

Talking with Experts: Part 2 of 3

ENGAGING LGBT FAMILIES

How Leaders Can Build Agency Competency

AdoptUSKids spoke with three members of a time-limited advisory group that it had convened in 2010 to gather expert guidance for the design of services and tools to support recruitment and retention practices that are welcoming to, and inclusive of, prospective foster and adoptive parents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). The focus of the interviews was to discuss how child welfare and adoption agencies can effectively engage LGBT families. These experts shared insights and suggestions for specific action steps. This is Part 2 in the series of conversations with:

- Beth Brindo, MSSA, LISW-S, Independent Consultant
- Ellen Kahn, M.S.S., Director of the Human Rights Campaign's Family Project and the All Children—All Families Initiative
- John C. Levesque, L.S.W., Independent Consultant

What can supervisors, directors, and other agency leaders do to promote LGBT cultural competence within their agency?

Key Theme: Send strong, consistent messages internally and externally

EK: Are you sending frequent and routine messages to your staff about your commitment to inclusion—both serving LGBTQ youth well and meeting their needs and welcoming all qualified prospective families? Make these messages part of your broader communication, including at staff meetings, through newsletters, etc.

JL: They have to have that internal conversation within the agency first. Some people may have great comfort working with LGBT families, while others don't, but leaders need to demonstrate that this is a professional agency with professional practice. Leaders should send the message that working with LGBT families is a supported practice and let staff know that the agency has their backs and supports them.

BB: There are a lot of conversations that agency leaders need to have with each other to affirm, and continue to affirm, the agency's support for working with LGBT families and reaffirming that the agency is out [of the closet]. Are leaders talking about what this means for your funders, community partners, other families, donors, etc.? Agency leaders need to have these conversations before things hit the fan. One agency wrote a letter to the editor for the local paper with a strength-based approach to their welcoming environment, simply saying, "Hi, we're here. We're out. There's nothing to worry about. Carry on."

Key Theme: Obtain and provide accurate information and training

BB: The education piece is the critical one; how staff become educated about working effectively with LGBT families is key. If you don't have all staff (the person answering the phone, pre-service trainers, placement staff, etc.) on board and using affirming and welcoming language, things won't work.

JL: Agencies and their leaders also need to be re-

ally aware of what the laws in their state say or don't say about gays and lesbians adopting children. Does the law support it? Is the law neutral on it? Does the law forbid it? Leaders should be sure that staff aren't making assumptions about what kind of families are allowed to adopt.

BB: Get everyone trained on basic knowledge of working with LGBT communities, identifying system weaknesses, and work on these weaknesses so people don't fall through the cracks.

EK: In many communities, LGBT families continue to be seen as families of last resort or only families for LGBTQ youth. After 30 years of peer-reviewed research, we know that there's no basis for that approach; it's just based on personal bias. We know that LGBT families are successfully parenting all kinds of kids.

Key Theme: Assess and strengthen internal conditions at the agency

EK: Make sure staff feel welcomed and respected. If LGBT staff feel like they aren't safe or are harassed by co-workers, LGBT families certainly won't feel welcome and safe.

BB: Leaders should be asking themselves and each other, "Do we have LGBT communities represented on our board? On our leadership team?" As the agency looks at representing the diversity of the communities it serves, this is a key question.

EK: Have a commitment and demonstrate leadership around non-discrimination and best practices that you want to see in your staff. If you don't have a systemic approach to working with the LGBT population, you won't have good outcomes.



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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.

