Embracing LGBTQIA+ Staff in Early Childhood Programs

Jennifer M. Longley

At the end of Amanda's first week at her new job as a preschool teacher, she spends some time debriefing with the program's director, Donna. As they're wrapping up, Donna casually asks whether Amanda has any weekend plans.

Amanda has been wondering how LGBTQIA+-friendly Donna will be. Amanda has not yet revealed her sexuality to anyone at her new job, but this seems like a good opportunity. As casually as she can, Amanda says, "I'm planning to go to see the new sci-fi movie with Angela."
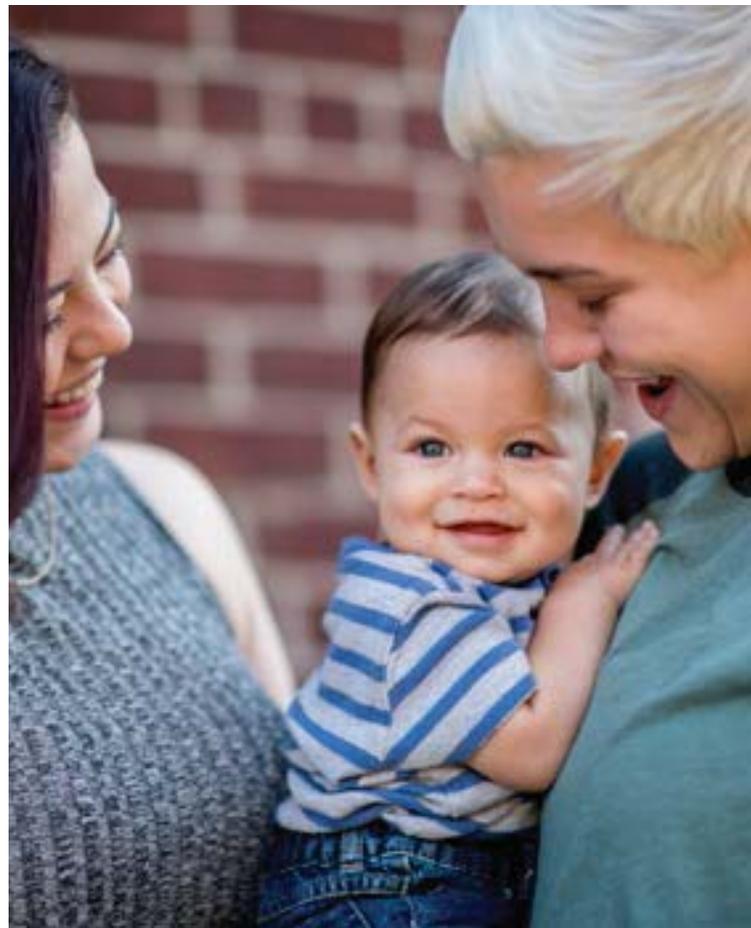
"Nice!" Donna replies. "Who's Angela?"

"My wife," Amanda answers, trying to keep her body and voice from shaking.

Donna stares at her desk for what feels like an eternity while Amanda waits, wishing desperately that she could take back her words. Eventually Donna turns, looks Amanda in the eye, and says sternly, "You're not planning to tell anyone else about this, are you?"

Amanda is devastated. She finds some comfort in the knowledge that Donna will be retiring soon, but she still worries. Do Donna's bosses share her views?

Later that evening, Amanda reflects on the decisions she made when she was applying for her position. Afraid she wouldn't be hired if she revealed her sexual identity, Amanda had left her role as president of her college's Gay–Straight Alliance club and her work at an LGBTQIA+ bookstore off her resume. She had decided she'd see how LGBTQIA+-friendly the program was if she were hired.

Amanda remembers how excited—and nervous—she'd been to land an in-person interview. While waiting to meet with Donna and the rest of the hiring committee, she'd struck up a conversation with Donna's

assistant, who had admired Amanda's wedding ring and repeatedly referred to Amanda's spouse as "he" or "your husband." Fearful, Amanda had not corrected her. Now, after her conversation with Donna, Amanda is even more worried about the future of her job.

Early childhood professionals—just like the children and families they work with—represent a wealth of cultural heritages, languages, religious beliefs and practices, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities. They also have a responsibility to respect and encourage all of their colleagues so that everyone who cares for and educates young children can work productively, have their professional needs met, and find satisfaction in their work (NAEYC 2011). As NAEYC's long history of publications on ethics (Feeney & Freeman 2018) and anti-bias (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2020)—and its recent position statement on advancing equity (NAEYC 2019)—make clear, this includes colleagues who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, and asexual or who otherwise do not conform to conventional expectations about gender and sexuality (LGBTQIA+).

