

**Tip Sheets to Welcome and Include
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Families
in Early Childhood Settings
in accordance with the National Association for the Education of Young
Children Code of Ethical Conduct**



All children enter early childhood programs with their families: the adults who feed them, play with them, care for them; the adults who are their first and most enduring teachers. Family is a natural and important focal point for curriculum in early childhood settings. It is also an excellent, developmentally-appropriate starting point for helping children recognize and appreciate similarities and differences. For educators who value anti-bias education, extending our work on diversity to include different family structures is an important next step.

In early childhood settings, children learn everyday how the world works and who is recognized, accepted and validated, and who is not. As educators, our ethical responsibility is to support all children and, given their developmentally driven ties to their family, this support must occur with clear and respectful attention to the context of their families. When a child's family is rendered invisible, the child's sense of self and safety is affected.

Too often controversy and discomfort surround issues related to LGBT families. Many educators want to be inclusive and welcoming but do not know how, and because of their inexperience and the silence around this issue, are concerned about doing or saying the "wrong" thing.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is very clear about the essential competencies for all educators on including and valuing all families. These "Tip Sheets" offer concrete suggestions on how to extend this inclusion to LGBT families.

They address five different topics:

1. Creating welcoming and inclusive classroom environments
2. Developing inclusive curriculum for children
3. Answering children's questions
4. Responding to adults' concerns
5. Supporting children's natural gender expression and identity

The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Commitment and NAEYC Program Standards cite the fundamental expectation and priority for all early childhood educators to partner and build relationships with diverse families. They can be used as a foundation of support to all early childhood educators as they expand practices to be inclusive of LGBT families.

Creating Welcoming and Inclusive Environments for LGBT Families



Children thrive when they are supported, valued and recognized in the environments that surround them. Their identities are deeply linked to their families, and thus the messages given to them about their families affect their own sense of self. Educators give messages everyday that impact the degree to which a family feels welcome or unwelcome in the classroom. This message is conveyed through language, materials, forms, and images available in the environment. When a family is not visible, children recognize this absence and may conclude that their family is less valued, does not matter or that there is something wrong with them. And because of the interconnection of their identity they may generalize these feelings as being about them. Classroom environments provide concrete evidence of inclusion/exclusion by what messages are communicated. This requires intentional practice. The strategies below can help build visibility and inclusion of LGBT families, conveying the message that they are valued, safe and welcome.

- Include LGBT families in photographs, drawings, and posters that are displayed in the classroom.
- Have children's books that include LGBT families on the bookshelves and available to all children. Read these books to the children during story or circle time on a regular basis.
- Forms should use non-gender specific terms such as "guardian" or "parent" rather than "mother" or "father" so that no family is excluded by the language on the forms.
- Don't assume heterosexuality.
- Find out about, and use, the language families use to describe themselves.
- Include resources for LGBT families in the community resources available to families.
- Use language in the mission statement and parent and staff handbooks that explicitly includes LGBT families and staff.
- Include the question "What does your child call each parent/guardian?" as part of intake. Be sure to let teachers know the language to use so that each child and family is recognized and supported.
- Commit to hiring diverse staff that reflects children and families in the program and larger community.
- Find ways to create a work environment that allows LGBT staff to choose to be safely out to other staff, parents and children in the Center.
- Provide ongoing parent meetings and staff trainings to address issues of diversity that include visibility and concerns of LGBT families.
- Use films, articles and speakers to enhance staff and parent training (a list of resources can be found at www.parentservices.org).
- Institute anti-discrimination policies and procedures that protect LGBT families and staff.
- Have a policy in place to consistently and proactively handle situations in which bias is expressed by children, parents or staff.
- Post symbols in the classroom that indicate the environment is safe and welcoming for all kinds of people, including LGBT people. Such symbols might include a rainbow flag, a pink triangle, or a Safe Space poster.
- When speaking with adults do not use gender specific language about their significant other unless they have shared the gender of their partners. Do not assume their partner is of the opposite gender.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children emphasizes the importance of this work in their Code of Ethical Conduct core values:

"Appreciate and support the bond between the child and family"

"Recognize that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community and society. (The term culture includes ethnicity, racial identity, economic level, family structure, language and religious and political beliefs, which profoundly influence each child's development and relationship to the world.)"

