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Maru Gonzalez
North Carolina State University, mgonza22@ncsu.edu

Michael Kokozos
University of Pennsylvania, mkokozos@upenn.edu

Sudha Sankar
North Carolina State University, sudha.sankar@ncsu.edu

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Strategies for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity among Elementary School Aged Youths in Extension

MARU GONZALEZ[1], MICHAEL KOKOZOS[2], AND SUDHA SANKAR[1]

AUTHORS: [1]North Carolina State University. [2]University of Pennsylvania.

Abstract. While there is a growing body of scholarship related to LGBTQ+ inclusive practices among adolescents in 4-H, there is currently no research focused specifically on elementary school aged youths. This paper identifies research-based strategies to foster LGBTQ+ inclusivity among elementary school aged youths in 4-H and provides recommendations for implementation at the individual and institutional level. These strategies include ongoing professional development, supportive adult relationships, inclusive curriculum and programming, and LGBTQ+ inclusive guidance and protocols. The strategies and recommendations for implementation underscore the need for a multi-faceted approach to create more welcoming spaces that benefit all youths.

INTRODUCTION

Children and youths who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or who hold an identity that does not conform to the dominant social norms related to sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQ+) face hostility, marginalization, and increased threats to safety on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Fish, et al., 2019; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Such experiences have been connected to negative mental health outcomes among LGBTQ+ youths and children, including an increased risk of depression, absenteeism, stress, suicide, and anxiety (Kosciw, et al., 2020).

Increasingly, elementary school aged children are exploring gender or identifying as gender expansive or transgender (Scharron et al., 2014), with one in eight reporting that they do not conform to traditional gender roles (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Evolving self-awareness and gender identity development are key developmental tasks of childhood. As early as two to three years of age, children begin to develop the concept of gender by expressing curiosity about their own bodies, observing and imitating the behaviors of those around them, learning to apply gender labels, and engaging in gendered play (Ruble et al., 2006). By elementary school (i.e., middle childhood), children recognize gender norms, are aware of the concept of gender as it relates to them and to social organizations, and develop personal narratives about gender (Rogers, 2020). As children acquire this awareness, youth-serving professionals and organizations play a key role in cultivating environments where youths are fully embraced as their authentic selves (Search Institute, 2018). Indeed, supportive adults and affirming environments contribute to positive emotional, academic, and social outcomes for all youths (Kosciw et al., 2020; Russell & Fish, 2016), including and especially those more likely to experience marginalization.

As the largest youth-serving organization in the United States and as a leader in positive youth development (Arnold & Gagnon, 2020), 4-H is uniquely positioned to provide welcoming environments where LGBTQ+ and all youths thrive. Unfortunately, there are significant disparities in 4-H professionals' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively support LGBTQ+ youths (Gonzalez et al., 2021). Current research, including LGBTQ+ related Extension resources and fact sheets, focuses almost exclusively on the experiences and needs of middle and high school aged youths (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020). The lack of scholarship focused on fostering LGBTQ+ inclusion in elementary school aged environments impedes practitioners' capacity to fully nurture youth thriving (Arnold, 2018).

The purpose of this paper is to expand the recommendations of previous Extension scholars (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020) beyond middle and high school aged youths by summarizing emerging promising practices for fostering LGBTQ+ inclusive environments among elementary school aged youths within 4-H.

STRATEGIES FOR CULTIVATING WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE SPACES AMONG ELEMENTARY AGED YOUTHS

Informed by a vast body of scholarship, we identified four strategies for cultivating LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces within 4-H that benefit all elementary school aged youths: (1) ongoing professional development for 4-H professionals; (2) supportive adult relationships; (3) inclusive curriculum and programming; and (4) LGBTQ+ inclusive guidance and protocols. In the Inclusivity Inventory (see supplemental material), we categorize strategies into a checklist for individuals, supervisors, and organizations intended to guide self-reflection and decision-making at the individual and institutional levels. After going through each strategy in the inventory, professionals are encouraged to take stock of strengths and areas of growth and identify next steps for improving inclusive practices. Regularly returning to this tool allows individuals and organizations to hold themselves accountable to the progress they are making in cultivating an inclusive and supportive environment.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is key to fostering an inclusive climate and increasing practitioners' capacity to effectively meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youths and the children of LGBTQ+ parents (McQuillan et al., 2023). A recent study (Gonzalez et al., 2021) found that 4-H staff who received professional development had greater knowledge and skills relative to effectively supporting LGBTQ+ youths than those who received no training. Because the majority of LGBTQ+ related training focuses on older youths (Kosciw et al., 2020), there is a need to develop professional development opportunities and resources that highlight the needs and experiences of a younger demographic. As demonstrated in the Inclusivity Inventory, 4-H professionals who work with elementary school aged youths should reflect on and address personal biases related to LGBTQ+ people and receive ongoing training on topics including transgender and gender expansive youth, sexuality, and gender identity development, LGBTQ+ parented families, effective intervention of anti-LGBTQ+ bullying and harassment, and LGBTQ+ inclusive programming.

