

Creating Inclusive Youth Programs for LGBTQ+ Communities

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It is vital for youth to experience inclusive programming that is welcoming. Extension has a responsibility and an obligation to provide youth with programs and spaces that are inclusive of all sexes, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. This article provides an overview of appropriate terminology, as well as steps for creating inclusive Extension spaces and programs for youth who identify as members of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) communities. With a focus on urban Extension audiences, this article uses accessible language, self-reflective prompts, and supporting visual aids to share lessons learned from ongoing inclusivity trainings with Extension personnel across the nation, as well as from research activities and inclusive programming.

Keywords: positive youth development, sex, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, 4-H

Introduction

With a particular focus on the needs of youth in urban areas, the purpose of this article is to educate Extension personnel on the basic concepts of gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation; the meaning of inclusive spaces; and best practices and practical steps for creating inclusive environments. While individuals of all gender identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, and sexes live in both rural and urban communities, youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities living in urban areas face unique challenges, including high rates of homelessness and hunger (cf. Cunningham et al., 2014), reliance on survival sex and/or other high risk sexual behaviors (cf. Abramovich, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2014), and intersecting cultural identities (cf. Bridges, 2007; Fox & Ore, 201). To promote positive youth development for urban youth of all gender identities, gender expressions, sexes, and sexual orientations, this article combines lessons learned from working with Extension personnel and programs, academic references, and resources used in emerging practices to frame and support these discussions while offering readers an opportunity to compare discussions on these topics that range in detail and complexity.

Why Should Extension Personnel Read This Article?

One reason why it is important for Extension to create inclusive programs is simply because it is a requirement of our relationships with the federal government. Since Extension programs are recipients of federal funds, Extension personnel and programs are obligated to be inclusive of all protected classes in programming, hiring practices, and work environments. In particular, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) expects Extension programs to be inclusive for clientele of all sexes, gender expressions, gender identities, and sexual orientations (USDA, 2015).

Beyond the obligation to provide inclusive, nondiscriminatory programs, there is a significant need. It is vital for urban youth who are developing the hard and soft skills necessary for successful transitions to adulthood to experience inclusive programming that is welcoming of all forms of diversity, and Extension has a responsibility to meet this need (Duke, 2014; Johnson, Midkiff, Serrano, & Farris, 2016; Misyak, Ledlie Soder, 2009; USDA, 2015). Many urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are verbally and physically harassed, physically assaulted, and sexually assaulted in schools where they should be safe to learn and develop (GLSEN, 2016b; Gordon, Conron, Calzo, Reisner, & Austin, 2016; Ybarra, Mitchell, Kosciw, & Korchmaros, 2015). Urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are significantly more likely to experience homelessness due to rejection from their families and experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and stress (Cunningham, Pergamit, Astone, & Luna, 2014; GLSEN, 2016b; Poirier, Fischer, Hunt, & Bearse, 2013). Youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are the population that is most likely to attempt and die by suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). Given Extension's role in operating 4-H and working with urban youth and families through nutrition and other educational efforts across the country, Extension personnel have the capacity to positively impact the experiences of millions of urban youth, families, personnel, and educators by creating inclusive programming. For 4-H professionals, these efforts are directly related to the foundations of positive youth development, particularly to youth's sense of belonging, caring connections, and physical or emotional safety.

Despite the identified need for inclusive Extension programming, historically, Extension efforts to increase inclusivity for individuals who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities has been limited (Ingram, 2005; Soder, 2009). Without a basic understanding of the needs and context of these protected classes, Extension personnel are likely to engage inadvertently in practices that have been identified as discriminatory. Prior research has identified the lack of existing Extension resources for personnel seeking to increase the inclusivity of their Extension programs (Soder, 2009) for clientele of diverse sexes, gender expressions, gender identities, and sexual orientations. Although focused on urban youth, this article seeks to help fill the identified gap in Extension resources by providing an accessible and introductory discussion that can benefit all in their efforts to provide inclusive Extension programming.

