



SUPPORTING AND RETAINING LGBT FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENTS

By the National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC)

The following information was adapted by Lyn Ariyakulkan, NRCPFC Information Services Coordinator, from material that was previously written and published by Dr. Gerald P. Mallon, NRCPFC Executive Director.ⁱ (October 2012)

Introduction

Like other foster and adoptive parents, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) parents are interested in seeking ways to incorporate their children into their lives and help them make a smooth transition into family life. Like their heterosexual and cis-gender¹ counterparts who adopt or become foster parents, they will at various times need support to sustain and maintain these connections. They may also want to meet other LGBT people who have taken on the challenge of parenting.

Many children and youth who are fostered or adopted have experienced trauma, abuse and/or disruption of prior placements. Given their experiences, they are likely to present challenging and difficult behavior. In a study of children joining new families, Quinton, Rushton, and colleagues (1998) noted that: ⁱⁱ

- The rate of clinical disorder among children in this study was almost five times greater than in the general child population and around twice that found among groups of looked-after children. Such results indicate the severity of the issues that adoptive parents may encounter.
- Parents in the study most frequently expressed the need for support with

respect to managing and controlling children's disruptive behavior.

- Children's challenging behavior also has consequences outside the home – e.g. with the extended family, community, and school.
- Due to the inability to pay attention when playing games, poor understanding of the rules, over-enthusiasm in interactions, insensitivity to the feelings of other children, quarrelling and aggressive behavior, there were substantial problems in children's relationships with other children.
- Parents in these studies identified the need for support in managing relationships with a child's birth family, which can be complicated, unfamiliar and stressful.

An Office of the Inspector General Report (2002) focused on foster parent retention made some important findings about the need to support these parents, as they are valuable resources. ⁱⁱⁱ The report found foster parents:

- Desired greater opportunity to voice their concerns;
- Expressed difficulty establishing positive rapport with caseworkers;
- Found it increasingly difficult to obtain necessary support services, such as respite, child care, dental, medical, and mental health services, for the children in their care;
- Felt it was difficult to deal with allegations of abuse by foster children.

¹ Those who experience congruity between their sex and gender are identified as cisgender. They may also be known as gender normative or gender straight.

Post-permanency services are needed to assist newly created families in staying together and managing issues as they arise over time. Foster and adoptive parents need support, empathy, and guidance to help them care for their families.

Informal Support

Informal networks are important in the provision of support for parents, but these support systems may change as a result of the placement. Some changes that parents reported experiencing include:

- Diminished existing informal support once parents embarked upon adoption, particularly if there were those who disapproved of what they were doing or who found a child's behavior unacceptable.
- Changes in relationships with single LGBT people once children entered the families' lives.

Children coming into placement are also likely to be confronted with the need to establish new sources of informal support.

Local LGBT Parenting Groups: *Across the country, LGBT families gather to socialize, educate, support, and advocate for children and families.*

- *Many groups include LGBT individuals and couples who are considering parenthood.*
- *Each group has a unique personality influenced by its geographic location, political climate, and needs of the families involved.*
- *Goals and objectives of the group's leadership shape the group's character.*
- *Groups typically are organized and run by volunteers, and may be formal or informal.*

To learn about starting a parent group, visit the Family Equality Council website at:

http://www.familyequality.org/get_involved/parent_groups/how_to_start_a_parent_group/

Post-Permanency Support Issues for LGBT Foster and Adoptive Parents

As with all parents, LGBT foster and adoptive parents should have access to post-permanency

support. However, there are particular factors that need to be taken into account in order to provide effective support for LGBT foster and adoptive parents.

