



## Creating a Welcoming Early Childhood Program for LGBT-Headed Families: Partnering with Parents Who Identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender

This resource is part of a series developed to support programs in partnering with parents/guardians who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT). You will also find information and strategies to create an early childhood setting that is welcoming for all children and families. Recommended for directors, teachers, providers, and parents.

Explore this resource to learn more about partnering with parents who identify as LGBT in your early childhood program. What you learn can help to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, build staff professionalism, and engage all families in your program. This information may be helpful for both providers and parents.

Early childhood programs can partner with parents to create a safe and nurturing environment for children. Safe environments ensure equality, respect, and dignity for parents and staff members, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, or gender expression.

For additional information about creating safe and supportive environments that welcome all families and about topics affecting LGBT-headed families specifically, refer to “Resources about Early Childhood Programs: Diverse Family Structure,” another resource in this series.

## How Can Program Staff Partner with Parents Who Identify as LGBT?

**Start with strengths.** Enable meaningful partnerships by starting with attitudes and practices that focus on families' strengths. Remember that all families, including those with members who identify as LGBT, have similarities and differences. Like all parents, parents who identify as LGBT have goals, dreams, and concerns about their children and families.

**Get to know your parents who identify as LGBT and recognize that each family is unique.** Ask the same kinds of questions you ask other families. Also, ask some questions specific to their family, such as:

- “What name does your child call you?” (for example, Papa or Daddy).
- “How would you like us to refer to you when talking with your child?”
- “How would you like me to describe your family to others (other children/other adults)?”
- “How would you like me to respond to questions about your family?”

**Understand that parents who identify as LGBT will have individual preferences about the openness of their family.** Some parents are private. Some parents who identify as LGBT may not feel safe or be comfortable with sharing details about their home life or family relationships. Some parents who identify as LGBT may be “out” in one aspect of their lives but not in others. (The phrase “being out” means a person has openly shared that they self-identify as LGBT.) For example, someone who is “out” to friends and family may not be “out” at work. This means they may not be comfortable with your sharing that they identify as LGBT with others without their permission. When and how to come out is a personal decision and is different for everyone.

**Create a welcoming environment for parents/guardians who identify as LGBT.** There are specific opportunities to make your environment welcoming and nurturing for members of LGBT-headed families.

- Make intake, enrollment, and other program forms reflect language that is welcoming to all kinds of families. For example, change the spaces that request the names of “father” and “mother” to “parent,” “guardian,” or “parent/guardian.”
- In written communications, address families using inclusive phrases such as “Dear Parents and Guardians,” or “Dear Families.”
- Make diverse images more visible in your program—consider pictures on the walls and photos in marketing brochures. Look for opportunities to share images of all kinds of families, including parents who identify as LGBT and their children. Have inclusive children’s books available, and read them to the class.
- Put signs or posters on the walls to welcome families and their children. For example, signs could say, “We welcome ALL families and children!” or “ALL families welcome here!” This signals to parents that you are accepting of diversity.
- Personally invite parents who identify as LGBT to participate in program activities—especially if you sense they seem uncomfortable.



**Develop an affirming and welcoming environment for all children.** Listen for and intervene in hurtful or biased comments from children, whether about a child's family, skin color, age, gender, or another personal characteristic. Help children learn to speak up for themselves and speak up for others. Help children feel proud of themselves and their families.

Make your program a safe space where children can come to you if they feel hurt or confused about another child's comments.

**Offer professional development activities that help staff learn more about LGBT-headed families.**

- Provide sensitivity and cultural awareness training about topics relevant to working with LGBT-headed families, and/or ensure those topics are included in other diversity trainings/staff development sessions.
- Train staff about what they can do when colleagues or parents use derogatory language and/or act in a discriminatory manner toward either staff or parents who identify as LGBT. For example, should they speak up in the moment, or wait and talk in private later? Should they talk with a supervisor about it, or speak directly with the staff member or parent who made the remark?
- Budget funds for staff to attend conferences about topics related to working with LGBT-headed families.



**Be ready to answer questions from children about LGBT-headed families.** Children are curious and want to know about everything they see and hear. They may have questions such as, "Why does my friend have two moms?" You could say, "She has two moms who love each other and who love and take care of her, just like your grandma takes care of you."

They might ask, "Where is Isaac's mom?" (pointing at Isaac's two dads)." You could say, "Isaac has two dads instead of a mom and a dad. That's who is in his family. A family can be made up of many different people." Keep your answers simple and straightforward.

In a group of children, you can invite discussion about different kinds of families and the things that families have in common. Focus on love, relationships, and caregiving. For example, "Let's talk about who takes care of us at home."

**Practice addressing discomfort about LGBT-headed families in your program.** For example, prepare in advance a response to use if you hear adults saying insensitive things. You could say, "It seems you are uncomfortable with having a family with parents who identify as LGBT in our program. Our goal is to maintain the dignity and safety of all our children and families."

**Promote anti-discrimination policies in your program.** LGBT-headed families may feel vulnerable in ways that other families do not because of past or current experiences in their own families and communities. While LGBT-headed families may be more visible and accepted in some communities, bias and prejudice still exists.

Some parents who identify as LGBT may withhold information, due to fears of discrimination or rejection (of their family but especially of their young child), or for fear that their confidentiality will be breached by staff members.

Be sensitive to the fact that LGBT-headed families are also at a higher risk of poverty and may have lower access to health care because of bias and laws that historically did not recognize LGBT-headed families. Parents of color who identify as LGBT may have additional challenges related to poverty, bias, and discrimination.



- Ask yourself: how accepting is my community of LGBT-headed families?
- Address diversity in your mission statement and implement an anti-discrimination policy that explicitly includes actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Share your program's confidentiality policy with all families, and reiterate it when sensitive conversations arise.

**Foster a safe environment in which staff members feel free to ask questions, discuss values, examine bias, and evaluate attitudes.** You can expand your program's approach to diversity training and coaching to include opportunities for reflection and recognizing individual biases, values, or beliefs.

- Support staff in engaging with all families in a respectful and appropriate way.
- Provide opportunities for staff to reflect as individuals, address concerns and questions with supervisors, and share ideas and strategies with peers.
- Encourage staff growth by creating a shared agreement about how to discuss challenging topics as a group in a safe and respectful way.
- Create a balance of appropriate training and coaching opportunities to ensure staff have the skills to contribute to an LGBT-welcoming program environment, and to work directly with parents who identify as LGBT.
- Help staff develop skills to handle and be comfortable with experiences that can lead to professional growth.

**Explore your own beliefs and practices.** We all have biases, though we may not always want to admit it. Explore your own feelings separately, and when you're ready, talk with a supervisor or a trusted colleague. Remember that you have the opportunity to join with each family and become their partner in their child's and family's development. Visit websites and explore resources about working with LGBT-headed families.

## In this Series

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Explore other resources from the Creating a Welcoming Early Childhood Program for LGBT-Headed Families series:

- A Checklist for Programs
- Children's Books that Include Diverse Family Structures
- Resources about Diverse Family Structures

Visit our PFCE web portal on the Office of Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family>.

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