

POINT SOURCE YOUTH ON BEHALF OF OCFS PRESENTS:

SOGIE DISCUSSIONS FOR YOUTH

Executive Summary

When working with youth, conversations about sexual orientation and gender identity expression (SOGIE) can come up regularly. This training featured experts in the field on how to navigate these conversations with young adults and youth under 18 and explored best practices, resources, and concrete steps for affirming conversations around SOGIE for all young people.

Speakers

Pixie Popplewell, MSW, Director,
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Office of Children
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The purpose of this resource is to provide information & guidance from experts in their field that is as updated and accurate as possible. It is not intended to give medical advice for individuals or organizations.

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Five Best Practices

1 Be aware of your language use. Always use person-first language, and never assume how a person would like to be represented or addressed. Make pronoun usage and education part of your organizational culture —don't use someone's sexual identity or gender orientation as a pronoun. Only use the pronouns and names a young person has shared with you.

2 Let young people take the lead. Young people are the experts of their own lives. Provide young people with the space and affirmation needed to feel comfortable and encourage them to come to you—whether with questions, exploring, or sharing.

3 Create a safe space for youth clients. Setting up a safe space starts with examining the way you show up as a service provider and how you approach youth clients. Using affirming language, displaying affirming signage, and having an affirming intake process are all pillars in the creation of a safe space. Build your approach, forms and documents with inclusive language. Ensure that forms and documents use inclusive language, such as using Parent/ Caretaker instead of Mother/Father.

4 Check your own biases and assumptions. The most important information is what comes out of the conversation with a youth client, not what you think you know or assume you know beforehand. During SOGIE discussions ensure that you are embodying a compassionate and empathetic position, there is a lot to learn from youth.

5 Recognize that we are all always learning and evolving. Ask young people about their pronouns, how they would like to be referred to, and any terminology they'd like you to know— and be sure to share yours as well. If a young person uses a term you don't know or haven't heard of, feel free to explore that with the youth and ask questions — they're the experts! Allowing for learning moments with youth helps to create braver spaces and youth empowerment.





The How-To's of SOGIE



WHO

SOGIE is for everyone. Understanding sexual orientation, gender identity and expression is essential work towards understanding and making any adult and young person feel safe and affirmed. All folks at an organization — from the front desk to the CEO — should understand SOGIE and receive training on how to create inclusive environments. Youth are often the most knowledgeable about SOGIE language and information. Ensure you are not only having conversations with youth, but that you're creating opportunities to learn from them.



WHAT

SOGIE is an acronym for “sexual orientation and gender identity expression.” SOGIE work allows organizations to create more inclusive and expansive systems for youth and staff of all identities. What organizations should aim for is going beyond visibility to a place of acceptance, understanding, challenging biases, and creating changes to their policies and culture when needed.



WHEN

Always! Never assume anyone's gender or sexual orientation and always aim to be person-centered. It's important to meet people where they are — and that includes letting them lead these conversations with you in a way that makes them feel most comfortable. There are

many different entry points for this work and it is never too late to start learning about SOGIE.



WHERE

SOGIE discussions and understanding is important in various settings, communities, and institutions. SOGIE discussions and understanding also depend on and take place within your own culture, family structure, and your own history and values. It is important to understand SOGIE in all of these contexts and to advocate for equity and inclusion.



WHY

Chapin Hall estimates that over 40% of youth who experience homelessness identify as LGBTQ+. It is highly likely that SOGIE conversations will happen naturally in this work. In order to serve youth to the best of your ability, it's important that you have a solid understanding of SOGIE. We aim to create equitable, safe, inclusive spaces so youth can arrive as their full selves and receive trauma-informed, youth-centered, and compassionate care.



HOW

Make sure you continue to educate yourself on SOGIE and stay current on language and best practices. Through this work you should strive to create systems, safe spaces, and a sex-positive culture. This needs to be done through a trauma informed, anti-racist, youth-led lens and approach to our work.