In April 2004, the British group, Family Futures Consortium, held a one-day workshop for lesbian and gay foster and adoptive parents to provide a forum where they could share their personal experiences of parenthood and to identify particular needs of this group of parents. The following issues were identified by participants, which have implications for agencies when considering delivery of effective support to LGBT foster and adoptive parents:^{iv}

- Loneliness and isolation – overlapping issues of being a lesbian or gay parent with a child who has attachment difficulties. The group also acknowledged that lesbian and gay parents may not seek out help or guidance from professionals employed to serve them due to experiences of homophobia. Consequently, parents risk becoming increasingly isolated.
- Validity as a parent and as a family – as a lesbian/gay parent, how does one present oneself and the family to the world and negotiate the world and any tension this causes?
- Rejection and fear of rejection— for themselves as parents and/or for their children as children of gay parents, in part due to the perception of lesbian and gay families as second-best.
- Issues of secrecy— in order to protect their families, gay and lesbian parents may have to negotiate with their children who they may share certain aspects of their family life with and who this information must be withheld from. As a result, parents and children may experience confusion, fear, or difficulty relating to issues of openness and secrecy.
- Ongoing support and opportunity to share commonalities and differences— this needs to be done in a 'safe space.' It is essential for individuals to continue to work through their own issues and to better understand how these influence and affect the unique relationships between parent and child. While all participants

acknowledged that things had improved, the effects of homophobia in the personal, public, and professional areas of life “continue to be deeply disturbing.”

- Unique experiences of being lesbian and gay adults— this could contribute to their overall effectiveness as parents, given their ability to empathize with difference and cope with rejection.

Child welfare professionals supporting LGBT parents need to be aware of these issues and how they might impact parents and children. Given the importance of peer support, perhaps agencies need to consider how best to facilitate support groups for LGBT parents.

“Promising Practices: The Toolkit for LGBT Family Groups”: *The Family Equality Council provides those involved in LGBT parent groups or considering starting a new group with ideas and strategies for several key areas:*

- *Organizational infrastructure—outreach, fundraising, needs assessment, data and evaluation*
- *Programming—social and community building, parent education and peer-led support groups*
- *Advocacy—parent advocacy, school change work, institutional change work with service providers, and broader social justice work*

http://www.familyequality.org/_asset/lmw34v/PromisingPractices-Final-Feb2012.pdf

Characteristics of Post-Permanency Support Services

In the context of LGBT foster and adoptive parents, there are some specific issues which agencies should consider. Some of the characteristics of effective support services for LGBT families are as follows:

- Post-permanency and adoption support staff are available and competent to work with LGBT-headed foster and adoptive families.
- Staff gather information from many sources in order to assess any situation (e.g. retrieving case records, speaking with teachers and other professionals,

procuring specialized assessments when needed, and gathering perspectives of all family members).

- Extra time is spent with families to provide the opportunity to fully discuss difficulties they have experienced and what attempts have been made to find solutions.
 - Staff should be truly empathetic listeners so families can share their feelings with minimal interruption.
 - Staff should be able to identify when issues in placement are related to the gender identity or sexual orientation of the parent(s) and when they are unrelated.
- Staff use a range of interventions to work with LGBT parents – including providing or connecting them to support groups, meeting with parents, and advocating for resources.
 - Staff help families to think about how adopting or fostering has affected their lives and relationships.
 - Families learn about the effects of trauma and abuse, and the impact of separation and loss, and have support in managing contact issues. Post-approval training is important along with ongoing support.
 - Staff help adoptive and foster parents to care for themselves and de-personalise children’s behavior. “It’s not my fault!” and “My child’s behavior is normal in light of his/her history” are important messages that parents can internalize through good post-permanency support work.
 - Staff help adoptive and foster parents to adapt to the normal developmental changes that occur for their child, i.e. adolescence. Staff must be comfortable differentiating between issues related to the adoptive or foster parent’s gender or sexual orientation and their child’s developmental issues.

LGBT parents might be particularly vulnerable to feeling that they have to prove their worthiness as parents in a different way than do their heterosexual and cis-gender counterparts. Supportive services that acknowledge the particular challenges and strengths of LGBT

parents and that can help them to understand the context of their children's difficulties can contribute to the maintenance of successful placements.

