



Findings from the RISE Youth Qualitative Interviews

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OPRE Report 2016-05

Background

As one of the six grantees in the Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII), the Los Angeles LGBT Center is implementing the RISE (Recognize Intervene Support Empower) initiative in partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and more than 20 community and foster care agencies. This brief describes findings from interviews with nine youth who are participating in RISE. The RISE Initiative aims to reduce the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) youth in long-term foster care, and improve permanency by decreasing heterosexism and transphobia in caregiving settings. As part of the [PII approach](#), a formative evaluation is being conducted to assess achievement of short-term outcomes: decreased heterosexism and transphobia. The formative evaluation is also monitoring initial implementation of the RISE interventions. Interviewed youth were asked to provide details on their perceptions of RISE, foster care services, and changes in their lives during receipt of services.

RISE comprises two interventions: **Care Coordination Team (CCT)** and **Outreach and Relationship Building (ORB)**. Both are designed to provide LGBTQ children and youth, parents, caregivers, and child welfare professionals with the support and education needed to nurture durable lifelong connections. Nine youth, who were participating in CCT, were invited to participate in evaluation interviews.

Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII)

The federal Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII) is a multi-site demonstration project designed to improve permanency outcomes for children in foster care who face the most serious barriers to permanency. Child welfare policy and practice are limited by a lack of evidence-supported interventions. The PII project aims to address this lack by increasing the rate of children discharged to permanent homes and adding to the body of knowledge about what works in child welfare. In 2010, the Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families funded six Grantees, a training and technical assistance provider (PII-TTAP), and an evaluation team (PII-ET). Each Grantee is implementing a unique approach to the project, both in the populations they target and the interventions they develop or adapt. PII-ET is charged with designing and carrying out rigorous evaluations to examine the implementation and effectiveness of the interventions designed to reduce long-term foster care stays and improve child and family outcomes.



The CCT is an adapted care coordination model that integrates two established practices, Wraparound¹ and Family Finding and Engagement², with LGBTQ-specific education and support strategies. The CCT intervention targets children and youth ages 5-17 (referred to as youth in this document) who are identified or self-identify as LGBTQ or gender-nonconforming and who have permanency barriers.

Youth are directly served through the CCT and supported by ORB services. ORB is an organization/system-level training delivered to caseworkers, support staff, therapists, and other professionals working within the LA County foster care system. ORB aims to increase LGBTQ knowledge and competency to serve LGBTQ youth among trainees from DCFS and private foster care agencies.

RISE CCT Services

A unique care coordination team forms after assent or consent to CCT services is obtained. This team is composed of professional CCT staff, caregivers, and the child or youth's supports, and together the team focuses on helping the child or youth achieve emotional and legal permanency.

- The **Facilitator** is responsible for the development and implementation of the Plan of Care, which centers on developing emotional and legal permanency for the LGBTQ youth, working with young people around their LGBTQ identity and working with their families to understand LGBTQ identity and the needs of their LGBTQ child. RISE uses a “family centered and strengths based approach to partnering with families in making decisions, setting goals, and achieving desired outcomes.”
- The **Youth Specialist's** primary role is to engage LGBTQ youth and develop a trusting relationship so the youth can learn to value, care about themselves, and thrive. The Youth Specialist operates from a positive youth development model and uses a strengths-based approach. The role includes being an educator about LGBTQ identity development, an advocate for the youth against bias, homophobia, transphobia, a resource specialist who connects youth to other LGBTQ peers and community, a role model, and a navigator who helps the youth identify and achieve their personal goals.
- The **Family Finder** works to identify and locate potentially supportive adults in an effort to expand and strengthen the natural support system of the LGBTQ youth. The Family Finder uses a set of best practice strategies which include internet searches, mining case records,

¹ Wraparound is an intensive, individualized case planning and service process. Per the [National Wraparound Initiative](#), wraparound has four phases: engagement and team preparation, initial plan development, implementation, and transition.

² Family Finding and Engagement is part of the [Family Finding](#) model. This model conceptualizes permanency through a connections framework, defining it more broadly than legal relationships. The model also provides a process for engaging children and youth in foster care, and known family members, in the search for permanent connections.

interviewing the youth and professional and non-professional adults the youth is in contact or wished to be in contact with. Once an adult is identified, the Family Finder works with the Parent Partner to develop a plan to engage the adult(s) and increase the contact and strengthen the relationship between the adult and LGBTQ youth.