“With trauma-informed care, we need to understand that Queer people walk around with armor. **We as service providers provide a safe space for those individuals to let down their armor by setting our surroundings and environment to be inviting and accepting** (flags, wall art, etc.). Things like mispronouncing their gender or pronouns can bring that armor up.”

— Pixie Popplewell



Three Actions You Can Take Now

1

Co-create ways for youth to meaningfully lead at your organization. Youth are experts of their own lives and are often experts in SOGIE. Letting youth lead this work can create much needed culture shifts at your organization that center the voices of youth and the most marginalized communities.

2

Go beyond the rainbow stickers and signs! Although they are amazing and affirming additions to your organization, it is important we go beyond showing we are a safe, affirming space, to ensuring we are one. Take a look at your policies and procedures, your intake forms, and your staff trainings. Ensure they are aligning with youth's needs and are affirming of all identities.

3

Expand your education and address your biases. Reflection, awareness and education are integral to providing better services for young people. One way you can take action now is to begin exploring what, how, and by whom you were taught about these subjects. Continue your education to meet youth where they are and to truly be able to build rapport and understanding. We all have biases, intentional reflection helps us grow and evolve.



Creating Affirming Environments For All Youth

- **Encourage youth to express themselves** in whatever way, area, speed and/or space they want.
- **Allow room for change and evolution.** Young people should be affirmed to explore themselves and evolve in whatever ways help them feel closer to their most authentic selves.
- **Treat youth holistically.** Youth are more than their SOGIE - whether they are cis, trans, straight, gay, or queer. Service providers are here to provide safe spaces, resources, and support to all youth, always.





Terminology, Definitions And Language

- Exhaustive List of Terminology: <https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/Terminology>
- Lambda Legal Terminology: <https://www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/article/youth-glossary-lgbtq-terms>
- PFLAG Glossary: <https://pflag.org/glossary>
- WAF Glossary: <https://wearefamilycharleston.org/lgbt-glossary-az>

“As service providers, it’s our responsibility to educate each other and provide appropriate support to the youth we are serving and not try to be experts or heroes. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter if you’re uncomfortable; it’s about what helps **youth feel most comfortable.**”

— Janikqua Cutno



Do's And Don'ts For SOGIE Conversations



Do's

- Use all pronouns identified by the youth. If the youth uses She/They/Them, use all of them, not just the pronouns you are comfortable with.
- Create space for the LGBTQ+ community (flags/ inclusive posters/ language.) This helps to create a space for youth to feel more affirmed and comfortable openly being themselves.
- Train staff on the history of marginalization of the LGBTQ+ community and how it impacts young people today.
- Continue to inform yourself and update what you know. We don't use the same language we used 10 years ago, so keep educating yourself.
- Follow the youth's lead. Youth may be more connected to current happenings in LGBTQ+ culture, and they are certainly more connected to themselves! Always be open to addressing adultism and learning from young people.
- Challenge your internal biases. It's important to explore what you feel you know, have been taught, and understand about SOGIE. Address what personal biases you are bringing into your work and address them.
- Bring your full self to this work. Be humble and human. We are often told to create a deep distance for professionalism. Instead, be humble and human, and set healthy boundaries. This makes it much easier to build rapport.





Don'ts

- ☑ Don't offer resources to just LGBTQ+-identified folks as a way to single the community out.
- ☑ Give all resources to all youth to create space for those that are not out yet and/or may not yet feel safe to explore.
- ☑ Don't ever assume anyone's gender or sexual orientation. There are many reasons why folks may present differently than you have learned or may be accustomed to.
- ☑ Don't out any youth and ensure you have informed consent in sharing any and all information around SOGIE. This can be with family, friends, or even other co-workers.
- ☑ Don't create barriers to service.
- ☑ Don't let being afraid to fail or mess up keep you from doing this work. We all are learning and will make mistakes. It is important to hold yourself accountable when you make a mistake, and always explore repairing any harm. Don't let the fear of making a mistake keep you from learning, having conversations, and advocating for LGBTQ+ young adults.



