



## SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

LGBTQ+ youth comprise 3%–11% of the youth population but 15%–30% of the youth in foster care, according to statistics cited in the 2019 article by Salazar and colleagues listed below. These youth may be questioning, exploring, or living openly as LGBTQ+, or they may still be closeted. Foster caregivers can benefit from resources and education on how to provide supportive homes for these youth. Work led by Kevin P. Haggerty, PhD, at SDRG, in cooperation with the Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families, addresses these issues through *Connecting*, a parenting program for foster parents and relative caregivers and the teens in their care.

Former SDRG researcher and current assistant professor in Human Development at Washington State University, Vancouver, Amy Salazar, PhD, was lead author of two articles about the development of an LGBTQ+ training module designed to build relationships between caregivers and youth in the foster care system as part of the *Connecting* program. In a 2018 article in the journal *Child Welfare*, Salazar and her colleagues published research summarizing their findings from focus groups of young people formerly in care, caregivers, and child welfare staff. The article discusses the unique challenges and support-related needs of system-involved LGBTQ+ youth and their caregivers and provides strategies for building better relationships between them.

In the 2019 article, published in *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, Salazar and colleagues tested the new materials with members of the same groups. The resulting training module, “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE): A Guide for Foster Caregivers,” is part of *Connecting*, a self-directed, evidence-based prevention science program. A link to the module is given below.

### The Challenges

Before and after entering the foster care system, LGBTQ+ youth can face a lack of acceptance, discrimination, intolerance, and unsafe living situations. Discrimination and stigma can be found at school, in church, and in the public sphere. Youth may fear further rejection from their new caregivers. Insensitive and hurtful comments can break trust. Caregivers report feeling unprepared to talk about sexuality.

### In Their Own Words

“Not everywhere outside that house is gonna be safe for them.... So, a lot of them just need that support and that knowledge that when they come home they are—they’re okay and they’re gonna be safe and accepted.”

—A former foster youth

“So, making sure they know that you’re there, no matter what. That you accept them, no matter what they decide, and that they don’t have to decide today what that is; but whatever they’re thinking that day is A-Okay. And that I will go to the school, and if anybody’s harassing them, I will deal with it. If their social worker is understanding, I’ll go there. I’ll talk to the counselor; I’ll talk to the attorney; whatever they need. So that they know that they’ve got somebody at their back.”

—A caregiver

From the 2018 article below.

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Certainly, the coming out and self-discovery process may be tumultuous and stressful for these youth and those who care for them. It is essential for caregivers to be attentive to past trauma and mental health challenges. Appropriate information about transitioning and medical intervention for transgender youth is critically important to their well-being.

## Building Relationships and Resilience

Parents and caregivers can significantly improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth by responding positively to the youth's identity and by building a strong relationship with their child. In the *Child Welfare* article, the authors identified eight ways to build relationships: (1) safe and accepting spaces, (2) caregiver/youth interactions, (3) shared activities, (4) caregivers acting on behalf of youth, (5) caregiver self-work, (6) youth self-work, (7) working with people where they are, and (8) supportive programming.

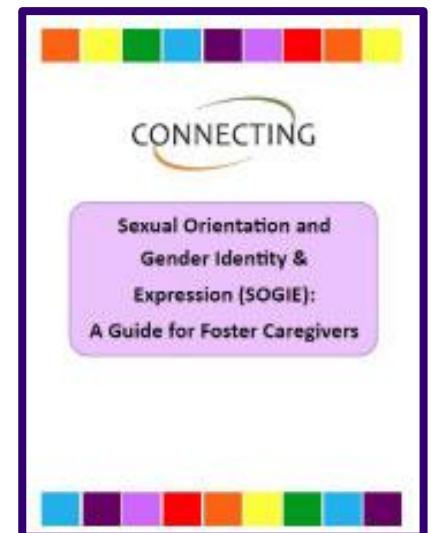
The same article names three critical needs for LGBTQ+ youth in foster care: acceptance, support, and assured safety. The module helps their caregivers meet those needs, even in an unsupportive faith community or environment. Through the module, caregivers learn about the unique challenges of the LGBTQ+ population in foster care and how to discuss sensitive topics related to gender identity and sexual orientation. Regardless of their level of comfort or knowledge, this module helps caregivers to have positive and supportive interactions with LGBTQ+ youth in their care, even with youth who are not yet out to the caregiver.

## The Module

The module, available to foster caregivers in Washington and beyond, includes:

- Video stories
- Know, Knew, Heard Activity (glossary, pronouns, language usage)
- Myths and realities (gender roles)
- Identifying roadblocks to acceptance
- Statistics and techniques for talking about discrimination
- Making a Safety Plan for Youth
- Strategies for having sensitive conversations
- Are You in Crisis? (suicide prevention, mental health resources)
- Resources and advocacy tools for seeking appropriate healthcare

Click the image to the right to download the *Connecting* module, or go to [http://www.sdrg.org/Connecting\\_Module.pdf](http://www.sdrg.org/Connecting_Module.pdf).



For additional information on this topic, please refer to the original articles:

Salazar, A. M., Haggerty, K. P., Barkan, S. E., Peterson, R., Furlong, M. E., Kim, E., Cole, J. J., & Colito, J. M. (2019). Supporting LGBTQ foster teens: Development of a relationship-focused, self-guided curriculum for foster families. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1007/s13178-019-00387-z.

Salazar, A. M., McCowan, K. J., Cole, J. J., Skinner, M. L., Noell, B. R., Colito, J. M., Haggerty, K. P., & Barkan, S. E. (2018). Developing relationship-building tools for foster families caring for teens who are LGBTQ2S. *Child Welfare*, 96(2), 75-97.

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