

Engaging Black 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth in Advocacy



The Youth MOVE National TA Center is a program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under grant 1H79SM082658-01 and, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

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Introduction

Welcome to the Engaging Black 2SLGBTQIA+ Youth Implementation Guide. Created between 2020-2023 by the QIC-2SLGBTQIA+ community, this guide is a resource for professionals who are new to, or struggling with, engaging Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in their work.

There are countless opportunities to partner with Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and young adults at every facet of an organization! This of course may make it hard to know where to start or how best to do this within any specific type of profession. This guide will help you figure out where to start, identify possible strategies and engagement activities, and point you towards additional resources. All you need to do is follow along and be open to doing this exciting and challenging work.

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Funders



The National Quality Improvement Center (QIC) on Tailored Services, Placement Stability, and Permanency for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S) Children and Youth in Foster Care has been established in collaboration with the Children's Bureau (CB), to develop, integrate, and sustain best practices and programs that improve outcomes for children and youth in foster care with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions (SOGIE). The QIC-LGBTQ2S is led by the National SOGIE Center at Innovations Institute at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work along with participating core partners: Human Service Collaborative; Judge Baker Children's Center; and Youth MOVE National.

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The Youth MOVE National Peer Center is a program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) under grant 1H79SM082658-01 and, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Interviews, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.

Across the country, recovery-oriented services and consumer run organizations, including youth and family-run organizations, are increasingly seen as vital supports within the mental health service array. Youth MOVE National's Consumer Peer Center was established in July 2020, with grant funding support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. As a youth-run peer organization, YMN honors lived experience and recognizes the value of both traditional and non-traditional supports. We serve peers across the lifespan, their families, and providers of all ages, to grow the youth peer movement across the United States. As one of five funded Centers, we look forward to collaborating with our partners to improve and sustain the implementation of peer and recovery-oriented services and supports.

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Content History

Throughout the duration of the QIC-LGBTQ2S and its five Local Implementation Sites (LIS) (Cuyahoga County, Ohio; Allegheny County, Pennsylvania; Prince George's County, Maryland; and the state of Michigan) it became increasingly clear that piloted interventions, child welfare professionals, and QIC-LGBTQ2S partners had to consider not only the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in foster care, but specifically Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in foster care. Young adult consultants from each LIS were initially engaged in the project to provide youth voice and guidance on intervention implementation, recruitment to interventions, and the evaluation of their site's work. As time went on however, the young adult consultants transitioned from the project. Those that continued to serve at their LIS shared how the overwhelming whiteness of LIS and QIC-LGBTQ2S leadership did not represent the systems they were aiming to improve! With the majority of young adult consultants bringing not only their lived experience as 2SLGBTQIA+ foster care alumni, but as Black young people, they were able to identify key areas and strategies that were missing from LIS, QIC-LGBTQ2S, and intervention plans. This guide is the result of their experiences in the child welfare system, on the QIC-LGBTQ2S project, and their recommendations for engagement. We hope this guide will offer insight, action steps, and a path towards greater authentic youth engagement of young Black 2SLGBTQIA+ people in your own work and bring about systems change.

Glossary

Youth Development

A process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences that help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent.¹

Youth Leadership

A part of the youth development process and supports the young person in developing the ability to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, set goals, and have the self-esteem, confidence, motivation and skills to carry them out. Youth leadership also involves a young person's ability to guide or direct others on a course of action, as well as serve as a role model.²

5 Core Values

Value and invest in Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth

1 Overall, there is a lack of resources that meets the specific needs of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Creating programs and community spaces that are exclusive to Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth allows them the opportunity to engage with their community without fear of rejection or discrimination. Provide Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth with leadership opportunities, self-advocacy tools, educational information, job training, etc. that are culturally relevant and based on an intersectional lens.

Listen to Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth

2 If we want to be accountable to Black queer and trans youth, you must take a step back and listen to their concerns and goals without judgment and take action. Too often we listen but fail to take actionable steps to ensure the development of young people. Be sure to maintain an individualistic approach, what works for one Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth won't necessarily work for all. The voice of youth is constantly evolving and changing over time, so Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth need to be at the forefront of their own advocacy.

Be flexible in the support offered to Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth

3 Things are always changing, and this includes the needs of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. Think about what considerations are needed when supporting Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth's independence and be flexible that things can, and often do, change.

Remove your own biases from advocacy work

4 Improving how systems and individuals support Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth requires recognizing white supremacy and interrogating your own anti-Black prejudices and biases in order to dismantle them. This can be scary and takes work, but challenging the ways we were socialized and taught, allows us to break the cycle and go in a different, more inclusive and affirming direction. Unlearning and relearning is at the center of growth, accountability, and change.

Increase the number of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals in advocacy work

5 There needs to be an intentional focus on increasing the amount of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals serving youth. For Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth it can be difficult to open up or connect with folks who do not share their experiences, identities, or communities - representation matters. It is imperative that agencies and systems hire, retain, and invest in Black 2SLGBTQIA+ professionals.

Youth Engagement

Youth engagement is a strategy in which youth are given a *meaningful voice and role*, and are *genuinely and intentionally* involved in working towards changing the programs, services, and/or systems that directly affect their lives. **Youth engagement** is a means by which an organization achieves a goal, such as *improving young adult outcomes*, or increasing the rate at which young adults utilize the organization's services from a co-designing, collaborative approach.



Youth engagement is not a one-time event; it is an *ongoing process* and may be at different stages and in different parts of programming and/or services. **Active youth engagement** looks like youth assisting with planning meeting agendas, facilitating workshops, keeping records such as attendance and notes, and/or researching ways to improve or change programs. These are common areas where high participation levels of youth engagement can sometimes be found. However, by contrast, a program's budgeting process or board of directors may have lower participation levels of youth engagement. This might be because of the level of training or support young people may need to understand finances, which requires intentional ongoing coaching. Perhaps there are policies which exclude young people under a certain age from serving on the board of directors, and it takes time to adjust policies that would encourage further youth engagement. Some states even have laws that prohibit youth under a certain age from serving on boards, so it's always good to check your state requirements, and advocate on a state level for change.

Youth engagement is often successful when implemented within *positive youth development* and *developmental relationships* frameworks. **Authentic youth engagement** is present when young adults are provided *opportunities* to consistently participate in decision making, are able to take ownership of, and are compensated for, their work, initiate conversations and plans, and be able to give feedback that impacts programs, services, and/or systems that serve them. This requires adult support and appropriate developmental relationships that create trust, collaboration, and partnership.

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a strategy which engages youth in their own environments such as within their families, schools, youth organizations and community in a productive way, reinforces a young person's strengths, and provides for positive youth outcomes by helping them build leadership skills and maintain positive relationships.

Developmental Relationships

Research has found that young people who experience strong developmental relationships across different parts of their lives are more likely to show signs of positive development in many areas, including:

- Increased academic motivation
- Increased social-emotional growth and learning
- Increased sense of personal responsibility
- Reduced engagement in a variety of high-risk behaviors
- And most importantly, an overall increase in personal health and happiness

Young people succeed when they have *strong, positive relationships* in their lives. Many times however, supportive adults and professionals are unsure of what actions or activities help create those relationships. Advocates can start by selecting one of the five elements to practice, such as expressing care, by being warm and approachable, and checking in with the youth in their life, or sharing power by creating opportunities for youth to actively participate and lead in their own advocacy. The **Developmental Relationships framework** not only names the feelings and intangible parts of a strong and positive relationship, it offers actions to take with young people in order to build a stronger relationship with them.

Five Elements of the Developmental Relationships Framework



Express Care



Challenge Growth



Provide Support



Share Power



Expand Possibilities⁵

Youth Mental Health

It's important to talk about mental health in youth advocacy work because it impacts how young folks view and interact with the world and others. It can affect how they view their own 2SLGBTQIA+ identity in a positive or negative light, it can even affect how they are treated and function in society that can intentionally, and unintentionally, devalue and even criminalize their identity and mental health.

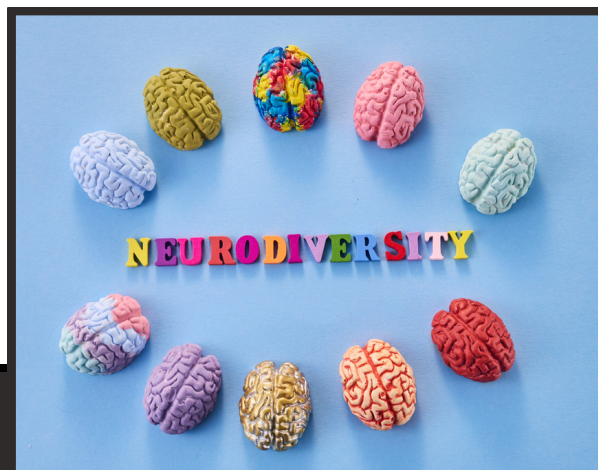
Common mental illnesses among historically, and still presently, marginalized people who face systemic oppression, such as the BIPOC, 2SLGBTQIA+, and disabled youth communities are depression, anxiety, and even trauma based ADHD. Queer and trans Black people face one of the largest numbers of disproportionate health disparities and intergenerational trauma. To folks of privileged identities, “symptoms” can look like moodiness, irritability, paranoia, coming off seemingly blunt or rude, or even as youth lashing out or acting in “unacceptable” ways. For many Black youth, mental health needs, trauma, and lack of safe, affirming environments, are often perceived as aggression. For foster youth, in particular Black youth within the child welfare system, this can manifest as anger and standoffishness as a defense mechanism.

However, these are all common and understandable reactions for people who are constantly devalued, marginalized, ignored, and who face constant microaggressions and institutionalized oppression, such as racism, sexism, cissexism, heterosexism, and ableism among others. Black youth have even been punished by schools and social systems for things their white peers receive services and support for, or even are seen as totally fine and acceptable. When faced with all of that, these should be seen as normal behaviors regardless of diagnosis. This is why creating a safe space for Black youth to work through their emotions and their experiences in the world is so important.



Neurodivergence

For Black 2SLGBTQ+ youth, neurodivergence is yet another barrier between them and connecting with others or receiving the treatment they deserve. The world is much more difficult for Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth who are neurodivergent to navigate due to their many intersecting and marginalized identities. The United States is still under Settler Colonialism, a system that was literally created for white, neurotypical, temporarily able bodied men. Because of this, we must question whether the issue is diagnosis, symptom based, or whether simply being differently abled is again “unacceptable” in a society that devalues it. Therefore, it can be hard for neurodivergent youth to open up or trust a social worker or clinician when they have most likely experienced significant trauma from just being who they are, and these people may be viewed as just another person erasing their identity and pathologizing them.



Asking neurodivergent youth how they best like to be supported is extremely important. Neurodivergent youth, just like all youth, need and deserve control of their own treatment. Giving examples of new coping skills neurodivergent youth can use, while also asking how you can support them in utilizing the coping skills they have already, can also help promote continuity. It is vital to ask neurodivergent youth how you can be more accommodating to them in various situations especially during meetings (i.e., asking if they would like to take a break or if they want to have something to draw or take notes on as they process information, etc.). Even something as simple as asking permission before you attempt to shake a neurodivergent youth's hand can mean a world of difference to them and can help socialize all of us to better norms around consent and bodily autonomy.

Education

Black students experience racism, bullying, and discrimination within school systems. Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are oftentimes more harshly punished when responding physically to other youth after concerns to their safety have been ignored or when simply defending themselves. A recent study done⁷ by GLSEN found that:

89% of Black LGBTQ+ students reported having heard racist remarks in school

84.3% of Black LGBTQ+ students heard negative remarks about transgender people while in school

97.9% of Black LGBTQ+ students heard “gay” used in a negative way

44.7% of Black LGBTQ+ students experienced some form of school discipline

Black LGBTQ+ students in majority Black schools were less likely to have a Gay Straight Alliance group at their school than Black LGBTQ+ youth in majority White schools (**41.9% v. 53.8%**).

Advocates must understand the ways in which racism, homophobia / heterosexism and transphobia / cissexism, contribute to the disparities Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth face in education in order to better serve this population.