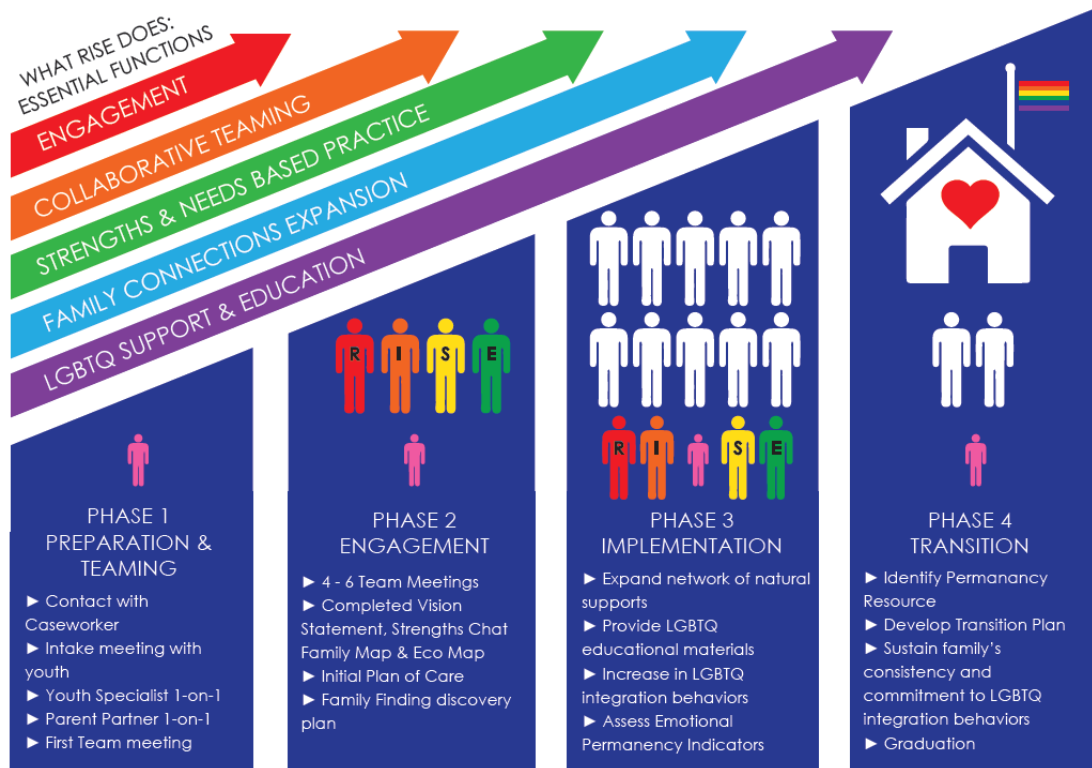
- The **Parent Partner** works with related and non-related adults to educate, provide support, and develop strategies to reduce rejecting behaviors and increase supportive behaviors toward the LGBTQ youth. Parent partners use motivational interviewing techniques and provide educational materials to support adults through their process of coming to terms with the youth's identity, demonstrate empathy, address concerns, and provide accurate information about LGBTQ identity and the needs and unique challenges of the youth.

Family team members consist of the youth, caregiver(s), **natural supports**, and **formal supports**. Natural supports are generally relatives, friends, associates, and co-workers who will be there for the family after they have graduated from the program. Formal supports are agencies and organizations set up to assist people, such as DCFS, private and public mental health agencies or practices, placement agency staff, attorneys, and low-income assistance agencies.

The CCT offers an array of services to youth and their caregivers. Initially, the team identifies the youth's barriers to permanency and assesses the family's or caregiver's level of acceptance and/or rejection. The team then works with the youth, caregiver, family, and natural and formal supports to develop strength-based strategies to:

- Expand the number of family connections;
- Build a larger network of natural supports;
- Decrease LGBTQ-rejecting behaviors and increase supportive and accepting behaviors;
- Identify emotionally permanent connections with supportive adults.

Strength-based strategies are implemented during each phase depicted in the figure below. The most intensive work to build connections and supports, decrease rejecting behaviors, and increase supportive and accepting behaviors occurs during phase 3 (implementation).



