

Kari Robideau:

Hello. You are listening to the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development Podcast Series. Thank you for tuning in. My name is Kari Robideau and I'm a youth development extension educator. We're going to continue a conversation today with Joe Rand who's also an extension educator about how we can strive to be inclusive youth programs for LGBTQ youth. It's great to have you back Joe.

Joe Rand:

Thanks. I'm glad to be back.

Kari Robideau:

Now, you have been with me on three prior episodes, because we've talked about providing safe places and what that means, how it looks and you've also shared words, phrases and actions that we can use and listeners might also remember that many of the things you share are simple ideas but can be very complex and not very easy to implement.

Joe Rand:

And I think that's part of what's great about doing another podcast, is that we continue to have the conversation and continue to adapt our own practices personally and within our organizations. And that makes them more inclusive and it does help make it easier. It doesn't necessarily make it easy, but it becomes a little more secondhand nature. And we don't have to work as hard, which is also something we're going to talk about a little bit later in the podcast.

Kari Robideau:

Today you're challenging us to consider whether our organizational commitments to providing safety and equal access to all youth that we've discussed a lot in your prior episodes. Do those align with our actual program practices? Let's start with you giving us a background on what the current trends and research are telling us about the emotional and physical safety of LGBTQ youth.

Joe Rand:

Sure. One of the first places I go when I'm looking for current data is the School Climate Survey put out by an organization called GLSEN, which is the gay and lesbian straight education network. And every two years they do a nationwide survey where they ask students about incidents of victimization in their school day, just trying to find out how inclusive schools are. Not specific just to LGBTQ items but also general diversity. And so they put out stats and data nationwide and then also they give a snapshot into each state. In their 2017 report, GLSEN showed that victimization in schools based on gender expression and sexual orientation, really has remained the same since the 2015 survey, the last time that they did the survey. And what that means for our young people, is that those marginalized LGBTQ students who do experience discrimination and harassment are more likely to miss school, are more likely to face discipline in school, they're less likely to attend postsecondary education, they have lower grades, they have lower self-esteem.

Joe Rand:

They're just in a more vulnerable place all around because of the micro aggressions and harassment and prejudice that they face. And that's why it's really important for both our educators and staff and faculty

in schools, but also in our out-of-school-time programs to make sure that we are addressing some of these things. If youth are feeling all of these stressors in school and then they come to a place out of school where they continue to feel them, they're going to opt out because school is a place they're required to be after school programs aren't. And so if we don't create environments where they feel like they can be authentic and where they feel safe, why will they continue to be a part of them? The other thing the report talked about was that some forms of harassment trying to downward harassment based on gender expression has risen. So, what that means is that those youth who identify as trans who might be expressing their gender in a nontraditional or nonconforming way, are experiencing harassment more frequently than they were two years ago.

Kari Robideau:

We both work for the university of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development as I mentioned in the introduction. And in our 4-H Youth Development Program that is out of school time, you have led us to really think about the information you just shared. Let's make sure that the out of school time is safe and inclusive for all young people. Will you talk a little bit about how the Minnesota 4-H Program strives to provide that high quality safety youth development space for all of our youth? What are we doing?

Joe Rand:

Yeah. So, not only are we doing it but we are charged with doing it as being part of a Land-grant institution, it is our role to provide that education to all of our kids and the Minnesota 4-H Program is doing that in a variety of ways. We have started to intentionally in the last few years reach out to underserved or non-served audiences in order to diversify who we're serving and really that's the only way we're going to stay relevant. But we also have to make sure that once we get those folks here, once we get those young people and adults here in part of our program, that we're able to provide spaces where they feel emotionally, physically safe so that they can engage.

Joe Rand:

And so while the university has an equal access policy, we also then have to take the next step and make sure that we don't just use that policy but that we're actually have some practices in place to make sure that what we're doing on the ground and what our volunteers and our staff are doing is creating spaces with regard to LGBTQ youth and parents and volunteers, they feel like they can engage. We have to improve how we facilitate and build the skills of being able to navigate differences because we know all of our participants aren't always going to fully agree, but we need to be able to equip them with empathy and the skills they need in order to be in the same space at the same time and respect each other in order to have dialogue, in order to learn together, in order to engage in programming together and still have differing opinions about things. And that all of them are able to bring their authentic selves to the table.

Kari Robideau:

Now, last summer in order to find out how we can do this better, you conducted a focus group with young people.

Joe Rand:

So, at a youth leadership conference that Minnesota 4-H hosts, where youth from across the state attend. I had the opportunity to chat with those young people first about pronouns and why pronoun

usage is important. And so we talked a little bit about gender identity and gender expression and then we also talked about a little bit about what the difference between sex and gender is and then also about why it's important to use pronouns that people want to be associated with in order to respect them and who they are. So, that was the first thing that we did. But then from there, we dove a little deeper into whether or not our Minnesota 4-H Program feels inclusive and equitable for LGBTQ youth. We had a whole bunch of different kids in the room, they weren't necessarily LGBTQ kids, they were just the youth that wanted to be there.

Joe Rand:

So, came from varying backgrounds from across the State. We did a SWOT analysis. So, SWOT is an acronym standing for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Sometimes instead of threats, people will say challenges, but essentially that's what we did. We did that SWOT analysis through the lens of inclusivity for LGBTQ youth and volunteers and members within our program. There were some great insights from those youth, directly from the youth about what our program does well, where we see some challenges and where they see some opportunities.

Kari Robideau:

Tell us about some of the strengths or what our program is doing well.

Joe Rand:

So, young people appreciated leaders who were willing and able to engage in dialogue or who did actually intervene when other youth were facing harassment or discrimination. Specifically that based on ethnicity, religion, or gender expression or sexuality. They acknowledged the presence of religions within our program and that we have folks from a lot of different religious backgrounds that some of which are affirming to LGBTQ folks and some who are not. And the kids really valued that diversity. And last, young people appreciated that the organization as a whole was trying to reach out to audiences who haven't traditionally been served by 4-H and that we're recruiting new people and that we were trying to increase the diversity of our program.

Kari Robideau:

And then what are some of the challenges or weaknesses that you heard about our program?

Joe Rand:

So, youth identified that we do have some non-inclusive practices like dress codes for certain things that many of our programs don't always offer gender neutral bathrooms, which is something that we thought we should be considering when we're choosing locations for our programs. And that we still separate activities by gender. And so we say we want to have a boys block in or we want to have a girls whatever. Or that when we're in a space that we're still separating by boys and girls, specifically in overnight situations, youth who are trans don't always feel like they are able to house with the gender they align with. And so that was frustrating. The youth also talked about some discrimination and harassment from youth and adults that still happens and that there isn't always intervention when those things happen. So, I recognize that we're never a fully... Be great if we could wipe it all away and never have any of that. But if youth are identifying that it's happening, then I think it's our responsibility to continue to try and move the needle so that we can make it less.

Kari Robideau:

So, then out of this conversation that you were able to have with the young people, what are some of the opportunities to improve our program that you learned?

Joe Rand:

Young people actually saw a lot of places where we have opportunity for growth and change. And that's one of the great things about our kids, is that they are very resilient and are always optimistic and always have lots of ideas. So, one of the things they talked about was just an increase in education for themselves, increased capacity for them, for volunteers, for staff. And that they wanted to learn more. So, that when they're engaging in those conversations, they're able to talk about things, they're able to talk about gender and sexuality and different populations of people and feel like they have a foundation of knowledge to talk from. They also talked about promoting inclusion and being really upfront about that and that we encourage participation from diverse audiences, not just LGBTQ audiences, but all audiences. And that we really need to uplift that we do that because it's not something that happens everywhere and it's certainly not something that is promoted or marketed by a lot of other organizations. And the fact that we are able to provide that space, they thought was really valuable and not everybody realized that.

Joe Rand:

We still go back to that same old belief around 4-H being about cows and farms. And people don't realize that we've moved well beyond that and that we're about way more than that and we want a diverse population of people to be engaging in our programs because that's how we grow, that's how we change, that's how we stay relevant. And that's really what makes a program robust, is having all those different points of view, all the different abilities and all the different walks of life together creating programs that are really positive for our kids. Young people also identified that we need to see some change organizationally and that... Specifically regarding housing for their trans peers and conducting programs in spaces that are more inclusive for our trans kids. But also that we have practices to ensure that we as staff and as volunteers and as adults working with young people are intervening when we see harassment or discrimination and that we have some practices in place to lean on so that we don't always have to recreate the wheel every time something comes up.

Joe Rand:

What was the new notion for me, was the idea around youth constantly having to be change agents and the teachers or educators in order to, they themselves ensure the spaces they want to engage in are safe. And so there's some research out there around an idea called compassion fatigue. And that research really is related to folks with disabilities and when they engage in organizations or programs, they often have to create changes or be a part of changes so that they can engage in those programs. And so that's real similar to what our LGBTQ youth and adults and volunteers are doing right now with our program, is that they are... That's how we're learning. Is that we as an organization are relying on them to create change based on situations they encounter where policy doesn't work necessarily or a practice that we have or a way that we do a program isn't inclusive.

Joe Rand:

And so then it's our responsibility as an organization to learn from that knowledge and create a practice around that, so that when it happens again, we don't have to do the whole process again. And another kid or an adult doesn't have to be the change agent for the same thing another time. Because what

happens then is that especially with kids who are faced with micro aggressions all day long in school and are engaging in different places where they're having to constantly create spaces that they feel safe in, they're going to get tired and they're going to opt out and they're going to be exhausted, because they're having to constantly do it. And so it's this fatigue that has created. And so it's our job to be more proactive and to learn from those situations when they arise, take note of that, create a... Not necessarily a policy because policy isn't always the best answer. Policy locks us into things. But at least create a best practice or guidance around that situation so that staff, so that volunteers have something to lean on the next time that it comes up.

Joe Rand:

And not only is that something for them to lean on and then there's a practice, but then that also helps to create a safer space so that youth know that, "Okay, this organization is going to provide me with X, Y and Z. They thought it through. They know how to do this thing so I can engage, I can be myself and I don't have to worry about having to fight this battle again when I get there." That's where I see our next step needing to take... That's what I see as our next step. Is moving from just learning as we go and relying on our youth, which is fine. Yes, we need to hear from them, we need to know what they feel like, what change needs to happen, what they see as policies or programs that aren't inclusive.

Joe Rand:

We need to know that we need. We need to hear their voice. And then we need to be proactive about creating spaces ahead of time where they can engage and not always relying on them to teach us about what they need, but to learn from them and to do what we're charged to do. And to provide places for positive youth development for all our kids.

Kari Robideau:

There's so much yet to learn and so much yet to change, but just summing it up that we have said we're an inclusive and safe place for you. I can totally hear why it would be frustrating. Why you would feel that fatigue as a young person when the practices aren't always matching what you're telling me you're going to provide. And I'm guessing that's not only something that happens in 4-H Youth Development Programs.

Joe Rand:

Yeah, I see it. I'm teaching now more around the state, especially in rural environments and talking to folks who are administrators and people with positions of power. And that's what I hear often is that, "Well, when something comes up we engage the person or the youth and their family and then we figure out how to navigate it, which is great because it really addresses the needs of that specific youth and that family. And I think still if we don't learn from it and we have to do that whole process again, we've done our organization and future youth a disservice. Because we need to take that information and learn from it and put a practice in place so that youth aren't constantly having to be the teacher. And in Minnesota 4-H we're starting to do that. We're going down that road. We're putting together a group of people to look at, what are some best practices and what are some guidances for our staff and for our volunteers working with LGBTQ youth?"

Joe Rand:

And so we're going to look at some of those things around, what are the best practices around housing and what are the best practices around where your program is happening and how do you figure out

how to have a gender neutral bathroom if you need one? And other things like that. Even just how we talk about gender and sexuality. And building capacity within our staff and with our volunteers and making sure that they are able to have conversations and feel like they are equipped to have the conversations and to engage with each other and to make sure that they're providing spaces that are safe and inclusive so that our LGBTQ youth and volunteers and other members, parents, whomever feel like our organization is a place where they can be authentic, they can fully engage and they can be who they are.

Kari Robideau:

Well, Joe I think you gave us a lot to think about today, but even more importantly a lot to do. And to me that's the message of this podcast is that, from the mouths of the young people who you did the focus group with, keep educating, keep telling us more, keep telling us how we should talk with each other and how we should interact with each other. If you're promoting inclusion, let everyone know that you are and then have practices that follow that up and show and feel like that. That you are an inclusive program that you don't just say that you are.

Joe Rand:

Absolutely, the follow through is so key.

Kari Robideau:

Thank you Joe. Well, it is time for us to close up this podcast, but I know that we will hear from you again and until that time I would like to invite all of our listeners to go to our website @www.extension.umn.edu/youth and you can learn more information about training and education tools for youth workers and leaders and research base articles written by our colleagues. Also, check out our Minnesota 4-H youth Development Program, information about inclusion and diversity that we've been working on and how we continue to work with our programs and improve them. Also, read and comment on our youth development topics that are covered in the youth development insight blog. Now, Joe has a blog post that is titled, How to Be More Inclusive With LGBTQ Youth, and you can go in and join that conversation that's already happening by commenting on that post, asking him questions. If you've heard from Joe before you know that he loves to learn more from you as well as engage in a dialogue that may help you improve your practices. That's going to wrap up this podcast today. Thank you for joining me Joe.

Joe Rand:

Always a pleasure Kari.

Kari Robideau:

And thank you to all of you who are listening today. I'm Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.