



The Value of a \$27 Sign

Katie Slivovsky

Chicago Children's Museum

"Security chased me."

"I run into problems 80% of the time."

"I have spent so many hours avoiding public multi-stall bathrooms that I have damaged my bladder and put pressure on my kidneys."

"The problem was a daily one. I'd think about where I was going, what bathrooms I'd have access to, how much I drank during the day, whether I'd be with people who could help stand guard..."

The ACM website states that thirty million people visit children's museums every year. According to TransActive Gender Center's admittedly conservative estimate, 2 percent of the population is gender non-conforming or gender expansive. That



We need to have more places like this (Chicago Children's Museum) where they have the all-gender restrooms and the rainbow flag at the front desk welcoming people

—Jason, 14, trans youth visiting CCM

means it's possible that 600,000 people may not feel confident that they will find an appropriate place to go to the bathroom in our museums.

The solution is both simple and complicated. The simple part: if you already have private family bathrooms, buy an all-gender bathroom sign for \$27.00 at www.MyDoor-Signs.com and stick it on the door. Tomorrow.

Now for the complicated part: it's easy to slap a sign on a door, but that's not quite enough. As part of Chicago Children's Museum's (CCM) overall commitment to access and inclusion, a committee of eight staff from various museum departments meets regularly to strategize on how to actively welcome, engage, and include the LGBTQ community. Let's work backwards from the all-gender restroom example and explore what else might be done to expand and support your museum's welcoming efforts.

Show Visible Signs of Welcome

If you'd like people who identify as transgender to know they are welcome at your museum, add the universal sign of welcome—the inverted rainbow triangle—to your entrances and website. Transgender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer/questioning visitors—as well as their allies—will notice it.

At CCM, we place inverted triangle rainbow symbol front and center, even before the admissions info.

Talk with Staff about Key LGBTQ-Inclusiveness Issues

• LGBTQ-inclusiveness from a child-development point of view

Communicate how important and healthy it is for children to see their family configurations and gender expressions reflected in their community. If you read or share one resource, let it be this article from

I'm attempting the unthinkable: addressing an issue as broad as LGBTQ* inclusion through a lens as specific as amenities. Amenities may seem like a narrow lens at first, but they reflect a museum's deeper philosophical decisions about its identity and the audiences it serves.

Let's start with the amenity that 100 percent of visitors to public institutions need but only 98 percent can count on: an appropriate bathroom. Do your bathrooms serve all your visitors?

If you haven't spent a lot of time with this question yet, consider the excerpt below from a post titled, "Public Bathroom Use for Transgender Teens: If You're Gender Non-Conforming, Finding a Place to Pee Can Be Tough!" (http://gayteens.about.com/od/transgenderteenissues/a/trans_bathroom.htm):

Imagine this: You're a transgender teen (or caregiver, child, friend, or relative) and you have to pee. Sounds pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Unfortunately, for a lot of trans people taking care of this basic need isn't. That's because the majority of public bathrooms are specifically designed for either men or women, and a trans person whose appearance or body doesn't conform to what people think of as male or female may run into trouble trying to use either restroom. In fact, it is often against the law to use a bathroom designated for the opposite sex.

What's the problem? The Transgender Law Project did a survey of this issue a few years back and talked to people about their bathroom experiences.

Here are a few things they heard:

"I've been yelled at, 'you're using the wrong bathroom.'"