¹ NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment. (April 2005) National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C. p. 1. Endorsed by the Association for Childhood Education International Adopted by the National Association for Family Child Care

Developing LGBT - Inclusive Curriculum for Children



All children can learn to respect and appreciate the wide diversity of families that are part of our world. This is an fundamental and natural part of diversity work. There are many simple practices that educators can incorporate to be inclusive of LGBT families, so that each child can feel safe and welcome in the classroom, and so that all children can benefit from the awareness and acceptance of difference.

- Recognize that when we talk about LGBT families we are talking about *families*; not *sex*. When we routinely talk about mothers and fathers we are not talking about sex. When we talk about LGBT parents, we are also not talking about sex. We are simply speaking about families, the most constant, central and formative presence in children's lives.
- Focus on what makes families special. Emphasize the love and care that are most important in families.
- Read children's books that include LGBT families.
- Use books and photos that include different family structures, cultures and ethnic backgrounds to invite children to notice similarities and differences and ask questions about the families.
- Ask open-ended questions about the books you are reading and be willing to explore with children the questions they have. (Two Lives Publishing is a good resource for LGBT inclusive children's books, www.twolives.com. A bibliography of LGBT inclusive children's books is available at www.parentservices.org.)
- Adapt children's songs to include the diversity of families, so that different family structures are included on a regular basis in the classroom. For example you can adapt the song "Where is Thumbkin?" and substitute different family members for each finger. (Words to this song and other songs can be found at www.parentservices.org)
- Contact vendors of children's materials and ask them for puzzles, games and posters that include LGBT families. This will help them to recognize the need to develop these materials.
- Create matching games and puzzles using photos of diverse families. You can cut these out of magazines and laminate them. You can also use the real photos of the families within your classroom or center.
- Use what you hear from children to learn what they think about families and to challenge misinformation or stereotypes.
- Use regular family block toys, felt board pieces or doll house toys in sufficient numbers and combine them to form different kinds of family structures that include same-gender parents.
- Together with the children, make a graph of the different family members in children's families in the classroom and post it. Children can count how many people are in each family and compare and classify who the family members are.
- Be attentive to the language used every day in the classroom to describe families. For example, do not say to children, "**Take these papers home to your mother and father,**" thus excluding children who do not live in a family with a mother and father. Speak more generally to children saying: "**Take these papers home to your**

The National Association for Education of Young Children Code of Ethical Conduct

P-1.1 – Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code.

P-1.2 – We shall care for and educate children in positive emotional and social environments that are cognitively stimulating and that support each child's culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure.¹

¹NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment. (April 2005) NAEYC, Washington, D.C, p. 3.

- Develop literacy through inviting the children to dictate stories about what families do to take care of each other.
- Directly address any hurtful comments that may reflect on, or be directly about, someone's family and do not allow it to continue.
- Help children see that each family is special. Create a large motor game in which children have to run, jump, take steps backward when you call out different family members, i.e. "If you have a dog, take two steps forward. If you live with two mommies jump three times. If you live with your daddy and mommy turn in a circle. If you visit your daddy take one giant step. Make sure to include all kinds of families, so that each child is invited to move as many times as other children. Also, invite children's questions and ideas.
- Many children have single parents, guardians, or lesbian or gay parents and are left out during the celebration of Mother's Day and Father's Day. Create a "Person You Love Day" instead of celebrating either Mother's Day or Father's Day. Invite all children to celebrate any person that they love. In this way, no child will feel isolated or uncomfortable when their family does not fit the "mold."
- Create persona dolls that have lesbian or gay parents as well as other kinds of parents/guardians and have the dolls share special things that they do with their families. Also have the dolls share how sad they feel when someone makes fun of their families. Ask the children for ideas of what to do to take care of the doll.
- Do not assume heterosexuality of children. We do not know the sexual orientation that children will recognize as they grow older. Make sure that when you are speaking about loving relationships you represent the diversity of how people form loving relationships so that as children grow, they will recognize the diversity of ways people can be welcome in the world. For example: "It is wonderful to have people that we love and care about, as we grow up. Some men love women, some men love other men, some women love men and some women love other women. Some people like to be by themselves. There are many ways to love and feel loved."
- Some available resources for materials include: Our Family Coalition, www.ourfamily.org; NAEYC, www.naeyc.org; Lesbian and Gay Child Care Task Force in Seattle, c/o mcdispensa@earthlink.net; Family Diversity Project, www.familydiv.org.

Answering Children's Questions about LGBT Topics



Children's questions provide rich terrain to support learning. The process of inquiry is essential as children work to understand the world around them. When educators avoid or are uncomfortable with children's questions about certain topics, they begin to cast a shadow that may squelch children's learning and convey a message that there is something wrong with the topic being addressed. This may lead to tension and to the perpetuation of assumptions and bias. When educators value, encourage and respond to children's questions, more authentic learning and exploration can occur.

