
Tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.

—Audre Lorde (1984, p. 42)

This special issue of Child Welfare emerged from a series of conversations with child welfare colleagues who participated in the work conducted by CWLA and the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund as they developed a unique partnership entitled, Fostering Transitions: CWLA/Lambda Legal Joint Initiative To Support LGBTQ Youth and Adults Involved with the Child Welfare System. A special issue about this topic never has been published before, and many wondered why so little concern has been expressed about the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) persons affected by child welfare in national, state, and local policies; child welfare agency practices; and professional publications.

For the most part, with few exceptions, the situations that gay and lesbian children, youth, and families endure are representative examples of child welfare in its most challenged state. The very existence of this population is generally unacknowledged publicly by
most child welfare professionals except when a particular case that pertains to sexual orientation is blared across the print news or sensationalized in the mass media. This lack of acknowledgement by traditional child welfare practitioners and policymakers is in stark contrast to the heightened consciousness about the population, as evidenced by the runaway and homeless youth programs across the nation, who seem to have a much higher level of comfort in addressing the needs of LGBTQ children, youth, and families.

In this special issue, we have brought together an array of diverse opinions by practitioners, policymakers, and others concerned about children, youth, and families who struggle with issues of gender and sexual orientation in their deliberations of policy and practice alternatives. This special issue is written from an unapologetic and decidedly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)-affirming perspective to assist practitioners, scholars, and policymakers in shaping these deliberations. Clearly, issues of sexual and gender orientation have been assigned to a low position in public debates about how to improve child welfare practices and programs. The issue is seldom raised as a determining factor in the development of policies for families and youth and children. As highlighted in this issue, however, it is a critical factor in the lives of countless children, youth, and families who are affected by issues of gender and sexual orientation on a daily basis, and some great programs for LGBTQ children, youth, and families are emerging around the country.

Changes in the country’s attitudes toward LGBT persons and civil rights struggles by LGBT persons themselves demand a conscious effort to include issues of gender and sexual orientation in child welfare practice and policy debates. A deferral will serve only to increase social costs to society and perpetuate harm to thousands gay and lesbian children, youth, and families whose lives are affected by the child welfare system.
Introduction

One might ask, “what could be gained by elevating gender and sexual orientation issues as a factor in the policy-development phase?” We would respond by asking, “what could be lost by not incorporating the unique needs of LGBT persons?”

What Child Welfare Needs to Do to Respond to LGBT Children, Youth, and Families

Resolving the child welfare imbroglio for LGBT children, youth, and families—as well as all children, youth, and families—requires changes in both the policies and practices of child welfare agencies (Mallon, 1999). These changes must be based on an intentional and deliberate recognition of the uniqueness of one’s sexual orientation, so that approaches can enhance family functioning and the well-being of children and youth. Confident, but effective initiatives and pilot programs should be launched, particularly those that encourage the development of community-based preventive services, empowerment models, and training for sensitive practice. Openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender child welfare professionals are essential key players in these change efforts, but so are nongay allies. Although the major sources of power and control over the distribution of child welfare services are assumed to be heterosexual, but the resources themselves—the nurturance, the sustenance, and the affection—are in LGBT people.

To effectively serve LGBT children, adolescents, and families, professionals in the child welfare system must first accept that they have clients who are LGBT. They also must acknowledge that LGBT persons are affected by every level of child welfare services, from adoption to out-of-home care, from child protection to family preservation services. Integration of an LGBT-affirming perspective in contemporary child welfare policies and practices can promote the well-being of LGBT children,
youth, and families. Indifference to issues of gender and sexual orientation will result in continued psychological and social assaults. Indefensible policies and practices, as well as personal bias against LGBT persons, must be eliminated by child welfare systemic policy reform or by legislation in the form of nondiscriminatory protection by the enforcement of laws. The profession also must ask itself, how has it been possible for our colleagues in the runaway and homeless youth programs to acknowledge this population and respond to its needs, and why have professionals in the traditional child welfare field been so reluctant to do so.

