

Dykes and Tykes: A Virtual Lesbian Parenting Community

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Abstract:

This article is a collaborative project by six members of an Internet community of lesbian mothers called MOMS. MOMS is a diverse community of lesbian mothers that is inclusive of bisexual and transgender women, as well those planning to become parents. The article outlines the history of the group and how the moderators have created an environment that encourages diversity. Members of the MOMS community differ in age, race, ethnicity, and nationality, as well as political, religious, and social expressions. Additionally, they became parents in diverse ways and parent children in distinct and often disparate styles. Nonetheless, MOMS is a high-volume list with a large membership that remains a close-knit and intimate discussion group.

This article outlines some of the discussion topics common on the MOMS list. Some of these are particular to parenting, and others involve a broad spectrum of subjects including racism, butch/femme dynamics, vegetarianism, circumcision, breast versus bottle feeding, and transgender politics. To subscribe to the MOMS list, send an e-mail message to majordomo@groups.queernet.org. Write "subscribe moms" in the body of the e-mail, without quotation marks.

This essay is the collaborative effort of six members of an Internet mailing list called MOMS, which is hosted at QueerNet.org. MOMS is a dynamic, engaging discussion forum that has served as a close-knit and intimate source of support for a diversity of lesbian, bisexual, transgender moms, and potential moms ("wannabes"). The list topics range from general parenting advice ("Why is my two week old baby's poop green?"; "Please tell me that 12 years old is too early for a first date?") to discussions about national and international politics, racism, classism, population growth, transgenderism, vegetarianism, and of course, lesbian sex. Discussions on the list are often philosophical, and sometimes volatile, but also frequently involve bantering and humor. Members frequently mention the list's strong sense of community, and other members' intelligent and diverse opinions as factors that keep them "hooked" on this high-volume list. To subscribe to the MOMS list, send an e-mail message to majordomo@groups.queernet.org. Write "subscribe moms" in the body of the e-mail, without quotation marks.

The group began in 1992, and has had three moderators (list-wranglers) over the years. MOMS is a high volume list; there are days when there are over 150 posts, and there have been, at times, over 400 members on the list. The list currently has 213 subscribers. The majority of members live in the US, with some members in other countries that have included Canada, Israel, England, Finland, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, and others over the years. In this essay, we will draw a portrait of the list and its issues, including membership issues, list history, the scope of topics covered, the list and community-building, and how the list has changed over time.

In terms of membership, the list itself is defined by identity; it's for lesbian mothers. We define both these terms broadly. We interpret "lesbians" as "women with same-sex orientations," and our members identify as bisexual as well as lesbian. Some members also identify as "gay women" or "queer," although each of these terms is disliked by many list members. "Mothers" is also defined broadly; we include women with children, as well as women who would like to have children – "mom-wannabes." "Mother" is also defined broadly because as queer women we journey to parenthood by many paths. Some of us gave birth to our children. Some of our partners gave birth to our children. If our partners gave birth to our children, some of us were able to access second-parent adoption and some of us are legal "strangers" to our children. Some of us adopted our children individually or with our partners. Some of us have partnered with women who had children and have become step-moms. Some of us gave birth to our children while we were in past relationships with men. Some of us gave birth to our children with our current male partners. Some of us gave birth to our children in non-romantic partnerships with a male co-parent. Some of us gave birth to our children with the help of a male donor – known and unknown. All of these paths to motherhood are honored and respected on the MOMS list.

The inclusiveness of the list stems from the guidelines spelled out by the list's founder, and first "list-wrangler," Dorsie Hathaway. As a member of earlier Internet lists like Sappho that were set up with virtually no formal guidelines, Dorsie found that problems of divisiveness arose. She recalls, "When those of us who were lesbian mothers who had [previously] been married or partnered with males talked about our lives with kids, we got nasty comments about being breeders. We got all this flack about being impure because we'd slept with men and had children." She spells out some of the consequences of the divisiveness in the following way: "People are afraid to speak

up, take discussions private instead of public, and the sense of community is very small." In founding the MOMS list, she thought: "What if I took a different approach and made a space that was deliberately inclusive of lesbian / bi parents, that didn't discriminate if they had ever been married, slept with men, were co-parenting, used artificial insemination, etc.?" In forming the MOMS list, she created a set of guidelines that encourage list members to be inclusive in their dialogue, and reflect multiple points of view. She states:

"I really wanted this to be possible because I wanted people [to] not [be] hurt, not to feel like outsiders – I wanted them to know there were other lesbian moms who felt like they did, and who were struggling with the same things, dealing with divorce, custody, TV, night terrors, etc. – some normal parenting experiences and some unique to queer women."

