

Evidence Brief

Delivering Group Programming for LGBTQ+ Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "LGBTQ," "youth," "support," "groups," and "best practices."

Summary of Evidence

A. Three Best Practices

1. Understand youth in terms of their strengths and assets.

Organizations can better serve LGBTQ+ youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets, including resilience, resourcefulness, and agency. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Organizations can engage with youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the deficit is located in society and social structures, not in youth themselves (Baldrige, 2014).

2. Create and foster a positive, inclusive, and affirmative space.

Staff and facilitators play an important role in fostering a safe environment for LGBTQ+ youth. According to The 519 (based in Toronto), "affirming and positive environments are created verbally, emotionally, and physically; they are made possible through welcoming, kind actions toward trans people, as well as through inclusive physical spaces" (Hixson-Vulpe, 2015, p. 25). Avoid essentializing or assuming how a person identifies; youth are not only coming from a variety of social locations, cultural backgrounds, and religious backgrounds, but also have various gender identities and sexual orientations (Jonah, 2016).

Organizations should undertake training, education, and awareness-raising efforts to introduce cisgender staff, volunteers, and program participants to the complexities of gender identity, gender expression, and the negative consequences of assumptions (Jonah, 2016). Training should "[underscore] the fluidity of gender expression and that these changes should be celebrated, not investigated" (Theriault & Witt, 2014, p. 92). LGBTQ+ youth experience positive outcomes when they feel that they can be their authentic selves (Gamarel et al., 2014).

Consider using the affirmation cards developed by trans and queer youth as part of Planned Parenthood Toronto's Queering SexEd project (2016). Each card features a statement to help youth feel seen, valued, and supported; in a group setting, the deck can foster dialogue around bodies, gender, identity, self-love, and resilience.

Given that LGBTQ+ youth may have concerns about privacy and confidentiality, especially when compared to their peers (Williams & Chapman, 2011), it is important to consider how groups will navigate these issues before engaging young people. Keep in mind that many LGBTQ+ youth report different levels of 'outness' across social networks (McConnell et al., 2017), and that fears of being outed can act as a barrier to participation in LGBTQ+ programming (Paceley et al., 2016). In some instances, it may be helpful to hold meetings outside of LGBTQ+ programming spaces in order to ensure the privacy of participants (Paceley et al., 2016).

3. Recognize LGBTQ+ youth's multiple and intersecting identities.

Organizations should adopt an intersectional lens and recognize that the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth are shaped by their sexual orientation and gender identity as well as other identity markers, such as race/ethnicity, class, ability, housing status, newcomer status, and religion (Daley et al., 2017). Groups should strive to make space for – and affirm – *all* aspects of young people's identities (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018).

Evidence suggests that racialized LGBTQ+ youth experience interlocking structures of disadvantage, which are further compounded by a shortage of appropriate and culturally-sensitive services (Brockenbrough, 2016; YouthREX, 2017). Racial and ethnic minority youth face discrimination in service settings (Munro et al., 2013) and LGBTQ+ communities (Ghabrial, 2016). Moreover, they “may feel conflicted about acknowledging all parts of themselves and struggle in their efforts to combine their racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual, and gender identities” (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, 2012; see also Asian Community AIDS Services, 2016; Daniel & Cukier, 2015; FrancoQueer, 2015; Munro et al., 2013).

Organizations serving racialized LGBTQ+ youth should consider working with community members to develop culturally-responsive programming. For example, groups can help racialized LGBTQ+ youth to “reconnect with and foster their ... cultural traditions while also accepting and nurturing their LGBTQ+ identities” (Daniel & Cukier, 2015, p. 51).

B. Four Effective Strategies to Consider

1. Support multiple levels of engagement.

Some evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ youth benefit when programs support multiple levels of engagement – “from hanging out to active participation in adult-supervised activities to designing activities themselves” (Theriault & Witt, 2014, p. 93; see also Wilkerson et al., 2017). Programs that offer both structured and unstructured activities may be more responsive to youth with different needs. For example, Hatch Youth (based in Houston) supplements a youth-led support group with unstructured social time and an educational (‘consciousness-raising,’ see below) component. Researchers theorize that the program’s outcomes – increased social support and improved mental health – may be attributed to its broad approach (Wilkerson et al., 2017).

2. Raise critical consciousness.

Research suggests that programs that raise critical consciousness and promote community engagement may empower LGBTQ+ youth, and, in so doing, improve other aspects of wellbeing (Wagaman, 2016). For trans youth, skills in self-advocacy and an awareness of adultism have been linked to resilience (Singh, 2013). Facilitators can help youth develop critical consciousness by encouraging them to reflect on how their individual and shared life experiences are connected to broader political and social contexts.

3. Foster peer and community support.

Researchers agree that peers are an important source of social support for LGBTQ+ youth. Friend support is associated with improved mental health outcomes, including higher self-esteem and lower levels of depression (Johns et al., 2018; Snapp et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019). Evidence also suggests that a supportive peer group can protect against mental health challenges for LGBTQ+ youth who lack support from their family of origin (Parra et al., 2018). Youth-led support groups, such as Gay Straight Alliances, are associated with lower levels of school-based victimization (Marx, 2016). Programs can foster a sense of community by creating opportunities for peer advocacy and facilitation.

LGBTQ+ youth also value, and benefit from, connections to the broader LGBTQ+ community – for example, participating in Pride events and having adult mentors (Bird et al., 2012). Some researchers suggest that the internet and online media can act as a source of resilience and belonging (Craig et al., 2015; Singh 2013). Consider incorporating digital tools and platforms to increase access to information and resources, and to promote broader community engagement (YouthREX, 2017).

4. Make space for discussions about sexual and mental health.

School settings and curricula often fail to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth, putting them at a higher risk of poor mental and physical health outcomes (Sadowski, 2017; YouthREX, 2018). Organizations should consider incorporating presentations or workshops on topics relevant to the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. Examples from effective interventions include substance use, sexuality, HIV/STIs, healthy relationships, general health/wellness, LGBTQ+ current issues, and history of LGBTQ+ culture and oppression (Wilkerson et al., 2017). Evidence suggests that even a brief coping skills group intervention may be effective at improving mental health outcomes and coping among LGBTQ+ youth (Craig & Austin, 2016).

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