Our Panelists: The YES Institute

Joseph Zolobczuk, MS Ed. (He/Him) Executive Director

Joseph has served on staff with YES Institute for 25 years. As Executive Director of YES Institute, Joseph supports and guides an amazing team who leads continuing education courses for teachers, mental health therapists and medical professionals across South Florida – and national communities via Zoom – working to reduce health disparities of youth and families impacted by gender stereotypes and anti-gay social stigmas.

Milagros del Valle (She/Her)

Milagros is a mom married to her wife and they are raising two kids. She is a new volunteer speaker with The YES Institute. Milagros is a dedicated Mother of three. Milagros is passionate about human development and coaching personnel; her professional background is in healthcare operations. In the past few years, it has become clear to Milagros that youth are the future, and she believes, "youth are our opportunity to create a positive shift in our world. It is because of this that I have chosen to invest my time in sharing my story and experience to help children, young adults and parents in any way I can."
Questions and Answers

What is an ally and how can I be a meaningful one?

Being an ally is not binary. It is a commitment to lifelong learning and asking questions. It is discovering how to help through genuine conversations with the person or community. It’s also knowing when it’s appropriate to ask questions, and when it’s best to listen.

Understand that not everyone is cut out to be an educator about their community. Some people don’t want to be, or don’t feel comfortable.

Creating opportunities for representation. Children need to see other children and families like theirs. Resources like Kids & Pride Panel, or the YES Institute show children that they’re not alone.

What if your institution or organization is hesitant to do Pride programming?

Don’t try to persuade. It’s very difficult to successfully persuade people out of their own views. It can make them even more entrenched in their views. Instead have a conversation and find a way to do Pride programming that works for their microculture.

Look at your mission statement. Is your organization including ALL children and families?

What if your donors or sponsors threaten to pull their funding because of Pride programming?

Don’t resist the conversation. Talk with them and share other options for exhibits and programming that might be more of an interest to them.

How do we respond to upset customers, or even upset staff who don’t want to participate in Pride programming?

It’s important to have the courage to step into that uncomfortable space and really listen. True diversity includes voices we don’t always agree with. Guests and staff may have beliefs that bump up against our own personal values.

Front-facing staff can acknowledge and validate our visitors’ emotions. Don’t try and fix it or change it.

Ex. I see you’re upset and you’re worried. You came all the way here, let’s talk about what other exhibits or options we have that you might really enjoy!
Questions and Answers

How can we be true allies to the LGBTQ+ Community— not just performative? And not just in June?

Engage LGBTQ+ youth organizations by creating collaborative projects that highlight queer youth in your community.

Create safe spaces! “Even when traveling we chose places, we think we’ll feel safe.”

It’s not always something someone says or does. Body language can say a lot when welcoming people.

Visual cues: The Pride flag, gender neutral bathrooms, and signs that reflect diverse families

Train your staff to use non-gendered language or language that doesn’t force children to make a choice about how they identify.

Ex. Good Morning Boys & Girls vs. Good Morning Everyone!
Ex. Girls line up over here, boys over here vs. Everyone whose name starts with an "S" line up here

Diversifying your bookshelves with picture story books that reflect different families for year-round representation.

Be mindful of gender rigidity. Gender rigidity in early learning creates gender bias in children. It impacts their development and limits what they think they’re capable of i.e., STEM Gender gap (The Dream Gap)

Ex. “I don’t want my son to play with dolls, it’ll make him gay.” The truth is that no toy can make a child be anything.

Ex. “Sally can’t play with Legos because she’s a girl.” That’s strange because I’ve seen Sally play with Legos and she’s good at it!
Questions and Answers

Parents and Caregivers

Comments from parents:
“I could never have a transgender kid- I would disown them.” Much of our own gender expectations and reactions are based on how we grew up and how our family spoke about gender and/or being gay.

Comments about children:
“How could you dress your son like that?” “Why don’t you ever put her in dresses?” You don’t have to explain or defend yourself or your child’s choice of dress.

Read the room, especially if it seems like someone is looking for a confrontation. If you do feel like you want to respond, acknowledge their feelings first “Wow, I see that you’re having a strong reaction to how I’ve dressed my child.” And then take it from there. “We believe pink is a color for everyone.” “My daughter prefers pants to dresses.”

Educators

How can we talk about/be inclusive of families with queer parents and/or questioning children without getting dinged for the “Don’t Say Gay Bill”?

It’s important we are clear about what we’re talking about. It’s called the “Parental Rights in Education” bill and no where does it say we can’t protect children from bullying.

Anti-gay bullying is the most prevalent kind of bullying. Interrupting and intervening isn’t restricted in the bill.

Don’t allow micro-aggressions to happen in your class. Micro aggressions are commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental slights, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.

Start student kindness clubs

Literature Resource: Beyond the Gender Binary by Alok Vaid-Menon