

FOCUS

Newsletter of the Foster Family-based Treatment Association



Recognize. Engage. Affirm. Love: Improving Responses to LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care —by Bill Bettencourt

"All youth in child welfare settings face challenges to their well-being. Research shows that LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning] youth have poorer outcomes and face greater risks because of the impact of bias and rejection."¹ The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) created the getR.E.A.L. (Recognize. Engage. Affirm. Love.) Initiative to address these issues and "to help transform child welfare policy and practice to promote the healthy development of all children and youth. Sexual orientation, gender identity and expression [SOGIE] (along with race, ethnicity, and disability) are part of the identity formation that occurs in adolescence."² The getR.E.A.L.

Initiative focuses on needed improvements that are critical to ensure that attention to healthy sexual development and gender expression is part of the framework child welfare agencies use to promote the healthy development of all children and youth. "The ultimate goal of this work is to create lasting policy and practice change within the nation's child welfare system to benefit LGBTQ youth."³ The initiative has three core components: supporting site work, building and supporting a national network, and promoting knowledge development for the field.

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative is part of work that has evolved over time. A national effort resulted in the publication of the Child Welfare League of America's Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBTQ Youth in Out-of-Home Care.⁴ Through the work of the California Family to Family Initiative, three counties worked with these guidelines to try to improve policy locally to conform with California's non-discrimination legislation. The initiative supported a state work group chaired by the California Director of Social Services that resulted in an All County Letter recommending counties use these guidelines for this purpose. Key partners in the work included Family Builders By Adoption, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, Legal Services for Children, and the Family Acceptance Project.

Subsequently, Family Builders By Adoption (based in Oakland) launched the Putting Pride Into Practice Initiative working with six counties to improve policy and practice using these guidelines. In addition this initiative brought

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¹ Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/get-r-e-a-l>

² Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/get-r-e-a-l>

³ Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/get-r-e-a-l>

⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.nclrights.org/legal-help-resources/resource/child-welfare-league-of-america-cwla-best-practice-guidelines-serving-lgbt-youth-in-out-of-home-care/>

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EDITOR'S COLUMN

—by Beverly Johnson, LCSW

Variety Is the Spice of Life

"It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength."

—Maya Angelou

When I volunteered to pen an article to frame this edition of *FOCUS* on diverse populations, I immediately thought about how far we've come in the past 25 years in the child welfare field. There has been an increased awareness among the child welfare community to recognize new populations, that just several years ago, had gone unnoticed. We have seen great shifts across the country in recognizing and ensuring that we adequately address the unique needs of populations—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ), commercially sexually exploited children (CSEC), kinship caregivers, and transition age youth (TAY)—*much of this evolution occurring after years and years of research, discussion, and active listening to clients*. And yet as I take pause, I wonder not only whether the way we've been going about our work is really making an impact but also what work we still need to do.

We know each person we serve embodies a unique story that has distinct cultural contexts with implications for how we assess and intervene. In celebrating diversity and acknowledging the many facets of culture that are inherent in all of us and that shape the way we think and behave, we have the weighted responsibility of ensuring that we are responding effectively to our diverse clients in effecting positive change. When I think about this responsibility, some questions come to mind: How do we begin to address the work we do with diverse populations? How do we equip our staff to identify the uniqueness of each client

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together people from across the nation to develop *Guidelines for Managing Information Related to the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression of Children in Child Welfare*. All of these efforts led to the development of the getR.E.A.L Initiative.

Site Work: Improving Data About LGBTQ Youth

One key challenge identified by the California workgroup was the lack of good data on LGBTQ youth—is it possible to sensitively obtain critical data without putting youth at additional risk? Putting Pride into Practice Project in California responded by developing *Guidelines for Managing Information Related to the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression of Children in Child Welfare Systems*.⁵ The Guidelines are currently being field-tested in partnership with the getR.E.A.L. Initiative of Allegheny County (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Ultimately, the getR.E.A.L. Initiative will publish results, produce an implementation guide for child welfare agencies that includes a curriculum and sample policies, and disseminate its work through journal articles, webinars, and the like.

