

Lesbian and Gay Parenting

By Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev

Gay and lesbian parents have always existed although it is only in the past few decades that we have openly identified ourselves. All gay and lesbian people struggle with the question of how open and honest to be about our sexual identity, but for gay and lesbian parents the struggle can be profound. On one hand our children can be hurt by people who are uncomfortable with a parent's sexual identity and on the other hand growing up in a home with secrets and shame can also be damaging. Although there is a price to pay being open about being a lesbian or gay family, there is also a price one must pay living a carefully protected, secretive life; gay and lesbian parents need to ask themselves which one is really higher.

Living Secretive Lives

“Coming out” is sometimes criticized by non-gay people as a blatant in-your-face flaunting of one's sexuality. The opposite of coming out, though, is remaining in, being closeted. This means one must actively chose to hide aspects of their life that might reveal their sexuality. This includes which books or magazines one has on a bookshelf or coffee table, as well as having only one parent listed at the daycare, and that parent being the one solely responsible to pick up the child, or attend appropriate meetings.

One divorced mother of three, became involved with another woman when her children were between 8 and 15. In what was an otherwise open home environment, her partner lived as a housemate in a basement room, and only came upstairs to sleep after the kids were asleep. The women never showed any signs of affection in front of the children. They did share household chores and finances, and the children were close to their mother's “friend”. This arrangement was supported by the woman's therapist who thought it would be too hard on the children during their adolescence to have a lesbian mother. The relationship eventually ended (and with all that pressure it is no surprise). Years later when the mother ‘confessed’ about the relationship to her children she discovered that they had always suspected, and were angry that she had been too ashamed to admit it. They told her how painful it was when her “friend” moved out. Since they didn't have a label for this person's role in their lives, they also had no way to understand their grief and confusion when the relationship ended.

Another couple has been lovers for over 10 years, although both live in platonic relationships with their husbands. The families are best friends, and they maintain this secret relationship because they believe it is best for one woman's 12 year old son. Situations like these are more common than many people realize. One can only wonder if living with secrecy, lies, and adultery is better for a child, than to struggle to understand that two women who he has known and loved his whole life, love one another deeply.

Sometimes parents are out to their children, but ask the children to be secretive as a way to protect the family. Obviously asking children to collude in a lie can create a great deal

of confusion. Children often don't understand the political, social or legal ramifications of their parents choices. A young child who is asked to hide a gay relationship from their other parent or a teacher may develop anxiety or sleep disturbances while s/he tries to do the "right thing", but is unsure exactly what the right thing is. Young children's concept of honesty is simply black and white, and they may feel emotionally torn in the grey area of changing social mores.

As many gay parents have noted, having children often puts people in contact with many institutions (i.e. schools, daycare, hospitals) where one must decide whether or not to be out. The alternative to being out and honest is to lie or avoid the topic. "She's my friend" or "He's my roommate" some gay people will say. However, the school administrators will not release a sick child to a "friend", and physicians cannot recognize the medical requests of a "roommate".

Although coming out can be a courageous and planned action (as Ellen Degeneres has modeled), more often it is in doing the simple day to day life tasks that one must make an intentional effort to not be out in order to not be obvious. Is the lesbian couple with their two children who are shopping in the supermarket blatantly flaunting their "lifestyle", or are they merely taking care of a chore? If one calls the other "honey" is that a militant act or an expression of caring that all couples exhibit? Why do gay couples have a "lifestyle" and not simply a life?

Coming out, in the sense I am using the word, is simply the act of gay people being honest about themselves and their relationships. It is choosing to not hide or deny how deeply we love each other and our children, and expecting to be treated just like other couples and families. Coming out means being visible. The price for being visible is that gay people can be more easily targeted; the price for being invisible is that gay people, and our families, disappear.

In reality, approximately 1/3 of lesbian women are mothersⁱ (only slightly lower than heterosexual women) and there are about one million gay fathersⁱⁱ, and researchers estimate that there are 6 millionⁱⁱⁱ children currently being raised in gay homes. Despite these numbers we are rarely represented in magazines or on television. This means our children, and our parents (i.e. our children's grandparents) do not see other families that look like us, which deprives us all of role models and increases our isolation.

Gay Parents Come Out

In the past most gay parents have remained secretive and protective, and for very good reasons. Our children had often been conceived in the context of heterosexual relationships, and a gay parent had to face not only his or her own coming out issues and the need to separate from a spouse, but also contend with coming out to children. If a custody battle ensued, often gay parents were fighting a losing battle in a homophobic court system. The legal and social stigma is finally improving for gay people coming out who have had children in previous heterosexual marriages, and more people are able to be honest about the nature of their families.

