI2-S; partner and collaborate with appropriate youth and family advocacy organizations (see "Internet Resources") to enhance the availability of supports for youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families.

What Does the Internet Have To Offer?

Several Web sites provide valuable information and resources such as educational brochures, tool kits, and training materials about working with youth who are LGBTQI2-S and their families, including the following.

Internet Resources: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Questioning Focus

Advocates for Youth
www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbtq.htm

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/orientation.html

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/publications/justthefacts.html

Child Welfare League of America
www.cwla.org/programs/culture/glbtq.htm

Family Equality Council
www.familyequality.org/index.html

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
www.glaad.org

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/home/index.html

GLBT National Help Center, National Youth Talkline
www.glnh.org/talkline/index.html

The National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth
www.outproud.org
www.transproud.com/index.html

The National Coalition for LGBT Health
www.lgbthealth.net

National Youth Advocacy Coalition
www.nyacyouth.org/nyac/resources.html

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays
www.pflag.org

Safe Schools Coalition
www.safeschoolscoalition.org/safe.html

Youth and AIDS Projects
www.yapmn.com/index.php

YouthResource
www.youthresource.com

Internet Resources: Transgender and Intersex Focus

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/transgender.html

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/intersx.html

Internet Resources: Two-Spirit Focus

NorthEast Two-Spirit Society
www.ne2ss.org

The Red Circle Project
www.apla.org/native_american/RCP

Internet Resources: Spanish Language

Ambientejoven
www.ambientejoven.org

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org/topics/orientacion.html

Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php

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