

According to a 2023 report by Children's Rights, there are more trans youth in the foster care system than not. Trans youth in the foster care system are among the most vulnerable population within the LGBTQ+ community as they face stressors beyond those expected by teens in the general population and in foster care. For example, it is normal for teens to feel that their parents do not understand them, feel sad or frustrated with their social groups, and experience academic pressures. Trans youth in the foster care system, in addition to experiencing these stressors, may also experience family and social rejection, political attacks on their identity, and difficulty accessing necessary medical and mental health care as a result of how the world interprets their gender identity. Social scientist Ilan Meyer coined the term "*Minority Stress*" to describe these additional stressors. As a result of these minority stressors, many trans youth may feel hopeless, which can lead to increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and thoughts of suicide.

However, research indicates that an affirming and supportive living environment can reduce these adverse mental health outcomes and provide trans youth with a sense of security and belonging. While many in the foster care system strive to create an affirming environment and probably do an excellent job at it, they may miss the mark on seeing and addressing the unique needs of trans youth. Furthermore, affirming environments are not just in the homes where youth reside, they are in the offices and services that trans youth participate in. Here are two simple yet powerful practices that foster care social

## **Two Ways Foster Care Social Workers and Administrators can Support Trans Youth**

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workers, administrators, and guardians can adopt to create an affirming space for the trans youth community.

### **Using the Right Pronouns & Names**

Perhaps the most powerful way to affirm trans youth is by using the pronouns and name they give you. For many of us, our names are part of our identity; they tell the world who we are and set us apart from others. Because most names are gendered (e.g., Gabriel vs. Gabriella), being called the name that matches your gender identity and expression is essential to trans youth who may already struggle to find their identity and place in society. Furthermore, it demonstrates a willingness to be a supportive person in their lives when they may be feeling disconnected and alone after being rejected by their families or friends. Data also shows that when trans youth are referred to by the pronouns and names that affirm their gender identity, their symptoms of depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts decrease significantly compared to trans youth who are unable to use their correct pronouns and names<sup>1</sup>.

### **Cultural Humility & Self-Education**

Another way we can support our trans youth in the foster care system is by practicing cultural humility when it comes to their identities and experiences. Cultural humility means that while we have a foundation of understanding and knowledge, it is impossible to know everything. So, instead of striving to know everything, we could strive to be lifelong learners and commit to being open to new ways of conceptualizing the experiences of others and expressing ourselves. The linguistic landscape has

evolved over time, and words we once used are no longer in use, while others have emerged. A good example of this is the use of they/them pronouns for a single person. While we may say that this is “grammatically incorrect,” Cultural humility allows us to say, “This may not make sense to me, but it’s not about me, and if this is the pronoun someone uses, then I can use it to address them.” Cultural humility also enables us to seek information from others by asking thoughtful and curious questions when we don’t understand something. For example, asking questions such as “What about that experience made you worry/frightened/feel uneasy?” or “Coming out to your family must have been difficult, could you tell me more about your experience and what made you come out now rather than another time?” Additionally, cultural humility asks us to be informed about the issues that trans youth in the foster care system are currently facing.

We can do this by connecting with organizations (e.g., Stand with Trans, Ruth Ellis Center) that work with this population and seeking out helpful articles written by credible organizations (e.g., HRC, Lambda Legal).

Trans youth in the foster care system are faced with so many challenges and minority stressors that can negatively affect their mental and physical well-being. While foster care parents, social workers, and administrators aim to support all of the youth in their care, it can be challenging to know where and how to start, especially when they face a barrage of calls, emails, and emergencies. While these two steps won’t solve the larger issues that our trans youth face, they can brighten the *here-and-now* experiences of trans youth in the foster care system.