

## **Working with LGBTQ2S+ Children and Families**

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In June 2017, Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre and QMUNITY received funding from the Social Planning and Projects division of the City of Vancouver, to work together on a pilot project for early childhood educators and family resource program staff. The concept of the project was to raise awareness amongst early learning practitioners on inclusion of trans, gender variant and Two-Spirit children and families in their programs.

The City was keenly interested in this work as it supports their ongoing commitment to demonstrating equity, diversity and inclusion by tackling forms of exclusion and discrimination for trans, gender variant and Two-Spirit people.

In 2015, Vancouver City Council passed a motion ensuring trans equality and an inclusive Vancouver; this project supported the City's commitment and corresponding strategy of "Being and Feeling Safe and Included". In addition to the City's commitment, research shows that children are most creative and gender-fluid between the ages of 0-6. Consequently, early childhood development programs and services in our communities interact with biological factors and policy environments to produce a range of developmental health outcomes for children. In other words, how we interact with and welcome children and families in our programs has a profound impact on their early development. As a significant funder of child care and family resource programs in the City of Vancouver, this project seemed like a logical next step to support children, families and early learning programs to create welcoming spaces for everyone.

The intention of the training was to raise awareness of why it's important to create environments where trans, gender variant and Two-Spirit children and families are welcomed and included right from the start. During the training, participants identified and examined their own biases, assumptions and behaviours. Frontline staff acquired simple tools and strategies to support children to learn about, and explore their gender in ways that are affirmative and healthy. A 4 hour interactive workshop was developed by Joel Harnest from QMUNITY and was delivered in various locations in Vancouver. To ensure continued engagement with the content of the workshops, access to consultation and mentoring with QMUNITY was available upon request for professionals who participated in the training, providing follow-up support to programs seeking to find ways to address LGBTQ2S+ inclusion.

To create inclusive environments for LGBTQ2S+ children and families, it is important to understand basic concepts like terminology and gender frameworks and models. The sessions challenged participants to interact, discuss and explore new ideas and language,

such as pronouns used to identify gender variant persons. The training started by exploring the ever-evolving acronym of “LGBTQ2S+”. To many, the initials included new concepts such as 2S or Two-Spirit. This is a term used by some Indigenous people to describe certain people in their communities who fulfill a traditional third gender (or other gender variant) ceremonial role in their cultures.

By learning the meanings of the terms sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation, we began to challenge our own understanding of how biological characteristics assigned to humans at birth may not be consistent with how a person may identify, express, feel and think of themselves. These understandings are fundamental to creating safe and happy spaces for all.

**Sex**

Biological characteristics chosen to assign humans as male, female or intersex. Determined by characteristics such as sexual and reproductive anatomy and genetic make-up.

**Gender Identity**

One's internal and psychological sense of oneself as male, female, both, in between or neither.

**Gender Expression**

How one outwardly expresses gender; for example through name and pronoun choice (she/he/they), style of dress, voice modulation, etc.

**Sexual Orientation**

Refers to a person's feelings of sexual and romantic attraction to other people (or to no one!). Sexual and romantic orientation are often used interchangeably, but can be different.

The training offered opportunities to explore and design ways to create spaces and interactions that are inclusive and welcoming. Inclusive environments start by enabling people to see themselves reflected in the space. We communicate organizational and personal values in the physical spaces we create. Visual representations and posters should represent all family and gender variations. Learning resources should be inclusive and representative of all families and children. Administrative forms should be adapted to consider pronouns, chosen names and gender options. For example instead of asking for a mother or father's name, use “parents”. This way all family types are acknowledged. Addressing people by their chosen pronoun such as “they” or “them” demonstrates that you respect their personal identity. In creating physical spaces, consider ways that children can explore and express gender in ways that are healthy, safe and non-judgemental.

The collaboration with Joel from QMUNITY and the City of Vancouver supported Westcoast's mission and values of education, diversity and quality by challenging early childhood educators and family resource program staff to develop understanding, language and skills to better support LGTQ2S+ children and families. The evaluations of the training indicated overwhelming satisfaction with the training itself, with several requests to make the training longer than 4 hours. It is true that a full exploration of the concepts covered would require much more time. As a result of this feedback, we are thinking about how to incorporate further training on creating welcoming and inclusive environments for all as a regular offering. This project raised our own awareness of how to embrace the diversity of those who use our programs and services and how to better reflect these values in our professional development offerings moving forward. For more information on ways to create inclusive and welcoming environments for all families, here some additional resources:

For additional resources visit QMUNITY's website and Westcoast's Early Learning Library for a list of books available.

QMUNITY <https://qmunity.ca/learn/resources/>

Westcoast Early Learning Library <http://www.wstcoast.org/library/index.html>

Trans Student Educational Resources <http://www.transstudent.org/gender/>

