

‘Pride’ and ‘prejudice’: supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and + (plus) children in care

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Synopsis of article

This article offers information and advice on how foster carers can support LGBTI+ children in care. It will discuss findings from the LGBTIreland Report, give information on the rights of LGBTI+ children in Ireland, give an explanation of common LGBTI+ terminology and list support services for LGBTI+ children in care and foster carers. In this article, the term ‘children’ includes children and young people up to the age of 18. Where research is mentioned which also includes young people over the age of 18, the term ‘young people’ is used.

Introduction

Like all children, LGBTI+ children in foster care require the support of a nurturing family to help them navigate adolescence and grow into their full potential. There are approximately 5,702 children living in foster care in Ireland (Tusla – Child and Family Agency, 2018). Of these, an estimated 5-10 per cent will identify as LGBTI+, this figure coming from the research conclusion that 5-10 per cent of the general population identifies as LGBTI+ (Gonsiorek and Weinrich, 1991). Foster carers can play a significant role in creating a positive experience for a child expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity and coming out. Therefore, it is imperative that carers are supported, informed and feel equipped to support LGBTI+ children in their care.

Currently there is no published research on the experiences of LGBTI+ children in care in Ireland and the services that may be needed to support them. While this is a matter of concern, the LGBTI Ireland Report 2016, which is a national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people in Ireland, gives detailed findings on the mental health and well-being of LGBTI+ people with an emphasis on young people. Furthermore, in 2015 EPIC (Empowering People in Care), and BeLongTo Youth Services, the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) young people in Ireland, developed a

resource called *Coming Out in Care* (2015) which gives information and advice to children in care and their carers and which this article will discuss in detail.

Research shows that both LGBTI+ children and children in care are at risk of discrimination, stigma, bullying and mental health issues (Dixon et al, 2004). Therefore, LGBTI+ children in care may face many additional challenges, as compared with their peers who are not in care, due to their care history. LGBTI+ members of EPIC Youth Councils listed a number of specific issues in relation to coming out in care, including fears that their sexual orientation or gender identity might compromise their foster placement, fear of bullying, and fear of rejection from carers. Consequently, it's vital that foster carers are supported to understand LGBTI+ issues and are given information on providing a safe, supportive, welcoming LGBTI+ friendly home.

Terminology: sexual orientation

Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to and who you want to have relationships with and includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual/straight, asexual and pansexual. Sexual orientation is different from gender and gender identity. Gender identity is discussed separately.

Sexual orientation terminology

Asexual: This is a term used for individuals who either do not experience, or experience a very low level of sexual desire.

Bisexual (Bi): Someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to both males and females.

Gay: Someone who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of the same gender. Gay is usually used to refer to males and lesbian to refer to females. Individuals may choose whatever feels right for them.

Lesbian: A female who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other girls/women.

Heterosexual/straight: A person who is attracted to someone of another gender.

Pansexual: Someone who could be attracted to any person, regardless of his or her gender. This term is often now preferred.

Intersex: Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person

is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of female or male reproductive or sexual anatomy.

LGBTI+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex +, the plus sign can include terms such as 'Q' for Queer, 'Q' for Questioning and 'A' for Allies.

Gender identity

Gender identity is our deeply-felt internal experience of our own gender. It refers to a person's feelings of being male, female, both, a mixture, or neither, which is shown through gender expression. Gender can be expressed through mannerisms, grooming, physical characteristics, social interactions, speech patterns, and so on.

Gender identity terminology

Transgender (Trans): an umbrella term for those whose gender and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were identified as at birth.

Trans is used to describe many kinds of gender identities that fall within the vast experience of human nature. If this is still confusing to you, all you have to do is call someone by the name they've told you is theirs and call them 'she' or 'he' or 'them' depending on what option they use. 'He', 'she' and 'they' are pronouns, and the pronoun that a person chooses for themselves should be respected. If you are unsure what someone's pronouns are, don't worry! Use 'they' and 'them' until you find out. Trans people can be lesbian, gay, bi, straight, and so on. Furthermore, all transgender people should be able to access gender-neutral toilets and changing facilities. This is to ensure that individuals feel safe and supported.

Transitioning: The term 'transitioning' refers to the process through which Trans people achieve the appearance, gender expression, and self-image they feel is right for them. Some people may change their names (officially through deed poll, or socially), pronouns, style of dress, and so on, as a way to express their gender identity. Others may feel that a medical transition (for example, hormone therapy or surgery) is the right route for them.

Medical transitioning: A process which normally begins with assessment through your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), who may refer

your foster child on to the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) at the Tavistock Clinic in London, who then may refer on to the Endocrinology Department at Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin for treatment. You'll find more information about the GIDS referral process, along with contact information, at the end of this article. Surgery isn't possible before the age of 18 years.

Gender expression: How we show our gender through our clothing, hair, behaviour, and so on.

Non-binary: People whose gender identity isn't exclusively male or female, and/or which has variations that are not seen as fitting in with typical male or female bodies. People who are non-binary may use they/them pronouns. You can find more information at belongto.org and shoutout.ie.

