

Recruiting and Retaining LGBT FOSTER, ADOPTIVE, AND KINSHIP FAMILIES

Sending a Welcoming Message

Many child welfare agencies are recognizing the importance of engaging with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) prospective families as a way of partnering to find stable placements and achieve permanence for more children in foster care. Recruiting and retaining LGBT families, however, requires much more than just breaking down institutional, formal barriers between a child welfare agency and LGBT prospective parents; it requires creating a welcoming, inclusive environment and finding a way to express welcoming messages to the individual people the agency wants to engage. With the many barriers that LGBT families have historically faced—and often continue to face—in pursuing foster and adoptive parenting, child welfare agencies who wish to work with LGBT families should be intentional about building trust and creating a welcoming atmosphere and organizational culture. Taking these steps can help your agency build your capacity to reach out to LGBT families and retain them. The tips below highlight key considerations to keep in mind and provide suggestions for specific ideas you can use as you seek to create a welcoming environment.

Always keep in mind the power of language and specific words.

Words can be very emotionally loaded, both positively and negatively. Words can also play a key role in communicating the fundamental values and priorities of an agency and setting the tone for interactions between an agency and prospective parents. For instance:

- Find resources in your local LGBT community to help you determine appropriate and respectful terminology for diverse populations that you serve.
- Avoid using the word “homosexual” when referring to gay or lesbian people, as it is considered a clinical word that has a connotation of pathology.
- Review terminology that your agency uses that might be misinterpreted by prospective parents. For instance, LGBT prospective families might interpret terms such as “traditional families” as meaning that they are not welcome even if an agency simply uses the term to refer to foster and adoptive families who come to the agency through traditional routes.

Remember, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Review the photos and images your agency uses in recruitment materials, publications, and around the office to ensure that the families in the photos reflect the diversity of prospective families you wish to engage, including same-sex couples and single parents. If prospective LGBT families don’t see families like themselves in any of the images your agency projects, they may find it more difficult to trust the agency and feel welcome.

Look for ways to frame statements in inclusive and affirming ways.

Avoid using forms, questions, and words that reflect any assumptions that all prospective parents fall into particular groups. Even seemingly innocent questions can send a message that you aren’t welcoming to LGBT prospective parents. For example:

- Instead of asking if an applicant is married—whether on a form or in a conversation—you can ask if someone has a partner or will be co-parenting.

- Instead of using the words “husband” and “wife” on forms that prospective or current parents must complete, use more neutral words such as “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” or “Applicant 1 and 2.”

Be congruent.

Using welcoming words and images can help your agency make a positive initial impression as you reach out to new LGBT prospective foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Once you have prospective families engaged, be sure that your agency will continue to be welcoming and culturally competent. If your agency sends mixed messages about whether or not LGBT individuals are welcome, your recruitment efforts may do more harm than good in trying to build new community connections.

SPECIAL THANKS and Recognition

Special thanks and recognition go to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s All Children – All Families initiative.

This tip sheet was informed extensively by the content and approach of the All Children – All Families materials, including the All Children – Training Curriculum and the Promising Practices in Adoption and Foster Care guide.



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AdoptUSKids is operated by the Adoption Exchange Association and is made possible by grant number 90CQ0002 from the Children’s Bureau. The contents of this resource are solely the responsibility of the Adoption Exchange Association and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Children’s Bureau, ACYF, ACF, or HHS. The Children’s Bureau funds AdoptUSKids as part of a network of National Resource Centers established by the Children’s Bureau.

