

CASA Conversations



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Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE)

Introduction

When it comes to communication, what makes for a great advocate? Great advocates listen to youth with open minds and support them, no matter what the youth are going through. Being a great advocate for a youth around Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGIE) is no different – if you are a good listener and can approach conversations from a place of acceptance, this will help you support your youth in whatever she is experiencing surrounding SOGIE. Even if you don't know that many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) people, you can still be an ally, and it starts with listening and acceptance.

Some advocates may wonder whether it is necessary or even appropriate to discuss SOGIE with their CASA youth; while you certainly shouldn't bring it up ("so, do you think you might be gay?"), you also should not feel you need to shut down conversations about it. Being able to engage with your youth about SOGIE is necessary to effectively advocate for supportive placements, permanency, and safety at home and school – all central to our goals as CASAs.

The Facts

Our society is unquestionably becoming more accepting of LGBTQ people, especially when it comes to traditional rites of citizenship like serving in the armed forces, getting married, and parenting. But these gains do not in themselves protect our youth from abuse and discrimination due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression (SOGIE).

- LGBTQ youth are two times as likely both to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school and to skip school because they feel unsafe.

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- 69% of LGBTQ youth reported experiencing some form of harassment or violence

When LGBTQ youth enter care, they are highly likely to experience additional maltreatment from foster parents, group home staff, and social workers (NCLR, 2006).

- In one study, 100% of LGBTQ youth surveyed in New York City group homes reported experiencing verbal harassment, and 78% experienced physical violence because of their sexuality or gender identity. In this same study, 56% of LGBTQ youth interviewed reported living on the streets because they felt safer there than in their foster or group home (Urban Justice Center, 2001).

Family acceptance is critical to youth outcomes; LGBTQ youth from highly rejecting families are much more likely to experience suicidal ideation and attempts, depression, substance abuse, unprotected sex, and increased risk for HIV and STDs (Ryan, et al. 2009).

- As a CASA, you can not only model and provide acceptance, but also engage family members to reduce rejecting behaviors.

LGBTQ foster youth in California are protected from discrimination in the child welfare system based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV/AIDS status by AB458. They also have rights to dress as they want, go by a name of their choosing, and to participate in LGBTQ activities (such as “queer prom”). For more on youth rights, see “Additional Resources” below.

Starting a CASA Conversation

Start by listening. Again, this is THE MOST IMPORTANT PART of being a supportive adult to youth, no matter what they are going through – but especially when it comes to identity development. You may have no experience at all with LGBTQ people, but if you can come to conversations with your ears and heart open, it’s much more likely that your youth will feel heard and understood.

Use gender neutral language. Instead of asking, “do you have a girlfriend?” to your male youth, ask instead about “important relationships.” Even something as simple as, “do you like anyone at school?” keeps things gender-neutral and lets the youth know you aren’t assuming he’s straight.

Be open about their interests. There are no activities that are “just for boys” or “just for girls.” Anyone can be a cheerleader, a football player, a fashion designer, a firefighter. Stay open and listen to what interests your CASA youth, then use your advocacy skills to make sure they get involved in activities they are passionate about!

“I was in a residential treatment center and the youth and staff were difficult to deal with. If a youth does come out as part of the LGBT community, I think the CASA should ask if the staff is supportive as well, because they’re there every single day and they’re being harassed by the kids and they can’t necessarily go to the staff members.” - Michael

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Just ask. If you are working with a transgender, gender queer, or gender variant youth and aren't sure how they identify, just ask: "what pronouns do you prefer to use?" Your CASA youth may also have a chosen name they wish to go by. Address them how they wish, and encourage them to dress, speak, and act in whatever ways make them feel like themselves. If you're ever unsure and haven't yet asked, use plural pronouns (e.g. "they want to enroll in a karate class") until you learn otherwise.

Demonstrate that you are an ally. Wear something rainbow (a bracelet, a pin) to let them know you're when they're with you, they're in a safe space.

Let them know they don't have to know. During youth and young adulthood, exploration of sexuality and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) is normal. All young people, even straight, gender-traditional ones, are figuring out who they desire (sexual orientation) and how they want to "do" masculinity and/or femininity (gender identity).

