A Guide for LGBTQ Inclusion for Jewish Youth Groups

*Below you will find several suggestions for how to make your youth group a more inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning teens, and those who have LGBTQ parents and family members. These suggestions are organized around the frame of exploring three areas of your school—**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 group or organization.*

CULTURE

What is the culture of your youth group?

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 teens a core value of your youth group.

Change comes from many directions including the grass roots, the grass tops and the leadership. As you spread the value of LGBTQ inclusion from wherever you stand, developing a commitment from the adult leadership of the youth group and buy in on the part of youth professionals, parents, and teens 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 school 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 youth group's commitment to inclusion. See Keshet's poster of [Seven Jewish Values for Inclusive Community](#) for some suggestions.

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

If you have already established the values that support LGBTQ inclusion, make sure that they are prominently displayed in the physical space, on your website, and in print materials. If you are starting the process of re-examining your values, open up public and communal discussions about LGBTQ inclusion at the beginning of the school year or in specific forums to review the vision and values of your community. By publicly stating this as a core value, potential and current LGBTQ members will know that their youth group values equality and that they will be protected against discrimination. Saying that "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 teens.
When leaders make incorrect assumptions about the sexuality or gender identity of teens, we risk rendering gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning individuals invisible, and may cause deep pain. When we fail to see our teens 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 teen about dating, don't automatically assume that they are interested in the opposite sex.

Ensure your facilities are inclusive.
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. Depending on the existing facility, this need not be complicated; covering the "men" or "women" sign with "all-gender restroom" sign could be sufficient. Remember to do this for temporary, shared, or rental facilities also.

This step towards inclusion might also mean making renovations so that every stall has privacy. If an all gender bathroom is not possible or appropriate for a given setting, think creatively for how a transgender or gender non-conforming student can have a safe bathroom space such as access to a faculty bathroom. Visit the Keshet website for the explanatory text that Keshet uses to accompany all-gender restroom signs.

Overnight Housing.
Ensuring comfortable housing for LGBTQ youth is often a challenge for overnight youth programs that have traditional "all male," and "all female" housing arrangements. 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 during programs:

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

An open LGBTQ youth rooming with straight identified peers:
There is absolutely no reason why a LGBTQ youth should be not allowed to room with straight identified peers. The primary concern in this situation is the possibility for bullying and harassment. Staff should be trained to identify and deal with bullying and harassment, and should seek support from their movement or synagogue staff if it persists.

Create a safe environment by prohibiting abusive and homophobic language.
The positive and non-homophobic or transphobic language used by youth professionals is an important model for teens of how to treat each other with respect and greatly influences youth group culture. One of the most important things a youth professional can do to ensure that LGBTQ teens feel safe and welcome in your 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 teens. Creating a "Safe Zone" program—displaying posters, stickers and other literature encouraging acceptance—is a great way to communicate that your youth group is a safe environment for all.

However, more than any program or sticker, it is essential to be proactive. When a youth professional overhears a student 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 professional 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 youth professionals 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 students who say "that's so gay", and order or print your own Safe Zone stickers. Keshet is able to provide further training in this area.

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 youth group is welcoming of LGBTQ students and families. For many, this is the first introduction to who you are and it will go a long way in letting potential members know that

the youth group 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 youth group is different, and no one knows your youth group 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 youth group 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 teens into the conversation. Brainstorm new ways to encourage greater equality and respect, address any issues and make it an ongoing conversation in your community. A youth group that cares deeply about the safety and happiness of their LGBTQ teens will undoubtedly be a wonderful place for them to belong.

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 youth group as soon as possible.

POLICY

Policies that explicitly include LGBTQ teens and staff are the foundation of LGBTQ inclusion in your youth group. 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 teens and their families, as well as LGBTQ staff and faculty members, need to know that your youth group 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 teens, inclusive anti-harassment Human Resources policies for 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 student handbook, and available upon request.

Visit Keshet's website 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 teens. 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 teen, write "gender" and leave a blank space to be filled in. This allows

parents and teens to fill-in how they want to be identified which may be outside of the two binary genders (male and female).

PROGRAMMING

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

Create programming that addresses Jewish LGBTQ issues.
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 programs on Jewish history, the Holocaust and Israel, there are many ways to include Jewish LGBTQ sources and material. 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. Check out the online [Torah Queeries](#) database. 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 teens by binary gender (man or woman).
It is often an impulse of youth professionals and teens alike to group students based on binary gender (man or woman). However, this is problematic for several reasons: it renders gender non-conforming or transgender teens invisible by assuming a binary gender and it categorizes teens without consent. It also encourages teens to view gender as an either/or category, which reinforces stereotypes and, it discourages teens from branching out and exploring friendships and experiences beyond their assigned or assumed gender. As alternatives, consider asking teens to count off, or divide them alphabetically, or by birthdays when you need to create group. You can ask teens 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.

Mark LGBTQ celebrations and days of mourning in your yearly calendar.
Like the Jewish calendar, the LGBTQ calendar has moments of celebration and moments of memorial and mourning for those who have lost their lives due to homophobic or transphobic violence. Join in on walking in an [LGBTQ Pride](#) parade most often celebrated every June. [National Coming Out Day](#) observed annually on October 11, is another opportunity for celebration and learning. November 20 is [Transgender Day of Remembrance](#), a day when we remember those transgender individuals who have lost their lives in violent attacks, and all those who have faced oppression due to transphobia.

Additionally, on *Yom HaShoah,* Holocaust Memorial Day, your community can remember Jewish and non-Jewish LGBTQ victims alongside all other victims of the Holocaust.

Include LGBTQ issues in your youth group's social justice agenda.
When deciding upon social justice issues to work on and fight for, include LGBTQ concerns related to employment rights and benefits, adoption, marriage, health issues, hatred and violence etc. Encourage members to fight against homophobia, transphobia and heteronormativity both within the synagogue and in the larger world, and include these struggles in your group's commitment to *tikkun olam*, healing our broken world.

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 youth professionals and teens.
Once your youth group has committed to the full inclusion of LGBTQ teens, 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, at daniel@keshetonline.org 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:

• 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 Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which has numerous resources on building inclusive school communities; including lesson plans, professional development and updates on local and federal law

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

- "Teaching Tolerance - A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center" offers advice and research on how to create inclusive schools

- StopBullying.gov provides information on preventing bullying of LGBTQ youth in schools

- BAGLY - Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth

- 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 wanting to be more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals

- JQYouth - A support network for Orthodox LGBTQ Youth

- The Bully Project- sponsored by BBYO and NFTY

- BBYO teens have released a resource on combating bullying in partnership with the BBYO Panim Institute and have created an international effort, Stand UP For Each Other: The Campaign for Respect and Inclusion.

- NFTY has compiled an initiative called Living NFTY: Bullying Teasing and Harassment including programmatic and Jewish resources relating to bullying and Jewish responses to bullies.

- An article from NCSY's International Director, Rabbi Steven Burg, speaking out against teenage bullying.

- Video of a moving address by USY's 2011 International President, who talked about Jewish values of inclusion and his own coming out.