SUPPORTIVE ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Supportive adult relationships play a crucial role in creating inclusive and safe environments for LGBTQ+ youths. Research has shown that supportive adults can contribute to better mental health outcomes and overall well-being among LGBTQ+ youths (Leung et al., 2022; Parris et al., 2021). For example, creating spaces where youths feel free to express identities through experiential activities, such as storytelling and art projects, allow them to discover and celebrate their unique voices while fostering a sense of self-confidence (Gonzalez et al., 2024). Promptly intervening when witnessing anti-LGBTQ+ remarks by youths establishes an atmosphere of respect, while vibrant displays and signage affirm visual support for diverse identities. Providing guidance and mentorship can help LGBTQ+ youths navigate the challenges they may face due to their real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This support extends through offering a listening ear, and tailored resources can counter the harmful effects of marginalization. Creating opportunities for LGBTQ+ youths to connect with understanding and empathetic adults can further bolster well-being and reinforce their sense of belonging within educational and community contexts (The Trevor Project, 2023).

INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMMING

Exposure to and celebration of differences from an early age has been shown to reduce prejudicial attitudes (Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017), which benefits all youths. Further, representation of LGBTQ+ people in curricula and programming and access to LGBTQ+ related resources has been linked to increased feelings of safety and a decrease in bullying, harassment, and absenteeism (Kosciw et al., 2020; Snapp et al., 2015). Among elementary school aged youths, LGBTQ+ inclusive programs should integrate LGBTQ+ people and experiences into lessons related to name-calling, respect, and bullying (Welcoming Schools, 2023). In addition, practitioners should avoid dividing youths by gender, which may exclude elementary school aged children who do not conform to traditional gender roles (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2012). Inclusive curriculum and programming also involves the representation

of various family constellations—including LGBTQ+ families—in programming and curricular materials, books, events, and resources. Finally, inclusive curriculum and programming teaches children and youths to recognize bias, speak out against anti-LGBTQ+ and all bullying and harassment, and contribute to welcoming and supportive environments.

LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVE GUIDANCE AND PROTOCOLS

Addressing LGBTQ+ issues in early education often presents challenges due to the absence of clear guidelines and protocols. Practitioners may encounter situations where a lack of training, parental resistance, or institutional barriers hinder open discussions about LGBTQ+ topics that restrict their capacity to offer comprehensive support (Leung et al., 2022; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023). However, Gonzalez et al. (2020) offer practical guidance that can be tailored to an elementary school aged context including adhering to comprehensive nondiscrimination, anti-bullying, and anti-harassment policies, and the use of affirming language that encompasses diverse identities and family structures. Additionally, practitioners and organizations must prioritize youths' privacy and safety by seeking consent before sharing personal information. Being sensitive to facility needs, such as restrooms, can further contribute to feelings of safety (Thoreson, 2016). Finally, practitioners and organizations should actively seek opportunities to enhance understanding of LGBTQ+ issues through ongoing professional development.

CONCLUSION

Fostering LGBTQ+ inclusive environments among elementary school aged youths is key to creating more supportive educational and community spaces. The challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youths underscore the urgency of addressing their unique needs and experiences through proactive strategies implemented at the individual and institutional level. By prioritizing ongoing professional development, establishing supportive adult relationships, developing inclusive curriculum and programming, and implementing LGBTQ+ inclusive guidance and protocols, practitioners and organizations can help shape environments that celebrate diversity, promote understanding, and empower all youths to thrive.

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