Embracing LGBTQIA+ early childhood professionals creates a positive environment where staff, children, and families thrive.

Even though Amanda works in a large city that is considered LGBTQIA+ friendly, unfortunately, her experience with Donna is an example of what happens to far too many LGBTQIA+ early childhood staff. Although it is not known what percentage of early childhood staff identify as LGBTQIA+, approximately four percent of the US population identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Gates 2017). As more public figures reveal their sexual and gender identities, society in general has become more welcoming. However, it is still common to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ individuals working in early childhood education (Kintner-Duffy et al.

Working Toward Equity in Early Childhood Education

Although this article focuses on LGBTQIA+ staff, these steps can be applied to any group that is minoritized. *Minoritized* (or *marginalized*) people belong to groups that differ from the dominant group in terms of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs and practices, ability/disability status, language, sexuality, or gender identity. They are considered minoritized because society forces them into positions in which they are denied power, representation, and rights; they often face social, legal, and economic barriers due to their membership in these groups. The steps outlined here can be used to embrace people from groups who are underrepresented in the staff of a program, such as Latinx educators, Muslim teachers, men, multilingual staff, and teachers with disabilities.

2012; Ferfolja & Stavrou 2015). This article outlines four steps program staff and administrators can take to embrace LGBTQIA+ early childhood professionals. As explained in "Working Toward Equity in Early Childhood Education" (above), these four steps create a positive environment that will benefit not only all staff but also all children and families.

Step 1: Establish welcoming policies and practices

Reviewing and rethinking program policies and practices is an important part of creating a work climate where LGBTQIA+ staff feel embraced. In 29 states, a person can be fired for being or appearing to be LGBTQIA+ (Human Rights Campaign 2019). This causes many LGBTQIA+ staff not only to hide their sexuality or gender identity and expression—including not correcting others' assumptions about their heterosexuality—but also to work hard to protect their secret. LGBTQIA+ individuals may fear not being hired; once hired, they may fear being passed over for a promotion, being ridiculed, facing disciplinary action, or losing their jobs if their sexuality or gender identity or expression is discovered.

LGBTQIA+ teachers like Amanda frequently develop a state of hypervigilance that impacts the learning environments and activities they create and the relationships they have with children, families, and colleagues (Ferfolja & Hopkins 2013; Gray 2013; Lundin 2016). Because teaching is based on interactions, teachers typically use themselves as teaching tools, sharing personal experiences, emotions, and ideas to promote learning and provide resources for the curriculum (Lundin 2016). Children feed off a teacher's knowledge, passion, interests, and connection to a subject or topic. A teacher's response to a question can further motivate a child—or it can quash a child's interest. However, LGBTQIA+ staff may limit the personal connections they make, focusing narrowly on the content of the curriculum, because they do not want to raise suspicions or questions about their sexuality or gender identity or expression (Ferfolja & Hopkins 2013).

> Amanda is in the block area, where Luz is building a parking lot. After Luz carefully pushes a car into the lot, she turns to Amanda and says, "I want to be a boy."

> Amanda quickly looks around and is relieved to see that none of the other staff have heard Luz's comment. She tries to redirect Luz by asking, "Do you want the green car?" Luz takes the car from Amanda, sighs, and returns to playing.

Instead of using the opportunity to explore Luz's feelings, Amanda ignored Luz's comment because she was afraid that discovery of her own sexuality would lead to her being fired or blacklisted from early childhood jobs in the community. If she had not been anxious about being identified as LGBTQIA+, Amanda could have talked with Luz about what her statement meant and the reasons behind it. Amanda might have even brought in books with gender fluid characters to engage Luz and other children in her class in conversations about gender stereotypes and expectations. Luz, Amanda, and all the other children in the class missed out on an opportunity for growth and exploration because Amanda did not feel safe as an LGBTQIA+ individual.

Having specific, welcoming policies that openly address LGBTQIA+ issues creates a positive climate for LGBTQIA+ staff (Ferfolja & Stavrou 2015) and gives teachers like Amanda the freedom to be more

Encountering Resistance

Culture change is a challenging process that requires effort and reflection. Embracing people who are different can be difficult and can cause conscious or unconscious biases to surface, which may create tension among staff members and families. The following are suggestions for handling situations that involve prejudice or bigotry.

- Focus on building a close-knit, family-like community of children, families, and staff. Mutual trust and clear communication will help staff members resolve conflict when it arises.

