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Achieving Safety, Permanency and
Well-Being by Improving Practice
with LGBTQ Youth and Families

Sample LGBTQ Affirming Homestudy Questions & Rationale

This guide was produced by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's All Children – All Families program and discusses key considerations for conducting LGBTQ-inclusive and affirming homestudies. For each topic area, potential questions are listed as well as the rationale for each question, and additional considerations to keep in mind. *These are suggestions* and the exact questions one should ask an applicant will depend on the individual situation. As is the case for many homestudy questions which can feel invasive or intrusive for applicants, *it may be especially helpful to explain the rationale behind questions prior to asking them.*

All Children - All Families has guided agencies across the U.S. in improving practice with LGBTQ youth and parents for more than a decade. To learn more and take advantage of the program's practice improvement model on behalf of your agency, visit hrc.org/acaf.

Topic: Coming Out and Living Openly

Before reviewing potential interview questions, let's consider some information related to the "coming out" concept and the LGBTQ community. The LGBTQ community is diverse and encompasses an array of different identities and experiences related to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Every LGBTQ person makes deeply personal decisions to be open about who they are with themselves and others — even when it isn't easy. They express that openness by telling friends, family, co-workers and even strangers that — among all the other things they are — they're also lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer. In so doing, they meet a challenge that was handed to them at birth: to be honest about this aspect of their lives, even when it's hard, and to talk with the people they care about, even when they don't know all the words. Every LGBTQ person will meet this challenge in their own way and in their own time. Throughout the process of coming out and living ever more openly, LGBTQ people should always be in control of how, where, when and with whom they choose to be open.

The "coming out" concept is one traditionally used when discussing sexual orientation. For example, someone coming out to her family as bisexual. Transgender people also come out during all stages and walks of life — when they're children or teens, when they're seniors, when they're married, when they're single, when they have children of their own. Transgender people have a gender identity that does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Disclosure for trans people can mean two very different things: disclosing the fact that you are trans to people who know you before you transition, and disclosing the fact that you are trans to people who only know you after transition. Whether by asking friends, family and co-workers to call them by another name and pronoun, or by undergoing medical transition, disclosure to

others can be both critical and stressful. Some transgender people may feel little need to disclose themselves to others, whether or not they plan to transition or already have. Some transgender people come out by having the courage to visibly defy gender roles and stereotypes everyday. For example, someone who is genderqueer or more androgynous in their gender expression may not have the option whether or not to be open about their trans status. For them, there is often no question of disclosure. They live openly and authentically by moving through the world as their authentic selves. Given the diversity among transgender people, there's no single rule to be applied as to whether a person will or even should disclose this aspect of themselves to others.

Questions to Ask:

- 1) When did you first realize you were LGBTQ¹, and when did you begin telling others? What were your early coming out experiences like?

- 2) Are you out in the community? At work? With your family? With friends and neighbors? How important is it to you to be out with these different people/in these different environments?

- 3) It is not uncommon for children to “out” their parents. In the past, have you ever been “outed” by someone? How did you handle it? How did you react?

Rationale Behind Question:

This question will give you insight into the applicants' early stages of the coming out process, and what impact that process had on them and those they came out to (e.g., parents, siblings, close friends, etc.). Applicants do not need to be out in all aspects of their lives, but being out to some people who serve as a support system is essential. Applicants should be at a stage of self-acceptance and integration regarding their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE).

This question will allow you to explore with the applicants, to what degree and in which parts of their lives they are out, giving you insight into the following areas:

- Does the applicant have an adequate support system?
- To what degree does the applicant have pride?
- How does the applicant manage homo/bi/transphobia or discrimination?

This question will help you explore with the applicants how ready they may be to address their status as an LGBTQ family. It will also give you some insight as to what plan the applicants may have in terms of talking to their children about their LGBTQ identity and being an LGBTQ family, and navigating privacy and secrecy.

¹ Note that LGBTQ is used throughout this handout to be inclusive of the entire LGBTQ community. During an interview, it will most likely be more appropriate to use the term for the identity of the individual you are speaking to, rather than the full acronym. For example, “When did you first realize you were gay?”

Other Questions You Might Ask:

- How comfortable are you with your identity as a LGBTQ person?
- What are some of the factors behind your decision to be out or not be out with certain people?

