



**NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER  
FOR PERMANENCY AND  
FAMILY CONNECTIONS**  
at the Hunter College  
Silberman School of Social Work



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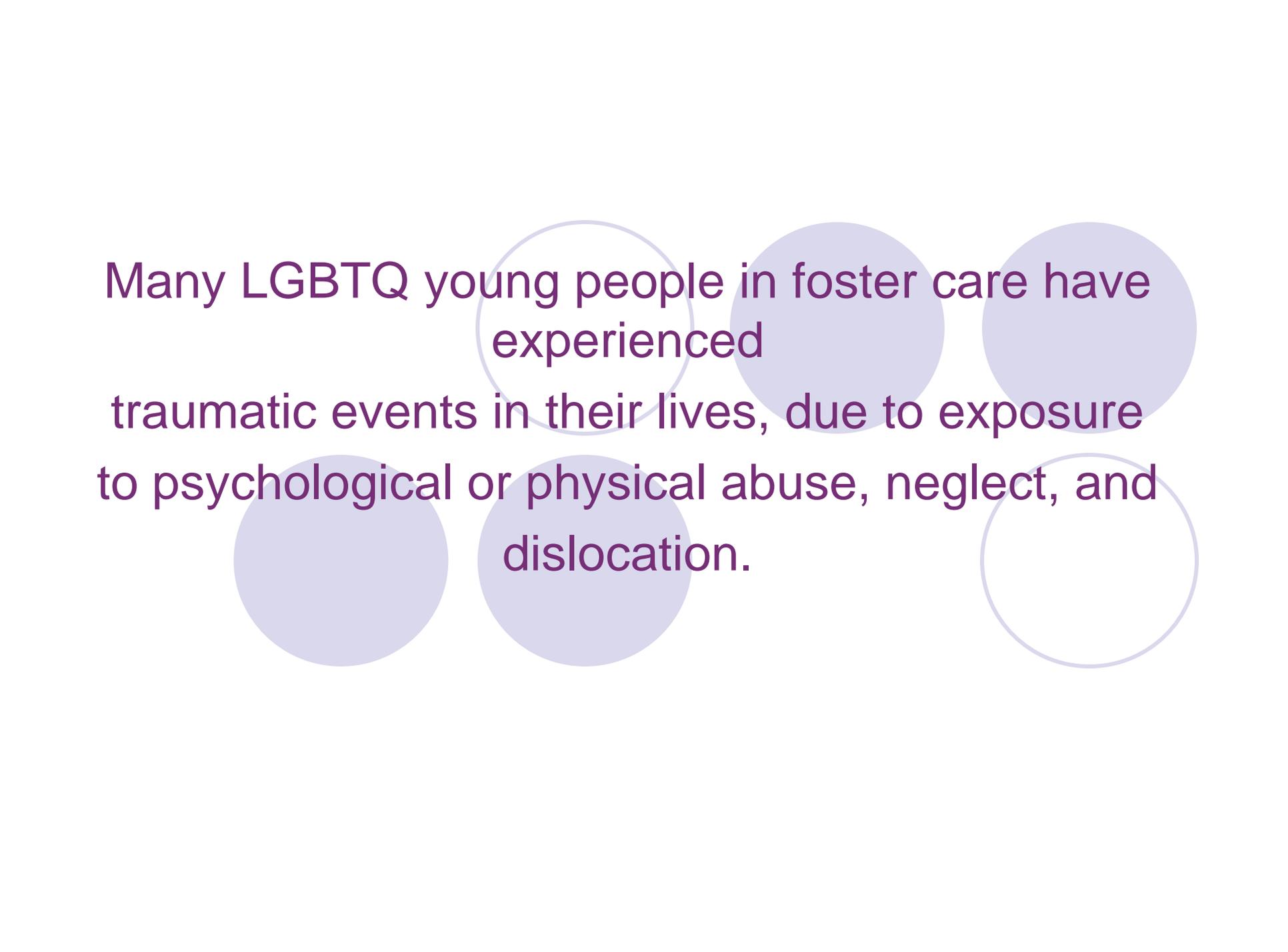
# Trauma- Informed Practice with LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care



MANY HOMELESS YOUTH ARE  
**REJECTED**  
BY THEIR FAMILIES BECAUSE OF  
THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

**Bellefaire JCB**  
MAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT YOUTH HOMELESSNESS  
A Youth Shelter, 2000 E. 17th Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115  
www.bellefairejcb.org or call 216.379.9200

When I told my parents I was gay, my father just stared at me and my mother just cried. It was really painful. When I realized that my own family couldn't accept me, my own flesh and blood, I thought, why should I expect the rest of society to cut me any slack. I felt hopeless, disillusioned and worthless. My own family . . . how could they do that to me, be so cold, so uncaring, it was as if they were saying they didn't care if I lived or died. I don't think I'll ever get over that. . .



