

## How Does She Do It All?

By Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev

As many of you know, I have recently published a book called *The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide*, which means that I have published two books in 2004. I have been "wow-ed" by many people who believe that I actually wrote two books in the past year, but nothing could be further from the truth. I actually wrote two books in SIX years, but the nature of the publishing world means that once you send your words to them, you surrender control of when (and if) they appear in print.

As the author of two potentially controversial books (the other one, *Transgender Emergence*, is a 500- page tome to the therapy profession to stop seeing transgender and transsexual people as abnormal or pathological), I have braced myself for an onslaught of negative feedback. So far the drum rolls of war are silent, but I am still wearing my protective gear, just in case. It is an interesting thing being "out there," and seeing your name on bookshelves. Although I am drawn to writing and having my words out in the world, it may surprise people to know that I am actually a shy person in some ways (or is scared a better word?). I prefer the quiet of my home to the bustle of the world; some say I am a curmudgeon, or a recluse, and I have often longed for the life of a spiritual renunciate (don't laugh; it's true). I love the act of writing (the tapping of my fingers on the keyboard is the ultimate act of both sensual and spiritual connection for me) far more than the thrill of publishing. But I write in part because I have to (as people have to eat, I devour books and words). Mostly I write because some things just damn well need to be said.

I wrote both books for the same reason: I am tired of living in a society, a culture, a country that forces us to "prove" our worth. For example, the research shows that children growing up lesbian and gay homes usually grow up straight. This is touted as great news, as if growing up lesbian and gay is not such a good thing, and that we should be happy that our children are spared that fate. As if it wouldn't have been good for some of us queers to grow up with gay parents (imagine that!). As if, growing up in gay culture was a handicap, that might stunt our children's sexual development, as if <clearing throat> growing up in heterosexual homes is not sometimes handicapping, in terms of heterosexism, homophobia, and general sexual repression for many children, especially those dealing with sexual and gender related issues. The truth is that some kids growing up with gay parents are gay, just like in straight families. The truth is that if all kids who grew up in gay homes were gay, that would be fine too. Being gay is not the lesser of two evils, or the outcome of poor parenting strategies; it is not second best.

I wrote those books because I'm tired (which is not to suggest that writing them has increased my energy!) I wrote those books because I am tired of defending my right to be lesbian mom, to be in a multiracial family, to be the lover of a Butch (noun, not adjective). I field hundreds of emails to my [Dear Ari](#) column from lesbian women and gay men who are coming out and worried about how this will impact their children. I talk to transgender and transsexual people that live in fear of losing their jobs, and their

families, for the simple, brave act of self-actualization. I think it is time we stop defending our "right" to our lives, and claim our lives and live them as fully as we can.

I wrote *The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide* because every gay parenting book I picked up told me that gay parents were just like straight parents, and *therefore* we had a right to parent our children. But I've lived my whole life within the LGBT community, and when I look around I don't see us looking like other families at all. I think of my friend Morgan, breastfeeding her babies, with her tattooed artwork that spreads across her breasts, arms and back. I think of my friend Daniela, lesbian mom to two sets of twins, worrying that someone will judge her parenting because one of her four children is going through a rough stage and acting out. I think of my friend Vince and Jack, white gay dads to their daughter Mona, a fiery African-American girl, who like all children of gay men, dresses sharp and has quick comebacks. Of course there are tattooed heterosexual moms, and all parents deal with feeling uncomfortable when their children have behavioral problems, and some kids living in heterosexual homes dress sharp, but queer homes are simply not "the same" as heterosexual homes. We have a distinct culture, or rather we live within distinct cultures, and many of our homes are filled with progressive ideas and more flexible gender expectations. I am tired of the suggestion that is bad for our children, and mostly I am very very tired of how we internalize those messages and feel bad about our families and our queer cultures.

As a Jew I learned a long time ago, that standing out from the crowd was not a bad thing. It's true we don't do Santa at my house, but as my older son will tell you, "OUR holiday is eight days, not one." We don't need to fit in, to be like others, to be "okay." It is our great gift that we are unique, as LGBT people, and it is these very gifts we give to our children.

I wanted to write a book that told it "like it is" about parenting, i.e., that it is hard. Exhausting, in fact. That it screws up your sex life, your financial life, and most of your social life. And maybe in those ways LGBT parenting is a lot like heterosexual parenting. But there are differences. We usually have to work harder to get our kids; we sometimes have to work harder to keep our kids. And there are unique challenges we face in a world that doesn't recognize our families and our partnerships, and looks at us askance sometimes while we are just trying to order a slice of pizza.

*The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide* is neither complete nor a guide (publishing is also about letting go of the power to name your literary offspring). It is, however, a beginning. It is a truth-telling, an expose if you will, on the real challenges of parenting, and on the real dykes and fags and gender-benders that are birthing, cuddling, kissing owies, and washing crayons off of walls. I do believe there is nothing more important than for us, all of us, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexuals to stop looking outside ourselves for approval for our lives. Our lives are magnificent, holy, and incredibly diverse and queer. Our children will benefit from our unique perspective. Abigail Garner, author of *Families Like Mine*, who is a heterosexual woman and the daughter of a gay man, defines herself as erotically straight, but culturally queer. She honors the distinctive qualities of growing up with queer parents, and how it has formed

and molded her. I honor her as a heterosexual adult who was raised by a gay men for not insisting that her family is "just like" other white bread American heterosexual families, but for celebrating all that is unique about being the child of an LGBT community that is coming of age.

Instead of trying so hard to fit in, let us try to fully become ourselves, to expand out into the fullness of our own edges.