Thoughts and Considerations:

- Remember that coming out and living openly is not the same experience for everyone. A person's coming out story is uniquely their own.
- Consider that the entire coming out *concept* could vary significantly to different people within the LGBTQ community. What it means to "come out" or "live openly" could mean something totally different, for example, to a gay man than to a transgender man.
- Remember that coming out is a lifelong process, not a one-time event.
- Interviewers should judge applicants' coming out decisions only on the basis of how those decisions will affect the applicants' ability to parent a child.
- Interviewers should refrain from viewing applicants negatively in cases where their families have been less than accepting and supportive of their SOGIE. Rather, interviewers should investigate the resilience and coping mechanisms that applicants have developed as a result of any hardship.

Topic: Support Network

Questions to Ask:

- 1) How would you describe the overall quality of your closest relationships in terms of emotional intimacy, openness, honesty, support, tolerance, and acceptance? Have you ever had to negotiate homo/bi/transphobia or heterosexism or cissexism in those relationships? (i.e. siblings, parents, ex-spouse)
- 2) (If applicable) What has been the attitude of your extended family to your partner? Have they been inclusive and welcoming? Is your family supportive of you (and your partner) parenting? If not, what will be your system of support in raising a child?

Rationale Behind Question:

This question will allow you to gain an understanding of the degree to which homo/bi/transphobia and/or heterosexism or cissexism exists within the applicant's significant relationships. This will be an important factor as these dynamics will also affect the child(ren). It will be important to explore how the applicant might mitigate any negative dynamics that the children may experience from their family's present relationships.

As with all families, because extended family members will be part of the family's life, it's important to know how supportive they are of applicant(s), and what role they will have in the family. If family members are not supportive, are there other sources of support, and how will the parents mitigate any negative dynamics that the children may experience from their extended family members?

- 3) What do you know about the attitudes of local schools, pediatricians, neighbors, faith communities, youth organizations, etc. in relation to LGBTQ families? Do you feel you need help gathering this information?
- This question will give you an indication of how proactive the applicants are in terms of understanding their status as a LGBTQ family and what experiences (negative and positive) or unique needs they might have. This will also give you insight as to what plans the applicants have in place to meet all of the needs of the child(ren). This is an opportunity to direct the applicants to local resources.
- 4) Who are the other close, trusted adults in your lives who will be additional support to your child(ren)? What other gender identities and expressions will your child(ren) see in these adults?
- This question is intended to explore the wide range of caring adults who will be a part of the child's community as they grow up. This is not to suggest that two moms, two dads, or a single parent of any gender can't provide what children need, but to point out that there are stages in children's lives when they may seek guidance or support from an adult of one gender for a specific need. For example, a boy with two moms might want or need to talk to an adult man about dating; or a cisgender girl with two dads might want to talk to a cis woman about bodily changes during puberty, etc. All children benefit from loving, supportive relationships with adults of all genders. Therefore, male applicants should be encouraged to consider women in their lives who can be supports to their children, and female applicants should similarly consider men in their lives who could do the same.

Other Questions You Might Ask:

- How does your family feel about your decision to foster/adopt?
- Do you have connections to other foster/adoptive parents? To other LGBTQ parents?

Thoughts and Considerations:

- In situations where an applicant's family relationships are damaged or lost, investigate the ways in which they create community and family with other people. Interviewers should remember that it is common for LGBTQ people to create incredibly strong friend networks—or families of choice—in cases where their biological families cannot provide them with all the support that they need.

Topic: Coping with Homo/Bi/Transphobia and Understanding Differences

Questions to Ask:

- 1) How have homo/bi/transphobia and/or heterosexism or cissexism affected your life and how have you dealt with this? What are the coping mechanisms you have used to face discrimination/rejection (if applicable)? Which ones have proven to be most useful for you?

Note: It can be helpful to ask applicants to share a specific life experience that illustrates how they reacted – it can be an indicator of how they will deal with future incidents, giving us a “track record” of their behavior in the face of challenges.

- 2) Are there ways in which being LGBTQ have helped prepare you for parenthood? Would you consider fostering/adopting a young person who is LGBTQ or questioning their SOGIE?

