

A Guide for LGBTQ Inclusion for Jewish Summer Camps

*Below you will find several suggestions for how to make your Jewish summer camp a more inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer campers, and those who have LGBTQ parents and family members. These suggestions are organized around the frame of exploring three areas of your camp—**Culture, Policy, and Programming**. Under these headings you will find more specific aspects and action to help you achieve your goal. This list is neither exhaustive, nor does it apply to every camp environment.*

CULTURE

What is the culture of your camp?

The first step towards creating a fully inclusive culture and environment is a commitment to a vision and the values of equality and respect for all people—and cultivating the language necessary to communicate those values and put them into action. Culture is also influenced by policy, which will be discussed in a later section.

Make inclusion of LGBTQ campers a core value of your camp.

Change comes from many directions including the grassroots, the grass tops, and the senior leadership. As you spread the value of LGBTQ inclusion from wherever you stand, developing a commitment from the senior leadership of the camp and buy in on the part staff, parents, and campers is essential in order to enshrine this belief as a core value of your community. It is also crucial that this value be discussed openly and expressed explicitly. Even in communities where there seems to be agreement that inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is essential, it is still important to state this explicitly. You may also find that not everyone is ready for this change and that is also part of the process. Long-term dialogue and on-going communication work to create buy-in and each camp community will progress at its own rate.

Start with the Jewish values that are the basis for your work. Do these values that you have already committed to, also support LGBTQ inclusion? Then, ask what additional Jewish values could be incorporated to strengthen your camp's commitment to inclusion. See Keshet's poster of [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) for some suggestions.

How will people know that your camp places value on LGBTQ inclusion?

If you have already established the values that support LGBTQ inclusion, make sure that they are prominently displayed in camp facilities, on your website, and in print materials. If you are starting the process of re-examining your values, open up forums to review the vision and

values of your community. By publicly stating this as a core value, potential and current LGBTQ campers and families will know that their camp values equality and that they will be protected against discrimination. Saying “we welcome everyone” is not enough.

Educate yourself and others on LGBTQ terms.

Often, one of the greatest challenges for non-LGBTQ people in talking about LGBTQ issues is uncertainty regarding language and vocabulary. As many terms are new, or are used differently by different groups and in different contexts, people are sometimes uncertain and embarrassed to enter a conversation for fear of being wrong, looking ignorant, or of inadvertently hurting someone’s feelings. Educating yourself, being respectful and taking responsibility if you make a mistake goes a long way to making LGBTQ people feel welcomed and safe. Visit the [Keshet website](#) for a list of LGBTQ terminology.

Do not assume the sexual orientation or gender identity of your campers.

When make incorrect assumptions about the sexuality or gender identity of campers, we risk rendering gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals invisible, and may cause deep pain. When we fail to see our campers as their full selves, we risk alienating them from our community and discouraging them from participating fully, or at all. For example, when talking to a camper about dating, don’t automatically assume that they are interested in the opposite sex.

Ensure facilities are accessible to campers and staff of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Restrooms: Everyday actions like using the bathroom are complicated and often dangerous for transgender and gender non-conforming people, because our world often only offers two options “male” and “female.” Consider whether all of your facility’s restrooms must be gender-specific or whether one could be made available to everyone. This need not be complicated; covering the “men” or “women” sign with “all-gender restroom” is sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also. Click [here](#) for the explanatory text that Keshet uses to accompany all gender restroom signs.

Bunks: Ensuring comfortable housing for LGBTQ youth is often a challenge for overnight camps that have traditional “all male” and “all female” bunks or cabins. There is rarely a single solution that meets the needs of every situation. However, it is crucial that open and frank discussions take place for all participants involved to feel comfortable. Here are a few suggestions based upon different situations you might encounter at your camp:

Transgender and gender non-conforming campers:

There is not a “one-size-fits-all” housing policy for transgender or gender non-conforming youth. It is vitally important to openly communicate with the youth about their needs and desires in order to create the best solution. Some transgender youth may feel more comfortable housing with the gender that correlates with their full time presentation and identity, others with their biological sex. Some may want to room with a few select friends and some, if given the option, may prefer their own room. Again, it is important to work with the youth to create a reasonable accommodation that best suits everyone.

A couple rooming together:

This situation is complicated because the camp should be careful to not give campers the impression that they are being punished or treated differently because they are LGBTQ. However, camps often have policies regarding sex and sexual behavior, which LGBTQ campers must follow just like their peers. If it is possible for the couple to remain in the same bunk but be supervised by a staff member sleeping in the same room that might be preferable. However, again, a resolution would depend upon an open, honest conversation and a decision that follows camp protocols and makes clear expectations. The important piece to remember is to keep the campers feelings in mind, and be sure to treat this couple as you would any other.

