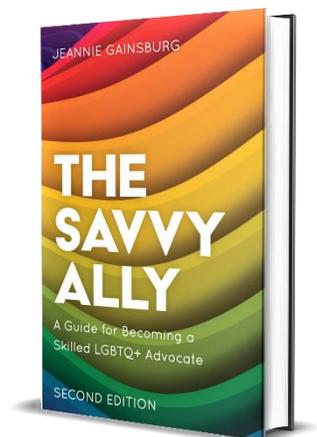


Creating LGBTQ+ Inclusive Libraries

(Sections of this handout were taken from *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate*)

This handout was created for public and school librarians who want to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive libraries for everyone. It offers information on why libraries have historically been sought out as safe havens for LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, plus so much more!) individuals, best practices for ally action, best practices for ally advocacy, and additional resources.



“You thought you were the only person in the world that was feeling this way. And you went to the library, you hid in the stacks, and you read *The Well of Loneliness*. Which was the only book...how we ever found that book, I don’t know...But you went and you read it in the library because you couldn’t take it home for your parents to see.”

Carmah Lawler, member of “Old Lesbians Organizing for Change”
from the film *Project Visibility*

Libraries as Safe Havens

Many older adults, like Carmah Lawler, have shared stories about desperately seeking LGBTQ+-themed books and information at their local public library. These books helped them find community and move toward self-acceptance. Today, libraries continue to act as safe havens for many LGBTQ+ youth and adults by providing books, resources, internet access, and a quiet space away from taunting peers, hostile workplaces, or disapproving family members.

Relax! It’s Not about Sex

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools, workplaces, and other public spaces is the misunderstanding that conversations will be about sex. The fear is that if, for example, a librarian reads a story to children about two princes falling in love, the librarian will need to be prepared to answer questions about sex. Let’s implement the wonderful “switch it” technique here. When a librarian reads a story about a prince and a princess falling in love, does the librarian need to be prepared to answer questions about sex? Probably not. But in either case, if questions about sex arise, the librarian will give an age-appropriate response about love and families. Being out as an LGBTQ+ individual is not about the bedroom. It’s about living freely and authentically.

Five Best Practices for Ally Action

Below are some best-practice tips for creating inclusive schools with your language, behaviors, and activities.

- 1) **Make sure your library is well supplied with LGBTQ+-themed books, magazines, and films.** Check out “The Top 175 Essential Films of All Time for LGBT Viewers” from the Advocate and find award-winning books by searching under “Stonewall Award,” “Lambda Literary Award,” or “The Rainbow List.” Normalize being LGBTQ+ by choosing books for children’s story times and films for community movie nights with diverse characters and families.
- 2) **Un-gender language and activities.** Don’t assume gender when talking with patrons. Avoid making gendered assumptions about people by using words like *sir, ma’am, Mr., Mrs.,* or *Miss*. A simple “How may I help you?” will work fine. Use *parents* instead of *mom and dad*, *students* instead of *boys and girls*, and *friends, folks,* or *team* instead of *guys*. If you aren’t sure which pronoun to use to refer to someone, use singular *they**. For example: “Can you help this patron? They’ve lost their library card.”
- 3) **Don’t tolerate put-downs.** Libraries should be welcoming to everyone. Speak up when you hear offensive language. If you aren’t sure how you should respond when you hear put-downs against LGBTQ+ people, try the “switch it” technique and think about how you would respond to racial slurs or body-shaming comments. Use those same techniques to educate about LGBTQ+ slurs and jokes. Hold all staff and patrons accountable to the same standards of courtesy and respect.
- 4) **Visibly indicate your support.** Showing visible support for the LGBTQ+ communities saves lives. Create a safer and more welcoming library by wearing a rainbow button or hanging a rainbow sign that says, “All families (or students) welcome here.”
- 5) **Share your pronouns.** Add your pronouns to your name badge, nameplate, business card and/or email signature helps to normalize the practice. This makes it more comfortable for others to share theirs too. Their pronouns may not be as obvious as yours. If everyone shared their pronouns, we would avoid so many embarrassing moments when we guess wrong. Sharing your pronouns also lets patrons know that you support all kinds of people and families, whether they conform to society’s gendered expectations or not.

* Did you know that singular *they* is now in the dictionary and that it has been used in written English since 1375! For more reasons to embrace this wonderful word, check out the 3-minute, animated YouTube video called “What’s Up with Singular *They*?”

Five Best Practices for Ally Advocacy

- 1) **Advocate for professional development.** Let your administration know that mandatory LGBTQ+ awareness and inclusion trainings should be included in diversity efforts. Also advocate for optional workshops and educational panels for community members who want to support their LGBTQ+ children or learn more about the LGBTQ+ communities.
- 2) **Support ungendered spaces and policies.** Educate others on the importance of ungendered facilities and policies. Give gendered, single-stall restrooms an upgrade with a new all-gender restroom sign. When buildings are being renovated, advocate for the creation of ungendered facilities. Allow patrons to use gendered restrooms that align with their gender identity.

Pop Quiz

Who should use an all-gender restroom?

- A. Transgender individuals
- B. Transgender, questioning, and transitioning individuals
- C. Anyone

Answer: C

Many people think of all-gender restrooms as “transgender bathrooms.” Some transgender individuals will use all-gender restrooms and others won’t. All-gender restrooms are there for *anyone* to use. What this means is, if a cisgender student feels uncomfortable using the same restroom as a transgender student, then the cisgender student can go and use the single-stall, all-gender restroom and have their privacy. Ta-da!

- 3) **Create displays that celebrate LGBTQ+ culture.** Create a Pride Month book display in June and an LGBT History Month book display in October.
- 4) **Take action for inclusive policies.** Create inclusive non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and display them publicly. Ensure that library patrons have access to LGBTQ+-related content on the internet. Many useful and potentially life-saving sites with LGBTQ+ resources are flagged as “inappropriate” and blocked by libraries.
- 5) **Adjust inflexible name change policies.** Being forced to use a library card with an old name can be hurtful for transgender individuals. Allow patrons to change the name on their card, even if their new name has not yet been made legal.

“When my teen readers heard Alex London talk about how he wrote *Proxy* because he wanted to see a hero like himself, the kind of hero he wanted to be – one who was dashing and had adventures and was also gay, I could see their eyes light up. I knew there were queer kids and straight kids in that room and I knew in that moment doors and windows were opening wide and, yeah, lives were being changed. As librarians, we can help make that change. It was something as simple as a story but it was so much more.”

Angie Manfredi, Head of Youth Services at the Los Alamos County Library System

Resources

Gainsburg, Jeannie. *The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate (Second Edition)*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, March 2023.

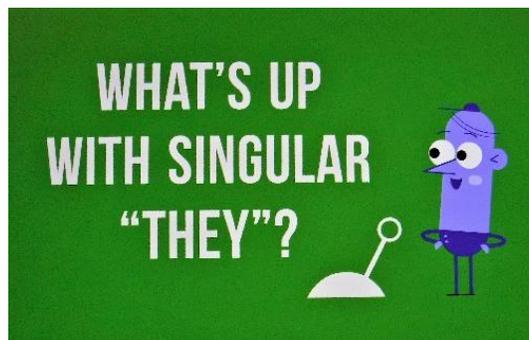
Gender Spectrum: Information on LGBTQ+ identities and creating inclusive environments at: www.genderspectrum.org

GLSEN: Resources for teachers, school staff, administrators, and GSA advisors at: www.glsen.org

Open to All: An online toolkit from the American Library Association Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table at: www.ala.org/rt/sites/ala.org.rt/files/content/professionaltools/160309-glbtrt-open-to-all-toolkit-online.pdf

Savvy Ally Action: Workshops on creating LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces, free handouts, and videos at: www.savvyallyaction.com.

Teaching Tolerance: Classroom resources and workshops for educators at: www.tolerance.org



Savvy Ally Action's 3-minute video "What's Up with Singular *They*?"

www.savvyallyaction.com
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