In the last two decades many self-identified gay and lesbian people, single and in couples, have actively chosen to have children outside of a socially approved heterosexual marriage. Some have had children using artificial insemination (also known as alternative reproduction -- to alleviate the stigma of the word artificial); others have chosen to adopt. Although many people still remain secretive about their sexuality or relationships, many of these lesbian and gay families are out about who they are. This means they are showing up in fertility clinics for information about attempting pregnancy, they are coming to adoption agencies stating clearly the nature of their family, they are going to attorneys for information on second parent same-sex adoption, and they are going to PTA meetings and little league games with the same enthusiasm as other parents.

The impact this lesbian and gay baby boom will have on the next generation is enormous. Whatever your personal politics, or emotional reactions, the reality is that all over our country gay and lesbian people are birthing, nurturing, and raising children that will be playing in the same playgrounds, attending the same schools, and challenging all of us to deal with this new level of diversity.

Gay Parenting: Just Like All Parenting (Almost)

In many ways the issues gay parents face are identical to the issues all parents face. Gay parents are no less exhausted at the 5 a.m. feeding, they are no less concerned when their child's fever registers at 104 degrees, and their couple relationships (including their sex lives) are no less challenged by the busyness of working and day care, dinner and laundry, and all of the complexities of family life. Lesbian moms and gay dads are as overwhelmed about money, and as frightened about teenage substance abuse as any other parent. Gay parents need to balance housework and careers, find appropriate day care, and good pediatricians. Single gay parents, like all single parents, need to turn to family or friends for help, or face these challenges alone.

There are, however, powerful differences. Lesbian and gay parents are never able to forget that they are a minority among parents, and like all minorities face certain prejudices and stereotypes. Many people -- school officials and lawyers, social service agencies and medical doctors -- may be offended by or hostile to same sex couples. Gay men and lesbians desiring to be parents are dependent on the compassion of social workers and medical personnel. One lesbian having difficulty conceiving was told by a physician that he would only consider working with her if she underwent a psychological evaluation. A gay male couple was told by an adoption agency that only one parent could legally adopt since they were of the same sex, and only that parent would be included in the home study, despite the fact they'd lived together for a decade, and that the non-adoptive parent was planning to be at home full-time with the child.

In the absence of institutional validation (i.e. domestic partnership and same-sex adoption legislation) gay and lesbian couples must develop extensive legal documentation to ensure the protection of their family. My partner carries power of attorney papers in her

pocket at all times that clearly state her legal right to make medical decisions for our son should the need ever arise. My will outlines my wishes to give her legal custody of our son in the event of my death. In a heterosexual family, a medical doctor would automatically assume both parents rights to make medical decisions. A heterosexual parents' right to custody of her child in the event of the death of a spouse would not even come under the scrutiny of a court system.

As dramatic as some of the legal and medical obstacles are, social difficulties can be equally difficult. One lesbian mother said, "Before my daughter's new friend had a sleep-over, I made sure to come out to her parents. Her family was great about it but I wouldn't want to take the risk that they were homophobic; there is no telling what kind of rumors they could start." Gay and lesbian parents need to continually deal with 'coming-out' to their children's friends and their parents. Teachers may not have had experience with same-sex parents and may believe stereotypes and myths about gay people. Although research has consistently shown that gays are less likely to be child molesters than heterosexual men, a well-positioned person who is misinformed or intentionally homophobic can cause tremendous damage.

Even if we do not believe the old myths and stereotypes about gay people, many of us have questions about these new family forms. The first time I was with two gay fathers and their newly adopted infant daughter, I remember thinking, "But, whose going to change the diapers"? although I of course know that men can change diapers, somehow the thought that they would change them All-The-Time seemed doubtful.

Living Open Lives

When gay couples choose to live more open lifestyles they have to face blatant hostility from some people; more often homophobia is subtle. Gay parents are asked, "Which one of you is the real parent." Assumptions are made that children of gay people are more likely to be gay, although all of the research has shown this to be untrue. (We must also note here the subtle homophobia in assuming that if children were more likely to be gay if they had gay parents then it would be okay to prevent gay families.)

