

# HELPING YOUTH THRIVE

HELPING YOUTH THRIVE THROUGH AN EQUITY LENS



**PLWG**  
PROGRAM LEADERS  
WORKING GROUP



FACT SHEET  
3/12

4-H Program Leaders Working Group  
*Access, Equity and Belonging Committee*

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**LGBTQ + Youth / Community**

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## Why an Equity Lens?

4-H has made a bold commitment to youth across the United States: to reflect the population demographics, vulnerable populations, diverse needs, and social conditions of the country (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). 4-H has affirmed that we will help close the opportunity gap for marginalized youth and communities to fully thrive (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 4-H, 2019; National 4-H Council, 2020). Making good on these promises requires that all those working with youth in 4-H critically analyze current programs and deliver those programs through an equity lens. Administrators, professionals, volunteers, and stakeholders have a responsibility to be aware of and confront the disparities that exist within 4-H programs and in society. Doing so is critical because those who aim to develop youth without acknowledgment of and response to a young person's possible societal inequities are perpetuating injustice (Fields et al., 2018). The 4-H Thriving Model (Arnold, 2018) describes the process of positive youth development in 4-H. We should explore the 4-H Thriving Model, our national theoretical framework, with the same level of critical review to ensure it guides our work with equity and social justice at the fore.

The 4-H Program Leaders Working Group, Access, Equity, and Belonging Committee (AEBC) has joined with the 4-H Thriving Model Taskforce to ensure this nationally adopted model is explored and utilized through an equity lens. The following fact sheet explores the Thriving Model in relation to LGBTQ+ youth.

The diversity of cultures within LGBTQ+ youth and communities requires an Extension professional first to familiarize themselves with the unique culture, social ecosystem, and history of the cultural group they plan to work with in order to ensure a level of success. An equity lens will allow an Extension practitioner to understand the specific conditions they must consider when planning to program with LGBTQ+ communities. Examples of a few such conditions are below.

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## Social Conditions of Youth Population

While we know that LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> youth are a marginalized population who participate in youth development programming, research on LGBTQ+ youth experiences and outcomes of out-of-school programs is limited. Additionally, research attempting to pinpoint an actual number of youth under the age of 18 who identify as LGBTQ+ is also limited. Yet, research indicates that youth are coming out younger than ever before (Russell & Fish, 2016). A report by the Williams Institute estimates about 9.5 percent of youth 13-17 in the U.S., or about 1.9 million youth identify as LGBT (Conron, 2020). However, these numbers were calculated by extracting data from a variety of sources and the author himself alludes to the limited data that exists. A report by the Trevor Project (2021) found that over one in four, or 26%, of LGBTQ+ youth identified as nonbinary and an additional 20% said they weren't sure or are questioning whether they identify as nonbinary. Gallup research identified that as generations get younger, LGBT identities increase (Jones, 2021).

Youth who identify as LGBTQ+ are at risk of experiencing stigma and victimization in their schools and communities based on their gender or sexuality (The Trevor Project, 2021; Rand & Pacey, 2021; Kosciw, et al., 2020; Gonzalez, 2017); these experiences are associated with mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (The Trevor Project, 2021; Kann et al., 2018; Connolly et al., 2016; Lick et al., 2013). Regardless of their geographic locations, LGBTQ+ youth are participating in out-of-school programs. One study confirmed that gay males have participated in 4-H for many years with positive outcomes even though they may not have recognized their sexual orientation until later in life (Howard et al, 2021). Youth professionals must recognize that these youth face mental, emotional, and physical health challenges at a greater rate than peers who identify as straight and cisgender. LGBTQ+ youth who have been victimized are more likely to struggle in

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<sup>1</sup> LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term for individuals of marginalized sexes, gender identities, and sexual orientations.

academic environments (Kahn et al., 2018). At the same time, supportive and inclusive systems are a preventative factor (Palmer et al., 2012) that supports positive outcomes for youth. Specifically, caring adults who affirm youths' LGBTQ+ identities and provide support and assistance in navigating difficult circumstances can make the difference between life and death for LGBTQ+ youth who are more likely to attempt suicide than non-LGBTQ+ youth (The Trevor Project, 2021).

## Competencies

[The 4-H PRKC](#) (4-H Professional, Research, Knowledge, and Competencies), particularly the Access, Equity, and Opportunity domains (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017, pp. 15-19), are relevant competencies for the youth development professional who wants to serve LGBTQ+ youth. Below are the topics listed when applying a LGBTQ+ lens and other strategies and considerations that may not already be included in the 4-H PRKC.

## LGBTQ+ 101 Training

Ensure that staff and volunteers who regularly engage participants receive LGBTQ+ cultural competency training and supervision, including how to meet the needs of community members with identities that intersect multiple disparities groups (Einhaus et al., 2018). This training should include an introduction and review of all related University policies and practices, such as use of the 4-H Program Leaders Working Group's [Practices for Inclusion of Individuals of all Gender and Sexual Orientations](#) (PLWG, 2020), as well as training in inclusive curriculum delivery.

