

Talking with Experts: Part 3 of 3

ENGAGING LGBT FAMILIES

Important Conversations in Child Welfare

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 3 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 conversations do you wish were happening more in the child welfare field around LGBT cultural competence?

Key Theme: Conduct honest self-assessments and ask the tough questions

EK: A good place to start the conversation is just to begin asking, and answering, the questions: “Why is this hard?” and “Why is this controversial?” At first glance, an agency may think that they’re welcoming or not discriminatory, but when they go a little deeper in their self-assessment, they often see some gaps. Are placements with LGBT families really happening, or are these families getting licensed and then ignored as placement options?

BB: Another important conversation that we need to have is about how to get people to ask the questions that they’re scared to ask. How can we help people get better information about working with LGBT families, learn realities rather than myths, and get past stereotypes?

EK: I’d like to see more people and agencies taking inventory and taking an honest look at their work, asking the questions: How are we doing in our different areas of practice with this community? Where are we falling short? What opportunities are we missing? We have a great online self-assessment tool for agencies, which is a good place to start (www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/adoptions/8431.htm).

Key Theme: Explore specific barriers and special considerations

BB: I’d like for there to be more conversations looking at what kinds of barriers LGBT families might experience as they pursue foster care or adoption and how can we eliminate or minimize those barriers. These barriers could prevent placements; we just need to acknowledge them so that we can come up with steps for addressing the barriers.

JL: We also need to discuss specific considerations for LGBT prospective parents, such as legal questions, appropriate techniques for home studies, and appropriate support services.

BB: An esteemed colleague of mine once said, “Sure, I’ll do a home study for LGBT families—but no one will place a child with them.” That’s an attitude that we need to change. We need to talk about how the field has moved ahead since those kinds of statements were more accurate. We used to have to operate more under the radar to work with LGBT families, but that is really changing.

Key Theme: Focus on the children in foster care and their needs

JL: More leaders need to be sending the message about paying attention to the LGBTQ youth in care and meeting their needs. This needs to be part of the broader conversations on cultural competence in working with various communities.

Agencies need to be more actively recruiting and retaining families, not just sitting back and waiting to see if LGBT families will contact the agency. We should be talking about the fact that this community has many people who have great problem-solving skills and strengths that will position them to help kids who have experienced trauma and challenges.

EK: In talking with some agency directors who are hesitant or don’t want to make any special effort to welcome LGBT families, we’re starting the conversation by focusing on the fairly significant numbers of LGBTQ youth in foster care, many of whom are already experiencing rejection and judgment from non-welcoming foster and adoptive families. Not all of these youth need to be placed with LGBT families, but we need those families as part of our pool of parents. For some kids, these families may be the best resource. This experience also helps some jurisdictions see the value of LGBT families as resources for all kids in foster care. It’s all about expanding the pool of parents for kids.



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AdoptUSKids is operated by the Adoption Exchange Association and is made possible by grant number 90CQ0002 from the Children’s Bureau. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the Adoption Exchange Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children’s Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS. The Children’s Bureau funds AdoptUSKids as part of a network of National Resource Centers established by the Children’s Bureau.