Developing Equitable SOGIE Practices: Organizational Checklist



Overview

Everyone has their own SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression), and collecting SOGIE data helps us create braver and more affirming environments for all young people. Honest and authentic conversations between providers and young people help to ensure that environments are safe, that barriers are addressed, and normalizes that SOGIE is a part of our everyday lives thereby helping to remove stigmas around the conversation. Providers should approach SOGIE by acknowledging the importance of serving young people holistically, and that truly affirming services are services that affirm the beauty and vibrancy of what makes us, us.



Staff Training

Comprehensive and regular trainings on SOGIE best practices are essential to creating brave, affirming environments for staff and youth clients. Staff should undergo adequate training on organizational policies and best practices related to SOGIE before participating in any intake sessions or interactions with youth. Organizations should provide regular and consistent opportunities for continued learning. SOGIE training should be included in all new hire onboarding, and organizations should strive to include interactive elements into trainings like quizzes, reflection exercises, and role play. These trainings should include:

Accountability and Developing Trust

- What are the organizational expectations for accountability (among both staff and youth)?
- How is a culture of accountability uplifted and enforced?
- How is the organization creating a 'call-in' culture?
- How does the organization evaluate processes that have the potential to cause harm?
- What do consequences look like for staff and youth?
- How is the organization dismantling punitive policies?



SOGIE Terminology & Definitions

- What are approximate terms and definitions that all staff must know?
- How are staff regularly evolving and growing their language?
- What are the continued learning opportunities for staff and youth clients on terminology and definitions?

Trauma-informed Care

- How is the organization creating a trauma-informed culture?
- What are the expectations for staff to be trauma-informed?
- What are the learning opportunities for youth clients and trauma-informed care?
- What is the trauma-informed framework for staff approaching SOGIE discussions?
- What are ways the organization is actively working to not re-traumatize youth?
- What policies and practices exist to keep staff and youth safe?

Best practices for approaching SOGIE discussions during intake

- What context should staff provide on SOGIE data?
- What needs to be captured in intake and what information can be gathered through rapport-building with youth?
- What inclusive and aware language should staff be using during intake?
- How are staff trained to recognize spoken and unspoken language and reactions from youth during intake?



Confidentiality and Safety

- How is SOGIE data collected and stored?
- What policies and procedures are in place to keep young people safe during and after SOGIE discussions?
- How will SOGIE data be shared? Who will have access to it?
- What confidentiality rights exist for youth at your organization and how are they upheld?

The Importance of SOGIE

- Why is collecting SOGIE data important at your organization?
- How is the collection of SOGIE data an equitable practice?
- How should staff discuss SOGIE with youth clients?
- How does SOGIE data collection help create braver environments?

Anti-discrimination and Anti-oppression:

- What training and resources are available to staff on bias and prejudice?
- What are the organization's commitments to an anti-racist culture?
- What baseline understanding and competency must staff have on cultural humility, anti-racism, anti-black racism, transphobia, ableism, homophobia and more?



Written Policies

It is important that organizational values, policies and procedures are thoroughly documented and accessible for youth clients and staff alike. New hires should receive policies in writing, and values and procedures should be posted in public spaces to create an ecosystem of care and transparency. Written policies on SOGIE practices should include:



Background and Purpose

- What is the purpose behind collecting SOGIE data?
- How will data be collected, stored, used, and shared internally and externally?
- How does SOGIE data collection ladder up into overall organizational standards?

Scope

- What is the scope of SOGIE data collection?
- What is the WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW, WHY?

Anti-discrimination

- What are the practices in place to protect and support staff and youth clients?
- What are the processes for feedback, evaluation and reflection?
- How should youth report harm?
- How should staff report harm?
- How is harm addressed?
- What does reparation, restoration, and reconciliation look like at your organization?
- How is accountability culture uplifted and upheld?
- How is the organization creating safe and affirming spaces for Transgender/ Non-Binary (TGNB) staff and youth?
- What training and tools are available for bystander intervention training (responding and reacting to harmful and problematic situations/interactions)?



