You Belong: LGBTQ+ and Allies Youth Group

Fairview Public Library

Young Adult

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Byline

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You Belong is a weekly, ongoing, after-school drop-in program designed to provide an inclusive and welcoming space for LGBTQ+ young people in the suburbs outside Toronto. We host one creative LGBTQ+ guest speaker or fabulously fun event every month.

Youth get the opportunity, along with others just like them, to plan for the events, create displays, design fliers and be a part of the promotion. This is an opportunity

for youth with shared values to network, have fun and make a difference!

Advanced Planning

We created this program to address the lack of LGBTQ+ programming in the suburbs outside downtown Toronto. Newcomer communities are most deprived of LGBTQ+ resources and services and frequently have to travel great distances to access them. Youth from newcomer communities face the most vulnerability and challenges, and many of them are not “out” among their families, friends and communities.

This program strives to be a private, safe, fun and educational after-school hangout spot for youth ages 13 to 19. It's a place where youth are allowed to shape and mold their own programming, an affirming space and learning platform from which youth can gain access to resources and services relevant to their diverse needs.

We started planning about two months in advance by targeting local high school gay-straight alliances (GSAs) to get feedback on what youth want in this type of program. Building a relationship first with youth through consistent visits to high school GSAs and LGBTQ+ nonprofit community organizations was crucial to the success of the program. It allowed us to establish trust with the youth so they felt comfortable coming to the program.

Marketing

Marketing is tricky for this type of program. This age group is extremely vulnerable and cannot be overly exposed or forced to identify when marketing. Libraries can be a great neutral space for LGBTQ+ programming, but you have to pick the room you are hosting the program in with great thought. When we began this program, we chose a room that is on a level that was not visible from the rest of the library services, making it private but still easily accessible.

We had some fliers in the branch, but the marketing we did was heavily based on in-person outreach to local high schools with GSA groups in them. We would contact schools and inquire if they had an established GSA and who the leader of the group

was. We would then persistently contact the group leader, asking to attend one session to speak to youth in-person about this new program.

High school outreach can be extremely challenging and time consuming. You must be persistent, access appropriate channels in-person and get the approval you need to speak to youth in GSA groups. We created "safe" fliers with no indication of "LGBTQ+" so the youth would be able to give them to their parents, letting their parents know they'd be attending a library program, yet not "outing" themselves. **(See fliers under Attachments at right.)**

Once word got out about the program the local newspaper, North York Mirror (see page 10), was extremely enthusiastic in printing articles about us. Many city center LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations that we visited were extremely helpful in advertising to their youth.

Budgeting

All the resources and guest speakers we provide are on a volunteer basis, so the library pays nothing. If you invest the time and energy in asking many LGBTQ+ community organizations to assist you, you will find that they are very enthusiastic in volunteering their time to be guest speakers.

The only cost of the program is snacks. Food is a crucial element for youth-based programming. Many big restaurant chains are willing to donate food if you provide a letter and business card informing them what the program is all about.

Day-of-event Activity

When it comes to staffing, consistency is important for this type of program. The youth need to develop a relationship and be able to trust the person running the program. There must be at least one staff member weekly (ideally two, so there is a back-up available when one person needs to be off).

We always put a display in the room with LGBTQ+ collection material that may interest the group. In addition, we display fliers and cards from outside organizations

that may be relevant.

Some programming ideas/activities are:

- LGBTQ+ film festival
- Pride Month author visit
- Speed dating
- Current affairs debates
- Substance abuse/mental health/sexual health nurses
- Pride displays
- Field trips to LGBTQ+ events/galleries
- Self-defense for LGBTQ+
- Queer slam poetry
- Queer confessions memoir writing

We use our own library resources to watch documentaries, play board games or do craft displays. Even simple, zero-cost days of just congregating, talking, sharing stories, debating or decompressing are great weekly activities.

Program Execution

We connect with many LGBTQ+ contacts and community members across the city that aree willing to attend as a volunteer guest speaker. Guest speakers share their experiences growing up, obstacles they faced and successes they have made. These speakers come in free of charge and are extremely valuable and poignant.

LGBTQ+ community organizations in the city center also have been very willing and helpful to attend sessions to speak on behalf of their organizations. This type of connection is mutually beneficial, as the organization meets their outreach criteria, and we are able to gain resources and guest speakers.

Attendance for this program can be extremely low at first, and it may take a long time to build a large audience. Some youth will drop out or be pulled out of the program because of families that do not approve or stress factors they are currently going through. It is extremely important to stick with the program and maintain consistency. The importance of the program is value-based more than attendance-based. Although attendance fluctuates, the youth that attend have expressed how

much it has helped improve their lives, happiness and perspective. There is a sense of belonging, close to home, which is our ultimate goal.

You Belong is the first LGBTQ+ consistent weekly, ongoing youth program outside of our city center core. We have been able to establish new community partnerships with large and reputable local nonprofit organizations. We have received attention from local newspapers like Inside Toronto, and we are now considered a potential satellite programming location and future partner with the city's largest LGBTQ+ community center, The 519.

Our evaluation is based mostly on the youth's experience. We always maintain a clear line of communication with youth to ensure we are meeting their needs, and the program itself is shaped and molded by the youth themselves. Toronto Public Library is working toward developing more systematic evaluation strategies. This is an area of further development that will move us away from informal evaluation methods currently used.

Advice

Step 1: Identify the need and establish the foundation

- Outreach, outreach, outreach!
- Build relationship on THEIR turf, where they already congregate and feel comfortable (e.g., high school GSAs, nonprofit organizations and community centers).

Step 2: Partnerships

- Find organizations in your community you can partner with.
- Even if you are doing it on your own, lean on community organizations for resources, services and expertise.

Step 3: Results and resources

- Have a line-up of varying program ideas, guest speakers, field trips and events. Think outside the usual library box. Let the youth have a say and shape the program themselves!

Did you try this program at your library? Share your experience using this form.

Supporting Materials

Document
flier-you_belong.pdf
Document
safe_flier.pdf
Document
cardstock_square.pdf
Download this Program as a PDF

- Programming Librarian Facebook Group

Slideshow Images





More Programs

May 24, 2023
Children (9 and under)+ |
Image



LGBTQ+ Pride Month

Audiences:

Audience
Children (9 and under)
Young Adult (17 - 20)
Adults (21 and up)
Intergenerational
Dec 17, 2015
Children (9 and under)+ |
Image



Library Offers Safe Space for LGBT Event

Audiences:

Audience
Children (9 and under)
Aug 21, 2015
Young Adult (17 - 20)+ | $
Image



Pride @ the Library

Audiences:

Young Adult (17 - 20)
Adults (21 and up)