

LGBTQ YOUTH AND SAFE SANCTUARIES

Being inclusive yet protecting all children and youth is difficult to navigate. It is a process that is constantly changing and evolving. Currently, there are a few considerations that I have found useful in making decisions around LGBTQ youth:

- Make no assumptions about a young person's sexual orientation or identity.
- Educate yourself and train your staff on proper use of terminology.
- Be intentional about creating a safe environment and culture by awareness and training around homophobic language and bullying.
- Create a policy or behavior covenant that all are aware of and commit to uphold.

Restrooms:

Everyday actions like using the bathroom are complicated and often dangerous for transgender and gender non-conforming people, because our world often only offers two options "male" and "female." Consider whether all of your facility's restrooms must be gender specific or whether one could be made available to everyone. This need not be complicated; covering the "men" or "women" sign with "all-gender restroom" is sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also. I also use private restrooms as an option for changing of clothes.

Housing:

Ensuring comfortable housing for LGBTQ youth is often a challenge for overnight camps that have traditional "all male" and "all female" bunks or cabins. There is rarely a single solution that meets the needs of every situation. However, it is crucial that open and frank discussions take place for all participants involved to feel comfortable. Here are a few suggestions based upon different situations you might encounter

There is not a "one-size-fits-all" housing policy for transgender or gender non-conforming youth. It is vitally important to openly communicate with the youth about their needs and desires in order to create the best solution. Some transgender youth may feel more comfortable housing with the gender that correlates with their full time presentation and identity, others with their biological sex. Some may want to room with a few select friends and some, if given the option, may prefer their own room. Also, some flexibility and accommodation choices can be made easier if hotel type rooms are available and the youth can choose their roommate. Again, it is important to work with the youth to create a reasonable accommodation that best suits everyone.

There is absolutely no reason why a LGBTQ youth should be not allowed to bunk with straight peers. The primary concern in this situation is the possibility for bullying and harassment. Counselors/Chaperones should be trained to identify and deal with bullying and harassment, and should seek support from Youth Directors/Administration if it persists.