Understanding the Basic Concepts

In the United States, it is common for people to grow up thinking of gender as a single concept. Most commonly, people think of gender/sex as referring to all people being either a man or a woman. This concept of gender/sex is referred to as the gender binary (cf. Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010). Additionally, people commonly believe that to whom one is attracted is determined by gender, meaning that women are attracted to men and men are attracted to women. However, in human sciences (in fields ranging from gender studies to sexuality to medicine to psychology), it is commonly accepted that there are four separate components to all people's gender and attraction: (a) gender expression, (b) sex, (c) gender identity, and (d) attraction. As noted above, these are also protected classes, which means the Federal government also recognizes all people have these four separate components. For youth growing up in urban areas, these concepts are becoming increasingly more common, with youth culture leading discussions and advocacy for acceptance of all gender expressions, sexes, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

LGBTQ+

First, it may be useful to some readers to explain the LGBTQ+ acronym. "LGBT" refers to individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. "Q" often refers to individuals who identify as Queer or Questioning:

- *Queer* is a reclaimed word that was once used predominately as an extremely offensive slur; however, the term is now used by many urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities (cf. Jagose, 1996; Rand, 2013). Queer is often used in urban communities as an umbrella term to refer to the entire LGBTQ+ spectrum (cf. Killermann, 2013). Like all labels, it is never appropriate to use the term queer to describe another person unless someone specifically indicates a preference to be described as queer.
- *Questioning* refers to people who are exploring their gender identities, gender expressions, sexual orientations, beliefs, and/or values (cf. Killermann, 2013).

The "+" refers to all other individuals who identify as members of communities that challenge the assumption that all individuals are heterosexual and identify with the male or female sex they were assigned at birth (cf. Killermann, 2013).

Gender Expression

This concept refers to people's presentation of their gender to others, including their dress, grooming, speech, mannerisms, and other factors. Gender expression is often thought of as a

binary in the United States, with a person identified as either masculine or feminine (cf. Dozier, 2005; Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Killermann, 2013); however, thinking of gender expression as a continuum can be a helpful way to consider gender expression as more than two options (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Gender Expression Continuum



Note: From Soule (2016)

Figure 1 is an example of what the Gender Expression Continuum might look like. On one side is masculine gender expression, and on the other side is feminine gender expression. It is common to consider wearing make-up, high heels, and a dress as expressing femininity, while wearing a suit, loafers, and crew cut as expressing masculinity. Other examples include pink signifying feminine and blue indicating masculine. In the middle, gender non-conforming and androgynous suggest two potential alternatives to the binary (there are many other alternatives as well). Gender non-conforming often refers to expressing both masculine and feminine genders in ways that do not align with societal ideals of what it means to be masculine or feminine. Wearing eye shadow, lipstick, and nail polish, as well as having a full beard, might be an example of gender non-conforming. Androgynous might be thought of as expressing gender ambiguity. Most people move across this continuum, to some extent, on a regular basis. For example, an individual may express more feminine when going out for a nice dinner and may express more masculine when engaging in activities in the outdoors. Gender expression often changes based on one's daily activities and is not the same as one's sex or gender identity.

Sex

Sex, or biological sex, refers to a combination of physiological attributes, including chromosomes, gonads, hormones, sex and reproductive organs, as well as secondary sex characteristics (cf. Carlson, 2016; Killermann, 2013). Most commonly, individuals are assigned to be either male or female at birth. Like gender expression, it can be helpful to reconsider biological sex as a continuum in order to explore biological sex beyond the binary of male and female (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Biological Sex Continuum



Note: From Soule (2016)

In Figure 2, the biological sex described as male with XY chromosomes, male sex and reproductive organs, and male hormones is on one side of the continuum, and the biological sex described as female with XX chromosomes, female sex and reproductive organs, and female hormones is on the opposite side. People who are *intersex* are born with physiological attributes that include a combination of male and female anatomy, which might include chromosomes, gonads, hormones, or sex and reproductive organs (cf. Balen, Creighton, Davies, MacDougall, & Stanhope, 2004; Vilain, 2016). There are countless ways physiological attributes might vary. For example, an intersex individual might have male-typical anatomy externally while having mostly female-typical anatomy internally.

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers to a person’s internal sense of gender. People’s gender identities may be different from or the same as the sex they were assigned at birth. There are many ways people identify their gender (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Gender Identity Continuum



Note: From Soule (2016)

In Figure 3, people who identify as men are on one side of the continuum, and people who identify as women are on the other. Before defining other gender identities, it is helpful to understand the meaning of sex assigned at birth. Sex assigned at birth refers to the sex designation indicated on a newborn’s birth certificate, which is generally determined by a medical professional or parent considering only the child’s external sex organs.

On the continuum, there are a range of gender identities besides man and woman. Urban youth culture is constantly evolving; however, common gender identities include agender, cisgender, transgender, and gender transition.