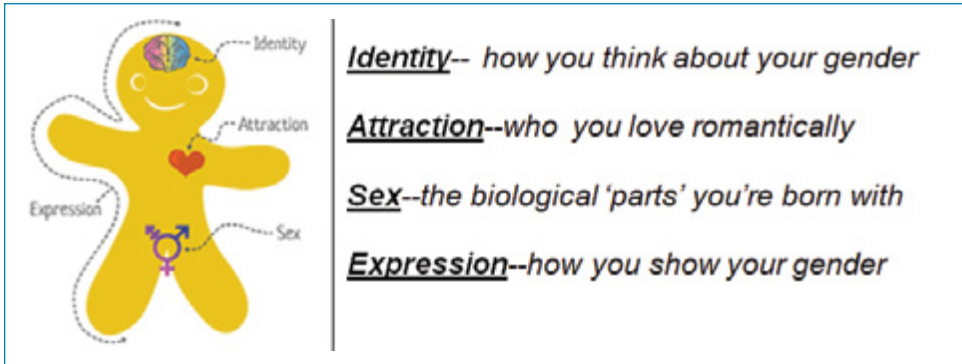
"I have been pushed, slapped and physically pulled out."

NAEYC's January 2010 publication *Young Child*: "Do No Harm: Creating welcoming and inclusive environments for LGBT families in early childhood settings" by Tracy Burt, Aimee Gelnaw, and Lee Klingler Lesser.

A couple of quotes from this great resource:

"Children's identities and sense of self are inextricably tied to their families. The experience of being welcome or unwelcome, visible or invisible begins in early childhood." (Burt, Gelnaw, and Lesser)

"When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you're not in it, there's a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." (Adrienne Rich, poet/essayist)



The Genderbread Person, above, was created by social justice comedian Sam Killerman. His website, itspronouncedmetrosexual.com, features articles, graphics, and other resources for talking about gender, sexuality, identity, and privilege.

• Avoid the gender binary

One of the easiest, most inclusive things you can begin to do immediately is to stop reinforcing the gender binary, which can make gender non-conforming, gender-expansive children and adults feel left out. Take a look at your museum announcements, materials, and environment. Do they categorize everyone as male or female, man or woman, boy or girl (i.e., following the gender binary)? If so, start thinking about gender as a complex milieu, unique to each person and including:

- identity: how you think about your gender;
- attraction: who you love romantically;
- sex: the biological "parts" you're born with; and
- expression: how you show your gender (Learn more about the "The Genderbread Person" at this smart and sassy website: <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com>.)

At CCM, we made the following chang-

es to avoid the gender binary:

- We changed all recorded announcements from "Attention boys, girls, moms, dads and caregivers" to "Attention visitors." (Who doesn't love fewer words?!)
- We never assume a child's gender. This takes practice. We say "Hi friend!" a lot.
- We never divide groups of children by gender. Instead we look for other distinctions, such as kids with Velcro vs. tie shoes.
- We usually don't ask visitors to check a box on a survey or form for "male, female, other." We rarely analyzed data this way so why even make gender a thing?
- **Handle complaints with good customer service.**

Once in a while a guest will question our rainbow sign or one of the other LG-BTQ-inclusive activities or events we host

are highly conservative. But so far, we've had more complaints about our no-coffee policy than about our rainbows.

• What staff do and don't have to agree with

It's OK if not everyone on staff (or on the board) sees things exactly the same way. Don't try to change beliefs. At CCM, we simply require staff to be helpful and outwardly friendly with all guests and restate the museum's inclusive policies as needed. Personal opinions stay personal and don't factor into the workplace.

Here's a related helpful example: there are staff who work at science-based institutions who believe in Creationism. As long as they can talk about science-based theories with the public (if their job requires it), that should be all that is asked of them professionally.