List wranglers have had several visions of their roles in the life of the list. Dorsie, who was list wrangler from the list's inception until 1998, felt that the role of list owner should be, "not diva, not head of a clique, but rather to sort of socially engineer the [new list] to maximize the chances that people could successfully hold conversations with each other and not take hostages or be made into targets, to have equality affirmed and for newbies to have just as much of a chance of succeeding in their first attempt at dialog as someone who had been on the list for months or years." Sarah Gregory, who moderated the list from 1998 to 2002, had a slightly different view of list-wrangling. She saw the MOMS list as a "benevolent dictatorship," and says, "The list exists for the community of people on it, so I really didn't try to shape it into something that might meet my personal preferences, but I did treat the guidelines as near-absolutes, and enforced them fairly tightly." The list guidelines have changed somewhat over time, mainly to clarify inclusion. Sarah notes that she "changed the guidelines to clarify that bi women and MTF transgendered women were welcome." These weren't changes from the initial list policies Dorsie wrote, but rather clarifications to paint a clearer picture of the list community as it evolved over time.

As a consequence of Dorsie's vision and the on-going work of the other subsequent list-wrangers, Sarah Gregory and Sarah Broadwell, most group members at this point work hard to avoid privileging biological or legal motherhood as current dominant society does. We have also seen the definitions of "mother" and "woman" become even broader when we note that, biologically, some of us contributed sperm, not eggs to the creation of our children, meaning those members of the list who are MtF (male to female) transgendered. Neither the inclusion of male-partnered bisexual women nor MtF transsexuals developed without dissent, sometimes extremely heated dissent. In interviews, many members noted that learning about and getting to know transgendered people has been an extremely significant part of their MOMS list experience. Michelle says, "I am particularly glad that transgendered individuals have membership and space to discuss their issues. I think that this is the area in which I have become most 'newly aware.'" Tempest adds, "I'd never really talked to someone with intimate knowledge of being trans [gender], or intersexed..., ...and getting a first-hand perspective on these issues has made a huge difference for me."

At the same time that explicit criteria for membership on the MOMS list encompasses complex issues that have divided other groups and communities, many members feel that implicit, usually unspoken, criteria also exist. Although even lurkers (members who read the MOMS list but post infrequently or never) have reported feeling included as members of the community, other members cite diverse and disparate attributes that hold the list together. These include left-wing politics, verbal ease, financial privilege, academic privilege, U.S. residence, and an ability to

endure an initial period of education on the list that sometimes has felt harsh enough to be called "hazing" by some members as other attributes necessary for a member to be whole-heartedly embraced as part of the community. Of course, other members have argued vociferously against each of those attributes. It seems likely that verbal skills do contribute to inclusion and community membership, since the list is a written medium and we get to know each other and relate to each other predominantly or solely through written messages. However, among members who post frequently, there is a wide range of styles, and that suggests that clarity, precision, and humor are highly valued.

Heated discussions arise fairly regularly over standards of interaction, often revolving around words like "nice," "gentle," "abrupt," "harsh," "rude," etc. Appropriate tone and what constitutes adequate indications of respect are hotly debated. How feminism, class, age, region, culture, education, nationality and various other factors are all played out in our various styles is also vigorously discussed. In the MOMS list community, tension has always existed between members' desires for an inclusive, diverse, and pluralist community and the desire to build a community that reflects certain other, less unanimously held, values and standards. In this, the MOMS list is very much like all other communities that wish to be diverse and democratic, yet retain some common goals, standards, and values that both hold the members together and create the character of that specific community.

