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Strategies to Promote LGBTQ+ Inclusivity in Adult-Serving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

Healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs for adults teach skills for forming and maintaining healthy, stable romantic relationships and marriages. Programs can serve a wide variety of populations, including married couples, unmarried couples, and individuals who may or may not be in a relationship. While these programs are available to adults who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or another sexual or gender minority (LGBTQ+), few of them specifically address the perspective and experiences of LGBTQ+ adults. The number of adults who identify as LGBTQ+ has greatly increased in recent years, and LGBTQ+ adults may encounter different issues and have different experiences in their romantic relationships than non-LGBTQ+ adults. For these reasons, it is important for HMRE programs to consider how to make their programs more inclusive for this growing and underserved population.

This brief highlights strategies HMRE programs can use to make their programs more inclusive for LGBTQ+ adults in the areas of (1) recruitment, outreach, and initial engagement; (2) program content and delivery; and (3) staff hiring and training. These strategies are derived from a white paper on making HMRE programs more inclusive for LGBTQ+ youth and adults,¹ which was developed as part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project. They are informed by a review of the literature on relationship education and



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About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. The project focuses on gathering and summarizing information on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programming and connected areas, using literature reviews, knowledge maps, expert consultations, and technical work groups. The project team has drafted a range of products exploring key topics that emerged during the project.

inclusive programming for LGBTQ+ adults, focus groups with HMRE program directors and program practitioners, and interviews with HMRE educators and participants. However, most of the strategies have not been evaluated in the HMRE program context. Readers are encouraged to reference the white paper for more information on the evidence supporting the strategies in this brief.

To use these strategies effectively, programs should consider partnering with people in the community who work with LGBTQ+ youth to better understand the backgrounds and needs of the youth they intend to serve. Such partners can include leaders or members of school-based gender and sexuality or gay-straight alliances (GSAs), local PFLAG chapters, or other local pride organizations. Because inclusivity is a dynamic and ongoing process, we suggest HMRE programs engage with these partners on a regular basis and incorporate an assessment of inclusivity into program improvement efforts. When reviewing the strategies presented in this brief, practitioners should consider how they can engage partners with in-depth knowledge of LGBTQ+ youth—including youth themselves—to put these strategies into practice.



RECRUITMENT, OUTREACH, AND INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

Most adult-serving HMRE programs engage in a variety of outreach activities to recruit eligible couples and individuals. These activities can include advertising (for example, ads on social media), referrals from partner agencies, and direct outreach from HMRE program staff. To recruit more LGBTQ+ participants and encourage initial engagement in services, programs need to demonstrate that they are LGBTQ+-friendly and have services relevant and relatable to this population. We note two promising strategies below.

Recruit in settings that are welcoming to and frequented by LGBTQ+ people.

HMRE programs can form recruitment partnerships with organizations that serve local LGBTQ+ communities. For example, community centers, LGBTQ+-friendly religious institutions, and advocacy agencies within an LGBTQ+ neighborhood could be a source of consistent referrals. LGBTQ+ communities and neighborhoods also offer opportunities for advertising and direct outreach (for example, by advertising at a Pride event). Online communities are also important to consider; for example, programs can advertise on social media or on the websites of LGBTQ+-friendly organizations.

Use inclusive images and language in recruitment and initial program materials.

HMRE programs often develop printed or other visual materials to aid in their recruitment efforts (for example, flyers, brochures, and testimonials). These materials should be inclusive and display symbols like a Pride flag, rainbow-colored font, and/or pictures of LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families. These materials should also feature inclusive language. For example, consider referring to the program as “relationship education” instead of “marriage education” or using the term “partner” instead of “husband/wife” or “boyfriend/girlfriend.” These terms avoid making assumptions about participants’ relationship status and intentions and help establish a welcoming environment.

This recommendation applies to materials beyond those for recruitment. For example, an HMRE program can modify intake forms to allow participants to select from a variety of sexual and gender identities and relationships statuses. Additionally, program leaders, educators, and case managers can wear name tags with their pronouns and encourage participants to do the same.



PROGRAM CONTENT AND DELIVERY

Many of the topics HMRE programs cover are applicable to people regardless of their gender or sexual identity. For example, communication and conflict management skills, which are covered by most HMRE curricula, are relevant to all types of interpersonal relationships. To help LGBTQ+ program participants see how they can apply these skills to their romantic relationships, programs must highlight examples and experiences that participants can relate to. In addition, LGBTQ+ people often have unique needs and relationship circumstances. To address these needs, HMRE programs may need to expand the content they deliver and how they deliver it in the following ways.

Enhance program materials with inclusive language, images, and examples.

Similar to recruitment materials, programs should review the materials they use to deliver the curriculum and other services to make sure they use LGBTQ+-friendly language and images. These materials may include worksheets, handouts, PowerPoint slides, videos, and others. For example, the curriculum may feature a video of a heterosexual couple using a particular communication technique. Instead of showing this video, programs could work with curriculum developers or community partners to identify or create a video featuring an LGBTQ+ couple. Recognizing that the LGBTQ+ community is diverse, program materials should feature a range of LGBTQ+ people, including men and women in same-sex relationships, bisexual individuals, transgender individuals, and others. Additionally, educators should use a range of pronouns when referring to people in the examples, such as “they” or “ze” rather than only “he” and “she.”