October 2014

Additionally the CCT offers training and supportive coaching to key placement staff who come into contact with the youth. The training and coaching consists of education on the best practices for supporting LGBTQ youth in out-of-home care, LGBTQ adolescent development, and an introduction to LGBTQ terminology and definitions.

RISE Youth Interviews

The formative evaluation uses a mixed-method design to document the implementation of CCT and assess whether CCT participants experience decreases in heterosexism and transphobia, as observed by improved well-being, reduced family rejection, and increased family support. As part of the evaluation plan, the evaluation team interviewed a convenience sample of nine youth who had been participating in CCT for at least three months.³ The youth ranged from 14-18 years old at the time of their interview, and were diverse in their LBGTQ identities (including gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, and gender transitioning).

³ OMB clearance is not needed when nine or fewer respondents participate in data collection.

To document implementation, participants were asked about their knowledge, expectations of, and experiences with CCT services. To assess perceptions of heterosexism and transphobia, and changes in behaviors, participants were asked about the foster care environment and discussions they had with foster care service providers. The evaluation team transcribed and analyzed the interviews. The analytic team created a common coding structure or “coding tree” with categories responsive to the major questions and sub-questions asked in the interview:

1. **Early RISE knowledge**
 - a. **Path to participation and pre-participation thoughts about RISE**
2. **Participation in RISE**
 - a. **Reason for participating; explanations of the program**
 - b. **Most helpful aspects of RISE**
 - c. **Protection of privacy**
 - d. **Most helpful RISE CCT staff**
 - e. **Life changes during RISE**
 - f. **Level of adult support**
3. **Discussions about sexuality, gender identity, and romantic attractions with foster agency staff**

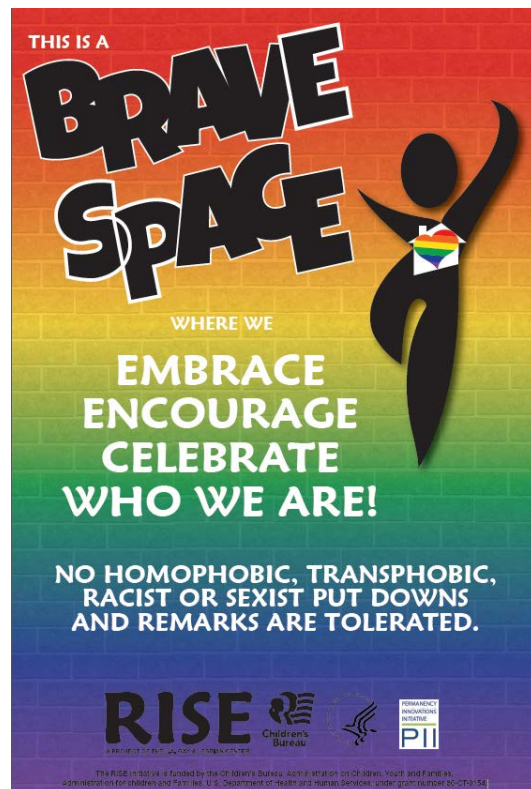
“... I think I was excited to know that the system is doing something about kids like me and stuff like that, so...I wasn't really nervous. I was more like excited to know the system is actually trying to do something for us.”

Findings

Early RISE Knowledge

Most youth learned about RISE either from their social worker or someone from the courts (attorney, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)). One youth learned about it from a RISE participant, and another saw a RISE “Brave Space” poster in their group home and initiated the conversation about RISE with their CASA.

The youth remember receiving varying degrees of information from the person who referred them to RISE. Of the youth who mentioned how they felt about the initial information about RISE, most youth responded positively with reactions ranging from “really excited” to “kinda happy.” Others had more neutral or unsure reactions at first but decided to give it a try.



Participation in RISE

Youth had numerous **reasons for deciding to participate in RISE**, most of which fell into one of three major categories:

- **Need for support.** Youth talked about needing support they thought RISE might offer. Types of support included help with coming out, help with a gender transition, and support for general needs.
- **Family relationships.** Youth hoped that RISE would help them communicate better with their families.
- **Connection with LGBTQ community.** Youth talked about wanting to meet or participate in activities with other LGBTQ people.