Although there are quiet days on the MOMS list, these are rare. MOMS is a high-volume mailing list, and generally if the list is quiet for more than 24 hours, someone will post a message questioning whether the QueerNet server is down. Despite the near constant criticisms of the amount of mail people receive in their inboxes from MOMS, when women are unable to access the list for even a few days, they have described it as "painful." Criticizers of the amount of email sometimes refer to the less serious posts as "noise" that is taking up bandwidth, which nearly always evokes a flood of responses arguing about what constitutes "noise." Some women are annoyed by the "Congratulations on the new baby" posts, which they say should take place off-list. Others find these posts heartwarming and essential for a sense of camaraderie and community. Often (at least monthly), intense political debates will ensue ranging from on-topic parenting subjects like breastfeeding and circumcision, to barely on-topic conversations such as the ethics of burning CDs off the Internet, or the Human Rights Campaign's treatment of transgender people. Many listmembers are academics, students, or professionals including therapists, medical doctors, nurses, and attorneys, as well as college professors of literature, social work, history, and queer and women's studies. For these women having the Internet at their fingertips has often meant that discussion and debate has included academic citations to bolster their viewpoints.

Some of the most intense list discussions that often reappear every few months or years include butch/femme dynamics, circumcision, breastfeeding, gender/transgenderism, bisexuality, and the perennial debate: racism. A typical pattern on the list will be that someone, virtually always a newcomer, will post something, not realizing that they have just pushed a hot button. For example one woman might write, "I just can't stand women who dress like men," or "Why would anyone want to sleep with a woman who looks like a man?" This will be immediately responded to with statements such as, "I love women who dress like men. Who decided how women and men should dress anyway?" or "I am a woman who wears men's clothing and I find your statement incredibly insulting to butches. Don't you know anything about the history of butch and femme dynamics?"

For days the list will be flooded by educational information on butch/femme dynamics, and personal stories from older lesbians from the 1950s and 1960s sharing their experiences, as well as younger lesbians who talk about identifying as butch and feeling invisible in the modern lesbian culture. Statements of personal identity and political perspectives will be interlaced with academic citations and bibliographic suggestions. Because these conversations often recur, there will often be postings expressing exasperation ("Here we go again") while others try to quickly jump in order to "nip it in bud." They will try to explain much of the above cycle in one long post, and encourage members to be more careful of their language and prejudices.

The nature of Internet communication means that list members are not able to visually see each other. No matter how well people think they know each other, issues like age and race are only revealed at the discretion of the member. Since there is a strong sense of community, it is easy to forget how very different members really are from one another geographically and demographically, across age, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and size. Those who are older and urban have an assumption of lesbian politics and community discourse that many younger, rural, or recently coming out members have never been exposed to. This was recently seen in a discussion about race. One member recently posted, saying, "I don't even see race. I don't notice the color of a person's skin." There was an outpouring of responses telling the new list member that this was "racist." The member was shocked, thinking that espousing "color-blindness" was the fulcrum of *not* being racist. Learning how important identity and race are for people of color gave her "a whole new vision about [racism]." Prior to the discussion she hadn't realized how subtle racism could be and admitted that being white she "may have been brought up racist without [that] intention." These conversations are educational for everyone, not just for those who first initiated the conversation or are the focus of the reaction.

The nature of the list dynamics has meant that some of these conversations are intense and contentious. As Donna, from Canada, said, "Few casual comments go by; people feel it is important to confront opinions, especially if they seem bigoted or narrow-minded." There have been criticisms that various people are "pompous," "rude," "righteous," and "caustic;" however, over the long life of the list, people who are "enemies" in one discussion are often strong allies in another. Some list members admit that they have reacted to some list topics by "ducking and running." Other members have said that that it has been hard learning to tolerate heated debates, but that over time it has made them stronger people. Michelle, from New York, says, "The dynamics can be intimidating to those who are new and unaccustomed to defending their ideas. I've become a better person because of this though, and I hope a better mom. I've learned that there are so many different ways to look at issues and how people live their lives - I hope I can pass this along to my son."

Many topics that recur have been hammered out in past discussions and decisions regarding membership of the group have already been decided. Someone who was not willing to be a part of an open and inclusive community or who is disrespectful towards bisexual members would not be welcome to remain in the community for long. Sue from Minnesota makes the point, however, "Sometimes when a certain kind of prejudice is deemed unacceptable, it just goes underground, which can be problematic in itself." Sue has suggested that this is true for the topic of transsexuality. Sue is married to a transman, and although she has not experienced direct hostility about that issue, she has questioned whether it impacts how other list members see her.

