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Strategies to Promote LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Youth-Serving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

Research indicates that more than one in four high school students in the United States identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+).¹ These youth are at higher risk of mental health issues and negative relationship outcomes than their heterosexual, cisgender² peers.³ Youth-serving healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs, which aim to enhance young people's socioemotional and relationship skills and prepare them to have healthy romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood, have an opportunity to support the healthy development of the growing number of LGBTQ+ youth in their communities. However, few HMRE programs explicitly address the experiences of youth who are LGBTQ+.

This brief highlights strategies HMRE programs can use to improve their inclusivity for LGBTQ+ youth in the areas of (1) recruitment, outreach, and initial engagement; (2) program content and delivery; and (3) staff hiring and training. These strategies are derived from a white paper on making HMRE programs more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth and adults,⁴ which was developed as part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project. They are informed by a review of the literature on relationship education and inclusive programming for



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About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. The project focuses on gathering and summarizing information on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programming and connected areas, using literature reviews, knowledge maps, expert consultations, and technical work groups. The project team has drafted a range of products exploring key topics that emerged during the project.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Table 4: Number and Percentage of Students, by Sexual Identity—United States and Selected U.S. Sites, Youth Risk Behavior Surveys, 2021." Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023.

² The term *cisgender* refers to people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report." Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023.

⁴ Alamillo, J., L. Ouellette, L. Fernandez, and E. Pasternack. "Making Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs More Inclusive for LGBTQ+ Youth and Adults." OPRE Report #2023-287. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

LGBTQ+ youth, focus groups with HMRE program directors and program practitioners, and interviews with HMRE educators and participants. However, most of the strategies have not been evaluated in the HMRE program context. Readers are encouraged to reference the white paper for more information on the evidence supporting the strategies in this brief.

To use these strategies effectively, programs should consider partnering with people in the community who work with LGBTQ+ youth to better understand the backgrounds and needs of the youth they intend to serve. Such partners can include leaders or members of school-based gender and sexuality or gay-straight alliances (GSAs), local PFLAG chapters, or other local pride organizations. Because inclusivity is a dynamic and ongoing process, we suggest HMRE programs engage with these partners on a regular basis and incorporate an assessment of inclusivity into program improvement efforts. When reviewing the strategies presented in this brief, practitioners should consider how they can engage partners with in-depth knowledge of LGBTQ+ youth—including youth themselves—to put these strategies into practice.



RECRUITMENT, OUTREACH, AND INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Most youth-serving HMRE programs are delivered in high schools as part of the regular school day; however, some programs offer services at other locations in the community. School-based programs typically serve all students in a required class, such as health, and therefore do not need to recruit participants. In contrast, community-based programs typically engage in a range of outreach activities to advertise their services to youth in the community. Regardless of how they recruit or where they operate, the strategies listed below can help youth programs signal that they are LGBTQ+ friendly and can meet the needs of this population.

Make sure youth's first impression of the program is one of LGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Because school-based HMRE programs tend to include many LGBTQ+ youth, it is important for programs to signal from the outset that they have something to offer this population. Likewise, programs that operate outside of schools should ensure their outreach materials, such as flyers and advertisements, include LGBTQ+ -affirming images and language. Programs can display inclusive imagery like the Pride flag, rainbow-colored font, and pictures of LGBTQ+ youth and couples on outreach and initial program materials. These materials should also feature inclusive language, such as the term “partner” in addition to just “boyfriend” and “girlfriend.” Program staff, including recruiters and educators, should wear nametags that contain their pronouns, and they should give participants the option to do so as well. These types of modifications help establish a welcoming environment and signal to LGBTQ+ youth that they belong in the program.

Recruit in settings that are welcoming to and frequented by LGBTQ+ youth.

Programs that aim to recruit more LGBTQ+ youth should display marketing materials and conduct outreach in locations where youth will be receptive to their messaging, such as community centers, advocacy organizations, or health care facilities. Programs can also work with school-based groups, such as GSAs, to advertise to LGBTQ+ youth. LGBTQ+ community events or neighborhoods may offer additional opportunities for advertising and direct outreach (for example, programs can distribute flyers at Pride events or to LGBTQ+ owned businesses). Online communities are also important to consider; for example, regular posting and interactions on social media with local LGBTQ+ groups or businesses can be effective for reaching LGBTQ+ youth.



PROGRAM CONTENT AND DELIVERY

Even though many of the topics currently covered in youth HMRE programs are general enough to apply to a diverse group of participants, LGBTQ+ youth face unique issues and challenges concerning their relationships. The strategies below can help ensure that programs' content and approach to service delivery address the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Depending on their service context, programs may need to work closely with curriculum developers or school administrators to implement these strategies.

Enhance program materials with inclusive language, images, and examples.

As with recruitment materials, programs should review the materials they use to deliver the curriculum to make sure they contain inclusive language and images. These materials can include worksheets, handouts, PowerPoint slides, videos, and others. Existing HMRE curricula may contain examples that rely on stereotypical gender roles. For example, in a lesson about conflict management, the curriculum may depict a boyfriend and girlfriend having a disagreement about the boyfriend's preoccupation with sports. HMRE practitioners could work with curriculum developers or community partners to replace this example with one that features an LGBTQ+ couple using conflict management techniques to resolve their disagreement without relying on heterosexual or gendered norms. Recognizing that the LGBTQ+ community is diverse, program materials should feature examples with a range of LGBTQ+ youth, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identifying youth in same or different gender relationships. Additionally, educators should use a range of pronouns when referring to youth in the examples, such as "they" or "ze" rather than only "he" and "she."