*“[I wanted to participate in RISE because] I need people that are really supportive, you know, they look past my sexuality, they look at, you know who I am individually, and that's what I wanted. I wanted somebody who looks, you know, past, what my sexuality is, or you know, anything else with me. **They just see who I really am.**”*

Youth identified several specific **aspects of RISE** that they felt had helped them:

- **RISE Staff.** Youth spoke about feeling comfortable and open with their RISE team, becoming close to them, receiving support and understanding, and feeling like their team really cared about them. All youth felt that **RISE staff protected their privacy**. Every youth **singled out their Youth Specialist as the RISE staff member who had helped them the most.**

*“I had a lot of disappointment in my life, so it's like with a lot of people, even though I know that's not going to be my whole life...I always still have that feeling that they're going to leave and not tell me. So I guess knowing I'm going to see [RISE staff] every week, and even if I can't see them every week, like I'll miss a week ... **I know they're still gonna come back and I trust them in that.**”*

- **Support.** Youth talked about several forms of support that they received from their RISE team, including emotional support, advice on relationships with friends and family, and general life assistance. Youth brought up a variety of practical and emotional ways their Youth Specialist had helped them, such as helping with resumes and college applications, teaching new skills, giving relationship advice, or just talking to the youth about their problems and feelings.
- **Someone who understands.** In addition to their general positive relationships with their RISE teams, youth specified that they liked talking to someone who was also LGBTQ and thus knows where they're coming from and can relate to their experience as an LGBTQ person. Some youth expressed frustration at trying to talk about their identity with non-LGBTQ friends, family, or workers who did not have much knowledge or understanding of LGBTQ issues. They found working with RISE staff who had both knowledge and personal

experience with LGBTQ issues to be both emotionally meaningful and helpful in bridging the gap with the non-LGBTQ people in their lives.

- **Can be open about identity.** Youth liked that the RISE program gave them the opportunity to be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, either in conversation with RISE staff or through increased participation in the LGBTQ community. Youth talked about feeling they could “open up and not have to hide anything” and feeling more comfortable going out with same-sex partners. Several youth felt that RISE helped them “be [themselves]” either in RISE meetings or their daily lives.
- **Family relationships.** Youth brought up instances where RISE helped them connect with their families. RISE directly arranged for one youth to visit her siblings for the first time in months. Other youth mentioned how RISE staff helped them learn how to communicate better with their families. .

*“They've helped me to **reach out to family members** who, you know, I couldn't really lean on or act like a support system and **they've helped me conquer my fears.**”*

The youth mentioned many **ways in which RISE had contributed to a change in their life.** The most frequently mentioned areas of change included:

- **LGBT identity.** Most youth said that participating in RISE helped them realize, define, or be able to express their LGBTQ identity. Some youth talked specifically about how conversations with RISE staff helped them confirm that they are LGBTQ or learn more about how to define their personal LGBTQ identity. Youth also said that RISE staff helped them come out to important people in their lives, like family and social work staff, by helping them find words to talk about their identity, overcoming their fears about coming out, and roleplaying coming out conversations.
- **Self-acceptance and self-confidence.** Most youth mentioned how working with RISE staff helped them become more comfortable with themselves, including their sexual orientation or gender identity. Youth mentioned that their overall self-esteem and confidence had increased as a result of RISE activities such as creating a vision statement and goals for the youth, answering questions about themselves, learning coping skills, talking about their feelings, and finding positive attributes about themselves.

*“They told me, it's okay to be gay. **It's okay to be yourself.** There's nothing wrong with it.”*

- **Family relationships.** Most youth mentioned that participating in RISE helped them improve their relationships with their families. For most youth, RISE staff enabled them to spend more time talking with their families, either in person or over the phone. These conversations led to closer relationships and more frequent contact for most youth, which the youth largely attribute to the RISE program helping both the youth and family learn how to talk about their feelings, helping them come out to or feel more comfortable being themselves around their family, or the simple opportunity to connect.

“I wanted [the RISE staff] to speak as much as they could to my grandpa...and my sister, and you know, they accepted it because ... the RISE, they know how to word it, they know how to express it in a way that I didn't know how to.”