An openly LGBTQ youth bunking with straight identified peers:

There is absolutely no reason why a LGBTQ youth should be not allowed to bunk with straight identified peers. The primary concern in this situation is the possibility for bullying and harassment. Counselors should be trained to identify and deal with bullying and harassment, and should seek support from camp administration if it persists.

LGBTQ Bunk Staff:

When supervising and training all bunk counselors, whether counselors are LGBTQ or non-LGBTQ, it is essential to emphasize appropriate staff-camper boundaries and train them in the norms and expectations of your camp. There is no reason why a staff member’s LGBTQ identity would render them unsuitable to be a bunk counselor or any other staff role that lives in a bunk with campers.

Create a safe camp environment and culture by prohibiting abusive and homophobic language.

The positive and non-homophobic or transphobic language used by staff is an important model for campers of how to treat each other with respect and greatly influences camp culture. One of the most important things a counselor can do to ensure that LGBTQ campers feel safe and welcome in your camp community is to make sure that harassing language is strictly and proactively banned. Words like “faggot” and “dyke” and phrases like “that’s so gay” both

deeply offend and also create an environment that is not only uncomfortable, but unsafe for LGBTQ students. Creating a [“Safe Zone”](#) program—displaying posters, stickers and other literature encouraging acceptance—is a great way to communicate that your camp is a safe environment for all.

However, more than any program or sticker, it is essential to be proactive. When a counselor or other staff member overhears a camper using homophobic or abusive language, it is important that this is pointed out, discussed, and stopped. Incidents like these negatively affect the recipient, the one who perpetrates, and the bystander who witnesses it. Depending on the setting and the situation, the counselor may offer a short or a more involved intervention. If you are only able to provide a limited intervention for whatever reason, you can always revisit the issue after consultation with trusted colleagues. Training for counselors on how to do this is vital so that they feel comfortable and equipped to make it happen. Visit Keshet’s [website](#) for some ideas on how to respond to campers who say “that’s so gay”, and [order or print your own](#) Safe Zone stickers.

Share your culture and let the world know about your commitment to LGBTQ inclusion.

Even if you think it is obvious, explicitly state in marketing materials, on your website and other communications that your camp is welcoming of LGBTQ campers and families. For many, this is the first introduction to who you are and it will go a long way in letting potential campers know that the camp is a safe space for them, and letting all other constituents know the values of your institution. Keshet has [many statements of LGBTQ inclusion and welcoming](#) to share with you.

Inclusion is a journey, not a destination.

Every camp is different, and no one knows your camp better than you. No matter how many trainings you hold, safe space signs you put up, or anti-bullying policies you put into place, the only true way to create a fully open and supportive community is to be committed to values of equality and respect all the time, every day. Have your staff check in regularly and discuss how your camp is meeting its goals and achieving its values. This time for reflection does not necessarily require special meetings, but can be incorporated into your regular staff meetings and check-ins. Bring your campers into the conversation, particularly your CITs and older campers. Brainstorm new ways to encourage greater equality and respect, address any issues and make it an ongoing conversation in your community. A camp that cares deeply about the safety and happiness of their LGBTQ campers will undoubtedly be a wonderful place for them to grow and have a great time.

Make sure your institution is in Keshet's Equality Guide.

Keshet has a searchable [Equality Guide](#), an online guide for finding LGBTQ inclusive clergy and institutions. Be sure to register your camp as soon as possible.

POLICY

Policies that explicitly include LGBTQ families, campers, and staff are the foundation of LGBTQ inclusion in your camp. Inclusive Human Resources policies, documents, and guidelines are a way of demonstrating a commitment to LGBTQ inclusion from the highest levels of organizational leadership. They are also crucial to creating environments for learning and working that are safe for all participants.

Create inclusive policies.

Both current and potential LGBTQ campers and their families, as well as LGBTQ staff members, need to know that your camp values equality, and is committed to protecting them from discrimination and harassment. By mentioning this commitment in your existing policy documents or by creating new language, you will communicate a commitment to equal treatment for all.

The necessary documents include a comprehensive anti-bullying statement for campers, inclusive anti-harassment Human Resources policies for faculty and staff, and a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. These statements should be easily available on your website, printed in your parent and camper handbook, and available upon request.

Visit [Keshet](#) for sample language for different non-discrimination policies.

Ensure inclusive documents.

