

Fostering resilience in children of lesbian and gay families by Vivien Ray

Introduction

Developing a happy and healthy family life can be a challenge at the best of times, but there are some issues and challenges that are unique to families with gay or lesbian parents. For example, research shows that a high percentage of children of gay or lesbian parents are bullied as a result of homophobia. Research also shows that repeated bullying can lead to early initiation to drug and alcohol use as well as later substance misuse.

This fact sheet examines issues facing lesbian and gay families. It discusses some of the risk factors affecting their well-being, and offers suggestions for supporting them, including details of support groups which focus on family and community connectedness.

Lesbian and gay families

In this fact sheet, lesbian and gay families refer to families with children being raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers.

How are gay and lesbian families formed?

The majority of lesbian mothers and gay fathers conceived their children in a heterosexual relationship. Many lesbians are now using the method of artificial insemination, either via a clinic or by themselves. In Australia, just under half of lesbian parents conceived their children via artificial insemination, but nearly all lesbians intending to have children in the future plan to have them via self-insemination or through a clinic (McNair 2002).

Risk factors affecting the well-being of the members of a gay or lesbian family

Keeping a secret

Homophobia is learned behaviour. Young children have not learned to think negatively about homosexuality and are accepting of gay and lesbian people. It is only when homophobic attitudes are passed on to them that they become homophobic themselves.

In the study that my partner and I (Ray & Gregory 2001) conducted among school students, we discovered that 90 per cent of primary school children in Prep, Year 1 and Year 2 had openly told people at school about their gay or lesbian parents' sexuality. However, in Years 3 to 6, 39 per cent of children in the study kept the sexuality of their parents to themselves or told just one person. In Years 7 to 10 of secondary school, a similar percentage of students (36 per cent) did not disclose the sexuality of their parents to others. In quite a few cases, the children keep their 'secret' for many years. By the end of their schooling, young people in Years 11 and 12 encountered fewer homophobic attitudes, more positive interest in their families and more support. The number of young people in Years 11 and 12 who kept the sexuality of their parents a secret decreased to 14 per cent.

Internalised homophobia

If the children of gay or lesbian parents internalise homophobic attitudes, they may feel

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shame, as though their family is in some way 'bad' or wrong. Over time, some children come to blame their parents and feel angry towards them, rather than the society that doesn't accept them. Parents who are lesbian or gay may decide to conceal their sexual identity permanently in order to avoid putting their children at risk of being bullied or discriminated against.

Some children participate in friendship groups but tell lies to their friends and ask their lesbian or gay parents to participate in the lies. For example, sometimes children pretend their mum's partner is an aunt, and when they have a friend sleep over they make up a spare room that they pretend is the aunt's bedroom. Some children go to great lengths to hide the truth. When children tell lies to their friends, they don't feel a part of the friendship network. Some avoid having friends so that they can avoid the questions that would 'out' them.

Where are the gay and lesbian role models?

Due to a lack of story books with gay and lesbian families in them, or television programs or songs featuring gay or lesbian people, children and young people with gay or lesbian parents encounter situations that position them as 'different'. Very young children in crèche and early primary school often find it difficult to make themselves understood when describing their lesbian or gay parents. Due to lack of information, most children have never heard of children having two mothers or a known or anonymous donor. Teachers are reluctant to discuss or explain these family formations, so the explanations are often left to the 4-, 5-, 6- and 7-year olds.

Sometimes when there is a gay or lesbian person in a school novel, the teacher omits to discuss that character. The importance of having role models cannot be underestimated. Role models give young people someone to look up to, someone who is like people in their family. Role models increase accuracy in information that young people access, show others that gays and lesbians are one of the minority groups that contribute to our society, and decrease the need for isolation and secrecy.

When your child is bullied

In our study, just under half (44 per cent) of children in Years 3 to 6 had experienced being bullied due to the sexuality of their parents. The percentage was almost identical (45 per cent) for those in Years 7 to 10. Bullying involves name calling and taunts such as 'gaybo', 'leso', 'dyke' and 'fag'. It can also involve physical abuse. Secondary students in our study described having apple cores, banana skins and rocks being thrown at them. Some experienced sexual abuse by other students.

Although the children tried many different methods to deal with the teasing and bullying, they lacked the necessary power to overcome a culture of homophobia. Dr. Grant Betts (2001) from Sydney Children's Hospital found that the consequences of repeated bullying included early use of alcohol and other drugs. He also found that suicide ideation can occur in adolescents, particularly if bullying is related to homophobia.

Reducing the risks

Increasing a family's resilience to homophobia and increasing an organisation's capacity to support gay and lesbian families will benefit these families and their young people.

Increasing a family's ability to withstand homophobia and its repercussions

Families may be able to withstand the effects of a homophobic environment by:

- emphasising the advantages of the gay and lesbian family, such as the children's pride, their insights into being members of a minority group and the feeling of being special
- discussing each family member's level of comfort about being 'out'
- being sensitive to the changing needs of the child or children, especially the changes that occur as they enter and experience puberty, and when they leave school
- advocating on behalf of their children in order that the children's environments, including pre-schools and schools, are

safe and inclusive of diversity

- participating in support groups for gay and lesbian parents and their children
- actively seeking a sense of connectedness by participating in events such as Pride March and conferences for gay and lesbian families.

Increasing an organisation's capacity to support children of gay and lesbian families

Due to the high incidence of bullying experienced by children whose parents are lesbian or gay, it is important for organisations and schools to address this issue in their policies and practices. This may involve addressing staff about the law as it relates to equal opportunity, and inviting speakers with an understanding of homophobia to address the organisation. By displaying posters depicting gay and lesbian families and putting gay friendly stickers in public places, the organisation can demonstrate its willingness to support gay and lesbian families.

Support systems operating throughout Victoria

Groups for lesbian and gay people contemplating parenthood

Prospective Lesbian Parents meets monthly, offering support and information to lesbians contemplating becoming parents. 'Maybe Baby' is a social group for lesbians and gay men keen on having children. Both groups meet in Melbourne. *The Lesbian Parents Newsletter* gives details of local, interstate and overseas news relevant to lesbian parents, lists groups and their contacts, and has memberships all round the country. To subscribe, contact the author (details below).

Groups for children and their lesbian or gay parents

There are approximately six Melbourne-based groups in existence for lesbian mothers and

their children. Two are playgroups for those with children under age 6 years, while the others are for families with children of all ages. One group also exists in central Victoria and another on the border of New South Wales.

The aims of these groups are to put parents in contact with each other and also to give children an opportunity to meet other children with gay or lesbian parents. In the meetings, parents chat, discuss issues and get to know each other. Children, depending on their ages, play, talk and enjoy each other's company.

The group 'Bit Bent? Buddies' exists for lesbian mothers and gay fathers and their children. This group runs from the City of Darebin and is the only one of its kind. It involves family outings to different venues and a buddy system for children and adolescents who want to partner up with a child with similar interests. Feedback from parents and children involved in Bit Bent? Buddies is very positive.

References

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About the author

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