Many LGBTQ young people in foster care have experienced traumatic events in their lives, due to exposure to psychological or physical abuse, neglect, and dislocation.

It is important for people working in youth-serving systems to understand LGBTQ young people's responses to trauma in order to promote healing and emotional security. Although not everyone who interacts with young people in foster care needs to be a trauma specialist, they do need to engage in trauma-informed practice.



This framework requires advocates, administrators, and staff to be aware of trauma and its effects, to offer appropriate trauma screenings and assessments, and provide trauma-specific treatments.

# What is Trauma?

Trauma occurs within a broad context of development, culture, and family that must be taken into consideration.

Poverty, race, gender, and sexual orientation can further complicate trauma-related experiences.

# What is Trauma?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-V defines a “traumatic event” as one in which “the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the integrity of self or others.”

A critical component of trauma is that “the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.”

# What is Trauma?

One day my father heard me talking on the telephone to a guy who I had met. When I got off the phone he just went crazy on me, he started slapping me and saying that he didn't raise me to be no faggot. He told me to get the hell out of his house and literally threw me out the front door. I was devastated. I didn't know where to go, I had no place to go. I walked the streets for a long time and then I called and a friend who let me stayed at his house. My friend told me about a shelter for young people and I went there. They helped me to get into a group home and that's where I am now. I've tried to call my parents, I would really like to talk to them, but they won't take my calls.

# What is Trauma?

Three common elements characterize all forms of trauma:

1. the event was unexpected,
2. the individual was unprepared, and
3. there was nothing that the person could do to prevent the event from happening.

# Three Levels of Trauma

## Acute Trauma

refers to a single traumatic event that is limited in time, such as an auto accident, a gang shooting, a parent's suicide, or a natural disaster.

# Three Levels of Trauma

## Chronic Trauma

refers to repeated assaults on the LGBTQ youth's mind and body, such as chronic sexual or physical abuse or exposure to ongoing domestic violence.

# Three Levels of Trauma

## Complex Trauma

is a term used by some trauma experts to describe both exposure to chronic trauma, often inflicted by parents or others who are supposed to care for and protect the young person, and the long-term impact of such exposure on the LGBTQ youth

# Traumatic Events

I couldn't live at home with my family once they found out that I was gay so I was sent to live in a group home. That was worse than living at home. I didn't fit in at home and then I didn't fit in at the group home either. I was living in my fourth group home in like six months and it was horrible. The teasing, the tormenting, the harassment really got to me and one day I just decided that I couldn't take it any more and I left. I had no place to stay, but I didn't even care. I knew that I just couldn't stay one more minute in that group home. I lived with friends, I stayed on people's sofas, I prostituted - I'm not proud of that, but I did what I had to do - to get money to rent a place. I even lived in an abandoned trailer truck with ten other people, slept in railroad tunnels, and anywhere that was warm. As bad as things got on the streets - it was better than the group homes that I had lived in - at least people cared for me on the streets.

# Traumatic Events

Traumatic events overwhelm a LGBTQ young person's capacity to cope and often result in intense emotional and physical reactions, referred to as Child/Adolescent Traumatic Stress.

# Physical Reactions to Trauma

Physical reactions may include:

- Rapid heart rate;
- Trembling;
- Dizziness;
- Loss of bladder or bowel control

# Emotional Reactions to Trauma

Emotional reactions may include:

- Terror;
- Intense fear;
- Helplessness; and
- Disorganized or agitated behavior.

I was sent to the first place when I was eight. I was raped there by this counselor. He told me that if I told anybody that they would just keep me there or put me in another group home. I was there for five months and then I ran away, I was tired of being raped, and I was repeatedly raped. Then I went to a foster home and it was real strict, I left there and went to another group home and there somebody tried to set me on fire. I was sleeping and they put lighter fluid on my bed and threw a match on me, I got burned on the leg [he points to an eight inch burn mark] The staff didn't do nothing, they knew about it, they just moved my bed. I didn't feel safe there, you kinda had to sleep with one eye open. I finally left. I was tired of that shit

# What is Trauma Informed Care ?

## The Paradigm Change

Basic premise for organizing services is transformed... from:

“What is wrong with you?”

to:

“What has happened to you?”