## Language

Understanding terminology and language describing LGBTQ+ populations is crucial to making youth programs inclusive. Youth development professionals need to learn and use appropriate terminology to describe identities and experiences. Appropriate language usage includes understanding and utilizing gender-inclusive language, while eliminating language that is biased and/or discriminatory (i.e., calling youth by their deadname or incorrect pronouns). Adults should have the ability to recognize and address microaggressions and macroaggressions as these both can lead to negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth and families. It is also important to note that terminology is constantly evolving—particularly within youth groups--and can be geographically or generationally specific. To learn more about terminology read [Creating Inclusive Youth Programs for LGBTQ+ Communities](#) (Soule, 2017).

Pronoun usage by all members of an organization normalizes the sharing of pronouns, which can reduce stigma for individuals who use pronouns that differ from what others might anticipate. Pronoun usage reduces assumptions based on how someone looks, sounds, behaves, and more because people express their gender in many different ways. By sharing pronouns 4-H can become a more welcoming place for people of all genders and expressions. [What's the Big Deal with Pronouns](#) provides more information about utilizing pronouns in youth development settings (Rand, 2018).

## Intersectionality

The LGBTQ+ youth community is multifaceted and diverse. Some youth have different needs than others. For example, issues of racism—which may amplify when combined with anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination—affect LGBTQ+ youth of color (Daley et al., 2007; Schmitz et al., 2019). Issues of gender-neutral bathrooms are more consequential for transgender, intersex, and nonbinary youth than cisgender lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth. LGBTQ+ youth are not all the same and the competencies required by 4-H professionals to serve youth may vary, based on the needs of specific youth or youth populations.

# Youth Belonging and Participation in 4-H

Youth development programs are in a unique position to provide equitable spaces and other opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth. It is essential for LGBTQ+ youth to find safe and affirming spaces in which they can present who they are authentically, without fear of retribution, and create supportive relationships (Talbur, 2004). Safe environments are free from bias, such that youth from all backgrounds and all orientations feel comfortable interacting and trying new things (Smith et al., 2012). Only when youth feel safe emotionally, as well as physically, are they able to present themselves in an authentic manner and engage in positive development (Nadal et al., 2011). LGBTQ+ students need safe spaces to foster peer-to-peer relationships, develop coping strategies, and build community (Barry, 2000). With intentional effort, 4-H professionals can provide affirming environments for all youth, including LGBTQ+ youth. However, to do so, administrators, practitioners, volunteers, and youth must implement inclusive and caring practices. Research from two state 4-H programs found that youth and professionals indicated many challenges to overcome such as harassment and bullying, lack of protective policies and intervention, lack of diversity, a conservative religious tone (Rand et al., 2021), and a tendency by professionals to be reactive rather than proactive in their support of LGBTQ+ youth (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Opportunities to make the 4-H program more welcoming for LGBTQ+ members included training, making forms and documents more inclusive, and creating spaces specifically for LGBTQ+ youth (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Rand et al., 2021). ["Making the Best Better" for Youths: Cultivating LGBTQ+ Inclusion in 4-H](#) provides a series of checklists for supporting LGBTQ+ participation in 4-H, focusing on systemic advocacy, guidance and protocols, programming, and professional development and dispositions (Gonzalez et al., 2021).

LGBTQ+ youth desire formalized, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive programming (Elliott-Engel et al., 2020; Lapointe et al., 2018). Establishing a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ youth may involve creating programming specifically targeting or affirming LGBTQ+ youth (Pattisapu, 2019). Youth development professionals must be affirmative, model inclusive behavior, include youth-centered notions of identities and expressions, be trauma-informed, include a wide range of relationships, and adopt a youth-led approach (Lapointe et al. 2018). It is important for adults to draw their understanding of LGBTQ+ youth from multiple sources, including the youth they serve (Uttamchandani et al., 2019). If youth perspectives are not included in program planning and evaluation then important voices are being ignored and useful insights are being overlooked, which limits the meaningfulness of the data collected.

## ***Belonging and Participation in 4-H***

Caring adults in the 4-H program serve an important role in youths' lives. LGBTQ+ caring adults serve as mentors and role models (Einhaus et al., 2018; Myers, 2008), all while building strong relationships and helping to foster youth passion towards mastery (Bowers et al., 2014). This relationship between caring adults and youth is important for youth development outcomes. Additionally, because adult volunteers and professionals establish important youth–adult relationships, youth members may choose to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity or that of a family member to these adults. The 4-H program not only delivers programming to youth but also engages families and adult volunteers. As such we must also provide inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ families and volunteers. Inclusion efforts that acknowledge and address biases related to LGBTQ+ individuals are an essential component of a positive youth development experience. For example, having caring and affirming adults is a preventative factor in LGBTQ+ youth suicide ideation, attempts, and completion (The Trevor Project, 2021). At the same time, caring adults in the 4-H program need to be competent in non-discrimination and best practices to effectively support and affirm LGBTQ+ youth and be able to establish a harassment-free environment.