Make sure your forms including admission, registration, and permission slips are inclusive of LGBTQ families and campers. When crafting such forms, be sure that they are welcoming to a spouse or partner of any gender. Rather than listing "mother" and "father," write "parent/guardian 1" and "parent/guardian 2." Depending on the form, if it is not necessary, take out the question on gender. When you do actually need to know the gender of a camper, write "gender" and leave a blank space to be filled in. This allows parents and campers to fill-in how they want to be identified which may be outside of the two binary genders (male and female).

Create an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force.

Consider convening an LGBTQ or Diversity Task Force charged with strengthening your camp's organizational policies and practices. This group can consist of leadership, staff, and parents. This will insure that your camp has the infrastructure and leadership to effectively respond to issues as they arise, and to proactively identify areas for improvement.

PROGRAMMING

In order to achieve your goals, your values of equality and inclusivity must be imbedded in the everyday life of your camp, which is embodied in all programming and activities in which your campers participate. Here are a few examples of the many possible ways to teach about LGBTQ and Jewish topics.

Reassess your curriculum.

Our commitment to the inclusion of LGBTQ Jews is not just a secular value, but a Jewish value. When appropriate, integrate LGBTQ issues and topics into your programming in order to demonstrate how inclusivity is interwoven with our Judaism. In Jewish history, Holocaust studies and on Israel, there are many ways to include Jewish LGBTQ sources and material. For programs on Bible, look at the prohibitions in Leviticus from a new lens using Jay Michaelson's book, *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*. Also, Judaism says much about positive sexuality, gender and how to treat all people with respect. When discussing Jewish ethics around love and sex, do not just refer to heterosexual dating and marriage. For certain denominations and in pluralistic settings, acknowledge and include a full spectrum of relationships and ways to experience human love. When studying Torah, add an LGBTQ lens to your understand and examination of the text. There are now many resources for this such as the book *Torah Queeries* which provides LGBTQ readings on each *parsha* and for holiday. The book came out of an online series but developed all new submissions so now there are two unique sets of readings on each *parsha* from an LGBTQ perspective. The *Torah Queeries* database can be found [online](#). You can also introduce or bring in LGBTQ scholars who interpret Torah from a LGBTQ perspective (Here is an example from [Dr. Joy Ladin](#).)

Do not automatically group campers by binary gender (male or female).

It is often an impulse of counselors and campers alike to group campers based on binary gender (male or female). However, this is problematic for several reasons: it renders gender non-conforming or transgender campers invisible by assuming a binary gender and it categorizes campers without consent. It also encourages campers to view gender as an either/or category, which reinforces stereotypes and it discourages campers from branching out and exploring friendships and experiences beyond their assigned or assumed gender. As alternatives, consider asking campers to count off, or divide them alphabetically, or by birthdays when you need to

create group. In an age appropriate way, ask campers how they identify, and what words they use to describe themselves, or use gender neutral terms and phrases that don't make assumptions about gender identity.

RESOURCES

Collect and share resources on Jewish LGBTQ issues and topics.

You do not need to reinvent the wheel when introducing LGBTQ issues and ideas to your community. Full LGBTQ inclusion can be a complex process, but there is support for you on the internet and in professional development and training opportunities.

Below are a more suggestions for specific resources that will help you implement your new action steps:

Provide training for your staff, counselors and CITs.

Once your camp has committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ campers, families, and staff it is important to provide your community with the skills they need to put these goals into action. Through training, all stakeholders will have the opportunity to gain tools and resources, reflect on the needs of your population and learn more about how to create inclusive community. Contact [Daniel Bahner](#), Keshet's National Manager of Education and Training, and click [here](#) to find out more about Keshet trainings.

Keshet provides many [resources](#) which have been described throughout this document including [videos](#), [Torah Queeries](#), textual interpretation of Torah and Jewish holidays from an LGBTQ lens, "[Wrestling with God](#)," a collection of classical texts that deal with sexuality, gender and theology; and [Trans Texts](#) a collection of classical Jewish texts on gender in general, and non-conforming gender expressions in particular.

The following are additional resources that will be helpful for your institution:

Here are a few other resources that may be relevant to your institution:

- [Trans Torah](#), a website that seeks to help institutions like you become more trans-inclusive, and collects excellent resources, rituals, videos and text studies
- [The Institute for Judaism, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion](#), which has many useful articles and other resources
- The "[It Gets Better Project](#)"
- "[I am: Trans People Speak](#)," a collection of trans and ally voices from a range of personal experiences
- [Jewish Organization Equality Index](#), tools for Jewish institutions that want to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals



KESHET

Keshet is a national organization that works for full LGBTQ equality and inclusion in Jewish life.

- [National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Institute for Welcoming Resources](#), resources for LGBTQ inclusion in many religions
- [Liturgy and Ritual resources for LGBTQ Jews](#)