- Agender refers to people who identify as genderless (cf. Killermann, 2013).
- Cisgender refers to people whose gender identities are the same as their sex assigned at birth (cf. Killermann, 2013).
- Transgender refers to people whose gender identities are is different than their sex assigned at birth (cf. Killermann, 2013).
 - A transgender male is a person who identifies as male but whose sex assigned at birth was female.
 - A transgender female is a person who identifies as female but whose sex assigned at birth was male.

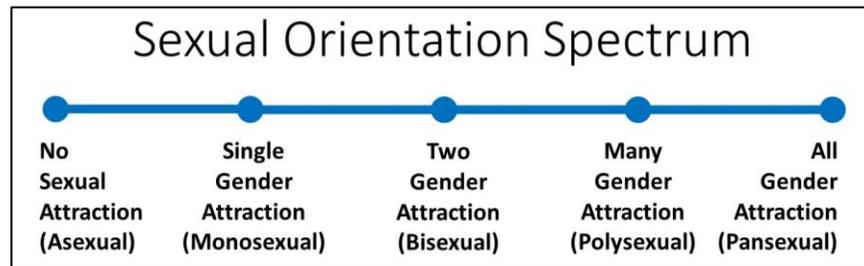
The concept of gender transition can encompass changes across all three of the continua discussed:

Gender transition refers to the process in which transgender individuals begin asserting the sex that corresponds to their gender identity instead of the sex they were assigned at birth. During gender transition, individuals begin to live and identify as the sex consistent with their gender identity and may dress differently, adopt a new name, and use pronouns consistent with their gender identity. Transgender individuals may undergo gender transition at any stage of their lives, and gender transition can happen swiftly or over an extended duration of time. (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 2)

A gender transition may or may not include changes in one's gender expression, gender identity, and sex.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation refers to whom an individual is attracted, which is generally based on gender identities (cf. Killermann, 2013). To describe the range of possible sexual orientations, a spectrum can be a useful visual tool when considering the multiplicity of sexual orientations (cf. Savin-Williams, 2014). Often, people assume individuals can have one of two sexual orientations, namely being attracted to people of the opposite gender or being attracted to people of the same gender; however, the Sexual Orientation Spectrum shows a range of other possibilities (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Sexual Orientation Spectrum

Note: From Soule (2016)

The following terms may help explain these possible categories for sexual attraction. A person who is asexual generally identifies as someone who does not experience sexual attraction. Sexual orientation can be broken down into additional concepts, such as sexual attraction and romantic attraction. There are many ways people who identify as asexual can experience romantic attraction (cf. Killermann, 2010).

Here are some commonly accepted explanations for the remainder of these possible sexual orientations:

- Monosexual refers to people who are attracted to others of a single gender, including people who are heterosexual, lesbian, and gay (cf. Brown, Montgomery, & Hammer, 2017).
- A person who is bisexual is a person who is attracted to two genders (most commonly men and women).
- A person who is polysexual is a person who is attracted to a variety of genders (cf. Oswalt, Evans, & Drott, 2016). For example, someone who is attracted to men, women, and transgender women may identify as polysexual.
- A person who is pansexual is a person who is attracted to others regardless of sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation (cf. Oswalt et al., 2016).

This section has provided an introductory examination of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as four components of gender and attraction that are separate yet interrelated. All people, whether they identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities or not, have each of these components. Understanding how the concept of gender is more complex than one often realizes provides Extension professionals with a foundation to ensure Extension programs are inclusive for all individuals, regardless of their sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.

Inclusive Extension Programs

The need to create inclusivity for LGBTQ+ communities has been documented in a wide range of fields, from medical environments (cf. Chelvakumar, 2016) to agricultural environments (cf. Blazejewski, 2012), from physical spaces (cf. Gorman-Murray & Jean Nash, 2014) to virtual spaces (cf. Downing, 2013) in a variety of Extension programs (Duke, 2014; Graham, Phelps, & Parsons, 2004; Maurer, 2013; McGuire & Catalpa, 2016; Misyak et al., 2016; Soder, 2009; Soule, 2016). Inclusive programming refers to the necessity for professionals and volunteers to be aware of specific needs of LGBTQ+ communities and to implement best practices to increase the comfort of individuals who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. Within the context of urban Extension programs, inclusive programming refers to much more than allowing all individuals to participate. Inclusive programming is consciously designed to

- remove barriers to participation,
- value diversity where individuals benefit from alternative perspectives and experiences,
- allow all clientele and colleagues to actively learn and contribute while feeling free to be themselves, and
- create an atmosphere of respect.