The work in California has evolved into a partnership effort with the California Department of Social Services and the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) and is led by Family Builders By Adoption. The focus is on ensuring that all initiatives launched in the state and all trainings are SOGIE-informed. This work is building on supporting the implementation of nondiscrimination legislation in the state and a commitment on the part of the state to ensure that all children achieve healthy sexual and identity development.

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative of Allegheny

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative and the Department of Human Services in Allegheny County are finishing the second year of a 3-year plan to implement the *Guidelines* and to align policy and practice to support effective implementation. Allegheny County has partnered with PERSAD, a large mental health agency serving the LGBTQ community. This effort is being evaluated by the University of Houston (UH) and will generate knowledge useful for other jurisdictions and the field at large.

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative of California

The getR.E.A.L Initiative of California is a 3-year initiative that is a partnership among CSSP, Family Builders, and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, with the following goals:

- Integrate a SOGIE framework into current statewide initiatives, such as the Continuum of Care Reform effort, implementation of the Katie A. settlement agreement, California Partners for Permanency, and the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model.
- Host regional convenings of county child welfare teams in partnership with the California Social Work Education Center and the regional child welfare training academies.

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⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/Guidelines-for-Managing-Information-Related-to-the-Sexual-Orientation-Gender-Identity-and-Expression-of-Children-in-Child-Welfare-Systems.pdf>

whom we serve? How do we recognize the individuality of each person so as not to miss key information about each individual to inform our work with her or him? Are we continuing to employ the same methods of working with these populations even though the efficacy is not well proven? How do we address the conscious or unconscious bias that is in all of us?

How do we know we are culturally competent?

The idea of cultural competence has been associated with an increased understanding of different cultures and their beliefs to build mutual understanding, increase communication, and improve the delivery of services to clients.

Cultural competence refers to the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence, 2001).¹

No doubt knowledge about the beliefs and practices of certain groups is essential; too often, however, such knowledge is little more than a laundry list that does little to bridge communication and build true understanding of a person's background. To make cultural competence training most powerful and relevant, providers must (a) keep in mind that culture is ever changing and not static and (b) consider the practice of cultural humility. I have a deep appreciation for the work of Dr. Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia, who describe cultural humility as

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- Work with statewide child welfare training entities to ensure that standardized training curricula are used throughout the state.

Fresno and Santa Clara Counties

In partnership with UH, Fresno and Santa Clara counties have been working the past several years to develop and implement SOGIE-informed policies and practices. Work groups in each county have identified research questions and strategies to gather information that will inform ways to build on the work that has been done to date. Research is being conducted, and the findings will be shared at the local and statewide levels.

Knowledge Development: Tools for Serving LGBTQ Youth

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative has partnered with several organizations to develop and share current knowledge about tools, strategies, practices, and policies that are promising or have been shown to be effective in supporting the healthy sexual and identity development of children and youth:

- **Youth engagement tools:** Partnership with the Bay Area Youth Centers in California, through a grant from the Walter S. Johnson Foundation, to develop the youth-driven BeF.I.E.R.C.E. tool for frontline workers regarding how to talk about sexuality and identity from a youth's perspective.
- **Tools for families:** Work with Family Builders By Adoption to develop a guide for parenting gender nonconforming children.
- **Family engagement strategies:** Creation of a Family Engagement Coalition with three other agencies—Family Builders By Adoption, the Ruth Ellis Center in Detroit, and SCO Services in New York City—that are pioneers in implementing family intervention models to try to keep together families that are struggling with their LGBTQ children. This work is based on Dr. Caitlin Ryan's Family Acceptance Project research. New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center in partnership with the New York City Administration for Children's Services is now beginning planning to implement a family engagement effort.
- **Prudent parenting guide:** Development of a guide for the new federal provision for state's to have a prudent parenting/normalcy policy with a focus on LGBTQ youth in foster care.

Creating a National Peer Learning Network

In March 2014, CSSP launched a national peer learning network of organizations concerned about the well-being of LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system as a source of information sharing and advocacy about broader policy and practice change to benefit LGBTQ youth. There are currently 80 members of the network, including public and private child welfare agencies, and advocates. They coordinate with the SAMHSA (Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) LGBTQI2-S work group.

