



**Promoting Safety and Connection
with LGBTQ youth in
Girls Circle® and
The Council for Boys and Young Men®**

One Circle Foundation promotes resiliency and healthy relationships through the circle models - Girls Circle® and The Council for Boys and Young Men®.

These models incorporate best practices that support adolescent development. Adolescence is a time of self-exploration and identity development. Teens are determining their identities, including sexual identities and gender identities, and making decisions related to sexuality. All students need belonging and acceptance within their school and neighborhood communities. Yet, because many traditional gender role beliefs about being female or male are rejecting toward LGBTQ youth, these young people can suffer isolation and exclusion.

- **Girls Circle®** is for all youth who identify with female social-emotional development and for willing youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or non-conforming.
- **The Council for Boys and Young Men®** is for all youth who identify with male social-emotional development and for willing youth who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or non-conforming.
- These models offer participants a gender-responsive environment free from judgment, intimidation or exclusion, and offer a safe space where youth can experience authenticity and acceptance amongst peers. This safety is fundamental to social-emotional development.
- It is imperative that all students have a safe space that affords opportunity to self-determine where along the gender continuum they feel most safe and supported. It is through safe relationships that adolescents are able to develop the social-emotional confidence and skills to pursue their goals and live safe, healthy, connected lives.

Girls Circle® and The Council for Boys and Young Men® are components of a support system for LGBTQ youth (who also may benefit from groups designed specifically to address the experiences and needs of LGBTQ youth - for example in a Gay-Straight Alliance or with another LGBTQ support resource). LGBTQ youth are 20 – 40% more likely to attempt suicide as a result of the stigmas and social isolation that continues to be pervasive in our culture. LGBTQ youth are at greater risk for:

- mental health problems including depression, suicidality, PTSD
- substance abuse
- homelessness due to family rejection
- Involvement in the juvenile justice system due to status offenses and survival crimes or behaviors such as truancy, running away, shoplifting and being sexually exploited.

BEST PRACTICES

1. **Organizations: Incorporate regular cultural competency training specific** to the issues, needs, risks, strengths, resources of the LGBTQ community. Understand various risks and strengths, aspects, terms, perspectives and identities of youth on the LGBTQ spectrum. Consider policies, staffing, verbal and written language, messages and posters in the setting environment, assumptions, safety practices, rights and laws, personal feelings and biases. Discuss any needs, questions, concerns, and roles with respect to creating and sustaining a safe and welcoming environment.

2. **Facilitators:**

a) **Develop your own cultural competency.** Through trainings and personal exploration, prepare and practice culturally appropriate facilitation and seek peer and supervisory support for any questions or support needs you may have.

b) **Be explicit.** At the first session and throughout the program, speak to youth about the inclusive and safe purpose and intent of Girls Circle and of The Council for Boys and Young Men. You can say something like this:

✓ *Girls Circle is for all girls. It's a place to be you and find acceptance and belonging for who you are. You can expect to NOT be judged here. Girls are diverse – all kinds of interests, styles, preferences; all kinds of beliefs, cultures, sexual and gender identities; all kinds of backgrounds, talents, ethnicities. Everyone here is welcome for exactly who you are.*

OR

✓ *The Council for Boys and Young Men is for all boys. It's a place to be you and find acceptance and belonging for who you are. You can expect to NOT be judged here. Boys are diverse – all kinds of interests, styles, preferences; all kinds of beliefs, cultures, sexual and gender identities; all kinds of backgrounds, talents, ethnicities. Everyone here is welcome for exactly who you are.*

✓ *No one wants to be judged. This is a place where whatever our differences, we all have in common the need for a safe, welcoming place to be honest, real, and respected. And that's why we're here. When youth and facilitators come together and are real with each other, refrain from judgment, and give respect to each person, we can deal with things in healthier and safer ways.*

c) **Group Guidelines:**

Include safe and inclusive language for all participants. Discuss offensive language: expressions such as “that’s so gay,” or “they’re so gay,” etc. Let the group know that safety is for everyone; even if no one is saying a term is offensive, the facilitator can be mindful and can ask for use of other non-offensive terms.

d) **Youth Choice:**

It’s essential that youth who identify as LGBTQ be provided with choices when being invited or provided with gender-specific programs. Gender-nonconforming and LGBTQ youth need choices that are responsive to their identity and that promote belonging, acceptance, and safety to develop.