The following section will outline six steps to create inclusive space; however, it might be useful to first consider what inclusive urban Extension programs look like in greater detail. The remainder of this section considers how youth-based Extension programs can promote inclusivity.

Here is an example of what one aspect of an inclusive Extension program looks like. Duke (2014) discussed the need for Extension professionals to consciously and proactively address clientele comments that are prejudicial, stereotyping, discriminatory, or scapegoating in order to prevent “demeaning and marginaliz[ing] our most vulnerable participants” (para. 16). Following this example, in an inclusive urban Extension program that provides nutrition education in classrooms, one might see the following exchange. An Extension educator is teaching high school youth about the relationships between nutrition and financial literacy using the *Hunger Attack!* curriculum (Peterson et al., 2011). During a lesson on eating out, one student explains to the Extension educator: “The amount of money they charge for popcorn at a movie theater is crazy. Seriously, it is so gay. I’d rather use my money to see two movies. Plus it does not even taste good.” The educator responds to the student and the class by saying, “It is fine to use the word gay when you are talking about a person who identifies as gay. But is it not acceptable to use the word gay to describe something that you don’t like. Thanks for pointing out that popcorn at the movie theater is an expensive snack. Can you tell us what you do eat when you go to the movies?”

Consider another inclusive urban Extension program example. In this scenario, there is a 4-H volunteer leading a Junk Drawer Robotics program (National 4-H Council, 2011) with a team of teen leaders. In a meeting to prepare for the lessons, the presentation team is discussing how to divide the youth into smaller groups. One teen leader suggests splitting the group by asking boys to go to one side of the room and girls to go to the other. The 4-H volunteer leader responds by saying, “You know, there are some youth in our project that may not identify as a boy or a girl. Is there another way we can split the group without leaving some people out?” For more suggestions on ways to respond to marginalizing comments (like the one above) or for lesson plans on addressing marginalizing comments with teens, see GLSEN (2008) in the Resource section.

In both scenarios, the examples of the inclusive urban Extension program involve using language appropriately and addressing marginalizing statements. These examples align with the foundation of the 8 Essential Elements of 4-H Programming (USDA, 2011) framework, which focuses on youth’s social, emotional, and physical well-being.

Practical Steps for Inclusion

Activities like inclusivity trainings, policy recommendations, and research demonstrate that individuals involved in Extension programming across the country are looking for practical ways to increase inclusivity for individuals of all sexes, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. Many of these individuals are beginning their personal journeys to create welcoming environments, while others have been involved in these efforts for a long time. Most are working at the direct programming level and do not have the authority to establish policies and procedures. Across a range of Extension roles and responsibilities, many are looking for ways to help youth, families, and colleagues feel welcome, safe, and accepted. The following sections outline six practical steps Extension professionals can use in their own programs and work environments. For creating inclusive Extension programs, be open minded, understand current research, know the power of language, focus on behaviors (not identities), advocate for inclusive spaces, and continue to learn. These steps reflect proven and emerging best practices from the Centers for Disease and Prevention Control (CDC, 2014), Georgia Safe Schools Coalition (2017), California Safe Schools Coalition (2017), and GLSEN (2017a), as well as others. While some of their resources are framed for in school use, these best practices are effectively used in many fields and environments (e.g., medical, faith-based, and corporate work).

Step One: Be Open Minded

Being open minded is an essential step in creating inclusive environments that welcome diversity. As an individual are exposed to new ideas and ways of living, it is frequent to find

oneself evaluating new information through one's own value system. Once people notice that they are evaluating information through their own value systems, ways of understanding the world, and biases; it is a great opportunity to suspend one's own understandings and expectations to try to learn something new. Here is a self-assessment to consider awareness of biases. Readers may wish to consider their level of agreement with each of the following statements:

- When I create a presentation or a document with visuals, I consider how different forms of diversity are represented in my work.
- I notice ways my work environment can be more inclusive and advocate for changes.
- I appreciate it when others let me know if I am speaking or behaving in ways that are biased.
- I respectfully let others know when they are speaking or behaving in ways that are biased.
- I make a point of seeking out input from others who I know think differently than I do.

Individuals who feel neutral towards or disagree with most of these questions are likely at the beginning of their journey toward self-awareness of bias. Individuals who agree with most of these statements are already engaged in the practice of observing and reflecting on their own bias. Readers who found this activity useful may want to explore a more in-depth personal assessment, like Project Implicit (2011) or Anti-Defamation League (2007) listed in the resources section.