Creating safe and inclusive environments

- How does the organization create safe and inclusive environments for youth clients and staff?
- How are youth clients integrated into the organizational culture?
- What does confidentiality and safety look like for youth and staff?



Intake

When supporting staff leading SOGIE intake discussions, consider the following questions as part of training, onboarding and regular evaluation:

Understanding verbal and nonverbal cues

- How are staff trained to respond to cues of discomfort during intake?
- What are the communications expectations for staff to navigate difficult conversations?
 - Examples of difficult conversations include:
 - Exploring SOGIE discussions with youth who may not be sure of their identity.
 - Navigating conversations with adults in a young person's life who may not understand or support them.
- How are check-ins conducted throughout the interview process?
- How are youth given multiple opportunities to re-consent, opt-in and opt-out?

Procedure

- How should staff ask for consent from youth clients?
- How are youth able to see and help inform their own case files?
- What is standardized respectful and supportive language for staff to utilize during intake?



- How are staff trained to check their own biases, assumptions, and stereotypes?
- What is the cultural humility training for staff to understand cultural and generational differences?
- How are staff trained to conduct interviews without judgment?
- How should staff respond when youth decline to disclose information? How are youth kept safe and comfortable?
- How are SOGIE questions woven into general demographic questions?
- Where should SOGIE Discussions take place to ensure privacy and safety for youth?
 - What are these protocols for in-person? What are the protocols to ensure confidentiality in virtual settings?
- Who is filling out the SOGIE information?
- How are staff explaining that all youth are asked the same SOGIE questions?
- What does supportive language look like during SOGIE interviews?
- How is re-traumatization avoided?



Follow-Up Conversations

Intentionality and thoughtfulness are important at every stage of interaction to create truly affirming and brave spaces. Collecting SOGIE data isn't just about siloed interactions, but also about checking in regularly with young people after these conversations, exploring how SOGIE data collection might open up new conversations and doing your best to keep youth and staff safe at all times. When exploring communications standards and staff trainings consider the following questions:

- How is aftercare conducted after SOGIE intake?
- How are youth able to update and change their SOGIE data?
- How is SOGIE training integrated across organizational spaces?
- What continued learning opportunities are made available for young people?



Addressing Homophobia, Transphobia And Discrimination

Harm is inevitable and exists everywhere, that’s why we tether ourselves to principles of harm reduction and a commitment to navigating harm without causing more harm through punitive consequences. Because harm is inevitable, we strive to create brave spaces, recognizing that when harm is inevitable no space is truly safe. Regularly discuss the below questions and areas with staff and youth clients to co-create a brave and affirming environment:

Intervention

- How are restorative and reparative justice practices standardized at the organization?
- What should intervention look like for staff/youth who witness harm among youth?
- What should intervention look like for staff/youth who witness harm among staff?
- How are the needs of folks who experience harm meaningfully centered in discussions of how to move forward?

Accountability

- What are the consequences for folks who cause harm (intentionally or not)?
- How are the needs of folks who experience harm meaningfully centered in discussions of how to move forward?
- How are both youth and staff held accountable?
- What are restorative practices that take place after harm is caused?



Standardizing Practices

- How is the organization standardizing use of pronouns for staff and youth?
- How are policies and procedures informed by and co-created with LGBTQ+ youth?
- How are documents and intake policies inclusive?
 - What supports exist for young people whose IDs and documents do not affirm their gender identity and expression?
- How do personnel policies, including non-discrimination, diversity and non-harassment policies explicitly include sexual orientation, gender identity and expression?
- How do intake forms create space for SOGIE self-identification, and provide space for written explanation?