- 3) How would you talk about SOGIE with a child in your home? How will you help your children if they experience prejudice because of your LGBTQ identity? Many of our children have the difficult experience of being “different”

Rationale Behind Question:

These questions will give you further insight into how the applicants dealt with challenges they faced within the process of coming out and living openly. They will give you knowledge of applicants’ coping mechanisms and strengths, which can relate to how they will cope with the challenges of being a parent and foster positive coping mechanisms in their children. They will provide you with information as to any internalized homo/bi/transphobia applicants may be experiencing and how this should be processed in relationship to their (new) role as parent. The questions also provide insight into how applicants deal with “world views” that may not approve of their LGBTQ identity, similar to what adoptees sometimes experience as a consequence of adoption being part of who they are.

These questions are an opportunity to see how an applicant’s LGBTQ identity can be a strength rather than a challenge. Many LGBTQ parents can empathize with foster/adopted children who experience discrimination, and can sometimes relate to the experience of being rejected by (or having complicated, compromised relationships with) families of origin. LGBTQ parents have a unique strength when it comes to what they may offer to an LGBTQ-identified youth.

Being faced with others’ prejudice or bias is an experience that most people, including children, will go through. Discussing with applicants how they will help their children as they experience prejudice ensures as much as possible that parents are ready to meet this need. This question is equally as important as asking how applicants will help their child(ren) understand

(being a member of one or more marginalized groups)—what skills and/or strengths would you bring to helping them through this challenge?

their experience and identity as an adoptee.

Thoughts and Considerations:

- Interviewers must not blame LGBTQ applicants for the existence of homo/bi/transphobia in the world. Society’s fear and prejudice is not a reason to deny qualified applicants the opportunity to foster/adopt, nor to deny children the right to live with loving, stable, accepting parents.
- Rather than to judge LGBTQ families for the existence of homo/bi/transphobia, interviewers should focus on the applicants’ coping skills and resiliency. Most importantly, applicants must be able to demonstrate foresight and preparedness for helping children cope as well.

Topic: Pathway to Parenthood

Questions to Ask:

- 1) Have you considered other options as pathways to parenthood? If so, please tell me about these. What experiences with infertility—if any—have you had, and how have you processed these experiences? Where are you in the process of grieving any feelings of loss you may have around not having biological children?

Rationale Behind Question:

While these are questions that are relevant for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ applicants alike, many LGBTQ applicants may not have had the same ability to create their families biologically. Some LGBTQ individuals or couples may have faced infertility. In addition to infertility, some transgender people have decided against having biological children for personal or social reasons, and some do not have a partner they can create a pregnancy with (e.g., a transgender woman and cisgender man cannot become pregnant together). However, some transgender people do choose to have biological children after they transition. In addition to exploring whether there is loss/grief related to fertility challenges, we want to make sure that an applicant’s decision to adopt has been reached via education, rational processing, and informed decision-making mechanisms.

Also, whereas a straight, cisgender couple who has experienced infertility is likely to have been encouraged to grieve and process that

experience, LGBTQ people who do not have the ability to have biological children are less likely to have had the same encouragement.

Thoughts and Considerations:

- Interviewers may find that LGBTQ applicants are more motivated or intentional when they choose to build their families through foster care and/or adoption, at least in part due to the limited family-building options that they may have.
- On the other hand, just like with non-LGBTQ applicants, LGBTQ applicants may have inadequate or inappropriate motivations.

Topic: Partnerships & Relationships

Questions to Ask (Couples):

- 1) Explore with each couple:
 - Strengths and vulnerabilities
 - Relationship/household roles
 - Decision making
 - Conflict negotiation
 - Impact fostering/adopting will have on relationship

If applicable:

- How they share parenting
- How fostering/adopting will impact children in home

- 2) Have you had significant relationships in the past? If so, how do they affect your life and present relationship now? What have you learned from these relationships?

Rationale Behind Question:

These topics are the kind of topics interviewers ask of all applicant couples, and we list them here to make the point that the relationships of LGBTQ couples should be treated in a homestudy similarly to those of non-LGBTQ relationships. Remember that many LGBTQ people are already raising (or have already raised) children.

Remember that, like non-LGBTQ people, many LGBTQ people have experienced previous relationships that are significant to their stories. Do not to assume you know someone's sexual orientation based on their current relationship status. For example, a woman who is currently in a relationship with a woman could identify as bisexual, queer, or another sexual orientation besides "lesbian." Use gender neutral language when discussing relationships to avoid making assumptions about a person's sexual orientation.