- Set community norms for meetings. Outline the behavior expected at the meeting, such as one person speaking at a time, respecting others, and focusing on collaboration. Begin each meeting by reviewing the expectations.

- Confront homophobic/transphobic comments or actions when they occur. Explain to the person making the comments what was inappropriate and why. Support the LGBTQIA+ member of the community, both in front of the staff and privately, as needed. If harm occurs, work separately with both parties to identify ways to repair the harm.

- Refrain from excluding anyone who is being respectful (keeping in mind the bullet above), even if that person has different beliefs or values. The goal is to build inclusive, diverse communities in which everyone feels welcome and is encouraged to learn from each other.

- Create time for regular discussions among all staff and with families about anti-bias principles and practices. (For a variety of books and articles on anti-bias education, see **NAEYC.org/topics/anti-bias-education**.)

responsive to the children in their classrooms. Program administrators can develop strategies that express explicit support for LGBTQIA+ staff and prepare them to handle instances of discrimination (see "Encountering Resistance," above). If superiors or members of the community are resistant, administrators can explain the importance of having

All early childhood educators should be able to work productively, have their professional needs met, and find satisfaction in their work.

staff with a range of backgrounds and experiences in early childhood programs, emphasizing the value that LGBTQIA+ educators bring to a program. As US society grows more diverse (Keating & Karklis 2016), early childhood programs that mirror the richness of our population are essential for ensuring that all children and families feel welcomed and for equipping young children with the skills they need to navigate the world.

Even if a program is located in a state in which a person can be fired for being or appearing to be LGBTQIA+, program administrators can create policies stating that applicants and employees will not be discriminated against because of their sexuality or gender identity or expression. They can also examine the wording in program publications, such as the staff handbook and the forms that staff fill out, to ensure the language is inclusive of LGBTQIA+ individuals. For example, instead of requiring staff to identify as either male or female on forms, leave a blank space for staff to write in how they identify—or consider whether it's necessary to collect gender information on that particular form. When hiring, administrators can also take steps to create an inclusive environment by advertising that members of the LGBTQIA+ community are encouraged to apply.

Step 2: Celebrate staff members' personal and professional identities

Asking staff to share personal information serves many purposes. Staff who offer details of their lives build deeper relationships with children, families, and colleagues and promote open, honest communication. By revealing talents or similarities, they can create a more family-like atmosphere in the program. Teachers cannot separate their personal identities

from their professional identities (Lundin 2016). They bring their backgrounds, experiences, and histories into the classroom. Encouraging staff to share their lives and interests can expand children's knowledge and encourage children to share too, resulting in a stronger classroom community.

> After Donna retires and Carla, the new director, starts, Amanda is relieved and invigorated by Carla's desire to get to know the staff and her openness about valuing diversity among staff, children, and families. In her first staff meeting, Carla engages everyone in creating a Get to Know Me book that features staff photos and profiles with hobbies, pets, family members, favorite things, and other fun facts. Throughout the activity, Carla is encouraging and respectful—and her positive example makes her expectations for staff interactions clear.
>
> Bringing the Get to Know Me activity to her classroom, Amanda shares with the children that she adores penguins. A few days later, Tyrone's family comes in to tell Amanda about their recent visit to the local zoo's penguin exhibit. Over the next couple of weeks, Tyrone and Amanda collect pictures of different penguins and identify and research various penguin species.
>
> Their excitement is contagious, and soon the whole class gets involved. Together, they create a book about penguins and visit the penguin exhibit at the zoo. They also talk about penguin gender roles, learning that male penguins stay on the nest with the chicks while female penguins travel long distances to gather food for the family.

Celebrating staff not only helps with relationship building—it enriches a classroom's curriculum. LGBTQIA+ staff who feel comfortable sharing personal details and life experiences, from the identities of their partners to their favorite animals, can broaden the horizons of children, families, and staff by introducing topics or issues that may have gone unnoticed. Amanda's openness about her love of penguins built on the curriculum, and it led to a class conversation about gender roles in relation to penguins. A teacher's

Pronouns

One important way to make LGBTQIA+ individuals feel welcome in a school community—and to support the community's shift to a more expansive view of gender—is to pay attention to the pronouns people use to refer to themselves. In addition to leaving a blank space for gender on forms for new staff and families, consider including a space for individuals to list their preferred pronouns. If this is not possible, you can also ask individuals privately, "What pronouns do you prefer?" People are usually happy to share their preferences.

If there has not been an opportunity to ask, using the gender-neutral *they*/*their*/*them* is appropriate. The following are examples using *they*/*their*/*them* instead of the binary gender pronouns *she*/*her*/*hers* or *he*/*his*/*him*:

- "Please welcome Corey; *they* will be the new teacher in classroom 4."

