

12 Tips for Advocating for LGBTQ Youth

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CASA and GAL volunteers have a unique ability to make a profound difference in the lives of LGBTQ youth in care. As challenges arise, what do you need to know to make that difference? In training, volunteers are taught to have the goal of finding safe, permanent living arrangements for the children they advocate for. To ensure this result for LGBTQ youth, keep in mind the following tips to help you in your advocacy.

1. Examine your own biases and recognize that it is okay to be uncomfortable at times.

Please know that a person does not choose to be lesbian, gay or bisexual—they just are. Remember: Youth do not require therapy simply because of their sexual orientation. As long as you are open-minded, the LGBTQ youth will recognize that it is safe to disclose personal information. You will often see that you have biases that you weren't aware of and begin looking at things differently.

2. Obtain specific education and training on how to advocate for LGBTQ youth.

For example, using correct terminology is key (see the Vocabulary sidebar in the cover story). Your program may provide an in-service training on this topic as part of your continuing education. Also investigate local training opportunities with other agencies. National CASA provides workshops at the national conference on LGBTQ issues and has published a bibliography of resources on working with LGBTQ families (see the Resources sidebar in the cover story).

3. Research and be aware of resources in your area.

A good place to start is the Resources sidebar provided at CASAforchildren.org/Connection. Be sure that youth have opportunities to socialize with other youth who identify as LGBTQ. This is important to eliminate feelings of isolation and of "being the only one." If local resources are scant, research an online support network for gay and transgender youth.

4. Use general terms when speaking with people.

Rather than asking a boy if he has a girlfriend or a girl if she has a boyfriend, ask whether there is someone special in the youth's life. Or ask young people what term they would prefer you use.

5. Strive to learn the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity.

Working with a transgender youth can be most challenging for a volunteer. A transgender person has a variety of complex issues to address. Know when to ask for help and seek outside resources and information.

6. Respect confidentiality and don't "out" a youth.

If an LGBTQ youth comes out to you about his or her sexual orientation or gender identity, it is not for you to share with others. You have gained the youth's trust, and you should respect that. Don't guess or make assumptions about whether or not a youth may be LGBTQ. If youth are at risk of harm or in a facility that is not beneficial to them, empower them to assist you in developing a safety plan

or a recommendation for moving to an appropriate placement. Remember: Just because youth come out to you, it doesn't mean they are ready to be out to everyone involved in their lives. Nor will others in their lives necessarily be ready to receive that information. Breaches of confidentiality can lead to the youth being harmed—in extreme situations—to suicide. There are rare exceptions to preserving confidentiality; for example, if a judge requires you to reveal this information or if it would not be in the youth's best interest to keep it private. If you are uncertain about a specific case, talk to your volunteer supervisor.

7. Ensure safety for the LGBTQ youth.

Be prepared to advocate for youth who are not safe in their living arrangements. Federal law (the 14th Amendment along with various child welfare acts) ensures that every youth in state custody will have safe and appropriate care based on their needs.

8. Learn the laws pertinent to LGBTQ individuals in your state or city.

State and local laws vary greatly. Know what is required for medical care and treatment as well as for safe living arrangements. Transgender persons may need referrals for legal assistance to challenge policies that do not permit them to dress in a means consistent with gender identity rather than birth gender. Or they may need legal assistance to ensure their basic care and placement in housing that is appropriate to their preferred gender as well as safe from harassment. Sometimes assistance is needed to access medical or mental health care, including transition-related treatment if called for.

9. Be a visible advocate by challenging myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ persons.

Practice supportive, accepting, affirming and nondiscriminatory behavior. Challenge biased, discriminatory behavior, not just in your advocacy efforts but in your daily life as well. Youth will be testing you along the way to determine whether you are trustworthy.

10. Recognize system failures that impact the youth.

LGBTQ youth are often erroneously labeled as sexual offenders and end up in the juvenile justice system. As you read the child's file information, you may deduce that the youth was charged and placed in the juvenile justice system simply for having a same-sex relationship or encounter. Consider whether this would have been seen as typical adolescent sexual exploration had it been a heterosexual couple. Challenge these system failures.


11. Recognize educational failures.

Schools may be unsafe places for LGBTQ youth due to verbal harassment and physical harm or threats. The harassment may come from peers or even school staff and educators. As a result, many LGBTQ youth become truant or drop out of school altogether. Help youth complete their education by advocating to ensure their safety while in school. Again, be certain not to out the youth without his or her permission or involvement.

12. Advocate strenuously for permanency.

Long-term foster care is not a permanent living arrangement for any youth, including an LGBTQ youth. Too often, it is difficult to find foster families with the knowledge and openness to care for an LGBTQ youth. Social workers may tend to rush to place children in group home settings rather than finding a family and providing resources to ensure that the living

arrangement is successful. LGBTQ youth often leave out-of-home placements by running away or aging out without a caring adult in their lives. It is our responsibility to ensure that every child leaves care with an identified family or other adult for youth to turn to for support, love, assistance and continued advocacy. Help youth identify adults who they feel could provide them with safe, affirming environments and be long-term families who will commit to them over the long haul. This should begin while LGBTQ youth are in care and not be left to them to establish when leaving the child welfare system.

Follow these guidelines and you will be a strong advocate who shows youth that you are open-minded and caring. With their trust, you will be better able to speak up and ensure that youth have their needs met in safe, affirming living arrangements while in state custody. 

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