

iNSIDEoUT Program for Children Ages 7-12

Purpose of the Group:

To cultivate an atmosphere in which children ages 7-12 are kind and accepting of one another, and feel safe and confident. To encourage them to challenge society's rigid gender roles and to express themselves freely, however they choose. To help children gain some understanding of LGBTIQ-related issues, especially the ways these issues relate to their lives, for instance, in cases of bullying and gender-variance. To provide support for all youth, especially youth who have variant (real or perceived) gender identities or expressions and children of same-sex parents or other alternative families. To help young people realize that their voices matter and to encourage them to believe in themselves and to take initiative. To give them opportunities and encouragement to exercise their power. To build leadership among youth and especially future leaders of iNSIDEoUT and Queer-/Gay-Straight Alliances. To help students start QSAs/GSAs in their schools, and to transform elementary and middle schools in North Carolina into safe spaces for everyone, spaces that affirm LGBTIQ and gender-nonconforming identities and expressions.

Set-Up:

The group will meet every other week for two hours on Sunday afternoons at a church in Durham. In addition, the program will include overnight retreats and outings to fun places around the Triangle.

What are the Reasons for Programming for 7 to 12 Year Olds?

There are many:

- Bullying begins and may even be most pervasive in middle and elementary schools.
- For 7-12 year olds, the pressure to conform to rigid gender roles is extreme. For example, youth often divide themselves according to sex, especially at younger ages (members of the opposite sex have "coodles").
- Gay-Straight Alliances are important for providing support and a safe space for youth in middle and elementary schools just as they are in high schools.
- Many (if not most) 7 to 12 year olds have already heard LGBTIQ-related terms used in hateful and offensive ways. LGBTIQ-related words are already associated with homophobic sentiments even in very young children. Children should understand what these terms mean and why it's bad to use them in hateful ways. Take, for example, the following real conversation between a (bearded) friend of mine and a five-year-old neighbor:
 - 5 yr. old – What's that on your fingers?
 - Friend – Nail polish.
 - 5 yr. old – I didn't know you were a girl.
 - Friend – I'm not.
 - 5 yr. old (with disgust) – Well that's gay!
 - Friend – What does that mean?
 - 5 yr. old – I don't know, it's just gay.
- Children have a unique capacity to act as agents of social change, especially given the malleability of the personalities and identities that they are still forming (and the fact that they will be the world's next adults.)
- Children are naturally self-expressed. For a movement that promotes self-expression, this is invaluable.
- Younger youth will be stronger as teenage (and adult) leaders, LGBTIQ-allies, and advocates for social justice if they experience an LGBTIQ-affirming environment and learn to speak their voice and take initiative early on.
- LGBTIQ people need support and understanding, even at 7 to 12 years old. Many adult LGBTIQ people have known that they were LGBTIQ or different in some way since they were very young children – that means that young children may already be struggling with their sexual and gender identities in a variety of ways and on many different levels.

