

# Support needed for foster carers of LGBTQ young people

July 30 2019

---

More support is needed for foster carers looking after LGBTQ young people, according to new research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA).

Findings from the first ever study of LGBTQ young people in care in England found good examples of foster carers being available and sensitive, and offering acceptance and membership of their family.

However, there was also evidence of foster carers struggling in some areas in relation to meeting the needs of LGBTQ young people, whether because of their lack of knowledge, skills and support or because of ambivalence, discomfort or, in a few cases, homophobia or transphobia among foster family members.

Although there were some positive descriptions of the support available from [social workers](#), most carers felt alone with the question of how best to support LGBTQ young people. This lack of support also meant that negative attitudes and approaches could go unchallenged.

The research, conducted by UEA's Centre for Research on Children and Families, focused on the nature of foster carers' experiences and perspectives on caring for LGBTQ young people. It involved interviews with 26 carers, who described the importance of offering LGBTQ young people not only the nurturing relationships that all children in care need, but helping young people manage stigma and other challenges associated with minority sexual orientation and gender identity.

The findings—published in the journal *Child and Family Social Work* as part of a special issue on fostering teenagers—are from a wider study of the experiences of LGBTQ young people in care, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and led by Dr. Jeanette Cossar from UEA's School of Social Work. This also included a survey of local authorities in England and interviews with 46 LGBTQ young people who were or had been in care.

Gillian Schofield, Professor of *Child and Family Social Work* at UEA and lead author of the foster carer paper, said the experiences and needs of LGBTQ young people in care had been overlooked in England, both in policy and research.

"LGBTQ young people in foster families are likely to have many of the same needs as other fostered adolescents, but they also face additional challenges," said Prof Schofield. "Their emotional, psychological and social well-being depends on how they manage, and are supported in managing, both the difficult histories they share with other children in care and their minority sexual orientation and gender identities.

"Understanding caregiving roles and relationships for LGBTQ young people in care has important implications for recruiting, training, matching and supporting foster carers to care for LGBTQ young people effectively, to ensure their needs are met. Our work highlights one of the key areas in fostering that professionals supporting young people in foster care and training and supporting foster carers need to be better informed about."

For LGBTQ young people, trust in caregivers was often said by carers to have been damaged by previous adverse experiences that included abuse, neglect, separation and loss. For some this had been compounded by moves linked to rejection of their [sexual orientation](#) or trans identity by birth, foster or adoptive parents.

Carers described needing to be sensitive to the difficult choices facing young people about how open they wanted to be about sexuality or gender, especially when they were anxious about being rejected or moved. They reported particular dilemmas in supporting young people in care to feel confident in expressing their LGBTQ identities while simultaneously protecting them and helping them to protect themselves from bullying.

Carers talked with pride of the way in which young people treated them as parents, and often recognised the additional element of security that accepting young people's LGBTQ identity contributed to a sense of family belonging. Where foster carers had helped LGBTQ young people to feel fully accepted as family members, this gave them greater confidence in other areas of their lives. However, it was also important for foster carers to promote positive relationships between young people and their birth families.

A number of implications for practice emerged from the interviews with foster carers, and were supported by other data from the project from young people and social workers.

Prof Schofield said: "At the initial assessment, training and preparation stage, it will be important for fostering agencies to explore prospective foster carers' values and attitudes in relation to LGBTQ issues.

"Key also to ensuring high quality foster care will be the quality of the work of supervising social workers and children's social workers. Foster carers in this study felt that they needed social workers to offer better information, for example in relation to LGBTQ support groups or [gender identity](#) services."

Carers also needed clearer policies and better support to manage the day-to-day decisions within the care system, whether regarding decisions

over sleepovers or managing inter-professional meetings such as statutory reviews. Better training for social workers about the experiences and needs of LGBTQ young people and their carers is also essential, both in qualifying and post-qualifying programmes.

'Providing a secure base for LGBTQ young people in foster care: the role of foster carers', Gillian Schofield, Jeanette Cossar, Emma Ward, Birgit Larsson and Pippa Belderson, is published in *Child and Family Social Work*.

Provided by University of East Anglia

Citation: Support needed for foster carers of LGBTQ young people (2019, July 30) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-foster-carers-lgbtq-young-people.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.