Sometimes very well-meaning people are nervous and uncomfortable around out gay parents. Our day care teacher wasn't sure how to address our sons 'Valentine's Day card. "Does he call you both mom?", she asked nervously-- once I assured her it was okay to ask. It was somehow more difficult to ask my family how we were identified then perhaps it would've been to ask the parent of a step-child, or custodial grandparents. Even in heterosexual homes children do not necessarily call their parents mom and dad.; some children even call their parents by their given names.

All families are different from one another. Simple things such as what we call one another, to the more complex issues of how we divide chores, will vary from family to family. Depending on the family, gay parents may take turns going to parent-teacher conferences, or go together, or one may be more active in the child's school performance -- just like other parents. In single gay parent families, it means the child may talk about

dad's date, or mom's new girlfriend (and may be thrilled, or resentful, --like all other dating parents).

Living open lives means that we choose not to hide the uniqueness of our families. When strangers ask me, "Is this your kid?", I know that they may be confused when I answer, "He's our child." Sometimes people will look at me, and then my partner, and then back at me, trying to understand what I am saying. It is my experience that people quickly assimilate the information and deal with us respectfully and kindly. I think this in part because we are comfortable with ourselves and our family.

Recently, our local gay community hosted a program for children of gay parents. When her mom asked her what she thought of the event, one little girl who had been raised by lesbian parents asked, "Why did they keep saying it's hard to come from families like ours? Nothing is hard about our family; we have lots of fun."

In gay families where children are raised without shame and feel comfortable about themselves and their parents, children learn to deal with prejudice and homophobia. Children only feel that their families are less than "normal" if they are told that. Despite social awkwardness and the sluggishness of bureaucratic change, gay parents experience the same joys that all parents do. Despite all of the difficulties we face, the research continually shows that our children grow up well adjusted and with intact self-esteem.^{iv}

Regardless of one's personal or religious beliefs, the children of gay parents will be attending school and playing on the soccer field with the children of heterosexual parents. As parents we will be attending the same school plays and field trips. Perhaps someday our adult children might marry each other and we will be members of the same extended family. What messages do we want to send our children to help them adjust? How can we educate our families to feel comfortable with diversity? How are we prepared to address the homophobia our children will experience?

All parents have hopes and dreams for their children. One hope we all have is for our children to be accepted among their peers. As parents we must all work together so that our children are comfortable with diversity, and for a future where loving our children is the strongest bond that parents can share with one another.

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To whom it may concern:

Enclosed you will find a document on Lesbian and Gay Parenting issues. As a mother of a two-year old child, and an avid reader of parenting magazines, I have been saddened by the lack of representation of gay parents. As a therapist, social worker and educator I will well-acquainted with the issues gay parents are currently facing. Our invisibility in the mainstream parenting world, especially given our visibility in the general media, is inexcusable. Issues of second-parent adoption, domestic partnership, adoption, and donor insemination are all issues discussed on television, in newspapers and in court rooms across this country.

I am contemplated long and hard which popular parenting magazine I should challenge with this article. I have chosen your magazine because, unlike your competitors, you have occasionally mentioned the issue, and do seem to be open to other alternative lifestyle type of issues.

I realize that the article I have written is long, and probably a bit too academic for your audience. It is also possible some of the issues I raise might best be broken down into smaller more manageable articles. I have tried to avoid issues of blatant controversy, but I have also tried to avoid the simplicity of sappy “we are just like you” kind of journalism. I implore you to accept this challenge: to begin to include articles of issues facing gay and lesbian families. In the regular text of your articles on toddlers, or ear infections, or vacations it would feel so inclusive to see mention of “.....Mary and Lisa Smith, and their son.....”etc.

On a more personal note: I am a therapist in private practice, and an adjunct professor at the State University New York at Albany, graduate School of Social Welfare in Albany, New York. I specialize in working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people and their families, and have been conducting training’s and workshops educating therapists, teachers, clergy etc. on these issues for the past 15 years. I am very open to critical feedback on this article, and happy to assist you in examining the inclusion of these issues in your magazine.

Sincerely,

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ⁱ see the Institute of Gay and Lesbian Strategic Studies Fact Sheet Economic Issues of Lesbians and Bisexual Women, July 1996, as quoted in the Advocate , Issue 727, February 18, 1997.

ⁱⁱ see Frederick W. Bozett (1987) author of Gay and Lesbian Parents.

ⁱⁱⁱ see Joy Schulenberg (1985) author of Gay Parenting

^{iv} see Schwartz Gottman's article "Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents" in Homosexuality and Family Relations (1990) by F.W. Bozett and M.B. Sussman (Eds.).