3) (If unmarried same-sex couple)
How do you negotiate your family finances? Are finances joined or kept separate? What, if any, legal protections have you (or will you) put in place to ensure that your family is cared for in case of changes in health, employment, housing, relationship status, etc.? Do you plan to get married in the future? If not, can you tell me more about that decision?

For unmarried same-sex couples, laws around joint and second-parent adoptions have an enormous impact on the kinds of financial and legal arrangements they can make to keep their families secure. It is critical to know that they have explored the ways in which these arrangements will impact the logistics and power dynamics in their family once a child is placed.

4) (If unmarried same-sex couple)
If joint or second-parent adoption is not available in your state, who will be the legal adopter? How did you or will you come to this decision? How will you, as a couple, handle the potential challenges and power dynamics that arise when only one partner is a legal parent? (For example, issues of “ownership” or “whose kid is it?”)

Questions to Ask (Singles):

- 1) Have you had significant relationships in the past (including marriages)? If so, how do they affect your life now? What have you learned from these relationships?
- 2) Do you date currently, and if so, how would you describe your dating life? How do you meet the people you date and what do you look for in a significant other? How do you plan to

Rationale Behind Question:

Remember that many LGBTQ people have experienced previous relationships—including marriages—that are significant to their stories. Also recognize the importance of using gender neutral language while discussing current relationships and relationship history in order to avoid making assumptions about a person’s sexual orientation.

One false stereotype about LGBTQ people is that they are all promiscuous and “oversexed,” and this assumption can influence the manner in which interviewers question LGBTQ applicants about their dating practices. Interviewers should inquire about single applicants’ dating practices in the way that

balance dating with parenting responsibilities?

they similar questions of non-LGBTQ applicants.

3) Do you hope/expect to end up with a long-term partner one day? How/when would you introduce a partner to your child(ren)? How would you expect a partner to impact your child(ren)? How would you expect parenting to impact your relationships?

The sexual orientation of an applicant, whether single or coupled, is unknown until the applicant shares this information. These questions are an opportunity to explore how the experience of children and parents might change when a partner joins a family, and how parents will talk to their children about this shift.

Thoughts and Considerations:

- Remember that LGBTQ people often have the experience of people viewing them in an over-sexualized way. For this reason, questions about sexual/love relationships can feel loaded to LGBTQ applicants, and interviewers should only ask relationship questions that are typical to ask of all applicants. Providing a copy of the interview guide in advance can assure LGBTQ applicants that these personal questions are asked of all prospective parents.
- This is an area of the homestudy where some interviewers will feel the most uncomfortable working with LGBTQ families, subsequently creating greater discomfort for the families being studied. Interviewers should talk with colleagues about any discomfort they feel and practice asking the relevant questions before they conduct homestudies with LGBTQ applicants.
- One mistake that interviewers should avoid is assuming that, in same-sex relationships, one person takes on the “male” or “man’s” role and the other, the “female” or “woman’s” role. While traditional masculine and feminine roles may be observed in same-sex relationships, all couples are different and one should avoid asking questions based on this stereotype.
- As of June 2015, marriage equality is the law of the land in all 50 states. Despite this fact, not all same-sex couples will choose to get married – just as not all different-sex (straight) couples choose to get married. Interviewers must not view same-sex couples negatively or less committed if they are not legally married. Instead, agency staff should discuss with same-sex couples/LGBTQ applicants all the potential legal steps they can take to protect their families. Examples of these protections, outside of marriage, include domestic partnership, civil unions, second-parent adoptions, living trusts, medical and financial powers of attorney, access to health insurance/medical care, etc.

Topic: Gender Identity and Transition

The term “transgender” is used to describe people whose gender identity does not align with their sex assigned at birth. This definition covers a very diverse group of people with an array of different gender identities. Some transgender people transition and live as men or women (e.g., a trans man who was assigned female at birth and now lives as a man). This could mean using a different name and gender pronouns and changing the way they express their gender through clothes, hair, etc. (all aspects of a *social* transition). For others – not all – this will also involve medical intervention, for example through hormone therapy or surgery (aspects of *medical* transition). Some trans people identify outside the gender binary – male or female – and use terms like genderqueer to identify their genders. Similarly, people with non-binary identities often take steps to socially transition and may or may not undergo any medical intervention. Before determining which of the questions below are applicable and/or appropriate, it is necessary to understand the person’s gender identity.