- Value children's questions! They are a rich source for exploration, emerging curriculum and information.
- Do not ignore or sidestep a child's question. Do not make a child feel uncomfortable for asking a question.
- Be honest. Keep language simple and appropriate to the child. Do not make assumptions about the information being asked, based on an adult perspective.
- When we do not answer questions directly and openly we may convey our own discomfort and send the message that this is a "bad" thing to talk about. Children receive that message and stop asking questions. Then we all lose an important opportunity to support learning.
- Recognize and explore your own discomfort.
- If you are afraid you won't know how to answer children's questions that might be asked when you read a book or create curriculum, identify the questions that scare you and practice answering them with colleagues.
- Don't be afraid to admit to children when you do not know the answer to a question. Model for them the curiosity to find out what you do not know and then share what you have learned.
- It can be helpful to turn a question back to the children and say: "Tell me what you think," so you can understand more fully what they want to know.
- Recognize that silence is not a passive act. When teachers are silent, they are conveying a message to children that they should not ask questions. This means that the burden of understanding and exploring sensitive topics is left on the shoulders of children.
- There is not one right answer to children's questions. There are many ways to respond. Our responsibility as educators is to recognize our own discomfort and to address it; to gather information about topics that we do not know so that we can answer children's questions in a way that supports their learning and exploration rather than shutting it down.

The "NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards" emphasizes the importance of Relationships:

*"The Program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child's sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and to foster each child's ability to contribute as a responsible community member....Children who see themselves as highly valued are more likely to feel secure, thrive physically, get along with others, learn well, and feel part of a community."*¹

¹ National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2008) *National Early Childhood Program Standards*, p. 1.

Some examples of possible answers to questions children often ask:

Q: Why does Alden have *two daddies*? Where is Alden's mommy?

A: *"Isn't Alden lucky that he has two daddies that love him? In his family there are two daddies. In Suzie's family she has a mommy and a grandma. Who is in your family? (It would be good to know if Alden's birth mother is in his life at all and how his fathers address this question. Based on the information from his fathers you might give more information about Alden's birth mother. This same question also comes up for children in single parent homes, where children want to know where the other parent is. In partnership with families you can explore how they would like you to address this question. The main emphasis is to value each child's family just as it is, and to point out that there are many kinds of families and each family is special.)"*

Q: Why don't I have two daddies?

A: *"Everybody's family is different. And every family is special. In your family you live with your mommy. What are some of the special things you like to do with your mommy?"*

Q: My mommy says it's bad to have two daddies. She said it's not natural.

A: *"Grown ups don't always think the same way. Here in school, we know there are many different kinds of families and we appreciate what is special and wonderful about every family. Tell me more about what you think or what you are wondering about. I will talk to your mommy to learn more about what she thinks."*

Q: What does gay mean? What's a lesbian?

A: *Gay means two men who love and care about each other and are special in each other's lives. A lesbian is a woman who loves another woman and they care about each other and are special in each other's lives.*

***"Foundations Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding Their Success"* highlights the importance of children's questions, and educators' responsibility to encourage questioning as a strategy for learning:**

"Pondering, Processing and Applying Experiences: This includes forming ideas, reflecting on past events, posing theories about the future, and acting on knowledge of the real world. Children begin to draw on everyday experiences and apply that knowledge to other situations; seek information for further understanding; generate ideas and suggestions and make predictions...Strategies for early educators include supply[ing] materials that encourage a spirit of inquiry and encourag[ing] children to ask questions of one another and share/compare ideas.¹

¹ Editor, Betty Work. *Foundations: Early Learning Standards for North Carolina Preschoolers and Strategies for Guiding Their Success*. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, North Carolina, p.13.

Responding to Concerns of Adults Related to Inclusion of LGBT Families in ECE Settings



No child enters an early childhood setting alone. When we work with children we work with families. As educators learn more about caring for children in LGBT families we need to address any uncomfortable or challenging issues, and grow our skills in partnering with families. Respect and authentic relationships with families must be the foundation even in the midst of possible conflict and disagreement. Avoiding the subject is not a child-centered or productive choice. It perpetuates silence and bias and leaves the burden on children.