Despite Sue's concerns, many list members say that it is the "personal" association that has most deeply impacted people's political views on difficult subjects. One such example comes from a list member, Carrie, who identified as intersexed. Dorsie, from Oregon, says:

"Carrie, in her openness, transformed the understanding of many women on the list of what it's like [to be an intersexed] person, not a person who chooses the path but someone who was incorrectly assigned at birth one identity and had to work hard to reclaim her true identity because her biology and anatomy were not aligned in a way that society would expect. Getting to hear Carrie's struggle and her concerns about parenting her kids exposed people to a much broader world than they could have imagined, and because they had a comfort zone of knowing they could filter someone out, that they didn't have to read someone's posts, they actually were encouraged to pay attention more because they knew they had an out."

Issues like racism and the inclusion of bisexual and transgender people assume an agreed upon philosophy that newcomers are expected to respect. Other topics require the ability to learn "to agree to disagree." Some of the most contentious debates include issues of vegetarianism, circumcision, and breast-versus-bottle feeding. Ultimately, these are decisions influenced by ethical, religious, or health-related considerations, and after posting and discussing various sides of the debate, members have had to learn to respect the diversity of choices available to parents. However, this does not stop the onslaught of responses as soon as a new member posts, "My milk is drying up. Do you think it's okay if I stop breastfeeding now?" or innocently asks, "What do you all think about circumcision?" Some of these discussions have become so familiar to old list members that they have known "nicknames." "The Cow is your Mother," refers to a very intense debate about vegetarianism, named for the subject header that was used by one very strong advocate for a vegetarian lifestyle. The "Christmas Debate" refers to the near yearly discussion about the expression, "Merry Christmas." Inevitably one list member will joyfully share her Christmas salutations with the list, only to be met with a long series of posts on how Christmas is a Christian holiday, and how the onslaught of Christmas cheer is disrespectful to Jews, Muslims, and Wiccans. Underlying all of these discussions are, of course, wider issues of eco-feminism and religious tolerance, and underlying *those* issues of course, are the voices of concerned mothers who want to rear the next generation of children with a greater consciousness of diversity on a planet that will sustain them.

There are, of course, no simple "right or wrong" answers to these questions, and being a list member means learning to accept a greater diversity of opinions and lifestyle decisions than one ever thought existed. As Simone from Florida, a prolific and humorous list member has said, "Both sides of an argument can have validity. Even when I'm certain I'm right (and I usually am), I often have to give pause to find an answer to a challenging angle of the issue I hadn't considered before. I also learned that you can make darn near anything out of tofu, but I still have no desire to do so."

Tempest, from California, attributes the great diversity of opinions, in part, to the international perspective of the list. She says:

"I've learned about Canadian politics and how their political system differs from the US. I'm especially grateful for the perspective I received from an ex-list member in Israel about the fragile situation there, as seen from inside the country - something extremely valuable and difficult to come by in the mainstream US media. Even just seemingly-trivial

discussions like holidays and foods are immensely broadened by having an international perspective - I love hearing about how folks do things differently elsewhere."

Despite the volatile debates and the occasional person who leaves in fury over a passionate argument, the overall consensus is that the list is a warm, close-knit family whose members put up with each other's foibles. Christie, from Hawaii, says, "I love that the list discusses real issues with real heart. I have learned so much...in content as well as about people in general. I think some of the most enduring dynamics are the respect and openness of the list."

This sense of community fostered by the "respect and openness" Christie describes gets to the heart of why the list matters so much in the lives of many members. Lauren, a transgendered woman from New Jersey, finds the acceptance of the community especially important; she says, "The acceptance I received, and the wonderful messages of affirmation for my own posts, made me feel a part of something that I otherwise would not have had at that point." In interviews we conducted, members repeatedly described the sense of connection they felt with other women who were also both mothers and lesbian- or queer-identified. Michelle, from New York, describes the list as "no holds barred conversation" and "entirely non-superficial" in contrast to her "straight new mommy community" where she finds "these activities to most always be very superficial with the main thing the moms have in common [are] being 'Moms.'" Donna, from Canada, explains the difference between her "real life" communities and the MOMS list in terms of the level of struggle revealed, "Often, [in real life], people present a kind of seamless front, and sometimes I feel as if I am the only one who struggles at all with the complexities of [a] relationship and dealing with alternative family structures." Additionally, many members of the list don't have other people in their day to day lives who are dealing with alternative family issues, much less ones who have the knowledge of how to deal with some of the struggles that gay families face.

