Journey to Acceptance: the RISE Care Coordination Team Experience of LGBTQ Foster Youth

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Summary of Findings

The major theme from both interviews was CCT’s positive effect on youth’s confidence and self-acceptance, both generally and regarding their LGBTQ identity. Youth also described improvements in their relationships, mostly with natural supports (relatives, friends, mentors). These improvements came in part through CCT staff facilitating more contact between the youth and their families, and in part, because the youth felt they improved their interpersonal and communication skills and could better express their feelings, particularly about their LGBTQ identity.

LGBTQ Identity, Expression, and Community

![Collaborative Teaming](Image 249x2928 to 317x3238)

Understand & Accept LGBTQ Identity

“RISE taught me how to talk about it in a positive way taught me the right things to say because sometimes I didn’t know how to explain it to people.”

Youth reported that their Care Coordination team helped them "find the right words" to talk to other youth about their identity, and also helped them make better decisions and how and when to come out to the people in their lives.

“RISE taught me that I could talk about it.”

Youth noted that their Care Coordination team helped them “find the right words” to talk to other youth about their identity, and that “RISE taught me that I could talk about it.”

Make Decisions about Coming Out

“I was able to meet other people and see that I’m not alone and there are other people going through it.”

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Feel More Connected to the LGBTQ Community

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Deal with Negative Interactions

“I’m more comfortable being myself, and I can handle the situations better with my mom now. That’s helped me a lot.”

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Increase Comfort Having LGBTQ-related Conversations with Adults

“After RISE had come and she would participate in some of the meetings, I know she would ask me more about my romantic relationships, is there anyone I’m interested in. It wasn’t always me going to her.”

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Methods

The qualitative evaluation used a mixed-method design to assess improved self-acceptance, increased connections and family support and decreased family rejection. The evaluation team used a convenience sample and interviewed nine youth who had been participating in CCT at least three months and a second group of nine youth who had completed, or nearly completed, CCT services. The youth ranged from 15-19 years old at the time of their interviews, and were diverse in their LGBTQ identity (including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and gender-variant). Participants were asked about their knowledge, experiences of, and expectations with CCT services, the foster care environment and discussions they had with foster care service providers.

Background

The federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) is a multi-state demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care who face the most serious barriers to permanency. As one of the six grantees in the Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII), the Los Angeles LGBT Center is implementing the RISE (Recognize Intervene Support Empower) initiative. RISE’s Care Coordination Team (CCT) services, targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) children and youth in foster care, aim to reduce time spent in foster care and increase connections with families and support systems adults, increase participants’ self-acceptance, and decrease family rejection. CCT integrates Wraparound and Family Finding and Engagement with LGBTQ-specific support and education.

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Most youth said that participating in RISE helped:

• Improve relationships with important adults in their lives. Most youth felt that their relationships with their family, counselors, or caregivers had gotten better through participation in RISE. Youth attributed these improvements to their own improved communication skills and comfort in being themselves, as well as to the adults’ increased understanding and acceptance of their LGBTQ identity through conversations the adults had with RISE staff or participating in RISE activities.

“RISE helped change a lot of things that were broken with me and my mom’s relationships.”

• Increase signs of support and acceptance from adults. Part of the relationship improvements youth experienced involved more overt acceptance and support for their LGBTQ identity from the adults in their lives. Youth described family members giving direct verbal support for the youth’s identity or romantic partner, as well as increasing involvement in LGBTQ community. Youth also described foster caregivers (such as group home staff) becoming better listeners and demonstrating more respect and support for the youth’s identity.

Practice Implications

The majority of youth expressed that while they were comfortable talking about their romantic lives or other aspects of their LGBTQ identity with adults, they preferred to have the adult start the conversation. Youth noted that acceptance of their identity does not necessarily equate to comfort in discussing boyfriends, girlfriends, or other LGBTQ-related topics, and they may assume that if an adult does not ask them about something, it’s because the adult doesn’t want to talk about it.

“I kind of want them to bring it up, just so I know when they’re ready to bring it up.”

A young person’s identity and personal relationships are a developmentally important part of adolescence, and knowing they can talk about this aspect of their lives with a trusted adult allows youth a sense of normalcy. Where adults may consider ways to let the youth know that they are safe in discussing any aspect of their lives. However, it is still important to respect boundaries drawn by the youth. Overall, youth felt more comfortable sharing personal information with adults with whom they already had a trusting relationship.

Further normalcy can be encouraged by helping LGBTQ foster youth connect with their local LGBTQ community (e.g., community centers, youth groups and activities, support groups). RISE youth frequently mentioned the value of talking to someone with shared life experiences, who “understood where they were coming from.”

For More Information

A research brief describing the findings from the first round of RISE youth interviews is now available from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). The final RISE formative evaluation report, along with the final evaluation reports from the other PII grantees, will be available in the future at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/permanency-innovations-initiative-ei-evaluation.

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