Controversy, discord and passionate debate often surround issues related to LGBT families. Some educators are intimidated and avoid changing their environments or curriculum to be LGBT inclusive because they are afraid of stirring more conflict; don't feel knowledgeable or competent; or are uncomfortable with their own feelings about LGBT people and families. Some are concerned they will not know the right thing to say to a parent or colleague who objects.

In order to provide a safe environment in which all children can thrive, adults must find the way to engage in authentic dialogue and address conflict that surrounds LGBT families.

- As an educator, recognize what you don't know. Engage in a process of learning independently and with others.
- Seek multiple perspectives. Listen to other people's stories and experiences.
- Read articles. Engage in dialogue.
- Identify your own questions or areas of discomfort and recognize that others have similar experiences.
- Each person can only begin the learning journey from exactly where they are. It is only by being authentic that real learning can happen.
- Find allies who will learn with you and who can support one another in exploring next steps.
- Honor every person's right to their own beliefs. At the same time, know the mission statement and philosophy of your program, and the core standards of best early childhood practice. Relate the inclusion and recognition of LGBT families to these core standards and to the mission of the program.
- If a parent or colleague challenges the use of LGBT inclusive curriculum, **begin** the dialogue by sincerely **asking** about their concerns. Listen carefully to understand what they are saying. Be sincere in offering your attention to hear what is important and meaningful to them.
 - Don't jump in to tell them how "wrong" they are, and show them how "right" you are.
 - Don't be too quick to reach for "solutions." Often we look for solutions without hearing the other person's perspective or deepest concern.
 - Look for a common ground, which is often: "We both want to do what is best for children. We may see how to do that differently, but we share that intention."
 - Continue to look for common ground and ways to connect, while also staying connected to your own deep commitment to include and protect all children and families.

Research demonstrates the importance of family involvement in the success of children. The National Association for Early Childhood Education Accreditation Standards describes the work with families:

"Program Standard: The program establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture.

Rationale: Young children's learning and development are integrally connected to their families. Consequently, to support and promote children's optimal learning and development, programs need to recognize the primacy of children's families, establish relationships with families based on mutual trust and respect, support and involve families in their children's educational growth, and invite families to fully participate in the program."¹

¹ National Association for the Education of Young Children (2008). *Early Childhood Program Standards*. Washington, D.C.

- Some adults express the concern that if we talk about gay or lesbian families as “normal” it will encourage children to be gay. Explain that we are reflecting the diverse sexual orientations and gender identities that exist now and have existed throughout our history.
- The American Psychological Association states “*most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation.*”¹ Studies show that extensive prejudice, discrimination and invisibility cause serious negative effects on health and well-being for LGBT people.² Reflecting and honoring the diversity that exists does not cause more people to become gay, but it may protect the lives and health of people who are.
- Recognize the importance of religion in some people’s lives. Understand the richness that it provides and the deep sense of comfort, safety and community that it offers to many people.
- Explore the dilemma of conflicting values for many educators and families when their religion rejects LGBT people (or rejects the expression of their loving relationships), while educational standards and codes of conduct emphasize acceptance and appreciation of all families.
- Do not try to debate about passages from the Bible or other holy scriptures. Opening dialogue is not a debate. Focus on how to value and protect every child and family.
- If a parent or colleague complains that their religious beliefs are opposed to supporting LGBT families, acknowledge everyone’s right to their own beliefs. Also acknowledge your core commitment to fully value every child and family in your care. Each individual family has the right to choose what they teach in their home. When we come together in community we are charged with reconciling diverse beliefs and creating acceptance for everyone.
- While valuing people’s individual religious beliefs, explain that no one’s beliefs can be used to diminish the value or identity of other people.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children Code of Ethical Conduct

“recognizes that those who work with young children face many daily decisions that have moral and ethical implications.”¹

An Ideal in the Code describes the importance of working *“through education, research, and advocacy toward an environmentally safe world in which all children receive health care, food, and shelter, are nurtured; and live free from violence in their home and their communities.”²*

¹ National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2005). NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment. Washington, DC. p. 1

² Ibid, p. 7.

Resource: Family Acceptance Project, <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>

Statistics

The work to prevent suicide and violence towards LGBT people can begin in ECE settings. The Yes Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to preventing youth suicide provides the following statistics:

- 50% of elementary and middle school bullying incidents are based on gender or orientation slurs.
- 33% of all teen suicides are lesbian and gay youth
- 50% of lesbian and gay youth are rejected by their own families when their sexual orientation is disclosed
- 80% of youth harassed as gay actually identify as heterosexual, and are five times more likely to commit suicide than their non-harassed peers.
- Among people who identify as transgender: 31% suicide attempt rate; 60% are attacked in violent assaults.¹

Many of these statistics can be changed if children in early childhood settings are supported and taught to value all children and families. Opening respectful dialogue with adults is a big step in creating this change.