A number of members on the list are not "out" in their day-to-day lives, or may not have any kind of lesbian community available to them. Anna, who is a doctor in a rural community in New Zealand, states, "Due to my busy life and rural practice we are not really part of a 'real-life' lesbian community." Sanji, from New York, has been out for years, but lacks a supportive community in "real life" where she can really be herself. She says, "Living in a conservative community as well as being a prominent therapist within that community has limited my ability to just 'be' myself in lots of public and social ways. Having this list means I have a community I can relax in, at my fingertips every day."

During the interview process, we also asked list members how the list changed or influenced them. Kim, from Tennessee, grew up in a very homophobic Midwest town and has had to 'learn' how to socially be a lesbian, finds that the list has helped her to grow as a person. She states:

"Being on the list has exposed me to so many different viewpoints and cultures. Because of that, I have learned how to step up, squash down that Midwest state-of-mind, and allow my own opinions to come to the surface; that I can be my own person, have differing strong opinions and political values, have autonomy, and still be accepted in the eyes of those in my life. It's a very powerful thing - this list."

The list has certainly made many of its members stronger and more aware of how they self-identify. There has always been a vocal core group of members who are articulate and fiercely

proud of being lesbians. Standing up for our families and against injustice is a foundational value for many long-term list members. Other members who are perhaps newly out, or live in more conservative areas have benefited from these role models, and state that they have gained confidence from the example of others on the list.

A number of members note that their participation in the MOMS list has relieved the isolation they experienced or expected to experience as mothers. Some attributed their sense of isolation to motherhood in general (especially stay-at-home moms), while others see the mom's list as breaking the isolation caused by being different from other members in the "real life" communities they belong to. Michelle, from New York, says, "Finding the list was a haven for me. It was wonderful to approach a mom's community and not need to explain my situation. This sounds strange to me even to write, but I usually feel closer to the group of strangers on this board than I do to other moms I hang out with every week." Lauren, from New Jersey, has another take on this:

"Before joining this list, I was struggling in isolation to deal with the very real issues of being a lesbian, and transgender, mom in a world that was often less than welcoming or helpful. In the straight world I didn't fit in, and in other communities I was part of [the transgender and lesbian ones, to be specific] the idea of being a parent was still kind of unique, if not frowned upon. It meant isolation, even from communities of people I otherwise shared a lot with."

Lauren says in joining the list that "Suddenly, as isolated as I was in real life, I had this community that gave me a sense of belonging, and of being part of something, despite being denied this elsewhere." In these cases members seemed to find community on the list in ways that real life communities seemed to keep from them. Zan, from Pennsylvania, a list mom who never felt isolated, nonetheless shares a similar feeling of belonging: "as being a gay mom, I could easily feel like I didn't "belong" in any specific group, which I now can with this list."

In addition to the feeling of belonging, members also appreciate the immediacy of the community. For example, Kim says sometimes the list can be a lifeline, that "Those times when we are lonely at 3 am, when you have a screaming, colicky baby and aren't sure how to handle it, you can be very certain that if you post a plea to the list for help, you will receive a response post haste." In other words, for Kim the list, unlike real life communities, was always there and waiting for them at the touch of a keystroke, breaking both loneliness and giving comfort and valuable advice in times of desperation.

Over the years since the founding of the MOMS list in 1992, the list has grown and changed as its members have changed. The children of many list members have grown up while their mothers have been on the list, and thus the topics discussed have shifted somewhat over time from issues of diapering and baby food to issues of dating and puberty. There have always been members with children of various ages, however, and topics pertaining to various age groups are always discussed.

