

Ten Steps for Creating a Supportive Agency Environment for GLBTQ Youth

Here are ten recommendations for how agencies can create environments that suggest safety and acceptance for GLBTQ youth, and that affirm the identity of every young person.

1 Acknowledge that GLBTQ youth are among your clients. Do not assume that all your clients are heterosexual. The only way that anyone ever knows someone else's sexual orientation is if that individual tells you. Many times we make assumptions on the basis of inaccurate information or misperceptions.

Just as clients will tell you who they are when, and if, they feel ready, GLBTQ clients will come out if and when they feel the environment is safe. Even if you think you do not have any GLBTQ youth in your organization, you probably do but don't know it.

2 Educate yourself and your coworkers about GLBTQ youth. Become familiar with issues through books and other literature, bring in speakers, or ask an openly GLBTQ professional to act as a "cultural guide" to teach you and others in your agency about GLBTQ issues. (See the bibliography and resource list on pps. 104-105.)

3 Use gender-neutral language. If a practitioner uses language that assumes a person is heterosexual (i.e., inquiring about a boy's girlfriend), a GLBTQ client may not feel that the professional is knowledgeable or comfortable about his or her sexual orientation and may not share valuable information. Use of words and phrases like "partner" or "someone special in your life" is more appropriate, and it is important to use them.

4 Use the words "gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning" in an appropriate context when talking with clients about diversity. Youth workers try to be inclusive by specifically referring to the diverse groups of people that we encounter, e.g., Latino, African-American, Asian-American, developmentally challenged, etc. Being inclusive also means mentioning and acknowledging the existence of GLBTQ people. (For

more on appropriate language to use with youth, see pps. 98-99.)

5 Have visible cues in the waiting room or in your office that promote an affirmative environment for gays and lesbians. Magazines, pamphlets, and posters with the words "gay" or "lesbian" or with recognizable symbols printed on them let clients know that the agency is a sensitive, safe, welcoming place for them. If you put posters up and they are torn down—and they might be—put them up again and have a discussion about why some people react so strongly to these items.

6 Be prepared to change the culture of your organization. Condemning all slurs about any persons lets colleagues know that a joke is not funny if it is at the expense of any group. This sends an unambiguous message that oppression hurts everyone.

7 If a client discloses that he or she is GLBTQ, acknowledge it and talk about it. Don't just move on to other subjects. Use the disclosure for a deeper discussion. Talk about what it means to this client to be GLBTQ. Process the feelings with them.

It's all right to let clients know that you may not be able to answer all of their questions or even to acknowledge that the subject makes you feel uncomfortable because you do not have a lot of information about what it is like to be gay or lesbian.

It is critical, however, that, as a youth worker, you accept the person unconditionally, are supportive of the individual's struggle to come to terms with these complex issues, and are willing to listen.

At the same time, realize that GLBTQ youth have many more aspects than their sexual orientation. Like all

young people, they need support, appropriate adult role models, care, concern, guidance, and flexibility. (For an overview on how youth workers can support the coming out process, see *Lesbian and Gay Youth Issues: A Practical Guide for Youth Workers*, by Gerald P. Mallon, CWLA Press, Washington, DC.)

Learn the differences between transsexuality, transvestism, and homosexuality. Be aware that youth who are transsexual or transvestite are also members of sexual minority communities. They may or may not be gay or lesbian. They do, however, require services to meet their unique needs.

Research the resources that are available in the gay and lesbian community. Identify and become familiar with the resources for GLBTQ people in your geographic area (see the resource list on p. 105 for suggestions). Visit the services available in your area. Be willing to escort any clients who might be anxious or scared to go to a GLBTQ agency for the first time.

If you are gay or lesbian yourself, consider the value of your own coming out. Visibility is powerful, and GLBTQ youth can benefit from knowing youth workers who are open about their own sexual orientation (see "Inspired by the Teens," p. 69). Heterosexual youth workers are expected to be candid about heterosexual issues.

Of course, a practitioner does not have to be GLBTQ to work with GLBTQ youth (see "A Straight Woman in a Gay World," p. 95). Non-gay allies are also very important.