¹Yes Institute Statistics, www.yesinstitute.org/resources

¹ American Psychological Association. (2008). “Answers to your questions: For a better understanding of sexual orientation and homosexuality.” p.2. Washington, DC. www.apa.org/topics/orientation.pdf

² Ibid

Supporting Children's Natural Gender Expression and Identity



Many people are not aware of the wide range of both gender identity and expression that naturally exist in children and adults. It is important to understand that we are all part of a gender spectrum that is beyond the binary concepts of male and female. Some boys love to draw, play with dolls and read books. Some girls love to climb, get dirty and play with trucks. In early childhood settings we can support every child to express themselves fully and to be whatever and whoever they are.

- Be aware of gender stereotypes that children have already absorbed that influence and determine their behavior.
- Create curriculum to challenge these stereotypes. For example find photographs of a tough looking man, a grandmother, a young girl, a young boy, etc. Find photos of objects such as a doll, a saw, a motorcycle, an apron etc. Ask the children to tell you to whom each object belongs. If they say the motorcycle belongs to the tough looking man, you can say “No, that belongs to the grandmother, and the apron belongs to the man.” You can use this activity to learn what children think and to expand their thinking.
- Observe the language that educators use in talking with girls and boys. Notice how often comments are made about how girls look and what boys do. Change the language to encourage more fluid gender expression.
- Encourage all children to play with all kinds of materials. Invite both boys and girls to participate in large and fine motor activities, blocks, dramatic play etc.
- Be aware of how the lyrics of songs refer to gender roles. Change them to make sure that they support free gender expression.
- Expand the dramatic play materials to have interesting textures, props and colors for all children.
- When reading children's books examine the gender roles in the stories. If there are stereotypes, ask the children questions and help them develop critical thinking. For example, in a book about fire fighters, if all of the photos are of men, ask: “Are all fire fighters men?”
- Help children identify and address gender stereotypes. Make a chart with a column for what girls can do and what boys can do. Ask the children to tell you things they like to do. For example, “play soccer.” Ask them if that should go on the boys' side or the girls' side or both. As children begin to share what they like, it should become clear that most activities should go on both sides.
- Educators can model diverse gender roles. Children learn from what we do and who we are more than from what we say. Engaging in activities that fall outside of constricting gender definitions as part of natural daily activity makes a powerful impression.

NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct

Ethical Responsibilities to children:

Our paramount responsibility is to provide care and education in settings that are safe, healthy, nurturing and responsive for each child. We are committed to supporting children's development and learning; respecting individual differences; and helping children learn to live, play and work cooperatively.

I-1.3 To recognize and respect the unique qualities, abilities, and potential of each child.

I-1.5 To create and maintain safe and healthy settings that foster children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and that respect their dignity and their contributions.

- Do not separate children based on gender. For example: “All boys go wash your hands.” There are many ways to classify children such as: the activities they enjoy, what they are wearing, the color of their eyes, their birth month, location of their cubby, etc. In this way no child is pressured to fit into a gender that may not accurately reflect their internal identity.
 - Recognize that there are young children who are intersex or gender variant and classifying by gender may be confusing or harmful to them.¹
 - “There are children born into this world with a deep-seated internal conviction that their gender is different than the one assigned to them at birth.”² Children, who may be referred to as gender variant or transgender, often recognize this difference as early as two to four years old.³

The most important thing to do to support gender variant or transgender children, and all children, is to accept and affirm the child for whoever he or she is.

1 Intersex is the general term for a range of physiological conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of female or male. For more information go to the Intersex Society of America, www.isna.org. Young children also may have a gender identity that differs from their physiological gender. For more information go to Gender Spectrum, www.genderspectrum.org.

2 Minter, Shannon. (March 2002) *Listening to Gender Variant Children: a Humanistic Strategy for Advocates*. National Center for Lesbian Rights. www.nclr.org, p.4.

3 The Yes Institute defines transgender as “an umbrella term encompassing any self-expression or identity that does not conform to the male/female binary illusion.” www.yesinstitute.org. For more information on transgender children read the article: “If you are concerned

about your child's gender behaviors" at the Children's National Medical Center web-site: www.dchildrens.com/gendervariance, and visit www.genderspectrum.org.