- "Corey still needs *their* paperwork processed before being added to payroll."

- "I finished making Corey's ID badge, so can you give it to *them*, please?"

identity, background, and experiences can provide a framework for planning and implementing activities and interacting with others (Kintner-Duffy et al. 2012).

In addition to creating Get to Know Me profiles and books for staff and children, programs may also make a colorful display that showcases a different staff member or teaching team each month. When such displays are placed near the main entrance, families also benefit as they learn about the whole staff, not just their children's teachers.

Step 3: Include the LGBTQIA+ community and its culture

During a transition meeting with Donna, Carla is horrified when Donna suggests that Amanda probably should not be working at the center because she is a lesbian. Carla cannot imagine firing a staff member for that reason, especially a staff member as warm and caring as Amanda. Carla has seen the important connections Amanda has formed with the children and families in her classroom.

Carla's brother is a high school teacher who is gay, so she's seen the prejudice he has endured. She has attended PFLAG (formerly Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meetings because she wanted to learn how to support him—and now she is thinking about applying those lessons at her center. She knows she has to work with families and staff to create an environment where everyone is welcome, so she adds "Embracing staff diversity" to the agenda for the next family/staff organization meeting. She also calls her brother for advice. He suggests she contact PFLAG or GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) for ideas about how to be more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ staff.

When the culture of a school intentionally includes members of the LGBTQIA+ community, it signals to the community that the school values diverse perspectives and experiences. There are many ways to integrate LGBTQIA+ culture into a program. Start by identifying and reaching out to local LGBTQIA+ organizations and resources. While PFLAG and GLSEN are national organizations, they have local chapters across the United States that may also be helpful. Programs can

add LGBTQIA+ resources to their lending libraries or family resource centers and invite local members of the LGBTQIA+ community to attend events, read to the children, or serve on committees.

Programs can also celebrate the contributions of LGBTQIA+ individuals in various ways—and celebrate that all of us have multifaceted identities. When honoring cultural histories and heritages by observing Black History Month, Women's History (or Herstory) Month, or Asian Heritage Month, identify and incorporate LGBTQIA+ individuals from each group. In addition, join the LGBTQIA+ community in celebrating Coming Out Day, Anti-Bullying Day, or Pride Month. During these special events—and throughout the year—publicly display images that represent the LGBTQIA+ community, such as pink triangles, rainbow flags, and pictures and quotes from people who identify as LGBTQIA+. Ensure that each classroom library contains books with LGBTQIA+ characters or themes. These actions help demonstrate a program's commitment to inclusion.

Step 4: Think of others as LGBTQIA+

True culture change requires an intentional shift in sometimes unconscious modes of thinking on the part of program personnel and administrators. Homophobia toward LGBTQIA+ early childhood professionals is frequently caused by fear, ignorance, and bigotry. Some people may be afraid that LGBTQIA+ teachers will "recruit" young children to be LGBTQIA+, influence children's sexualities and/or gender identities, sexually abuse young children, or cause harm to children just by being around them (King 2004; Jackson 2009; Ferfolja & Hopkins 2013).

Celebrating staff helps build relationships between children, families, and staff and enriches classroom curriculum.

When LGBTQIA+ staff work in early childhood programs that make the effort to include them, staff, families, and children can realize that people who identify as LGBTQIA+ are no different from anyone else.

Creating a supportive environment can also be affirming for those staff members who recognize their sexuality or gender identities later in life, after they have been working in a program for some time. If the program has created an atmosphere in which LGBTQIA+ identities are viewed as part of the rich variety of experiences and backgrounds staff members contribute to the center, an individual revealing their sexuality or gender identity will not be seen as a shocking scandal or fodder for gossip. When program staff and administrators begin to think of others as LGBTQIA+, they pave the way for a diverse school community and for an inclusive society that benefits everyone.

One important part of creating an inclusive environment is learning the terminology and etiquette of the LGBTQIA+ community. Use terms such as *cisgender* (a person whose identity corresponds with the gender assigned to them at birth) and gender neutral terms such as *partner*, *spouse*, or *significant other* rather than *husband* or *wife*. Ask staff members and families what pronouns they prefer (see "Pronouns," left). For administrators in particular, it's also important to begin to dialogue with families and staff about the benefits of having LGBTQIA+ staff in the program and how to embrace them, helping them to think of colleagues, staff, and other people in the program community as LGBTQIA+. Shifting the mindset from one in which everyone is heterosexual and conforms to binary male or female gender norms can combat stereotypes, discrimination, and misinformation. It

allows LGBTQIA+ issues to become social justice issues in early childhood classrooms—and it establishes a supportive environment for children who are exploring their gender identities and expressions. (For more on gender exploration and fluidity in early childhood, see "Tate and the Pink Coat: Exploring Gender and Enacting Anti-Bias Principles" in the March 2019 *YC*: NAEYC.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2019/exploring-gender-enacting-anti-bias.)