Pitfalls to Avoid

Don't label. Youth go through experimental phases or periods in which they are "questioning" their sexuality, and may not want to "put a label on it." You shouldn't either. Even if you see your CASA youth holding hands with another girl, or notice that she's cut her hair very short recently, you shouldn't assume she now identifies as LGBTQ. **This is especially important in conversations with other members of the youth's team – social workers, judges, attorneys; once a youth has been labeled as LGBTQ, it is incredibly difficult for them to shake that label, especially in the child welfare system, where such details are immortalized in case files.**

Don't call it a "lifestyle"! This is pretty outdated, and it drives LGBTQ people crazy. Yoga is a lifestyle; living by the beach is a lifestyle. SOGIE is just part of life – of all of our lives.

And don't call it a choice. Whether or not it is scientifically proven that SOGIE is in our genes, referring to it as a "choice" could be hurtful to a youth who has struggled with their identity, or even wished they weren't feeling the things they weren't feeling. On the other hand, saying things like, "I know you can't help it – it's in your genes" isn't good either. **If they are finding their authentic selves, who cares if it's in their DNA or a result of their experiences?** It's best to just support them in their journey.

"[If the youth is religious,] the CASA should know about accepting churches in their community to go to. There are churches that support gay rights, and CASAs should be aware of that." - Michael

"[Coming out] is a process of discovering yourself – figuring out what you want and don't want and how you connect with people." - Ruby

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Don't be afraid to acknowledge your youth's sexual orientation or gender identity. If your youth has told you to stop calling her Barbara and start calling her Barry, it might feel uncomfortable at first – but make a point to do it. Don't avoid using their new name; when you use it, they will notice and value your effort. Similarly, if your youth has told you she has a girlfriend, use that same language. It's pretty invalidating when someone you've told about your romantic relationship with says, "you can invite your friend" or "how is your roommate?", even if they mean well.

Don't forget that SOGIE is about much more than just sex. Regardless of how you feel about talking about sex with your CASA youth, remember that SOGIE is also about their identity, their relationships, and their culture.

Don't push an origin story. The debate continues about whether or not sexuality and gender identity are inborn. While some find comfort in the "born this way" theory, others may feel that it suggests LGBTQ people "can't help it" and would change if they could. As a CASA, don't take a position, but if the youth seems to subscribe to one of these origin stories, support that.

My family member rejected me when I came out: she actually called the police on me. If I had a CASA at that moment of my life, what would have benefitted me the most is basically what the cop told me at the time: stay patient and just keep being strong. You've come this far, just wait until you're aged out and you can be on their own." - Ruby

Additional Resources

National CASA Association, LaRae Oberloh "12 Tips for Advocating for LGBTQ Youth," http://nc.casaforchildren.org/files/public/site/publications/TheConnection/Fall2009/Top_Tips.pdf

National Center for Lesbian Rights, "Queer and Trans Youth in California Foster Care Have Rights!: A Know Your Rights Guide." <http://www.ncrights.org/legal-help-resources/resource/queer-trans-youth-in-california-foster-care-have-rights-a-know-your-rights-guide/>

National Center for Lesbian Rights, "LGBTQ Youth in the California Foster Care System: A Question and Answer Guide" <http://www.ncrights.org/legal-help-resources/resource/lgbtq-youth-in-the-california-foster-care-system-a-question-and-answer-guide/>

National CASA Association, "Addressing the Needs of LGBTQ Youth in Care." *A CASA-specific resource about effective advocacy for LGBTQ youth.* http://nc.casaforchildren.org/files/public/site/publications/TheConnection/Fall2009/Cover_Story.pdf

Gay Straight Alliance, "Recommended Books for LGBTQ Youth." *Suggested titles for LGBTQ youth, allies, and parents. And CASAs, of course!* <http://www.gsanetwork.org/resources/posters-movies-and-more/recommended-books>

Rob Woronoff, Rudy Estrada, and Susan Sommer, "Out of the Margins: A Report on Regional Listening Forums Highlighting the Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth in Care." <http://www.cwla.org/programs/culture/OutOfTheMargins.pdf>

Tribal STAR in collaboration with the **National Resource Center for Tribes** (Children's Bureau) and the **National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections** releases a Tip Sheet for Two-Spirit/LGBTQ Native Youth in Child Welfare <http://theacademy.sdsu.edu/TribalSTAR/PDF%20Files/two-spirit-tip-sheet-2014.pdf>