The welfare of LGBT children, youth, and families cannot be adequately enhanced as long as the larger society, heterocentrically oriented and heterosexually controlled, ignores their existence. The misguidedness of the political system toward LGBT persons—their levels of participation, power, and struggle for human rights—is an excellent measure of the bias against all oppressed persons. Some child welfare professionals challenge the notion of creating separate programs for LGBT youth, but then refuse to put funds behind efforts to educate staff on how to respond to their needs. As Pharr (1988) aptly points out, no institutions, other than those created by lesbians and gays, affirm gay and lesbian identity and offer protection. The affirmation and protection usually automatically afforded to most children, youth, and families are rights not guaranteed by child welfare agencies to most gay and lesbian children, youth, and families. Of course, some institutions provide more affirming environmental “fits” than others for gay and lesbian persons. Whether one, however, looks at child welfare, education, healthcare, religion, culture, law enforcement, the media, or any other dominant system of larger Western society, we see heterocentrism at work. This force makes LGBT persons and their families especially vulnerable to life challenges.
The dominant child welfare institutions in the United States continue to exclude openly LGBT persons, even though, despite this exclusion, LGBT persons exist within all child welfare organizations. This overt heterocentric discrimination has been replaced by a covert but nonetheless effective heterocentrism in the lack of distribution of services to gay and lesbian children, youth, and families. In large urban areas, like Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, where gay and lesbian people are protected against discrimination by local legislation, the apparent discrimination has officially decreased, but exists nonetheless as services which reach LGBT children, youth, and families continue to be administered in a toxic form.

The behavioral heterocentrism reflected in inequities inflicted on LGBT persons is accompanied by several manifestations of ideational heterocentrism, which, in fact, serves to perpetuate and protect the behavioral manifestations. As we have seen, efforts for change specifically for LGBT children, youth, and families almost always have been met with a rationale that absolves those upholding the discrimination. These rationales all rest on some pervasive negative conceptions of LGBT persons. Each facet of these rationales reflects the refutation of LGBT people and their experience. This same denial of LGBT persons pervades the language of child welfare practice and policy development.

Most efforts for change, which rise and fall in the level of interest allocated by child welfare authorities according to political pressures or threats of class action lawsuits, failed because they have not been sufficiently radical. More specifically, they were not conceived or pursued from a LGBT-affirming perspective. They did not grow out of an LGBT experience. In addition, they were not based on recognition that some of the dysfunctions were inherent in the existing system of child welfare services.
The Need for Alternatives and Strategies

The lack of accurate and adequate information about children, youth, and families who identify as LGBT seriously impairs the capacity of both the family system and the child welfare system to provide competent service delivery to this underserved and marginalized population. Information alone is insufficient to achieve competence with respect to issues of gender and sexual orientation in the child welfare system. For proficiency to be achieved, policy and practice considerations must permeate all administrative levels and all types of child welfare programs. Clearly, a need exists to develop alternatives to working with all groups hindered by oppression in its various forms, but child welfare practitioners also must be cognizant of these conditions and incorporate strategies for helping clients overcome discrimination if long-term success is to be achieved.

Like cultural competence, competent practice with LGBT people at the service delivery level of the child welfare system can be achieved only with the recognition of the significance of gender and sexual orientation in people’s lives.

Administrators of child welfare systems in both the public and private sectors must make every effort to support the family, to enhance its functioning, and to avoid separation and placement. When separation is necessary, the importance of family and permanence must continue to be recognized through vigorous efforts to maintain family ties and to work, whenever possible, toward reuniting the family. These guidelines apply regardless of personal, religious, sexual orientation, or cultural biases to all children, youth, and families, including those who are LGBT.

As a system, which is by its own definition designed to provide protective and preventive services for the safety and well-being of a child or youth when the family system fails, child welfare practitioners must ask why this is not being done for LGBT
children, youth and families. The child welfare system already has the structures it needs to encourage competent practice with LGBTQ persons. Our hope is that this collection of articles also will cause some practitioners and policymakers to reflect on what other changes still need to be made.

Conclusions

To engage in serious discussion about issues of gender and sexual orientation in child welfare in the United States must begin not with the problems of LGBT persons but with the imperfection of the American society, rooted in historic inequalities and long-standing cultural stereotypes. As long as LGBT children, youth, and families are viewed as a “them,” the burden falls on LGBT persons to do all the work necessary for sound gender and sexual orientation relations. Traditionally, in American society, the members of oppressed, marginalized groups are expected to stretch out and bridge the chasm between the actualities of their lives and the consciousness of those whom oppress them. LGBT persons are frequently expected to educate the heterosexual world about their lives. This expectation permits those who subjugate LGBT children, youth, and families to maintain their positions of power and evade responsibility for their own actions. The implications of this approach is that only a certain American can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.” The emergence of a strong and affirming sense of pride among LGBT children, youth, and families is a revolt against having to fit in.

There are no quick fixes to the problems within the child welfare system. No single training program, policy, or practice intervention will eliminate the damage imposed on LGBT children, youth, and families. Although we must acknowledge the limits of these strategies and note the obstacles, the development of practice competence and policy development in this area holds promise for preserving and supporting families,
as well as establishing appropriate LGBT-affirming child welfare services for all those whose lives are affected by the child welfare system. Effecting systematic change, just like coming out of the closet, has never been easy. Addressing the needs of LGBT children, youth, and families requires that child welfare professionals obtain copies of the keys that will assist them in opening those doors that have been ostensibly and hermetically sealed for too long.

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References


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