Cisgender: Someone who is not transgender or non-binary.

Gender Recognition Act 2015

After many years of campaigning by Dr Lydia Foy and organisations such as TENI (Transgender Equality Network Ireland), the Gender Recognition Act 2015 was passed, which allows transgender people in Ireland to have their gender legally recognised. Ireland is one of a small number of countries worldwide that has legislation based on self-determination. This means that if an individual is over 18 years old there is no requirement for medical experts, medical treatments or diagnosis of a medical disorder in order to have one's gender legally recognised. However, young people aged 16-17 years can also apply to be legally recognised, though the process is more onerous. They are required to obtain parental consent, two medical opinions and a court order. This can be a lengthy and expensive process.

The LGBTIreland Report 2016

The LGBTIreland report was commissioned by GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) and BeLongTo Youth Services and completed in 2016. This study is the largest study of LGBTI+ people in Ireland to date. 1,064 LGBTI+ young people, aged between 14 years and 25 years, participated. This article will now discuss the main findings of the report, with particular focus on LGBTI+ children under 18 years.

LGBTIreland Report findings

Compared to the *My World National Youth Mental Health Study*, (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012), which studied the mental health of young people in the broader population, LGBTI young people in this study had:

- Twice the level of self-harm
- Three times the level of attempted suicide
- Four times the level of severe/extremely severe stress, anxiety, and depression.

Mental health

- 56 per cent of 14-18 year olds had self-harmed
- 70 per cent of 14-18 year olds had seriously thought of ending their own life
- One in three 14-18 year olds had attempted suicide.

School experiences

- Only 20 per cent of LGBTI students felt they belonged completely in school
- Only 44 per cent of LGBTI students said they received positive affirmations of their identity
- 67 per cent witnessed bullying of other LGBTI students in their school
- 50 per cent of LGBTI students personally experienced anti-LGBTI bullying
- One in four missed or skipped school to avoid negative treatment due to being LGBTI
- One in four considered leaving school early and approximately one in 20 quit school.

The report highlights the impact bullying can have on LGBTI young people's mental health, addresses the importance of safe and supportive schools and services, and the need for increased public understanding and awareness of the needs of LGBTI young people.

Ensuring young people know their rights

Every child has rights and LGBTI+ young people in care have the same rights as any young person in Ireland. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is the most complete set of children's rights ever produced and is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world (United Nations, 1989). The UNCRC has

four guiding principles known as 'general principles' and they play a fundamental role in realising all the rights in the Convention for all children. They are:

1. Non-discrimination (article 2).
2. Best interest of the child (article 3).
3. Right to life, survival and development (article 6).
4. Right to be heard (article 12).

Furthermore, in the Republic of Ireland, under the Equal Status Act 2000-2015 (ESA 'The Acts'), it is unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services, education, sports, access to public facilities and accommodation. It's important to note that Ireland has introduced legal requirements and a mandatory policy for addressing homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools. Additionally, Ireland has become the first country in the world to develop a National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy. This was a key commitment for the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the programme for Government (2016) and was launched in June 2018 (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018).

“*Coming out is the process of revealing your sexual orientation and/or gender identity to individuals in your life; often incorrectly thought to be a one-time event, this is a lifelong and sometimes daily process.*”

Supporting LGBTI+ children in care to come out

In 2015, EPIC and BeLongTo developed a resource called *Coming Out in Care* through a consultation process with LGBTI+ young people with care experience. It details how foster carers and professionals can support their LGBTI + young people (EPIC and BeLongTo, 2015). What follows is some guidance from this resource.

If you think a young person in your care is struggling with their sexual orientation or gender identity the best thing you can do is to make sure they know that you accept them for who they are and support them.

“As a foster mam, you just have to relax, stay calm and go at the pace your young person is at.” – Foster carer

If a young person in your care comes out to you they need someone to listen and be positive.

Steps to take

- Create a space where a young person can be honest and feel safe. Be open and support them
- Accept the young person and what they are telling you. It is likely that they have taken some time to talk to you about this and need your understanding
- Listen and don't make assumptions
- Reassure them that your relationship with them won't change
- Make contact with the services that can give you support and accurate information
- Educate yourself about LGBTI+ issues and find appropriate supports for the young person to access (and support them with travel allowance, lifts, etc)
- Assure them of confidentiality - it's their decision who they come out to and when they discuss it with others (in exceptional circumstances it may not be possible to guarantee confidentiality if you have grounds to believe a young person is at risk).

"When I told my foster mum, she said 'I know, I'm proud of you'." – Young person

Ways you can make your home welcoming:

1. Make it clear that jokes based on sexual orientation and gender identity are not tolerated in your home.
2. Do not tolerate homophobic or transphobic bullying.
3. Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships, for example, instead of asking "Do you have a girlfriend?", ask "Do you have a partner?"
4. Celebrate diversity and equality in all forms.
5. Provide access to a variety of books, films, and materials including those that positively represent LGBTI+ young people.
6. Let the young people in your care know that you are willing to listen and talk about any issues they may have.