# Community Relationships and Partners

It is important to consider inclusivity when exploring new partnership opportunities and to evaluate those that already exist. Consider the following:

1. With whom are you partnering? What types of organizations are you partnering with? Do your partnerships reflect the diversity in your community? Who aren't you partnering with? Why?
2. Do your partners have policies or practices that are inclusive to LGBTQ+ people? Do they have policies or practices that are discriminatory to the LGBTQ+ community? Do their policies and practices specifically value, protect, and name LGBTQ+ diversity?
3. Who needs to be a part of the conversation to evaluate current partnerships or explore new ones?
4. How can you help a partner become more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people?
5. Are you willing to end a partnership if an organization is not willing to include LGBTQ+ people, inclusive policies, and practices? What are your university's policies regarding partnerships that discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals?

## National Organizations/Resources

Inclusive youth development programs will have relationships and resources to support LGBTQ+ youth, families, and allies. In addition to the national resources provided here, develop a list of resources that exist in your state and local community whenever possible. Your university's Office of Equity and Diversity can also be a valuable resource.

## Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth, Families, & Allies

- [QTPOC National Resources](#)
  - Maintained by the University of Arizona, this is list of resources focused on issues pertaining to queer and transgender people of color (QTPOC).
- [The Trevor Project](#)
  - A national 24-hour, toll free confidential suicide hotline for LGBTQ youth.
- [Transgender Student Educational Resources](#)
  - Youth-led organization dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender nonconforming students through advocacy and empowerment.
- [Gender Spectrum](#)
  - Working to create gender-sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens.
- [GSA Network](#)
  - A next-generation LGBTQ+ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, transgender, and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities.

## Supporting Educators, Researchers, & Policy Makers

- [GLSEN](#)
  - Works to create school environments free from bullying and harassment for LGBTQ+ students
- [Human Rights Campaign](#)
  - Largest U.S. civil rights organization conducting research & policy work for LGBTQ+ equality.
- [Welcoming Schools](#)
  - Provides training and resources to K-6 educators to create LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying, and support transgender and non-binary students.
- [National Center for Transgender Equality](#)
  - Advocates for inclusive, national policies with an extensive record of success.

# Evaluation

Before including sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) measures in evaluation, youth-serving organizations should ensure there is a legitimate programmatic need to collect information about participants' sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation. For example, collecting evaluation data after a camping experience would constitute a programmatic need in order to evaluate the experiences of individual gender identities who self-report this information. In another example, including gender identity on a post-camp survey would allow for evaluation of program outcomes or experiences by gender identity. SOGI data should not be collected without a legitimate programmatic need. Also, it is important to recognize that not all youth or adults will be willing to disclose their SOGI data even when asked.

If SOGI data is collected, this information should be maintained separately from enrollment records and be available only to the individuals approved to handle confidential data for specified programmatic purposes. It is recommended that 4-H programs complete a human subjects request through their institution's IRB to ensure that SOGI data collection measures, storage, and usage are appropriate and necessary.

If SOGI data is collected, individuals should not complete missing responses for participants. Do not assume you know a person's SOGI for the purposes of collecting demographic data or for the purposes of being a supportive ally. Do not assume that gendered characteristics, interests, or behaviors are an indicator of a youth's or adult's SOGI (Uttamchandani et al., 2019).

In the rare case that there is a legitimate need to collect SOGI data, there are several best practices:

- Allow participants to self-report their own SOGI as much as possible. Terminology is constantly evolving (Soule, 2017), so evaluators should not provide a discrete set of labels when feasible. If a short list is provided, an open-ended response option should also be included (Einhaus et al., 2018).
- Specific to gender identity, children should be allowed to self-report their gender identity. Young children have established an internal sense of gender by preschool, making gender identity a valid measure for children (Fast & Olson, 2018; Stoller, 1992).
- Specific to sexual orientation, do not collect sexual orientation data from children under the age of 12 (Einhaus et al., 2018).
- Only in very limited circumstances (i.e., healthcare and research) is it appropriate to ask, "What gender were you assigned at birth?" When it is appropriate, this question should be paired with a question that allows the participant to report their gender identity as well. In these rare cases, both questions are important because, some people who have transitioned from their birth to their authentic gender do not identify as transgender and have changed all legal identification documents to reflect their authentic gender, and identify as their authentic gender (Einhaus et al., 2018).
- Collect data from your whole target population, not just from individuals who you think may identify as LGBTQ+, as you cannot presume to know who does or does not identify as LGBTQ+.
- Always include a "prefer not to respond" option for all SOGI questions.

A safe and welcoming environment is critical when engaging LGBTQ+ individuals, especially when asking about potentially stigmatizing personal information, such as SOGI. To obtain effective data, participants must have an existing sense of trust with the program. Different approaches to data collection can be used to ensure anonymity for the participants and reduce the risk to participants. The evaluator must maintain trust by informing the participant about confidentiality, ensuring responses are kept confidential, and providing privacy when collecting data (Einhaus et al., 2018). For example, a written survey could be used to take a census of SOGI populations in your program because participants may find the anonymity safe to disclose their SOGI. Whereas, in-person interviews or focus groups with openly LGBTQ+ individuals may increase dialogue and improve qualitative data collection.

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