Work with curriculum developers to address topics relevant to LGBTQ+ people and relationships.

Programs may need to incorporate additional content into their curriculum to better address the unique issues of LGBTQ+ youth. Box 1 shows potential topics to consider. For example, LGBTQ+ youth may have differing levels of "outness" at school, in extracurricular activities, and with their friends and families. Programs could address how to navigate this issue in different types of situations and interpersonal relationships. HMRE programs can work with curriculum developers to identify and draw from existing evidence-informed curricula or trainings

Box 1: Potential inclusive topics for youth-serving HMRE programs

- The impact of gendered social norms and language on LGBTQ+ youth
- Defining different types of romantic relationships and what they mean, including relationships among people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, nonbinary,⁵ or another sexual or gender identity
- Normalizing acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships
- "Coming out" and how to talk with parents, friends, and romantic partners about one's sexuality or gender identity
- Healthy communication, consent, and coercion for LGBTQ+ youth in relationships
- Pregnancy and parenting for LGBTQ+ people
- Positive and negative outcomes associated with marriage, including considerations for shared income and property



⁵ The term *nonbinary* refers to people whose gender identity falls outside of the traditional gender binary structure of girl/woman and boy/man.

to address these topics. In addition, programs can work with people who have in-depth knowledge of LGBTQ+ youth to develop new content.

When integrating content about LGBTQ+ relationships into existing curricula, programs should make sure to use a strengths-based approach. Often, when programs address LGBTQ+ youth and relationships, they focus only on the risks and challenges LGBTQ+ youth face. Instead, programs should emphasize the unique strengths and resiliencies of LGBTQ+ youth and their relationships, such as their ability to embrace roles that are not based on gender stereotypes. Programs should also acknowledge the systemic factors that may lead to negative relationship and family outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth, including social stigma, discrimination, and minority stress.

Consider using alternative delivery formats to deliver LGBTQ+ inclusive programming.

In certain contexts, programs may be limited in what they can discuss concerning LGBTQ+ relationships. For example, some school districts and states prohibit the discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in schools. In these contexts, programs can consider partnering with LGBTQ+ friendly organizations outside the school setting, such as health clinics, youth shelters, and LGBTQ+ community centers to provide more inclusive programming. Programs may also consider providing virtual services to LGBTQ+ youth using online platforms.



STAFF HIRING AND TRAINING

Program educators, leaders, and support staff contribute to creating a welcoming environment for LGBTQ+ participants. It is important, therefore, for programs to ensure their staff are well-trained and supported. Programs can achieve this in several ways:

Hire staff who are LGBTQ+ or who have lived experience as an ally or advocate.

HMRE programs can make it a priority to employ staff who are members of the LGBTQ+ community or who are active allies or advocates. These staff may be able to share relationship and other personal experiences that resonate with LGBTQ+ youth, allowing them to build trust and rapport. Although it may not be possible to assess candidates' LGBTQ+ identity in a job interview, HMRE programs can note that LGBTQ+ applicants are encouraged to apply or ask that people speak to their advocacy work in a cover letter.

Foster an inclusive and accepting organizational culture.

Ensuring an HMRE program is inclusive, responsive, and welcoming to LGBTQ+ youth involves every staff member at the organization. Commitment to an atmosphere of inclusivity and acceptance should be an organization-wide effort. To that end, leaders should work to ensure their programs foster an inclusive culture. This could involve modifying policies and procedures to make it explicit that staff are required to be respectful and inclusive. Program supervisors and managers can further support staff in their delivery of inclusive programming by incorporating feedback as part of regular supervisory conversations and performance evaluations.

Provide staff with training on how to serve LGBTQ+ youth.

Fostering an inclusive culture likely also involves providing staff with ongoing training related to serving LGBTQ+ youth. Box 2 provides a list of potential training topics to consider. Training should be provided by people or organizations with expertise in working with the LGBTQ+ community.

Box 2: Potential training topics for staff

- Information on LGBTQ+ history, cultural issues, and terminology
- Information on the diverse and intersectional identities of LGBTQ+ youth
- Cultural humility and responding to youth in a non-defensive manner
- Opportunities to explore one's own biases and misconceptions
- Techniques for managing sensitive interactions in workshops, including discriminatory comments from other youth
- Guidance on district, state, and federal laws and policies related to LGBTQ+ issues
- Supportive and trustworthy resources for LGBTQ+ youth and their families



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Inclusive programming has the potential to enhance services for youth of all genders and sexual orientations as they think about their own identity development, current and future friendships, family relationships, and romantic partnerships. It is important for youth-serving HMRE programs to continue to strive to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community. Failing to offer inclusive services runs the risk of excluding—or even harming—LGBTQ+ program participants. It is also not enough to state that program content applies to youth regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. To be truly inclusive, programs must directly address the needs and relationship issues faced by the LGBTQ+ youth they serve.

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