KEY POINTS:

- *It is important that agencies provide peer support and a 'safe space' to explore issues.*
- *LGBT applicants should be given information and linked to support groups.*
- *Child welfare professionals need to recognize the particular vulnerabilities and strengths of LGBT parents.*
- *It is important that accessible and ongoing post-approval training is provided.*

Organizations & Resources

From the T&TA Network

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections (NRCPFC)

The NRCPFC is a service of the Children's Bureau and member of the Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Network. NRCPFC is available to provide training and technical assistance to State, local, Tribal and other publicly administered or supported child welfare agencies around policy and practice with LGBT prospective parents and LGBT-headed resource families.

http://www.nrcpfc.org/tta/about_tta.html

Visit the NRCPFC hot topic webpage on "LGBTQ Issues & Child Welfare" for additional resources:

<http://www.nrcpfc.org/is/lgbtq-issues-and-child-welfare.html>

Child Welfare Information Gateway

The Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children's Bureau, provides professionals with access to a variety of resources and tools to help protect children, strengthen families, and improve child welfare practice. A section of their website is dedicated

to resources on "Working with LGBT Families":

http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/cultural/adoption/lgbt_families.cfm

AdoptUSKids

AdoptUSKids is a service of the Children's Bureau whose mission is to raise public awareness about the need for foster and adoptive families for children in the public child welfare system, and to assist in the recruitment and retention of resource families and connect them with children. The organization offers an array of services to child welfare professionals and families, including on- and off-site technical assistance, as well as support for foster and adoptive families. The AdoptUSKids website contains a page on "Adoption Laws and Resources for LGBT Families":

<http://www.adoptuskids.org/for-families/who-can-foster-and-adopt/adoption-laws-and-resources-for-lgbt-families>

National Resource Center for Adoption (NRCA)

The NRCA, a service of the Children's Bureau and member of the T/TA Network, assists States, Tribes, territories and courts in building their capacity to ensure the safety, well-being, and permanency of abused and neglected children through adoption and post legal adoption services program planning, policy development, and practice.

<http://www.nrcadoption.org/>

Resources for Families

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere! (COLAGE)

COLAGE is an organization "by and for" children, youth, and adults with LGBTQ parents whose aim is to engage, connect, and empower people to make the world a better place for individuals with LGBTQ parents and families.

<http://www.colage.org/>

Families Like Ours (FLO)

FLO is the premier national nonprofit providing

adoption resources to pre-adoptive, post adoptive, and foster families and adoption professionals. FLO supports all families wishing to adopt. While their emphasis is on LGBT adoptive families, the organization welcomes the diversity of all families regardless of sexual orientation and family structure.

www.familieslikeours.org

Family Equality Council

The Family Equality Council connects, supports, and represents LGBT parents and their children. The organization provides a network of support, including a variety of tools and resources for families and parent groups, as well as a state-by-state listing of local parenting groups.

<http://www.familyequality.org/>

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund

Lambda Legal provides legal advice and support for people experiencing sexual orientation-based harassment and other discrimination. The organization has a special project which focuses on foster care issues and has a long-standing interest in lesbian and gay adoption issues.

www.lambdalegal.org

National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR)

NCLR is a national legal resource center with a primary commitment to advancing the rights and safety of lesbians and their families through a program of litigation, public policy advocacy, and public education. In addition, NCLR provides representation and resources to gay men, bisexual, and transgender individuals on key issues that also significantly advance lesbian rights. The NCLR dedicates a section of their website to LGBT families and parenting:

http://www.nclrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issue_families

Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of LGBT persons, their families, and friends through: support to cope with an adverse society, education to enlighten an ill-informed public, and advocacy to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights. PFLAG provides the opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity.

www.pflag.org

Endnotes

ⁱ Mallon, G.P. (2006). *Lesbian and gay foster and adoptive parents: Recruiting, Assessing, and Supporting an Untapped Resource for Children and Youth*. Washington, DC: The Child Welfare League of America.

ⁱⁱ Quinton, D., Rushton, A., Dance, C., & Mayes, D. (1998). *Joining new families: A study of adoption and fostering in middle childhood*. Bristol, UK: University of Bristol and the Institute of Psychiatry.

ⁱⁱⁱ Office of the Inspector General . (2002). *Retaining foster parents*. Washington, DC: Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

^{iv} Family Futures Consortium. (2004, April 25). *One-day workshop for gay and lesbian adoptive and foster parents*. Unpublished paper.