Questions to Ask:

Rationale Behind Question:

1) If gender identity information is unknown:

Is there another name besides your legal name that you would like me to use?

What pronouns should I use when referring to you?

How do you identify your gender?

If clarification is needed:

I’m unfamiliar with that term and want to make sure I understand what it means for you. Could you say more?

Prior to the time of the homestudy, ideally an applicant’s gender identity, preferred name and pronouns are already known and should be used consistently throughout the interview. However, depending on your agency’s practices and the specific situation of each family, this is not always the case.

If information related to an applicant’s gender identity is not known or if you need further clarity or have reason to believe the records you have are not accurate, asking these questions will communicate a great deal of respect for your client’s identity and will afford you the opportunity to make sure you are addressing your client respectfully and appropriately.

If an applicant uses an identity that you are unfamiliar with, ask non-judgmental questions from a place of openness to understand.

If an applicant expresses concern or confusion as to why you are asking these questions, explain that you want to make sure you aren’t assuming anything about their identity and that the homestudy process necessitates that you ask important questions to get to know them as much as possible.

- 2) If person identifies as gender/name other than legal gender/name, and the extent to which any legal changes have been made is unknown:

Have you / will you make any legal changes to reflect your gender identity (e.g., legal name change)?

Asking this question will help you understand and be prepared for any complexities regarding paperwork required for the home study, e.g., whether birth certificate and social security card “match” the applicant’s current name and gender.

- 3) Could you describe your level of openness with others about your trans status?

The exact nature of this question will vary based on the identity and experiences of every trans applicant. Some trans applicants may have transitioned many years ago and may be “stealth,” meaning they do not disclose their trans status widely to others. They may not openly identify as part of the trans community at all. Some people who have transitioned continue to be open about being transgender, and may even be involved in advocacy or public education efforts. Others may be more visibly gender non-conforming and therefore unavoidably public, in a way, about their trans status. Still others may be in the process of exploring their options for social or medical transition.

For all applicants, this question will give you insight into whether and to what extent they are open to others about their gender identity/trans status. It will be helpful to explore how their gender identity/trans status has impacted their close, personal relationships (e.g., parents, siblings, close friends) as well as other important connections (e.g., employer, etc.). It will also help you explore what kind of support system the applicant has.

- 4) If person is transitioning genders and their history of or future plans for medical intervention is unknown:

Just like other non-transgender specific medical needs or possible surgeries should be addressed, this will help you further explore the applicant’s support system and whether or not that support system would be able to meet the needs of the

Are you planning any surgeries? If so, what will you do about childcare during the recovery period?

family while the applicant undergoes medical intervention and heals. Because a thorough medical history is part of the home study application process, issues related to any medical aspects of gender transition (hormones, surgery) will be addressed.

5) How do you anticipate telling your child(ren) that you are transgender? How will you answer their questions and help them understand gender?

These questions will help you explore with the applicants how prepared they are to talk about their gender identity and their experiences as a trans person with their children. As with the topic of adoption, we want to make sure that the applicants have a plan for addressing the various parts of who they are as a family in a proactive manner, as opposed to waiting until the children ask, or some event occurs.

It may be necessary to talk through with a trans applicant the ways in which their trans status/gender identity would be a relevant topic of conversation/exploration with children they are parenting, particularly for those who are not already parents.

6) How do you think having a trans parent could impact your child(ren)?

This question will help you explore with the applicant not only how they believe their children will be affected by having a trans parent, but more importantly, the ways in which the applicant anticipates addressing any issues that may arise.

Remember that this question is not meant to only elicit challenges these children may face. It is also an opportunity to explore the strengths a trans applicant brings to parenting and the benefits a child may find in joining their family.

Thoughts and Considerations:

- Remember to use the name and pronoun that the person uses. When in doubt, ask applicants which pronouns they prefer you to use. Avoid making assumptions.
- It is not appropriate to ask someone invasive questions about their body parts or “how far” they have transitioned. If applicants offer information on their transition process, it is appropriate to ask them to describe the experience, how it has made them feel, etc.