Not only should HMRE programs depict LGBTQ+ individuals and couples in their materials, they should also include examples that highlight how skills—such as healthy communication, conflict management, or building trust—apply to the unique issues that arise in LGBTQ+ relationships. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals may have differing levels of “outness” or be reconciling their sexuality with their religious beliefs, which could, in turn, influence their relationship dynamics. A lesson on building trust with a romantic partner could address these types of challenges.

Work with curriculum developers to address topics relevant to LGBTQ+ people and relationships.

Programs may need to incorporate additional content into their curriculum to better address the unique issues that arise in LGBTQ+ relationships. Box 1 shows potential topics to consider. HMRE programs can work with curriculum developers to identify and draw from existing evidence-informed curricula or trainings to address these topics. Alternatively, programs can work with experts in the LGBTQ+ community to develop new content.

When integrating content about LGBTQ+ relationships into existing curricula, programs should make sure to use a strengths-based approach. Often when programs address LGBTQ+ people and relationships, they focus only on the risks and challenges LGBTQ+ people face. Instead, programs

should emphasize the unique strengths and resiliencies of LGBTQ+ people and their relationships, such as their ability to embrace roles that are not based on gender stereotypes. Programs should also acknowledge the systemic factors that could lead to negative relationship and family outcomes, such as social stigma, discrimination, and minority stress.

Box 1: Potential inclusive topics for adult-serving HMRE programs

- Dealing with stigma, discrimination, and legal challenges
- Preparing financial, medical, or legal documents in states with limited LGBTQ+ protections
- Managing relationships with extended family members
- “Coming out” and relationship disclosure to difference people and in different situations
- Healthy communication, consent, and coercion in LGBTQ+ relationships, including polyamorous or non-dyadic relationships
- Family planning, parenting, coparenting, and blended families
- Positive and negative outcomes associated with marriage, including considerations for shared income and property
- Gender transitions/managing a partner’s transition



Consider using alternative delivery formats to encourage LGBTQ+ participants to engage in services.

As noted above, individuals in the LGBTQ+ community can be stigmatized or not “out,” leading to a desire to avoid services where they need to identify as LGBTQ+. This may be particularly true for group-based services that combine participants who may or may not be LGBTQ+. Programs may consider offering services to LGBTQ+ people separately or providing virtual or asynchronous services to help LGBTQ+ people feel more comfortable attending.



STAFF HIRING AND TRAINING

Program staff, including educators, case managers, and others, all contribute to creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ participants. It is important, therefore, for programs to ensure their staff are well-trained and supported. Below, we highlight strategies for achieving this goal.

Hire staff who are LGBTQ+ or who have lived experience as an ally or advocate.

HMRE programs can make it a priority to employ staff who are members of the LGBTQ+ community or who are active allies or advocates. These staff may have experienced situations and experiences in their relationships that resonate with LGBTQ+ participants, allowing them to build trust and rapport. Although this may be difficult to assess in a job interview, HMRE program can note that LGBTQ+ applicants are encouraged to apply or ask that people speak to their advocacy work in a cover letter.

Foster an inclusive and accepting organizational culture.

Ensuring an HMRE program is inclusive, responsive, and welcoming to LGBTQ+ community involves every staff member at the organization. Commitment to an atmosphere of inclusivity and acceptance should be an organization-wide effort. To that end, leaders should work to ensure their programs foster

an inclusive culture. This could involve modifying policies and procedures to make it explicit that staff are required to be respectful and inclusive. Program supervisors and leaders can further support staff in their delivery of inclusive programming by incorporating feedback as part of regular supervisory conversations and performance evaluations.

Provide staff with training on how to serve LGBTQ+ participants.

Fostering an inclusive culture most likely also involves providing staff with ongoing training related to serving LGBTQ+ participants. Box 2 provides a list of potential training topics to consider. Training should be provided by people or organizations with expertise in working with the LGBTQ+ community.

Box 2: Potential training topics for staff

- Information on LGBTQ+ history, cultural issues, and terminology
- Information on the diverse and intersectional identities of LGBTQ+ adults
- Cultural humility and responding to program participants in a non-defensive manner
- Opportunities to explore one's own biases and misconceptions
- Techniques for managing sensitive interactions in workshops, including discriminatory comments from other participants
- Guidance on local, state, and federal laws and policies related to LGBTQ+ issues
- Supportive and trustworthy resources for LGBTQ+ people and their families



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is important for adult-serving HMRE programs to continue to strive to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community. Being welcoming of LGBTQ+ participants is not enough. To be truly inclusive, programs must directly address the needs and relationship issues that LGBTQ+ adults face. Failing to offer inclusive services runs the risk of excluding—or even harming—LGBTQ+ program participants. While there are potential challenges that accompany this work, enhancing the inclusivity of HMRE programs is key for helping to improve the health and well-being of LGBTQ+ adults and their families.

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