Working with GLBTQ Youth

From Research to Practice

No single group has gone more unnoticed by society, or abused and maltreated by institutional powers, than youth with transgender needs and feelings. With the exception of its attention to child labor and child abuse or neglect law, our society has relegated children to a class virtually without voice or rights in society.

—Center for AIDS Prevention Studies[17]

In recent years, many programs for LGBT youth have witnessed an increased presence of youth who self-identify as transgender.** Youth who do not conform to prevalent gender norms, usually represented as feminine women and masculine men, often experience severe harassment, discrimination, ostracism, and violence. Transgender youth are increasingly claiming their right to define and express themselves in new ways. These new ways include—but are not limited to—hormone treatment, gender reassignment surgery, name change, and cross-living. Professionals who work with LGBT youth, in particular, increasingly observe the diverse ways in which these youth choose to identify, including making the choice not to identify.

Youth-serving professionals, parents, families, peers, and community members can play key roles in supporting the healthy development of transgender youth. Respecting transgender youth means taking responsibility for providing them with a safe and supportive environment. The following recommendations will not answer all your questions, but they can assist you.

- **Don't make assumptions!** Do not assume that you know a youth's gender, or that a youth has gender identity issues, just as you would not make assumptions about a young person's sexual orientation. Exploring gender is a healthy expression of personal development. Self-identification or self-acknowledgement is a crucial first step in a youth's identity development and self-expression.
- **Create a safe space for open discussion.** Work towards creating an affirming environment that supports non-stereotypical gender expression and offers safe space for open discussion. Use inclusive, affirming, non-presumptuous, nonjudgmental, and gender-neutral language. Create organizational norms on behavior and language with youth.
- **Be informed and don't be afraid to examine your own beliefs.** Most of us are products of a society that holds to rigid gender roles, and we have been influenced by our cultural background. We're taught what is feminine and masculine, female and male, and we expect that these bipolar categories do not change. Recognize your level of comfort with different types of gender expression and how this can affect your interactions with youth. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- **Seek to fully understand gender identity.** Each person's gender identity is natural to that person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are a part of each of us and often develop uniquely. Across human experience, gender identity may be experienced as a continuum. That is, some people do not experience gender solely as female or male. It is important for youth-serving professionals to educate themselves on gender identity, sexual identity, adolescent development, and sexual and social stereotypes. Moreover, sexuality and gender expression are only two of the aspects integral to a whole person. It is important to maintain a balanced perspective in addressing the multifaceted issues of youth's development.
- **Respect confidentiality.** When a young person shares personal information about gender identity, you have achieved the trust of that youth. A breach of this confidence can have dire consequences for the young person. If it truly becomes necessary to share the information, first get the young person's permission.
- **Know when and where to seek help.** Be aware of appropriate referral agencies for crisis intervention, mental and physical health services, emergency assistance, etc. Transgender youth are often subject to abuse, homelessness, suicide, harassment, and physical violence. Be aware of your personal and organizational limits and accept that your organization may not always be the best one to assist a young person.
- **Provide training for staff, board, volunteers, and youth.** Up-to-date training is necessary to help staff develop sensitivity and skills to interact with youth and to prevent anyone from being derogatory to transgender people. Be sure to provide transgender youth with information that can help ensure their physical safety.
- **Protect from harassment!** Immediately protect transgender youth from harassment in any form, whether perpetrated by other youth, staff, or others. Make it clear that harassing and/or abusive behavior toward anyone will not be tolerated.
- **Allow trans youth to use the bathroom that fits them best, join the appropriate athletic team, and in other ways live as the gender they are.** Trans young people have the right to feel comfortable in their daily lives and shouldn't be isolated or forced to use facilities inconsistent with their gender expression.

My body fits my gender identity perfectly, because I am who I am.
—Transgender youth[18]

My body is fine by me… but other people don't seem comfortable with my body as it confuses them.

—Transgender youth[18]

Gender is a construct. I can shape … how I want to be perceived.

—Transgender youth[18]

* These tips are adapted from a resource manual on gender identity and transgender youth issues, written by Charlene Leach and published by the National Youth Advocacy Coalition. The tips first appeared in *Transitions*, volume 14, issue 4, © Advocates for Youth, 2002.

** Transgender is an umbrella term for all whose self-identity is outside the boundaries of biological sex and/or culturally determined gender expression, including transsexual people, crossdressers, Two-Spirit people, drag performers, and people who do not self-identify with their biological sex.

Click here to view the endnotes.

This publication is part of the Creating Safe Space for GLBTQ Youth: A Toolkit.

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