What We've Learned: Advice for FFTA Members

The getR.E.A.L. team and its partners have learned a lot about how to better serve young people in foster care who have higher-level needs

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a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique... [T]he approach is not an examination of the client's belief system, but rather careful consideration to one's own assumptions and beliefs that are embedded in [one's] own understandings and goals of [one's] encounter with the client. Training for cultural competency, with its emphasis on promoting understanding of the client with her/his "own culture," has often neglected consideration of the provider's worldview. In practicing cultural humility, rather than learning to identify and respond to sets of culturally specific traits, the culturally competent provider develops and practices a process of self-awareness and reflection.²

In summary, I think this work takes a concerted effort minute by minute, day by day to see fully each individual and to rid ourselves of prescribed notions of who we think we see in front of us. Oftentimes, I am surprised and fascinated at the varied and rich cultural contexts of a person's life. This month's issue of *FOCUS* celebrates diversity as we acknowledge the many facets of our work with children and families from a variety of backgrounds and with a variety of needs. As I take stock of the varied populations we serve, I see children and families from all walks of life who look very different from families of the past. One common thread is the need to adequately address their experiences, so often filled with grief, loss, and trauma-related circumstances, that place them in a position of needing help. Another common connection is the importance of our helpers having a deep understanding of how to respond to persons from all walks of life. Key to this understanding is acknowledging that each individual needs to be seen in his or her own cultural light.

In this newsletter, you will hear from some of my colleagues across the nation about the unique and innovative ways they are working with these populations. I hope you will find their words both informative and interesting.

Beverly Johnson, LCSW is the Chief Program Officer of Lilliput Children's Services. She is a member of the FFTA Board of Directors and serves as the vice chair of the FFTA Editorial Committee.

¹ NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice. (2001). Washington D.C.: NASW Press.

² Tervalon, Melanie, and Jann Murray-Garcia. "Are You Practicing Cultural Humility? — The Key to Success in Cultural Competence". California Health Advocates, 1 Apr. 2007. Web. 01 July 2015. <http://www.cahealthadvocates.org/news/disparities/2007/are-you.html>.

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and have experienced multiple traumas, many placements, and long stays in foster care—many of whom are LGBTQ. Key points include the following:

- Messages from caregivers and those in faith settings, whether positive or negative, have a big impact on youth.
- LGBTQ youth may stay in the closet in order to survive, which has a negative impact on them. For example, getR.E.A.L. heard from a lesbian teen who, in coming out, was not supported by her foster parent, and the teen had to choose to stay in the closet rather than be separated from her sister.
- The presence of supportive community resources may mitigate the stress of living in a non-affirming home or placement, but when those resources are absent, the environment can be very damaging. A closeted gay youth who was living with a non-affirming family said, said that the family treats him well and connects him to valuable services. He has a whole lot of support in the jurisdiction where he lives. He can survive in the home, even though he remains closeted, because of the community supports. For young people without that support, being closeted can be more traumatic.
- Youth of color need culturally responsive support on identity development due to stigmas associated with race or ethnicity.
- The binary construct of gender roles (male/female) can be restricting for gender nonconforming youth.
- Many youth are placed in a group placement when they could live with an affirming family, provided that the family and the youth receive the kinds of supports needed to achieve permanence.
- Youth leaving group placements without a supportive family to go to are at higher risk for poor outcomes.

Finally, there's a high need for short-term treatment in family-based care, such as the programs FFTA members provide. Agencies and providers can do more to ensure foster families support youths' sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. Every foster family should love, affirm, and support each child in the family's care to be who that child authentically is. That's called well-being. That's healthy development.

The getR.E.A.L. Initiative is working to develop and share research, best practices, policies, and youth voices around the United States. If you are interested in learning more, visit the getR.E.A.L. website at www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/get-r-e-a-l or contact Bill Bettencourt, bill.bettencourt@cssp.org or (415) 748-1053.

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