

Talking with Experts: Part 1 of 3

ENGAGING LGBT FAMILIES

Creating a Welcoming Environment

AdoptUSKids spoke with three members of a time-limited advisory group that it had convened in 2010 to gather expert guidance for the design of services and tools to support recruitment and retention practices that are welcoming to, and inclusive of, prospective foster and adoptive parents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The focus of the interviews was to discuss how child welfare and adoption agencies can effectively engage LGBT families. These experts shared insights and suggestions for specific action steps. This is Part 1 in the series of conversations with:

- Beth Brindo, MSSA, LISW-S, Independent Consultant
- Ellen Kahn, M.S.S., Director of the Human Rights Campaign's Family Project and the All Children—All Families Initiative
- John C. Levesque, L.S.W., Independent Consultant

What are some specific things that child welfare staff can do to create a more welcoming, inclusive environment for LGBT families?

Key Theme: Use welcoming images, language and messages

Look at photos used in recruitment materials, on promotional information, and in the offices and meeting rooms at the agency to see if they represent diverse families, including same-sex couples. The images send strong messages to prospective families about who is welcome.

BB: If an agency is advertising in the local LGBT community newspaper, with a specifically developed ad, that sends a strong message about being welcoming.

EK: In recruitment and orientation activities, make a point of talking specifically about who the youth in care are, including LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning] youth, and who current foster and adoptive parents are, including LGBT families.

JL: As you do parent orientation and training, emphasize that there are all kinds of children in need of foster and adoptive families, so the agency needs all kinds of families. Spell it out so prospective parents feel included and welcomed in the process. Having pictures of different kinds of families around the office can also provide images that people can relate to and feel affirmed. Remember that seeing, hearing, and feeling are all important in helping people feel welcome.

EK: Be aware of the importance of subtle signals and language. Take a look at intake forms and anywhere else where prospective or current parents fill out information about themselves. Do the forms say “husband and wife?” If so, change them to make them more inclusive, such as saying “Parent 1 and Parent 2” or “Adult 1 and Adult 2.” Move away from asking questions such as, “Are you married or single?” Instead, think about other ways of finding out what you need to know. If you're really asking about whether someone is planning to attend an orientation gathering by themselves or with someone else, ask that question. If you want to know if someone has a parenting partner, ask that question.

EK: If you work in a State that isn't very welcoming to LGBT families, be particularly aware of the environment you're creating and the implied messages you're conveying. Avoid putting families in positions where they feel like they have to lie or hide the truth about their lives.

Key Theme: Be explicit in your official policies and statements

EK: Have your agency's mission statement, values statement, and non-discrimination policy visible on your website and on recruitment and orientation materials. Examine the statements and policies to see if they include specific language about welcoming families regardless of sexual orientation or identity. If your non-discrimination policy doesn't mention specific categories, at least include a statement about welcoming "all kinds of families."

Key Theme: Build community connections and relationships

BB: Have an understanding of allies and those who can be allies. The discussion about what an LGBT ally is and how an ally can support these efforts is really important.

JL: Use experienced LGBT families as cultural guides to help build relationships with LGBT communities and create a welcoming environment.

BB: Identify if you can work with current LGBT staff who are willing to be ambassadors with LGBT community contacts and make introductions.

Before you can really recruit families, families need to be aware that they can adopt; the whole community you're trying to reach needs to know that they can adopt. Building awareness of the need for foster and adoptive homes and who is allowed to adopt is a key step. For LGBT families, we need to raise awareness that it's okay for them to foster and adopt; there's a lot of confusion or misunderstanding about who is allowed to foster and adopt.

Key Theme: Take a holistic, values-based approach

BB: Take a step back and look at your practice and your professional ethics and what they say about working with families, preparing families, and working in culturally competent ways.

EK: The bottom line is that, for the people doing the best work on LGBT competence, it's been about a very intentional, very focused, very holistic approach to this work throughout their agency.



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