When Amanda arrives at work, Miguel and his family greet her in the hallway.

"Who's this?" Miguel asks, pointing to Amanda's Getting to Know You profile on the bulletin board.

"That's Angela," Amanda replies.

"Is she your sister? She's in one, . . . two, . . . three pictures!" Miguel counts.

Miguel's family is also looking at the board. Amanda knows they hold conservative ideological and religious beliefs. But she had spoken to the new director, Carla, before posting her profile, and she knows she has Carla's support.

Amanda kneels to get on Miguel's level. "Angela is my wife," she says, avoiding eye contact with Miguel's family.

"Does that mean you're a lesbian?" Miguel's father asks. Amanda slowly looks up and says "Yes," unsure what to expect. Miguel's mother jumps in, saying "At family/staff organization meetings, Carla has talked with us about employing LGBTQIA+ staff. Carla suggested we think about what it means to put rainbow flag stickers on the entry doors or invite a PFLAG representative to speak to us. Maybe you should come to a meeting."

Surprised, Amanda stammers, "Okay, I'll talk with Carla." She can't believe the changes Carla has made in such a short time.

Conclusion

Being LGBTQIA+ can profoundly affect a teacher's professional life. It can create a sense of hypervigilance, increase stress, influence classroom practices, and impact the relationships the teacher has with children, families, and colleagues. Identifying ways to create safe, supportive environments that embrace LGBTQIA+ staff should be a goal for all early childhood program administrators and staff. Children benefit when staff are at ease, emotionally available, and able to use their own lives as resources for the curriculum.

The process of embracing LGBTQIA+ staff starts with imagining an environment in which LGBTQIA+ early childhood professionals will feel welcome and comfortable, and then working to make that vision a reality, starting with the steps outlined here. Early childhood program staff and administrators who embrace LGBTQIA+ staff create a climate that celebrates diversity and difference, spreading the message to the community that everyone is accepted.

References

Derman-Sparks, L., & J.O. Edwards. 2020. *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, 2nd ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children).

Ferfolja, T., & L. Hopkins. 2013. "The Complexities of Workplace Experience for Lesbian and Gay Teachers." *Critical Studies in Education* 54 (3): 311–24.

Ferfolja, T., & E. Stavrou. 2015. "Workplace Experiences of Australian Lesbian and Gay Teachers: Findings from a National Survey." *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 173: 113–38.

Feeney, S., & N.K. Freeman. 2018. *Ethics and the Early Childhood Educator: Using the NAEYC Code*, 3rd ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Gates, G.J. 2017. "In U.S., More Adults Identifying as LGBTQ." *Gallup.* news.gallup.com/poll/201731/lgbt-identification-rises.aspx.

Gray, E.M. 2013. "Coming Out as a Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual Teacher: Negotiating Private and Professional Worlds." *Sex Education* 13 (6): 702–14.

Human Rights Campaign. 2019. "State Maps of Laws and Policies: Employment." www.hrc.org/state-maps/employment.

Jackson, J. 2009. "'Teacher by Day. Lesbian by Night': Queer(y)ing Identities and Teaching." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 6 (2): 52–70.

Keating, D., & L. Karklis. 2016. "The Increasingly Diverse United States of America." *The Washington Post.* www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/how-diverse-is-america/.

King, J.R. 2004. "The (Im)Possibility of Gay Teachers for Young Children." *Theory into Practice* 43 (2): 122–27.

Kintner-Duffy, V.L., R. Vardell, J.K, Lower, & D.J. Cassidy. 2012. "'The Changers and the Changed': Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 33 (3): 208–23.

Lundin, M. 2016. "Homo- and Bisexual Teachers' Ways of Relating to the Heteronorm." *International Journal of Teacher Research* 75: 67–75.

NAEYC. 2011. Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment. Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. NAEYC.org/resources/position-statements/ethical-conduct.

NAEYC. 2019. Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education. Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. NAEYC.org/resources/position-statements/equity.

About the author

Jennifer M. Longley, EdD, is a teacher and researcher based in Yonkers, New York, and is assistant professor of early childhood education at Borough of Manhattan Community College-CUNY. She is also involved in many LGBTQIA+ social justice initiatives.