



## Tips for Making GSAs Inclusive of Youth with LGBT Parents

There is a long history of youth with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer parents being involved with Gay Straight Alliances. In fact, the very first GSA club was started by a straight daughter of lesbian moms with her LGBT peers and teacher because she was sick of hearing homophobia comments in the hallways. She understood that anti-gay words, harassment and discrimination directly impacted her as someone with LGBT parents.

Youth involved in COLAGE are still today actively involved in GSA clubs all over the country. Both straight-identified and LGBTQ youth who have one or more LGBTQ parents bring leadership, unique perspectives and intimate knowledge of the harmful effects of homophobia and transphobia to student clubs. At the same time, GSAs do not always acknowledge or embrace the unique experiences of LGBTQ-parented students.

Ruby from California shared, "I actually started my GSA as the daughter of lesbian moms. But I was one of the only people in it who had LGBTQ parents. COLAGERS didn't feel like they had a place. The emphasis was on queer youth and straight allies and it wasn't clear where COLAGERS {ie. people with one or more LGBTQ parents} would fit in."

Often youth with LGBTQ parents feel that they straddle a unique position within the community. Because they may have grown up immersed in gay culture and community and because they are impacted by homophobia and transphobia in very personal and unique ways, COLAGERS often report that the term "straight ally" doesn't feel like it fits their roles and potential contributions to GSAs and other queer organizations. One COLAGE participant, Dakota, who identifies as straight, said, "I'm **not** an ally." He continued, "I've been gay since I went to my first Pride parade with my moms when I was not even a year old!"

Caroline, a student leader from a Massachusetts GSA who has lesbian moms, shared, "I wish students in GSAs would be more respectful of the fact that straight queerspawns can be as much a part of the queer community as LGBTQ students. It's frustrating to me when, in group discussions, students with LGBT parents aren't recognized as being a part of and in tune to the gay community."

How to make sure your GSA is inclusive of students with LGBTQ parents:

1. **Be wary about calling students with LGBTQ parents "allies."** Youth with LGBTQ parents often consider themselves part of the LGBTQ community. Some even identify as "culturally queer." No matter their own sexual orientation or gender identity, they are personally impacted by homophobia and transphobia on political, cultural, legal and societal levels. Many youth with LGBTQ parents have been involved with struggles for LGBTQ rights since they were old enough to talk and walk. Many youth who have thought about being involved with their school's GSAs have reported that they didn't like being called allies to the community. Recognizing their unique roll within the LGBTQ community will help validate the contributions and leadership of students with LGBTQ parents. Some groups and organizations might even spell out- *LGBTQ youth, youth with LGBTQ parents and straight allies*- in advertisements for members.

2. **Include activities and content about LGBTQ families in the work of your GSA.** Many GSAs tend to focus on issues impacting LGBTQ youth, sometimes to the exclusion of broader topics of importance to the LGBTQ movement. Because GSAs are meant to bring together students from all backgrounds, orientation and identities, if you are able to do cross-issue organizing, as well as include specific information, activities and education about LGBTQ families, students with LGBTQ parents will feel that your club is more applicable to their lives. Learn about laws and policies that would impact families. Celebrate people throughout history who have had LGBTQ parents. Do educational campaigns in your school about youth with LGBTQ parents. If you need resources or help to incorporate content into the work of your club, don't hesitate to visit the COLAGE website at [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org).
3. **Create space for all youth to be leaders in your group.** Don't assume that only youth who identify as LGBTQ are able to provide vision, leadership and enthusiasm for your GSA. COLAGE participants have shared stories where they felt "their opinions didn't count as much as the gay kids." All youth committed to the mission and goals of your club should be celebrated and nurtured as leaders and sexual orientation or gender identity shouldn't be a requirement for having your ideas and opinions matter.
4. **Welcome all students.** Create a space where youth are able to "come out" about their reasons for joining the group in their own time. Maybe a student wants to be involved with the GSA but isn't ready or able to say that they have a transgender parent. Don't question any students' reasons for joining the group- instead extend a warm welcome to all.
5. **Don't make COLAGERS into poster children.** Leave room for youth with LGBTQ parents to share their expertise but don't expect them to always educate or know all the answers about LGBTQ families and community. Also, don't expect that the only issue they will be interested in is families. Youth with LGBTQ parents are broadly impacted by homophobia and transphobia as well as other forms of oppression in ways that transcend just the fact that they have an LGBTQ parent.
6. **Don't expect youth with LGBTQ parents to be straight.** Youth with LGBTQ parents, themselves, cover the gamut in terms of their own sexual orientations and gender identity. Some are 2<sup>nd</sup> Gen meaning that they are LGBTQ identified and have an LGBTQ parent. Others are straight. Others may be questioning, although often kids of gay parents feel pressure to be straight to somehow prove that their parents didn't impact their sexuality. Try to let youth decide when and how they come out about any aspect of their identity and be open to the range of identities that youth with LGBTQ parents may have.

These tips are just a starting point for making sure that your GSA is a place that embraces and celebrates youth with LGBTQ parents. Of course, asking for the input and advice of students with LGBTQ parents in your school community is also important as each school and student has different needs and issues.

Another great place to educate yourself on the experiences of students with LGBTQ parents is the recently released report, "Invisible, Involved, Ignored" authored by GLSEN and released with COLAGE and the Family Equality Council. <http://www.glsen.org/cqi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/2271.html> . The report surveyed middle and high school

students nationally who shared their experiences in schools including the challenges of isolation, bullying and discrimination.

If you want resources about starting a GSA or helpful tools for your group, check out the GSA Network. **GSA Network** is a youth leadership organization that empowers youth activists to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools through Gay-Straight Alliance clubs that create safer schools and advocate for non-discrimination policies. GSA Network's successful youth-led organizing in California is a national model that is accelerating the growth and impact of the GSA movement. [www.gsanetwork.org/415-552-4229](http://www.gsanetwork.org/415-552-4229)

For more information about COLAGE, resources about youth with LGBTQ parents, or to connect with folks with LGBTQ parents through events or chapters near you, visit [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org).