



Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Parents and Their Children: Support Strategies for Educators

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Awareness of the diversity of families has increased among professional educators over the last decade. Our schools are comprised of children who are part of family constellations that deviate from traditional households of a biological father, mother, and siblings. According to the 2000 census, 99% of counties in the United States reported the presence of self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) couples, many of which have children or will have children in the future (U.S. Census, 2000). Even with increased awareness of such partnerships, LGBT families and their children may still tend to be rendered invisible by a society that condones prejudice and discrimination and devalues its gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender members.

Our schools today are built on the belief that all students have the right to a quality education that allows students to reach their full potential. The National Education Association (NEA, 2006) supports educators' efforts to be inclusive and respectful of LGBT issues within the school setting. The NEA believes that all students deserve to be educated in a safe and nonthreatening environment, free from intimidation and harassment. However, many children attend schools where the climate is not safe and secure for all. We know that students are more likely to learn and succeed in a supportive environment. If our schools are to serve all students, they must provide a safe setting in which staff and students are expected to demonstrate cooperation, acceptance, and respect for differences. It is important for educators to be aware of issues faced by LGBT parents and their children and address them within the school setting.

Within LGBT families, there are differences in the amount of openness. Not all parents disclose the fact that they are LGBT. Some parents readily share this information with their child's educators; others may choose not to disclose this information for fear of losing custody, fear of losing their jobs, or fear of exposing their child to bias and discrimination. One commonality among all LGBT families is their vulnerability to discrimination and prejudice.

STIGMATIZATION AND HARASSMENT OF LGBT FAMILIES

The research is mixed when examining the incidence of teasing, harassment, and bullying of children with LGBT parents. Many studies conclude that these children experience no more stigmatization than children of traditional couples. Most of the current research suggests that children in lower grades (K–2) tend to report little to no teasing or bullying in relation to their parents' sexual

orientation or gender variance. More incidents are reported as children enter the upper elementary school grades and move into junior and senior high school. The severity of the harassment and bullying also tends to increase with age. Experiences vary from disparaging remarks, taunts, and insulting language to physical assaults and violence (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

It is typically within the school setting that the children of LGBT parents first become aware of the prejudices that many in our society harbor against those who do not live a traditional heterosexual lifestyle. As children hear their parents described in insulting terms, they begin to realize that the school environment may be neither welcoming nor safe for them and their families. Children fear they could be harassed and lose friends if their family constellation becomes known. Children from closeted families may be afraid to invite friends over to their house or to form close friendships. Many children with LGBT parents experience situations in which the adults in their school environment do not take the harassment seriously.

Like all students, those from LGBT families need to feel included, to have their families experiences validated, and to feel safe from discrimination and harassment

Response to children with LGBT parents must focus on their need for and right to a safe, accepting school environment. Schools should address misconceptions about homosexuality and gender variance and challenge practitioners who allow LGBT members of their school community to remain invisible or isolated. Several general recommendations follow for responding to the needs of LGBT parents and their children.

STRATEGIES FOR SAFE SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS WITH LGBT PARENTS

The following suggestions are based on recommendations from the Youth Leadership and Action Program of COLAGE (2003):

Develop comprehensive safe-school policies. Schools should include sexual orientation and gender expression in their nondiscrimination and acceptance policies. School staff should have clear systems for reporting and addressing incidents to help ensure that families will receive assistance if issues of harassment and prejudice occur in their schools.

Create a friendly and inclusive school environment. Use inclusive language and make direct statements of nondiscrimination that invite sexual and gender-variant minority parents to feel safe enough to identify themselves. Educators who use inclusive language, both with students and adults, will help LGBT parents recognize that family diversity is respected within the school environment and give them the opportunity to disclose the nature of their family constellation. LGBT parents should be asked about ways to create a supportive environment for their children.

Make your classroom accessible to LGBT families. All forms and documents should use inclusive language such as “parent’s/caregiver’s name” rather than “father’s name” or “mother’s name.” School brochures and flyers should clearly state that families of all constellations and parents of all sexual and gender orientations are welcomed. On back-to-school night or during parent-teacher conferences, expect and welcome LGBT parents. Take steps to ensure that LGBT parents feel included in school activities and events.