Wherever one is today, being aware of the need to be open minded and willing to explore one's own biases is the first step in creating inclusive Extension spaces and programs. Being open minded is particularly important when working with urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. It is common for these youth to explore their own identities in detail and to have unique ways of identifying themselves that are unfamiliar to urban adult populations. Likewise, there is often variation in urban youth culture and language by city. In these cases, being open to youth's voices and experiences can build bridges between Extension professionals and the urban youth populations they seek to serve.

Step Two: Understand Current Research

Current research that explores the lives and experiences of youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities paints a stark picture of the challenges many youth face in their daily lives. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that "LGBTQ youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide" (CDC, 2014, para. 4). In their examination of more than 5,500 teenagers in four school districts, Gordon et al., (2016) found that students who express gender non-conforming are more likely to be targeted

for bullying and violence. Through an analysis of survey findings from the Teen Health and Technology data set of nearly 6,000 teenaged youth from across the United States, Ybarra et al. (2015) found that suicidal thoughts are “elevated for youth victims of bullying as well as those who are victims of peer harassment. Within sexual identity, the relations between bullying and [suicidal thoughts] is particularly strong for gay, lesbian, and queer youth” (Ybarra et al., 2015, p. 459). The researchers indicate their findings “suggest the importance of a universal prevention strategy in schools that explicitly and actively promotes inclusive cultures and are intolerant of bias-based bullying” (Ybarra et al., 2015, p. 459).

To increase understanding of the experiences of youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities, GLSEN—the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN, 2016b)—annually conducts the most comprehensive research on experiences of students who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities in the country. In their 2015 national survey, GLSEN (2016b) surveyed 10,528 students between the ages of 13–21 who live in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. GLSEN connected with youth serving organizations around the country to obtain a representative national sample of youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. GLSEN (2016b) determined that “schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBTQ students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBT language and experienced victimization and discrimination at school” (p. 4).

When comparing experiences of students who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities, GLSEN found differences in outcomes between students who experienced lower levels of victimization, and students who experience higher levels of victimization who

- are 3x more likely to miss school,
- have higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem,
- have lower grade point averages, and
- are 2x “as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education” (GLSEN, 2016b, p. 6).

The findings also examine aspects of school environments that can lead to increased sense of safety, school attendance, reduced victimization, and an increased sense of community. These include the presence of a gay–straight alliance, inclusive curriculum that discusses LGBTQ+ history and people in affirming ways, supportive educators, and comprehensive bullying/harassment policies (GLSEN, 2016b).

Understanding current research can help Extension professionals recognize the crucial need for inclusive programming, as well as to be prepared to help youth navigate these challenges. This research shows a compelling need to provide inclusive, nondiscriminatory Extension programs, such as the 4-H Youth Development program, Jr. Master Gardener program, and nutrition

education programs. These programs provide safe, welcoming environments for all youth, including those who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities because these students may be more likely to lack other opportunities to develop youth-adult partnerships at their schools, with their families, and in their communities. This is true whether youth live in rural or urban communities.

At the same time, the following are considerations specific to urban communities:

- Youth living in urban communities often have access to more LGBTQ+ resources and support. This also means that youth in urban communities are more likely to be having discussions about sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation, so adults working with these youth should be informed and prepared to discuss these concepts.
- Many youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities and who grow up in rural communities will move (or run away) to urban areas. Many of these youth—as well as youth who grew up in urban communities—end up homeless. In fact, it is estimated that youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities comprise up to 40% of the homeless youth population (Cunningham et al., 2014).
- Youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are more likely to engage in survival sex, sex trade, and substance abuse (cf. Abramovich, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2014).
- Youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are more likely to have romantic relationships than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Youth who identify as member of LGBTQ+ communities and live in urban communities are more likely to initiate these romantic relationships in person (as opposed to online) than their rural peers.
- Members of LGBTQ+ communities often have unique nutrition needs, ranging from obesity to body dissatisfaction to eating disorders to the impacts of hormone replacement therapy on nutritional health (cf. Bilyk, Wellington, & Kapica, 2013). Additionally, homeless youth living in urban communities are likely to be at higher risk of food poverty.
- Since there tends to be more racial and ethnic diversity in urban communities, it is important to be aware of the cultural differences in social stigmas toward individuals who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. While social stigmas are hard for all youth, some cultures are more accepting than others. For more information, see Bridges (2007) and Fox and Ore (2010) in the resources section.