Evaluation & Feedback

Creating pathways for youth to submit grievances, provide feedback and evaluate providers who are offering services is essential to create better youth-serving organizations. Explore the below questions with youth and staff to develop evaluation and feedback processes that prioritize confidentiality. When discussing with youth and staff, be sure to underscore the importance of feedback and encourage folks to regularly provide it while also helping folks navigate how to thoughtfully receive feedback.

- How are youth able to submit grievances?
 - How are youth clients kept safe during this process and how are grievances kept confidential?
- How are intake forms and processes evaluated? How are youth able to inform, improve, and co-create existing practices?
- How is staff SOGIE competency evaluated?
- How often are intake materials and training materials updated for staff and youth?



“Let’s not sexualize gender identity. It is important to be able to comfortably talk about it and educate youth about it. Let’s be real talking about gender and sexual identity. It can be a tough conversation, but the world has made these types of conversations such a taboo that it makes it uncomfortable or feels wrong to be having these conversations with minors but know that they know more than you think. Don’t think of your educational input or talking to a youth about their gender or sexual orientation as an imprint or traumatization to the youth. It is providing facts and exploration to youth, just as you would with anything else.”

— **Pixie Popplewell**



Ally To Advocate: How To Address Homophobia, Transphobia And Discrimination

Level 1

Creating an **accepting** environment for LGBTQ+ youth at your organization. This can look like adding pronouns and other SOGIE information to intakes, rainbow flags, ally stickers and verbalizations of safety.

Level 2

Moving beyond equality to **equity**. Exploring education on intersectionality, connecting with adjacent movements and community leaders. Knowledge-sharing and community dialogue.

Level 3

Moving beyond visibility and box checking to doing internal work and creating **equitable systems** with youth leaders and advocates. Committing to trauma-informed organizational policies, procedures and practices.

Level 4

Creating true change and transformation of yourself, your organization, and how you approach the work. Co-creating restorative, reparative and reconciliatory **justice practices** that keep youth and staff safe.

Level 5

Advocating for the **liberation of all youth, alongside youth** — especially those who are queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and/or youth of color. Centering the needs of the most marginalized youth in all policies, practices and structures of your organization. Consistently learning and challenging yourself to be more anti-racist, youth centered, sex-positive, and affirming and loving of all gender identities, expressions, and sexualities.



FAQs



How do frameworks like harm reduction, trauma-informed care, and positive youth development intersect with SOGIE and how might they be different when having these conversations with youth of different ages (i.e. under 16 vs over 21)?

It's important to have awareness of adultism as a hindrance to meaningful engagement and building trust with youth. Whether you're working with young people under 16 or over 21, you can co-create safe spaces by working within the understanding that young people are the experts of their own lives.



What special considerations should service providers make when talking about SOGIE with youth who are under the age of 18?

When engaging with all youth — especially youth under the age of 18 — it's important to consistently examine your own biases. Ensure that you have a space for staff to safely and truthfully express their resistance, questions and/or lack of information. Providing a space to relearn and gain perspective supports collective growth at organizations. Staff can experience burnout when they have difficulties understanding the community and cannot connect to the youth they are meant to support. Allow staff to teach one another and identify experts within your community to provide trainings, workshops and/or create materials.



Additional Resources

- Sometimes children’s books can help provide easily comprehensible conversation starters, and can also help with normalizing SOGIE discussions. Family Equality has a great starter list: <https://www.familyequality.org/family-support/lgbtq-books/early-elementary>
- Implicit Bias Test: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Healing centered engagement: <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Crosswalk-Youth-Thrive-and-Healing-Centered-Engagement.pdf>
- LGBTQ Wiki: https://lgbtqia.fandom.com/wiki/LGBTQIA%2B_Wiki
- True Colors Intentional Space: <https://truecolorsunited.org/portfolio/intentional-space-toolkit/>
- <https://transstudent.org/gender/>
ey/em/ir are some newer pronouns
- Gender Spectrum: <https://genderspectrum.org>
- Promising Practices: https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/files/assets/resources/Promising_Practices_Guide_4th_Edition.pdf