Always intervene regarding anti-gay or sexist language or actions. Educators should model inclusive language, respond to homophobic or sexist remarks, and confront misinformation and stereotypes. Set the tone in your classroom that racist, sexist, homophobic, and other discriminatory comments are not tolerated. Whenever you hear such a comment, step in and, if feasible, use it as a teachable moment. Try to link homophobia and sexism to other types of oppression, emphasizing that hate in all forms is wrong and unacceptable.

Include topics of diversity in your curriculum. In the classroom, teachers should instruct students about respect for and acceptance of diversity. The curriculum should include information about all cultural groups, including LGBT families. People from all cultural groups should be represented in the stories children read and in the content taught in the classroom. Have speakers use videos and show students that diversity is to be celebrated. Affirm that all types of families can have happy, successful home environments. It is crucial that teachers attempt to make their classrooms inclusive of a broad view of family so that children of LGBT parents feel welcome and respected.

Never “out” a student with LGBT parents. It should be the child’s decision whether or not to share his or her family constellation with classmates.

Pursue personal and professional development. Learn more about LGBT families and issues. Professional development for school staff must include multicultural diversity training that incorporates accurate information and representations of all family constellations. Inservice training should emphasize that diverse family configurations can be discussed in the school apart from discussions about sexual behaviors. Teachers should not be afraid to use the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

Be involved. If your school has a Gay–Straight Alliance (GSA) or similar type of club, attend meetings to show your support. If you are involved in your school’s GSA or other diversity club, ensure that LGBT family issues are included and that youth from LGBT families are welcomed as participants. A sense of community can make a huge difference in the school experience.

Open channels for communication with LGBT parents. When communicating with LGBT parents, try to be sensitive to their specific needs. Let parents know that you appreciate the risks associated with disclosure. It is important to treat all parents as equally involved in raising the child, acknowledging the roles that each adult plays. Parents should be asked about ways to create a supportive environment for their children and how they want specific questions from other parents, teachers, and students to be handled.

Give students access to information. Make age-appropriate, accurate, and up-to-date literature about LGBT families available to students in the school media center.

SUMMARY

In order to learn effectively, all students need to feel safe in their classrooms and schools. Supportive faculty, school personnel trainings, and comprehensive safe schools policies can make schools safer for everyone. Educators can be powerful role models for students, demonstrating that they believe in treating others with dignity and respect. Educators are in the position to instill in

young children an appreciation for differences so they will be less likely to participate in antigay name-calling or harassment of children who have LGBT parents. It is important that teachers reflect a broad view of the concept of family in their classrooms so that LGBT parents and their children feel welcome and included.

REFERENCES

- Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere. (2003). Tips for making classrooms safer for students with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer parents. Retrieved from http://www.colage.org/resources/safe_classrooms.htm
- Kosciw, J. G., & Diaz, E. M. (2008). *Involved, invisible, ignored: The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents and their children in our nation's K-12 schools*. New York, NY: GLSEN.
- National Education Association. (2006). *A school employee's guide to LGBT issues* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_LGBTguide.pdf
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *Married-couple and unmarried-partner households, 2000*. Census 2000 Special Reports. Washington, DC: Author.

RECOMMENDED PRINT RESOURCES

- Casper, V., Schultz, S., & Derman-Sparks, L. (1999). *Gay parents/straight schools: Building communication and trust*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kaesar, G. (1999). *Love makes a family: Portraits of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents and their families*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts.
- Lamme, L. L., & Lamme, L. A. (2002). Welcoming children from gay families into our schools. *Educational Leadership*, 59(2), 65-69.

VIDEOS

- Our house: A very real documentary about kids of gay and lesbian parents*. Independent Television Service, 501 York Street, San Francisco, CA 94110.
- That's a family*. Groundspark, 2180 Bryant Street #203, San Francisco, CA; <http://www.groundspark.org/film/thatfamily/index.html>
- It's elementary*. Groundspark, 2180 Bryant Street #203, San Francisco, CA; <http://www.groundspark.org/film/elementary/index.html>

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