It is vital that youth serving organizations, such as Extension programs, provide inclusive environments that enable youth to obtain the skills and assets necessary to successfully transition to adulthood. Understanding the challenges that youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+

communities face in urban environments can help Extension professionals provide competent programming that meets the needs of these youth.

Step Three: Know the Power of Language

This section provides a simple, introductory exploration of how heterosexism, homophobia, and cisgender privilege power in our society is expressed through language. There are many university courses and academic sources dedicated to exploring the impact and power of language, such as critical discourse analysis or Foucauldian discourse analysis (cf. McHoul & Grace, 2015; Rogers, 2011).

Humans use language to both describe and shape the world. This means humans use language to describe what gender looks like in their particular cultures, and these descriptions of gender then become the social norms and expectations that shape how people dress, behave, and express their genders. Consider an example. In trainings, the author guides participants through an activity from GLSEN’s toolkit for educators called “What Are Little Boys and Girls Made Of?” (GLSEN, 2016a). In this activity, participants work together in small groups to explore the following questions: What do we learn growing up about what it means to be a boy? What do we learn growing up about what it means to be a girl? Frequently, participants create lists that look something like Figure 5.

Figure 5. What We Learn About As We Grow Up

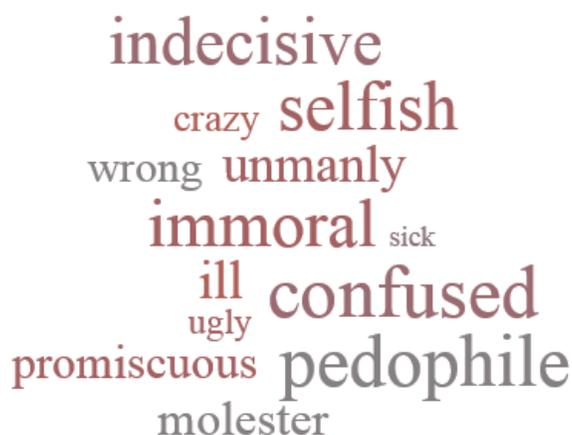


Note: From Soule (2016)

Readers are encouraged to consider what other words they would include in these lists. This exercise is not a reflection on what each participant individually believes; rather, the exercise helps participants to consider what youth learn about the ways they are supposed to “perform” their assigned gender by the language around them as they grow up.

Similar to the ways youth learn how to be girls or boys growing up, people also absorb language about individuals whose sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation do not align with society’s normative expectations. When the author asks training participants, “What does society teach us about what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex?” the lists contain mostly derogatory, hurtful words (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. What We Learn about What it Means to be LGBTQ



Note: From Soule (2016)

Figure 6 highlights the social stigma that society places on individuals who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. For youth (and adults) who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities, hearing and absorbing these words often has negative psychological effect. These psychological impacts may range from increased stress and anxiety to an ongoing sense of threat to one’s psychological and/or physical well-being to increased depression. For youth who internalize these social messages, they are likely to experience self-loathing, a sense of isolation from their family, peers, and community, as well as despair (cf. Cunningham et al., 2014; Maurer, 2013). Understanding the impacts of hearing and absorbing such hurtful language can help others understand why youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities are more likely to feel unsafe, to drop out of school, to be homeless, to abuse substances, and to attempt suicide (cf. CDC, 2014; Maurer, 2013). Language (both as a descriptor and a shaper of the social norms) has a significant impact on peoples’ psychological and physical well-being, particularly youth who are often still developing their confidence and self-knowing. Understanding the impact of language and using language appropriately is a key factor in creating inclusive programs.

The following are suggestions for how Extension professionals can use language to shape and create inclusive Extension programs:

- Use gender-neutral words and pronouns. For example, instead of saying “boys and girls,” say “youth.” Instead of using “he” or “she,” use “they.” Use gender neutral words and pronouns in both speech and written communications.
- Develop inclusive programming and presentation materials. For visuals, be sure to represent a variety of family structures, gender expressions, and races/ethnicities. In stories, examples, and scenarios, include people of all sexes, gender identities, and sexual orientations.
- When talking about interpersonal relationships, use words like “parents,” “guardians,” “siblings,” and “partners” rather than gendered alternatives.
- Always be respectful of the way someone self-identifies. Never label another person or use a label someone does not use to self-identify. This means it is inappropriate to call someone gay unless he has specifically identified as gay.
- Never disclose someone’s sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation with others.
- Learn about and use the (appropriate) terms and concepts local youth are using to describe LGBTQ+ identities. Particularly in youth communities, terms change and take on localized meanings, so do not just rely on this article or other resources.
- Do not assume someone is heterosexual or cisgender.
- Remember the differences between sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Do not make assumptions about someone’s sexual orientation based on their sex or gender identity.
- Always put people first. Do not just refer to people by one aspect of their identity. For example, the author writes about “students who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities” rather than LGBTQ+ students.
- When mistakes happen, apologize, use inclusive language, and try to not make the same mistake in the future.

Step Four: Focus on Behaviors (Not Identities)

As recipients of Federal funds, many Extension programs are already governed by comprehensive nondiscrimination policies that identify sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as protected classes. Comprehensive nondiscrimination policies let youth members, partnering organizations, industries, clientele, and colleagues know that Extension programs welcome all individuals. These policies establish that Extension professionals will respond to all inappropriate and discriminatory behaviors and identify the consequences for engaging in behavior that is discriminatory. It is important to note that comprehensive nondiscrimination focuses on inappropriate behaviors (e.g., teen sex) and/or discriminatory behavior (e.g., segregating a youth member who identifies as intersex) rather than focusing on

people's identities. The role of Extension personnel is to respond to behaviors, rather than to respond to fears about others' identities (e.g., parents concerned about their children interacting with a peer who is bisexual). While these policies are often already in existence, there is significant variation in the way these policies are implemented and enforced around the country. Nonetheless, all Extension personnel can advocate for policies that clearly articulate nondiscrimination for all members of LGBTQ+ communities, particularly in youth-serving programs.

The U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education (2016) indicated that, "As is consistently recognized in civil rights cases, the desire to accommodate others' discomfort cannot justify a policy that singles out and disadvantages a particular class of students" (p. 2). Extension programming should provide equal access for people of all sexes, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations, even if staff, faculty, youth members, adult volunteers, families, other community members, and/or a youth members' own guardians raise objections or concerns. Extension professionals should create and follow inclusive policies and procedures that hold all individuals to the same standards. For example, if there is a policy that personal displays of affection are not permissible, Extension professionals should respond to behaviors that violate these policies and procedures with appropriate corrective actions. In other words, whether a same sex couple or a heterosexual couple is observed kissing, the same corrective action should be taken. If parents are uncomfortable with their child going to camp with a teen leader who has shared a transgender identity, then those parents can choose to limit their own child's participation. However, Extension professionals should not limit the teen leader's participation. If a parent behaves or speaks in ways that violate Extension's nondiscrimination and/or harassment policies as a result of the teen leader's continued participation, then Extension professionals should engage the parent in the appropriate corrective action.

Extension professionals have a responsibility to ensure youth are welcomed into inclusive programs and offer positive and supportive environments that provide physical, mental, and emotional safety. Extension professionals should ensure that all instances of discrimination are addressed, including taking appropriate corrective actions. Additionally, all reports of discrimination against a person's sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation should be treated seriously and resolved in the same manner as reports of other forms of discrimination.

Step Five: Advocate for Inclusive Spaces

This step discusses ways Extension professionals can create or advocate for Extension spaces, documents, and environments that are inclusive of individuals who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities. The following are examples of inclusiveness:

- Request all single stall restrooms in Extension buildings be gender inclusive. Making gender inclusive restrooms is as simple as replacing existing gendered restroom signs with signs that just say “Restroom.” There are a variety of other options for inclusive signs as well. See Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA; 2015) in the resources section for more information on best practices.
- Lead a peer-to-peer training about the USDA (2015) “And Justice For All” poster, to let the general public and clientele know about their Civil Rights. This poster is required to be on display in Extension offices and programming sites.
- Hang a safe space sticker or poster in a visible place. Wolowic, Heston, Saewyc, Porta, and Eisenberg (2016) examined youth perceptions of safe space stickers and found that “most [youth] recognized and navigated towards these symbols. However, these displays should be backed up by the presence of knowledgeable, supportive persons sensitive to the needs of LGBTQ youth” (p. S1).
- Have lists of local and online resources available for youth, family members, and volunteers. See the resource section for ideas to begin developing resource lists. Also, contact local universities and community health centers to develop a list of local resources.
- Arrange an inclusivity training for others involved in Extension programs. Be sure to advertise these opportunities widely. See HRC Foundation (2017) in the resources section for a source of online trainings that can be shared with colleagues and volunteers.
- Promote youth safety and privacy by requesting all enrollment and registration forms remove questions requesting unnecessary personal information, and ensure language is inclusive. For example, the author recommends asking gender as an open-ended, fill-in the blank whenever possible. If multiple choice is required, consider the following options: Male, Female, Gender Identity Not Listed Above, and Prefer Not to State. For more information on developing inclusive forms, see Killermann (2017) in the resources section.
- Ensure program materials represent a wide-range of people, cultures, and communities. For Extension professionals involved in curriculum development, be sure that curriculum is inclusive. See GLSEN (2017b) in the resources section for research on inclusive curriculum and how to develop inclusive curriculum.
- Share opportunities to engage with LGBTQ+ activities and inclusion through social media. GLSEN and HRC are good organizations to connect with on social media.
- Create opportunities for people to discuss how inequity and inclusion is addressed in Extension programs. Be sensitive to people’s differing needs and preferences. Ask for suggestions for improvement, and follow through by implementing these suggestions.

Increasing inclusivity for youth members also allows Extension to create more welcoming environments for adults who are engaged in the program, including volunteers, paid personnel, and other community members. Inclusive environments result not only in better outcomes for youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities but can benefit all involved (cf. Meyer & Bayer, 2013; Teaching Tolerance, 2013).

Step Six: Continue to Learn

Understandings of and terminology for sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation evolve over time and can often be specific to geographical areas and to specific youth communities. In this sixth step, Extension professionals are encouraged to keep learning, as well as to circle back around to the first step of keeping an open mind.

In addition to continuing to engage in one's own education, consider ways to help others learn. Like many professionals, "few youth development professionals received any formal education...[and] youth professionals consistently report that they would like research-based information to help them better understand and support LGBT youth" (Russell, 2006, p. 1). Soder (2009) found that "there is a significant opportunity to decrease homophobia among 4-H state leaders through training" (p. 122). Extension professionals who are supervisors of paid employees or volunteers, can create opportunities for others to participate in trainings.

Going forward, there are many ways to continue to participate in learning, particularly for Extension professionals working in urban areas that often have numerous resource centers in their communities. One suggestion is to contact local resource centers, universities, and community organizations to find a list of upcoming trainings or to schedule an on-site training.

There are also many conferences that focus on diversity, including events centered on inclusion of people of all sexes, gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations. For people involved in Extension, the Cultivating Change Summit may be of interest. This summit brings together allies and members of LGBTQ+ communities from around the country who are working in agriculture, government/public service, and agricultural education. Wherever one is on a personal journey toward inclusion, there is always more to learn and share with others.

Summary/Conclusion

Extension professionals can meet the needs of urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities by providing opportunities for participation in positive development in environments that promote emotional and physical safety. Urban Extension professionals should consider offering programming to address some of the specific challenges of urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities, such as LGBTQ+ specific health and wellness

education programs. In order to provide inclusive programming, urban Extension professionals need an understanding of the basic concepts of sex/gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation that is equal to the understanding of the youth cultures that they serve. At the same time, language is complex and changes quickly, so Extension professionals should talk with the urban youth in their communities to find out how to relate to their specific youth populations. Likewise, trends for LGBTQ+ communities are continuously emerging, so Extension professionals are encouraged to seek up-to-date resources. Additionally, Extension programs should implement research-based and emergent best practices and practical steps for creating inclusive environments for urban youth. At the same time, information that has been published may use terminology and best practices that are out of date. While this article is a much needed step in the path to inclusive Extension programs of urban youth, much work is still needed in Extension. There is a need for systemwide policies that outline inclusive practices and provide program guidance. Efforts are needed to develop comprehensive and ongoing trainings on inclusivity for Extension administrators, academics, educators, and volunteers. Extension efforts may be enhanced by examining others' efforts to improve inclusivity for a variety of urban youth populations who experience discrimination. Future research should focus on measuring the knowledge gained by participating in inclusivity training for Extension professionals, as well as changes in attitudes, perceptions, and preferences in participants' understanding of LGBTQ+ communities in urban areas. Research is needed that examines the experiences of urban youth who identify as members of LGBTQ+ communities in Extension programming. As Extension professionals create more inclusive programs for urban youth, formative and summative evaluation of youth participants' experiences is needed to determine the efficacy of these efforts.

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