



Building Safety with Families: Recognizing and Affirming SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression)

October 27, 2017

Presented by Jessie Fullenkamp, LMSW, Director of Education and Evaluation, Ruth Ellis Center

This presentation examined why and how to work with families that have a child who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) in the juvenile justice system. The central goal of the session was to provide juvenile justice workers with tools and information that might contribute to them helping to preserve families while building acceptance for LGBTQ youth identify.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths face increased risks and challenges in everyday life, and significantly more danger to their personal well-being than heterosexual youths. LGBTQ youths are more likely to experience homelessness, be fired or not hired based on their SOGIE identity, be in the foster care system, contract sexually transmitted diseases, and experience substance abuse. Acceptance of youths by parents is a key factor decreasing the severity of these risks. For example, LGBTQ young adults that reported high levels of parental rejection during adolescence were more than eight times more likely to attempt suicide. LGBTQ youths, compared with their “straight” counterparts, are less likely to:

- Be adopted into foster care
- Have positive role models that identify as LGBTQ
- Feel safe in their faith/religious communities
- Experience employment and housing stability

Ms. Fullenkamp discussed behaviors that help decrease risk and increase LGBTQ youth stability in the family. They include talking to your child or foster child about their LGBTQ identity and expressing affection for the child when you learn that the child is gay, lesbian, or transgender. While not always a comfortable behavior, support youths’ SOGIE identity and advocate for the youth if they are mistreated because of that identity. *Require*—even if they disagree or are not supportive of a LGBTQ lifestyle—that other family members *respect* your LGBT child. Other helpful behaviors and activities include:

- Take your child to LGBT organizations or events
- Talk with clergy and help your faith community to support LGBT people
- Try to connect your child with a positive LGBT adult role model
- Welcome your child’s LGBT friends and partners into your home

There are also behaviors to avoid, such as:

- Any type of physical harm or punishment
- Verbal harassment, name calling, and labeling
- Excluding LGBT youth from family activities
- Blocking youth access to their LGBT friends and resources



- Blaming the youth (blaming the victim) when the youth is discriminated against because of their SOGIE
- Shaming the youth

The Family Acceptance Project outlined by Ms. Fullenkamp has as its goals and objectives to strengthen and help ethnically and religiously diverse families support their LGBTQ children within the context of their cultures and prevent or decrease risk, promote well-being of the youth, and increase possibilities for children to remain in the home. Specific scenarios, group activities, and response options were demonstrated and discussed during the course of the workshop. Books, a video series, and provider and parent educational materials were also introduced. Further information on the Family Acceptance Project is available through the Ruth Ellis Center, www.ruthelliscenter.org