- If a youth does not identify with the gender of the specific program, provide an alternative option. Cultural responsiveness is key to safety and an authentic environment where youth can feel safe and comfortable, where they can relate to the topics, and where they can connect.
- If a boy identifies with the female gender, afford him the opportunity to join with girls where he can be comfortable and be himself.
- If a girl identifies with the male gender, afford her the opportunity to join with boys where she can be comfortable and be herself.

e) Terminology:

Use inclusive terms such as “romantic partner” or “dating partner” or “special honey” and avoid gendered terms such as “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” or, when speaking about relationships, include both “girlfriends or boyfriends or whomever you choose to date”. Say “him or her”, or “the person you like” instead of single gender terms such as guy, girl, him, her, she, he, etc. When language in written materials or conversation emphasizes “straight” people, improve it. Stop and re-state language to include all kinds of youth. Ask the youth to help with that effort as well.

f) Use Diverse Materials:

Use variety of stories, images and media that represent the range of cross-cultural and LGBTQ youth within the examples, stories, TV shows, movies, magazines that are cited. Incorporate examples of role models into stories & references [examples: Brittany Griner or Jason Collins (openly gay professional basketball stars); Ellen Degeneres (comedian, talk-show host), etc.].

g) Personal Disclosures and Sharing:

If a group member shares personal information re: sexual or gender identity, or a story of someone they care about, always acknowledge the person for their courage and honesty, and their leadership by example; assure safety in the group. Acknowledge circle or council members for their part in creating safe spaces for participants to be real and express themselves. Ask how to support youth and offer resources as needed.

h) Seek Feedback:

Ask the group on occasion, “How are we doing with inclusiveness? On a scale of 1 – 10 with 10 being totally at ease and comfortable being yourselves, what number does each of you feel reflects the level of safety for you in this room? Please write it down. Then, please say and/or write down suggestions for what would increase your feeling of safety in our group.” Or, use a suggestion or feelings box where youth can provide input on safety and acceptance

i) Know and Share Community Resources:

Have information and resources visibly available and communicate the resources for all youth, generally and also when specific needs arise. See list of resources below.

LGBTQ youth often find significant support from local community groups whose purpose is to bring youth with diverse sexual and gender identities together, with or without allies.

Resources for Policy and Information

1. *Suicide Risk and Prevention for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*, 2008, Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Newton, MA <http://www.sprc.org>
2. *Mental Health Risk Factors among GLBT Youth*, 2007, National Alliance on Mental Illness, http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Multicultural_Support1/Fact_Sheets1/MH_Risk_Factors_among_GLB_T_Youth_07.pdf
3. *Creating Supportive Policies for LGBTQ Youth*. National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors: http://www.nasmhpd.org/docs/PreventionResources/LGBT%20Policies_final.pdf
4. *Massachusetts Schools Policies on Transgender Students* <http://www.masstpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/MTPC-2013-K-12-Best-Practices.pdf> -
5. National Child Traumatic Stress Network provides professional trainings and resources to support LGBTQ youth. <http://www.nctsn.org>

National Resources for Support to LGBTQ Youth, Families, and Providers

1. **Family Acceptance Project** - Research-based, culturally grounded approaches to help ethnically, socially, and religiously diverse families decrease rejection and increase support for their LGBT children - <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/>
2. **GLSEN** – The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network focuses on safe school environments for all youth, through the Gay-Straight Alliances and many other projects and educational campaigns. <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/about/index.html>
3. **GLBT NATIONAL YOUTH TALKLINE**
1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)
The GLBT National Youth Talkline provides telephone and email peer-counseling, as well as factual information and local resources for cities and towns across the United States.
4. **PHLAG** – Promotes the wellbeing of LGBTQ persons, their friends and families, through services, support, and advocacy. <http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=237>
5. **No Name Calling Week** – Resources to involve youth in stopping verbal harassments and educating youth on the power of names; <http://www.nonamecallingweek.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/about/index.html>
6. **Safe Schools Coalition** - Coalition to provide school advocacy, training, resources and research to promote safer schools. Seattle, WA (206) 632-0662 x49
www.safeschoolscoalition.org
7. **Trevor Project** -Suicide Prevention and crisis prevention and support helpline; 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, LIFELINE: 866-488-7386 <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>