Find out What Other Amenities Your LGBTQ Community Appreciates

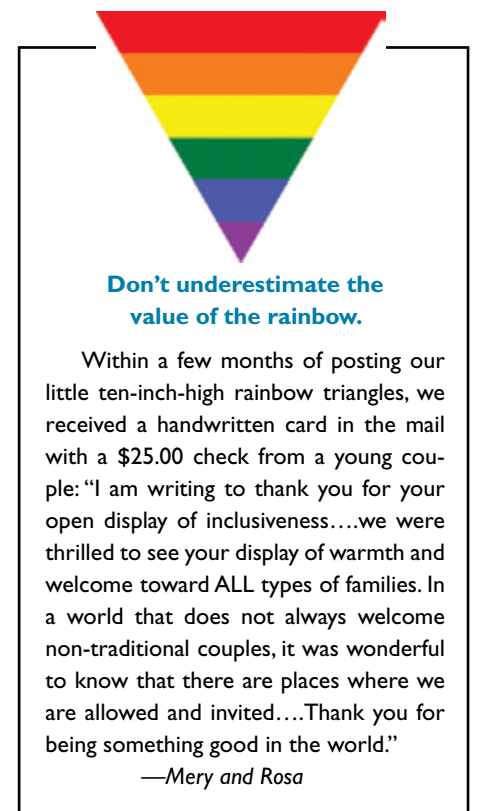
Theresa Volpe, CCM's LGBTQ advisor on access and inclusion, reinforces our idea that the LGBTQ community wants to enjoy the museum exhibits the same way everyone else does—in other words, no big changes needed. However, Theresa advised that many LGBTQ parents with young children do appreciate a special opportunity to meet each other in a family-friendly setting. So, on three occasions over the summer, we

throughout the year. Museum staff handle it the same way they handle a customer who questions our no-coffee-in-the-museum (or any other) policy by:

- 1) calmly restating the museum's policy;
- 2) keeping the conversation brief (without brushing off the guest);
- 3) never engaging in debate or adding personal statements about the policy; and
- 4) letting visitors know that completing a comment card is a solid way to ensure their voice will be heard by management.

In 2015, CCM visitors helped celebrate International Family Equality Day and PRIDE month by tying 1,500 individually colored ribbons to our central staircase, transforming it over six weeks into a three-story rainbow. Since this was anything but subtle, we touched base with all frontline staff to ensure they felt comfortable, confident, and empowered to field all comments.

Museum guests represent hundreds of cultures from around the block, around the country, and around the world. Some guests



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provided another type of amenity: a hospitality and resource room. In the museum's multi-purpose classroom, we provided snacks, LGBTQ-family-friendly children's books, and various materials about school safety, gender identity clinics, reproductive issues, etc. At other times, this same classroom space becomes a "quiet room" to serve families who have children with autism—or any family with a child who needs a quiet place to take a break. So, our multi-purpose classroom becomes a visitor amenity at times, depending on the needs of various communities. The same classroom is designated by signage for specific audience needs:

1) The LGBTQ Hospitality and Resource Room. ALL are welcome.
Or:

2) The Quiet Room: Calm an overstimulated child, take a break.

Conclusion

Why talk about LGBTQ inclusiveness through the lens of amenities? At first it was because I never pass up a chance to advo-




Theresa Volpe, CCM's LGBTQ advisor on access and inclusion, holds their toddler on a visit to the museum's Rainbow Staircase with her wife Mercedes and their two older children.

cate for inclusion. But as I wrote, the less I feared I would be misunderstood for oversimplifying something of profound importance and the more my commitment to this viewpoint/approach was reaffirmed. Overtly showing signs of welcome, acceptance, and inclusion is both simple and profound.

And finally, if bathroom signage seems minor compared to larger issues of inclusion, consider Houston's recent repeal of

its equal rights ordinance that guaranteed protections based on an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as on sex, race, color, ethnicity, national origin, age, familial status, marital status, military status, religion, disability, and pregnancy. Popularly known as the "Bathroom Bill," proponents of the repeal focused their media efforts on lurid stories of the dangers posed by transgender people using bathrooms of choice. Bathrooms are the tip of the iceberg.

An all-gender bathroom sign may only cost \$27.00 but the message it sends to all who need or appreciate it is priceless. 

Katie Slivovsky is the exhibit development director at Chicago Children's Museum (CCM). In 2011, she co-founded a CCM initiative that focuses on actively welcoming and engaging the LGBTQ community. Katie has also worked at the Children's Museum of Richmond (VA) and the Children's Museum of Indianapolis (IN).

* LGBTQ: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning