

# LGBT+ INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN EARLY YEARS

## Case Study | South Lanarkshire Council

**The LGBT+ Inclusive Education in Early Years project was designed to improve the life experiences of LGBT+ adults, children and families in Scotland.**

It was recognised that by collaborating with practitioners, parents and children, settings can improve how they welcome and support the diversity of family structures and improve outcomes for children.

By actively challenging bigotry, prejudice and discrimination, the project provides a framework which teaches children to celebrate difference and affirms their identity through positive representations in interactions, resources, environments and experiences.

The project also provides a model for ELC settings to embed LGBT+ inclusive education, and details the tools, knowledge and practices to deliver the Scottish Government's vision of being the first country to have LGBT+ education as part of its curriculum across all sectors.

The LGBT+ Inclusive Education in Early Years project adopted a social justice, action research approach to improve the mental health of LGBT+ children, young people and adults in Scotland. Research indicates that LGBT+ people in Scotland are more at risk of suffering from depression, discrimination, suicidal ideation and poor mental health than the general population<sup>1</sup>. This project aims to improve these outcomes by addressing erasure, lack of representation and lack of visibility of LGBT+ families in Early Learning and Childcare settings.

The project aims to ensure that Scotland really is the best place for all children to grow up, including those who identify as LGBT+, and parents and carers who identify as LGBT+<sup>2</sup>. This was deemed as being even more vital considering the impacts of Covid, which has negatively and disproportionately affected LGBT+ young people and adults in terms of isolation, social anxiety and access to safe spaces.

It was developed to support progressive legislation changes in Scotland in the past decade. These legislative changes have directly impacted families and children in ELC settings, and include joint adoption for LGBT+ couples (2009), access to IVF for lesbians (2009), the Equality Act (2010) and equal marriage (2014). These legal changes have enhanced the presentation of different types of family units to Early Learning and Childcare settings, however settings must take steps to ensure inclusion is effective.

A key part of the project involved practitioners developing an understanding of the ways gender stereotyping impacts upon very young children and their families, and the ways in which this can lead to health, social and economic inequalities in later life. These were identified as issues that could potentially be affecting children in all ELC settings. In this way, the project was cognisant of Scottish Government initiatives such as Gender Equal Play<sup>3</sup>, Improving Gender Balance Scotland<sup>4</sup> and A Fairer Scotland for Women<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Stonewall Scotland Health report, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Care Inspectorate, 2018

<sup>4</sup> Skills Development Scotland, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government, 2019

The LGBT+ Inclusive Education in Early Years project has been rolled out to a number of Early Learning and Childcare settings, and enlists full involvement of the children, the practitioners, and the parents. After being awarded an Innovation Award in 2020, the learning was shared with ELC settings across South Lanarkshire. A basic version of this project was trialled at the Early Learning Unit in Hamilton, in 2018. In 2019 and 2020, an expanded version of the project was undertaken at Cathkin Community Nursery. This involved academic research, quality improvement methodology, and the delivery of training to both practitioners and parents/carers. The training is now also part of South Lanarkshire’s live learn online programme (available to all staff, not just those in education), which means the impact will continue.

Despite LGBT+ education being delivered in some primary and secondary schools, this is the first project that directly addresses LGBT+ education in Early Learning and Childcare settings. It was designed within the frameworks of action research, quality improvement and developing a theory of change. A driver diagram was produced which identified an aim of being able to evidence 5 practical examples of LGBT+ inclusive practice. From this, primary drivers including children’s experiences and parental involvement, and secondary drivers including developing appropriate resources and using observation and peer assessment were identified. These were taken from change ideas such as using a whole setting approach, embedding practice as legacy learning, and making use of imminent curriculum change (the rollout of LGBT+ education in Scotland).

Early project actions included full setting training sessions for practitioners caring for 0-5 years, face to face information evenings with parents and using questionnaires to gather quantifiable data to measure the impact and success of the project. This, along with qualitative data such as interviews with parents, practitioners and children, observations of the children during play and playroom audits of spaces, interactions, experience and resources, were used to help deliver the results of the project.



The key success criteria of the LGBT+ Inclusive Education in Early Years project was to record a change in attitudes surrounding dealing with LGBT+ issues in Early Learning and Childcare settings amongst children, practitioners and parents and also to provide evidence that practitioners felt empowered to aid the children’s understanding of diversity in a way that is appropriate for ELC. The project produced a rich range of evidence which reveals that children and practitioners hold strong understandings of gender and heterosexuality “norms”, and this is evident in their thoughts, feelings, talk and play.

The project also provided evidence that heterosexuality is usually the only family form represented in stories, songs, resources and conversations in the nursery environment. This gives children strong messages about what is “normal” unless it is actively challenged by informed, reflective practitioners. A range of resources were purchased to increase visibility of LGBT+ people for the children, including many storybooks with diverse family structures, which became vital provocations for conversations between children and practitioners.

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***“This is the first time we have ever seen our family set up represented in stories and resources” LGBT + Parents***

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The project data recorded a positive impact upon children's, practitioners' and parents' understanding of LGBT+ people, once you enable opportunities for discussion, training and using resources. The data also revealed how accepting children are at such a young age which is undoubtedly a source of joy and optimism for the future.



The project collected evidence of practitioners analysing the ways in which they interacted with children in terms of gender stereotyping and upholding heterosexuality as a superior and privileged standard, and then taking steps to address this. Evidence was collated of practitioners challenging and disrupting children's stereotypical thinking, which enabled the children to enrich their worldview and expand the imagining of their own futures.

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***“Play and quality interactions can be expanded so that children can discover new ideas about what is possible in their lives” ELC Practitioner***

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A best practice infographic guide was produced for ELC settings as part of the project and this included the tenets that LGBT+ education is an appropriate topic for settings to investigate, and should begin to take steps to consider how they will approach this. In addition, the best practice guide details the ways in which LGBT+ education in settings is a process which involves combining a range of elements to be successful, including discussion, education, analysis and a commitment to self-reflection when interrogating language and actions upon the playroom floor. The project identified the ways in which educators must work together to negate any kind of institutionalised pedagogical practices which can lead to LGBT+ children and young people growing up to lead lives of shame, diminishment and poor mental health.

University of West of Scotland approached David Dick, Project Coordinator, in 2020, who supplied an interview and guidance notes, which are being used as a resource on their BA Childhood practice course, therefore reaching a new generation of early years practitioners in their studies. Education Scotland have had several meetings with David, and the project findings and recommendations will be available nationally on their website, under the banner of Improving Gender Balance and Equalities. The project was selected to be part of the Children and Young People's Improvement collaborative and a storyboard and video presentation is being showcased in November 2022 as part of the CYPIC learning sessions, which will be attended by educators and other stakeholders across Scotland.

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***“Developing an inclusive approach to LGBT+ education in early years is a team effort – I have been incredibly inspired by the responses from children, parents and practitioners, who have universally engaged with positivity and support. The feedback from LGBT+ parents tells me that this work is necessary and vital. I’m proud to work in Scotland, where our progressive attitudes give visibility to some of the most marginalised groups in society, and the voices of our youngest children provide us all with such a rich source of hope for the future” David Dick, Peripatetic Nursery Teacher and Project Coordinator***

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