Conclusion

This article has offered an overview of information and advice on how foster carers can support their LGBTI+ children. It is essential that foster carers are provided with information, training and ongoing support so that they are well equipped to meet the needs of LGBTI+ children in care. As a foster carer, if you feel your child's rights have been infringed or that their voice is not being heard, they can be allocated an independent advocate through EPIC's National Advocacy Service.

Further Terminology

Allies

People who identify as cisgender (see cis below) and straight, and who believe in social and legal equality for LGBTI+ people.

Assigned at birth

Assigned at birth refers to the way in which your gender is recorded on your birth certificate. When a baby is born, they are assigned a gender based on the physical appearance of their genitalia. Typically, babies are either assigned female at birth (AFAB) or assigned male at birth (AMAB).

Cis

Cisgender refers to people who are not Trans, but rather individuals who had the correct gender assigned to them at birth. For example, if someone was assigned male at birth (AMAB) and they identify as a man, then they are a cisgender man, or cis man, also referred to as a 'man'. If someone was assigned female at birth (AFAB) and they identify as a woman, then they are a cisgender woman, or a cis woman, also referred to as a 'woman'.

Cis and Straight

This the term we use to refer to people who are cisgender (see above) and heterosexual, that is to say, not part of the LGBTI+ community.

Coming Out

This is the process of revealing your sexual orientation and/or gender identity to individuals in your life; often incorrectly thought to be a one-time event, this is a lifelong and sometimes daily process.

Discrimination

Discrimination means making a distinction in favour of, or against, a person based on the group, class, or category to which a person belongs.

Gender norms

Gender norms define what society considers as male and female behaviour, and it leads to the formation of gender roles, which are the roles males and females are often expected to take in society.

Heteronormativity

Refers to heterosexual identities being considered the norm, to the exclusion of any other sexual orientation or gender identity. One way that it is demonstrated is by the lack of representation of LGBTI+ people and relationships in the media.

Heterosexual

Someone who is attracted to people of the opposite gender.

Homophobia and Transphobia

Homophobia encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian or gay. Transphobia relates to prejudice directed specifically at those who don't adhere to gender norms and people who are Trans.

Monosexual

Monosexual refers to people who are only attracted to one gender. For example, a straight man is only attracted, for the most part, to women, or a gay man is only attracted, for the most part, to men. It is used essentially to refer to people who are not bisexual or pansexual. Why is the term useful? It's useful when talking about the specific prejudice faced by bi and pan people because they may face discrimination from straight people, but also from gay and lesbian people as well.

Outing

When someone reveals another person's sexual orientation or gender identity to an individual or group, often without the person's consent or approval.

Prejudice

Prejudice is defined as a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

Pride

Pride is an annual celebration of LGBTQ+ communities held around the world. In Ireland most of the large cities and towns have their own Pride festival or else they have floats in the Dublin Pride festival.

Rainbow

The rainbow has represented LGBTI+ people since 1978. The colours reflect diversity within the LGBTI+ community.

Resources

BeLongTo have almost 40 LGBTI+ youth groups around Ireland where children and young people can meet like-minded people, talk about their experiences, and have some fun. All BeLongTo youth groups are facilitated by experienced youth workers.

BeLongTo

Parliament House, 13 Parliament Street, Dublin 2. Phone: +353 (1) 670 6223
www.belongto.org

EPIC is a national organisation that works with and for children and young people who are currently living in care or who have experience of living in care. EPIC also works with young people preparing to leave care and in aftercare, and with adults with care experience.

EPIC – Empowering People in Care

7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7. Phone: +353 (1) 872 7661 www.epiconline.ie

Regarding medical transitioning:

The Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) is commissioned by the National Health Service (NHS) in England and is a specialised service for children and young people, and their families, who experience difficulties in the development of their gender identity. The service was established in 1989.

GIDS, The Tavistock Centre

120 Belsize Lane, London, NW3 5BA. Tel: 0044 20 8938 2030/1

gids@tavi-port.nhs.uk <http://gids.nhs.uk/>

For information about referrals to GIDS please go to: www.gids.nhs.uk/referrals

LGBT Ireland provides access to a network of trained volunteers who provide a non-judgemental, confidential, listening support and information service for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people as well as their family and friends. Its website also provides a gateway to information and support options for LGBT people in Ireland.

LGBT Ireland

7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7. Phone: +353 (1) 685 9280

Email: info@lgbt.ie www.lgbt.ie

LOOK, (formerly Parents' Support), provides support to families and friends of gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) people and runs support groups around the country.

LOOK (Loving Our Out Kids)

www.lovingouroutkids.org

ShoutOut give workshops to students, teachers, youth workers, social workers and parents and guardians to help improve the lives of LGBTQ+ young people

ShoutOut

Outhouse, 105 Capel St., Dublin 1. www.shoutout.ie

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) seeks to improve conditions and advance the rights and equality of Trans people and their families.

Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)

Unit 2, 4 Ellis Quay, Dublin 7, Ireland. Phone: +353 (1) 873 3575

Email: office@teni.ie www.teni.ie

About the author

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