Donna, from Canada, states that over time, "I've seen the community shift quite a bit, and particularly I think there is a greater sense of internationalism, a little less US centric feel. The list has become much more tolerant to less strict definitions of lesbian, and is much more supportive of transgender and bisexual moms, in my opinion." Christie, from Hawaii, believes that while early on the list was more focused on the details of pregnancy and babies, that it has undergone a natural

evolution: "It's now evolved to a more philosophical idea based discussion." Anna, from New Zealand, counters that the flavor of the list is cyclical: "There have been many great philosophical debates and then weeks of more routine parenting commentary."

The nature of the list is sometimes debated on-list, without too much net change – the resolution seems to be that the list can't be all things to all people. In a recent debate, some list members complained that the list was too academic in nature, while Sanji, from New York, states: "These days there is a bit too much 'social bantering' for my tastes. I like the intense discussion about values and politics as it related to parenting."

One change that the list has experienced is due to the change in nature of the Internet – as online access has become commonplace in the last 10 years, the list population has shifted from members who were mainly academics, students, and those in technical fields, to the current list membership which reflects a broader cross-section of society. Lesbian parenting has also become a more mainstream topic, and perhaps some members have felt that they could find support elsewhere, or no longer need support, and have left the list.

Another change that the list has experienced is due to the high-speed Internet connections that many members have, that allow them to post in real-time throughout the day. Because of this, some members have noted that it can be difficult to follow all the conversations on the list, and participate fully, if you aren't online all day. Laura, from Washington, says, "Used to be (in my memory, anyway) that conversations could go on even if you weren't there in "real time" to respond to them. Now, it's more like, well, you missed the boat if you can't be online enough to participate in close to real time." Sarah, from Oregon, comments, "There are people who are SAHMs (stay at home moms), and who may post 30-40 (or more) times/day. That's a very different pattern than when people could post maybe 2-3 times/day, and when nobody could post more than 10% of the day's traffic themselves." Because of this, she feels that "The tone/style [of the list] is more casual, more chatty - again, because I think there's more people who can spend the time." One problem, because of this, is that the chatting can produce a list volume that can be daunting, or drown out, posts from newcomers. One of the enduring truths about the MOMS list, however, is that its nature is made up by the posts of its members – if members don't like the current direction that the list is going, they only have to post more of what they would like to see on the list to create a change.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the list has been how it has fostered relationships in real life. Many people have made friends with each other off-list and visit each other, and some members have gotten together as couples or become partners. There are two gatherings, one in the Northeast and one in the Northwest, which happen yearly, attended by current and previous MOMS list members. When members are traveling they often post their itineraries and members in other cities and countries will meet them, offer them places to stay, or have dinner with them while they are traveling. Once, a list member who is the mom of triplets was traveling by plane. Overwhelmed and exhausted, she was met at the airport by another list member whom she had never met before, who assisted her in getting children and luggage to the proper destination. Another time a list member who lives in a northern climate posted that she was planning to have a swimming party with a tropical theme held at an indoor pool. The problem was that the party was the next day and she couldn't find any underwater goggles, which her son was demanding. A list member from Florida ran out and bought 12 goggles, and had them mailed overnight to the party. The goggles arrived at 11 a.m. and the party started at noon.

Over the years on the list, there have been many exciting as well as tragic events in the lives of list members. There are successful births after years of infertility and the birth of 2 sets of twin girls within 48 hours of one another. There are also painful miscarriages and complicated pregnancies ending in children born with disabilities and mothers requiring extensive physical and emotional healing. For long time list members, the saddest memory of all was the death of a dearly beloved list member. Carrie, as mentioned before, was an intersexed woman raising her two children, the youngest a 16-year old teen, when she died of liver disease. She was found dead by another list member who lived in the same city, who came home and posted the subject header "Sad news." This list member, a mom rearing four teens of her own, took Carrie's son in and has continued to raise him. This story shows that the friendships and community that have been built over the past decade on the lesbian MOMS list are not "just" a cyber connection. There is a depth and caring for each other, that is at least as powerful as many have experienced in "real life" lesbian communities.

As the lesbian communities of the 1970s and 1980s have changed, or faded, or dissolved over political in-fighting, the MOMS list has proven that lesbians have a unique, enduring cultural community that is transnational and multiracial, and develops new forms in changing times.

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