

PROUD TO BE ME: A DEI INITIATIVE

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While enhancing staff competency in serving LGBTQIA+ children and families is critical in all fields, it is especially important for healthcare workers due to the unique needs and challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ children, adolescents, and their families. Nearly 5 million children are being raised by an LGBTQIA+ parent, and it is estimated that 7-9% of youth between the ages of 8 and 18 identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (Dowd, 2024) (Movement Advancement Project, 2025). The political climate in the United States regarding the LGBTQIA+ population is marked by ongoing debates and tensions, and legislation in certain states has placed restrictions on access to gender-affirming care, including limits on healthcare services for transgender youth, with potential legal and professional consequences for healthcare providers who offer these services (Movement Advancement Project, 2025). As pediatric healthcare workers, understanding the unique identities, perspectives, and challenges of LGBTQIA+ children and families not only helps provide optimal care but also ensures that LGBTQIA+ youth feel safe, respected, and supported during a critical stage of their development.

Proud To Be Me is a program implemented by one hospital to highlight LGBTQIA+ perspectives, increase awareness, and empower individuals who are a part of or interact with the LGBTQIA+ community. This article discusses how the hospital initiated the program, the challenges they faced, feedback from participants and the anticipated future directions of the program.



Staff received t-shirts with our custom “Proud To Be Me” design.”

Program View

During this three-week program in June, staff had the opportunity to attend three sessions and hear from different panels and engage in a reflection activity. The panels each had a distinct focus and provided a variety of members of the LGBTQIA+ community a platform to share their perspectives: LGBTQIA+ youth, LGBTQIA+ coworkers, and family members of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The reflective activity remained the same to ensure all staff members had opportunities to participate regardless of their schedules. Staff participation in these sessions was optional; however, they were not recorded to promote candid conversations.

The first panel included four youth who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community and were children of staff within the Child Life and Family Services Department. This panel aimed to enhance the staff’s knowledge and ability to work with LGBTQIA+ youth in a healthcare setting. In the program’s second week, the panel session included four child life and family services staff members who identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. The goal of this session was to enhance the staff’s ability to work with and support their

teammates and coworkers. For the program’s final week, the panel comprised eight family members of individuals who identified with the LGBTQIA+ community. The goal of this session was to provide staff with insight on how to support and work with family members of those who identify with the community. Panel questions were pre-selected and given to the panel members ahead of time. As questions were asked, panel members could answer on their own terms and were not required to answer every question.

Sample of Questions:

- What do you wish people knew about the LGBTQIA+ community?
- If someone were to make a mistake about your identity or your relationship, how would you want them to respond?
- How can healthcare professionals make receiving healthcare easier for you?
- What does being an ally mean to you? How can people use their voices to support and encourage you?
- What is one thing you believe is super important for them to understand about being a family member to someone in the LGBTQIA+ community?

Throughout June, all staff had the opportunity to participate in a creative self-reflection art activity aimed to encourage employees to reflect on what makes them unique and proud while recognizing the great power in celebrating one’s own identity and self-worth. Participants were provided with the supplies to create a self-portrait on a toilet paper roll and prompted to express their creativity, learn more about their colleagues, and share what makes them unique and the aspects of themselves they are most proud of. Participation in this reflective activity exceeded expectations, with some staff members returning for a second session to ensure they fully captured their sense of self.

Participant Feedback

This program was met with positive feedback, high attendance, and active participation, demonstrating its value and impact on hospital staff. Direct feedback from the sessions was

gathered to be used to make improvements and show staff their voices are heard and their contributions to programming are valued. Multiple participants commented on the variety of perspectives. One noted, “I really loved the format of learning from people we know and learning from the kids we serve.” Participants indicated an ongoing need for education and discussion on serving LGBTQIA+ individuals and families as well as patients of other marginalized groups, such as BIPOC individuals, disabled individuals, or patients who speak English as a second language. One child life specialist said, “There is a need for education on... systemic supports for different family systems. As child life specialists, we are trained to ask who is in the room and recognize that family-centered care (includes anyone who) families decide makes up their family, (and) we should be modeling (and) educating our multidisciplinary staff more explicitly.”