- **Interpersonal skills.** Most youth discussed how RISE helped increase their interpersonal and communication skills with family, peers, and other people in their lives. Most youth talked about how RISE staff helped them learn how to express or explain their sexual orientation or gender identity to other people, both while coming out and in day-to-day conversation. Several youth said their RISE staff taught them ways to “ignore the negativity” when they received hostility from other people and how to communicate their own feelings in a more positive way than they had previously done. According to the youth, these increased interpersonal skills contributed heavily to the increase in self-confidence and positive family communication discussed above.

Most of the youth saw an increase in adult support during their time in RISE, largely attributed to the adults’ participation in RISE or the youth’s increased comfort and skills in talking with adults. Youth described several **sources of adult support and different ways the adults expressed support to the youth.**

- **Parents or family members.** Most youth described increased support from family members, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and adult siblings. In several cases, family members began giving direct verbal support for the youth’s LGBTQ identity, such as saying they were happy for the youth or proud of them for being themselves, expressing acceptance for the youth’s same-sex partner, or initiating conversations about LGBTQ issues or culture. Some family members also became more involved in the LGBTQ community, such as involvement with support groups. Some youth mentioned the cessation of negative behaviors as part of the way they felt more supported by their family.
- **Group home staff.** Some youth mentioned that the staff at their foster care placement have become more helpful and understanding during RISE participation. For example, some staff members participated in RISE meetings with the youth. Youth also discussed using RISE-taught communication techniques to talk to staff about the youth’s LGBTQ identity. Subsequently, youth perceived that the staff became better listeners when the youth needed to talk, and staff who had previously not been supportive began demonstrating more respect and understanding for the youth’s identity, such as using correct pronouns for the youth.

- **Other adults.** One youth mentioned that the teachers at the youth's school are involved in the RISE program and now talk more with the youth. Another youth brought the RISE team to another program the youth is involved in to help facilitate ongoing support for the youth.
- **RISE staff.** Although the question was geared toward other sources of adult support, some youth specifically mentioned their RISE teams as significant sources of adult support in their lives.

Discussing Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Romantic Attractions

Most of the youth indicated that they had discussed things related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or their romantic relationships or attractions with workers or staff. Youth seemed to refer mostly to the workers or staff with whom they spent the most time, and it was sometimes unclear whether they were referring to their foster care agency staff (group home staff or caseworker at the group home) or their DCFS social workers. A majority of the youth expressed that their relationships with their social workers are good, specifying that they trust their workers and feel comfortable talking with them. For youth who mentioned changes in their relationship with their social workers, the majority expressed that these relationships have become more positive or better overall. Youth who already had a negative or mistrustful relationship with a worker did not experience any change in that relationship.

Overall, youth were most comfortable sharing personal information with workers or staff with whom they already had a trusting relationship. Youth who came out to their workers or staff members all reported receiving a positive reaction. Several youth mentioned that they have discussed their romantic lives with a worker or staff member and feel comfortable in those conversations.

*“After I started RISE, I felt comfortable with [my worker] and I told her about me being bisexual and like she's all like, oh okay. **She was really accepting.**”*

Youth who did not discuss topics related to sexuality or gender identity with workers or staff felt that this was private or personal information that they did not want to share. Some youth shared with some workers or staff, but not others. Some youth did not feel safe sharing sensitive information about themselves with specific workers or did not feel it was important to discuss with them. Other youth expressed that although their caseworker was aware of the youth's LGBTQ identity, the caseworker had not brought up any topics related to it; therefore, the youth assumed the worker did not want to talk about it.

Conclusion

Findings from qualitative interviews with youth participating in the RISE CCT intervention indicated that youth felt participation in RISE had a positive effect on their confidence and self-acceptance, both generally and especially regarding their LGBTQ identity. Youth also described improvements in their relationships with natural and, to a lesser degree, formal supports. These improvements came in part through RISE facilitating more contact between the youth and their families, and in part, because the youth felt RISE had taught them better interpersonal skills and ways to communicate their feelings to others, particularly in regard to their LGBTQ identity.

While these findings are positive, they are based on a convenience (i.e., non-representative) sample of CCT youth participants. The evaluation team will conduct a second round of youth interviews in Fall 2015 to further explore youth perceptions about how RISE may have contributed to improved interpersonal communication with natural supports, changes in their relationships with natural supports, and their journey to permanency. A final report on formative evaluation outcomes of the RISE initiative will be available from OPRE in 2016.

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