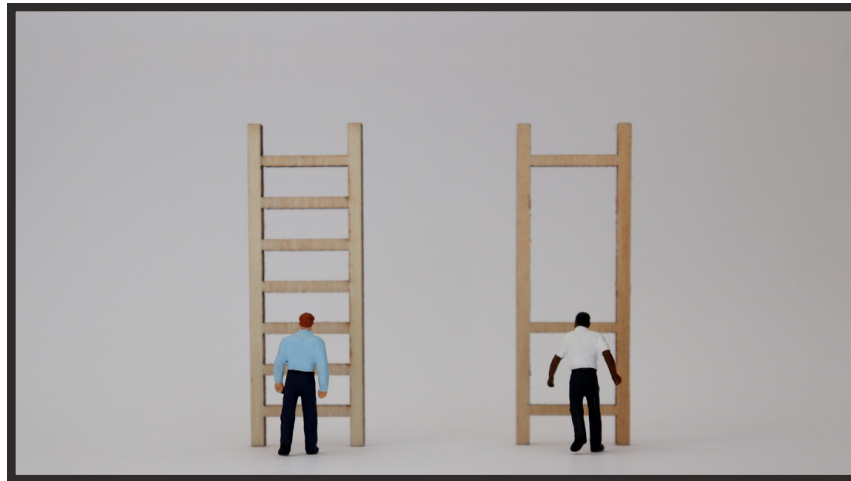
System-Impacted Youth

2SLGBTQIA+ youth of color are disproportionately affected by the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. 2SLGBTQIA+ youth make up 30.4 percent of the youth in foster care. Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth spend more time in out of home placements such as group homes, residential facilities, and detention centers than their peers. Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth aging out of foster care are at higher risk of experiencing houselessness, incarceration, and job instability due to various levels of discrimination. 2SLGBTQIA+ youth make up one fifth of the overall youth population in juvenile justice facilities. 85% of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth who are in juvenile facilities are also youth of color. LGB girls make up 39.4% of the overall population of girls in juvenile justice facilities. Advocates must understand and confront the ways in which 2SLGBTQIA+ youth have to navigate the effects of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism in the juvenile justice system.



Location

The experiences of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth can vary depending on where they are located throughout the U.S. It is not uncommon for Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth to feel isolated, experience rejection, or feel unsupported within various communities. Even within more progressive and thriving populations, Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are often tasked with educating others about racism while simultaneously experiencing it.



The health concerns of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are often ignored or not prioritized due to the racism that exists within the healthcare system. While states like California and New York are leading in the development of 2SLGBTQIA+ resources, services, and community centers, data confirms that systems are still failing to adequately serve 2SLGBTQIA+ youth overall. In more rural communities, Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth are more likely to become victims of violence and discrimination surrounding their identity.¹³



Conclusion

Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth face many challenges and disparities in the U.S. due to many forms of discrimination. Social workers, youth and family peer support specialists, federal and state funded grantees, attorneys, and other advocates working with Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth must understand these dynamics and how they can affect their advocacy. Using the 5 core values when engaging with Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth as a guide and applying an intersectional lens to your advocacy approach is key to achieving positive outcomes. We hope that this implementation guide has provided you with valuable resources and information to improve your support of Black 2SLGBTQIA+ youth in your agencies, programs, services and representation.

For questions, comments, or concerns, please contact:

Youth MOVE National
info@youthmovenational.org

Thank You!



Youth MOVE Peer Center
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Resources

Education:

GSA Network, LGBTQ Youth of Color: Discipline Disparities, School Push-Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: <https://gsanetwork.org/resources/lgbtq-youth-of-color-discipline-disparities-school-push-out-and-the-school-to-prison-pipeline/>

The Opportunity Myth: What Students Can Show Us About How School Is Letting Them Down—and How to Fix It: <https://tntp.org/publications/view/student-experiences/the-opportunity-myth>

Foster Care and Child Welfare:

NASPA Black Foster Youth Lives Matter: <https://www.naspa.org/blog/black-foster-youth-lives-matter>

Dorothy Roberts Shattered Bonds: The Color Of Child Welfare: <https://www.amazon.com/Shattered-Bonds-Color-Child-Welfare/dp/0465070590>

The Imprint: A Letter to Black Foster Youth: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/opinion/a-letter-to-black-foster-youth/44205>

Housing:

Supportive Housing and Health Services for LGBTQIA+ Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Promising Practices: <https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Supportive-Housing-and-Health-Services-for-LGBTQIA-Youth-Experiencing-Homelessness.pdf>

2SLGBTQIA+:

Harvard Law LGBTQ+ Advocacy Clinic & NCLR Trans Youth Handbook: <https://www.harvardlgbtq.org/trans-youth-handbook>

Lambda Legal “Safe Havens” Report:

https://legacy.lambdalegal.org/sites/default/files/publications/downloads/tgnc-policy-report_2017_final-web_05-02-17.pdf

Family Equality “LGBTQ+ Families for Black Lives” report: <https://www.familyequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LGBTQFamiliesforBlackLives.pdf>

Neurodiversity & Gender Diverse youth:

https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Neurodiversity-and-Gender-Diverse-Youth_An-Affirming-Approach-to-Care_2020.pdf

Mental Health:

Trevor Project Report on Black LGBTQ+ Mental Health: https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Trevor-Project-Black-LGBTQ-Youth-Mental-Health-Brief_February-2020-1.pdf

MHA Guide to BIPOC Mental Health Month:

<https://mhanational.org/BIPOC-mental-health-month>

Race:

Race Matters: How to talk about Race: <https://www.socialwork.career/2015/09/race-matters-how-to-talk-effectively-about-race.html>

Relationship Building:

True Colors webinar, Fostering Connections: Mentoring LGBTQ youth in foster care and transitions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i22Rq5p3cxg>

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- 12 Id.
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