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– Panel Attendee

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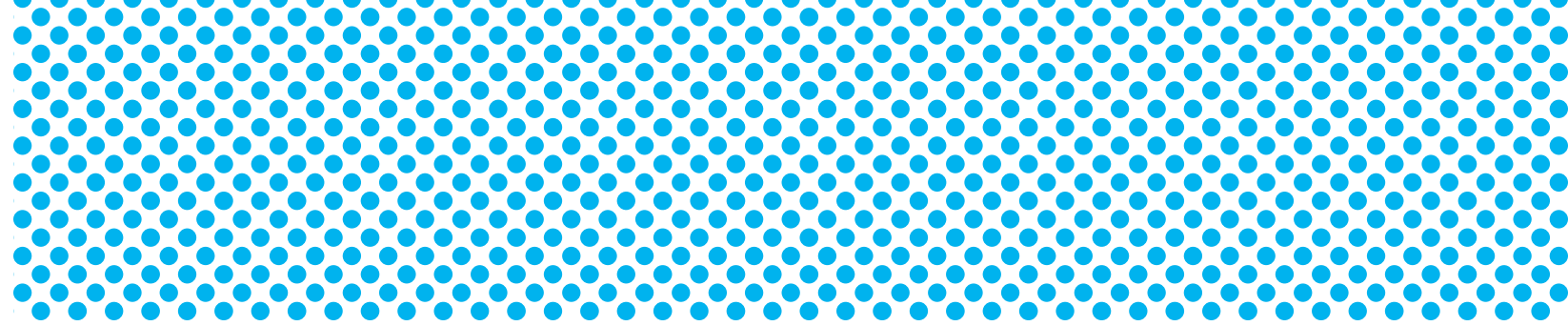
Author's Evaluation

There was a powerful sense of pride within our Child Life and Family Services Department, and staff arrived to the panels eager to listen, learn from our panelists, and participate in the reflective activity. Our team represents many backgrounds, beliefs, and perspectives, and attendees entered sessions with an open mind.

Our department's collective ability to deepen our understanding through active listening was strengthened through this program. The impact of listening resonated powerfully with all team members, both those on the panel and those in the audience. The openness and vulnerability experienced during these discussions fostered a new way of approaching our work, influencing how the team interacts with patients, families, and each other. This shift in perspective promises to significantly shift our team dynamics, enhance our thoughtfulness in our work, and inspire more innovative approaches to patient and family care within our hospital.

The program also strengthened our department's ability to engage in meaningful conversations about challenging topics. Shying away from discussions that may be divisive or controversial can be tempting.

Left: Staff participated in a reflective art activity, creating self-portraits emphasizing what made them unique and proud.



However, by coming together and intentionally creating a space to learn from our LGBTQIA+ team members, we discovered that we could address complex topics without hesitation. This experience underscored the importance of finding common ground and fostering respectful dialogue.

Challenges are a natural part of any successful program, but ultimately, the power of learning from one another's experiences far outweighed the challenges we encountered during this process. One significant obstacle we faced was finding LGBTQIA+ youth, co-workers, and family members to participate as panelists. In today's environment, hesitation in sharing about one's sexuality is understandable. To address this, we cast a wide net when recruiting participants to ensure that no one felt pressured to join. The individuals who chose to share their stories were strong, informative, brave, and often humorous. Their humanity, vulnerability, and honesty were evident in every response. For many panelists, it was their first time meeting others with similar experiences. Some family members candidly discussed their relationships with LGBTQIA+ siblings, children, or parents for the first time. The vulnerability and courage exhibited by the participants left a lasting impact.

Future Directions

Future initiatives could expand to include other marginalized groups with the goal to amplify the voices of patients and their families while providing healthcare workers with opportunities for learning and self-reflection. Moving forward, we hope to expand these

panels throughout the year, incorporating insights from parents of patients requiring comprehensive care. This includes families with children who have various diagnoses, siblings of patients with chronic illnesses, families who have experienced the loss of a child, and patients with invisible diagnoses. Additionally, the program highlighted the importance of creating space for staff self-reflection, and we will continue to offer these opportunities in the future.

Conclusion

The Proud To Be Me initiative represents a significant step toward fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals and their families within our healthcare system. By providing a platform for open dialogue and reflection among staff, the program not only enhances cultural competency but empowers healthcare workers to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ youth and their families. As the program continues to evolve, it holds the potential to build lasting connections and understanding within the community with the possibility of improved health outcomes and well-being for LGBTQIA+ patients and families. Emphasizing the importance of allyship and active engagement, this initiative can serve as a model for other institutions seeking to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in their practices. Through sustained commitment, education, and advocacy, we can create a healthcare environment that truly reflects and respects the richness of all identities.

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