# LGBTQ Adolescents Internal Reactions to Trauma

- Emotional numbing – alcohol, substances
- Avoidance of stimuli – family fixing
- Flashbacks and nightmares - abuse, trapped
- Confusion – Identity and Otherwise
- Depression/Anxiety
- Withdrawal and isolation – Am I the only one?

# LGBTQ Adolescents Internal Reactions to Trauma

- Somatic complaints – stomach ache
- Sleep disturbances – up all night
- Academic issues – didn't go to school
- Suicidal thoughts – more than 50%
- Revenge fantasies – violence, hyper vigilance
- Guilt – If I was just straight

# LGBTQ Adolescents External Reactions to Trauma

- Interpersonal conflicts --“fights”
- Aggressive responses – strike first
- School refusal or avoidance - truancy
- Substance abuse – weed, alcohol
- Antisocial behavior -- prostitution

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed services involve the integration of:

- understanding,
- commitment, and
- practices

Organized around the goal of successfully addressing the trauma-based needs of LGBTQ young people in foster care.

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed child welfare services have the following essential elements:

*An understanding of trauma that includes an appreciation of its prevalence among LGBTQ young people in foster care and its common consequences.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

People in that place understood me, they knew what I had been through, because they had been through the same or worse than me. I didn't have to explain myself over and over again to social workers or to justify why I knew at 16 that I was a lesbian. In some places I had been, even if you knew, that you knew, that you knew, that you knew you were a lesbian, someone still tried to challenge that reality. In this place - that never happened and I could relax for the first time, and focus on school, on getting a job, on having some healthy relationships with people who really cared about me. They “got” me and I thrived there.

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed child welfare services have the following essential elements:

*Individualizing the LGBTQ young person.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

*I wasn't just a kid that someone got paid to take care of. Like in the other ten foster homes I was in. I was someone that Mary loved and cared for, she made me part of her family. Even though there were 8 of us living in her house – she cared for each one of us individually – unconditionally.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed child welfare services have the following essential elements:

*Maximizing the LGBTQ young person’s sense of trust and safety.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

At Green Chimneys they told me it was OK to be gay. I didn't believe them at first, but after being there a few days I felt safe, I didn't always have to watch my back - they other kids there were just like me and the staff had rules and they enforced them, but they really cared for the kids that lived there. I learned to trust again at Green Chimneys and I build some great friendships there.

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed child welfare services  
have the following essential elements:

*Assisting the LGBTQ young person in  
reducing overwhelming emotion.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Hiding was so exhausting. I was literally making myself sick. I wasn't eating, I didn't talk to my family, I cut school, I got high. I was a mess when I was first coming to terms with who I was. I was very depressed and I often wondered if it was even worth living, but one day I met this guy at school. He was open about who he was, he didn't care. I of course was interested in getting to know him, because he was like I thought I was, but I was scared too. One day we talked, and then we got to be friends. He told me I wasn't crazy, I wasn't sick, I wasn't evil - he said I was fine just the way I was. He literally saved my life

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

Trauma-informed child welfare services  
have the following essential elements:

*Strength based services for LGBTQ youth.*

# What Makes Child Welfare Services for LGBTQ Young People in Foster Care “Trauma-Informed”?

*The first time I ever met kids like me, and ever went to a place where they told me I was OK was when I walked into HMI. Meeting other kids like me was fantastic I was not alone! The staff there were great, some of them were gay, some were not, I just felt at home for the first time.*

# Recommendations for Competent Practice with LGBTQ Youth

1. Realize, if you work with youth, you work with LGBTQ youth, they may not be out to you, but they are there!
2. Create environments which are LGBTQ affirming and safe for all youth.
3. Realize that some LGBTQ youth are open and out; some are not open or out; and some are not sure yet if it is safe to be open and out.
4. Don't be afraid to say the words, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning – it is powerful when you do.

# Recommendations for Competent Practice with LGBTQ Youth

5. Do not tolerate or excuse anti-LGBTQ practices, policies, or staff in your programs;
6. Clinically, not all LGBTQ youth need to process their sexual orientation or gender expression, they may be clear about it even if you are not.
7. Train yourself and your staff about trauma informed and competent practice with LGBTQ youth: be aware of “your stuff” about LGBTQ people.
8. Research or create LGBTQ youth resources and supports in your community.



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*A Service of the  
Children's Bureau*

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