HOMOPARENTAL FAMILIES: DEALING WITH HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

Mona Greenbaum
LGBT Family Coalition Director
Homoparental Families: Dealing with Homophobia and Heterosexism

In the section 30 years of scientific research served to debunk the myths surrounding homoparental families, particularly those regarding the supposed negative impacts of these types of families on childhood development.

The following section summarizes research on the impact of discrimination, homophobia and heterosexism on the development of children living in homoparental families. By adequately welcoming these children and their families into the school environment, preschools and primary schools can directly contribute to positive social change. The vital role of these institutions in the fight against homophobia will also be covered in this chapter.

Despite major legislative changes in Québec and Canada that have ended discrimination against same-sex couples and homoparental families in the eyes of the law, children living in these families still struggle daily with the stigma of being different. Their families are not recognized, accepted nor valued by society in general, and this feeling of exclusion often begins at school.

N.B. End notes for this section are found on page 13. For a complete bibliography, see the bibliography module.
THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM ON CHILDREN

Although the majority of children from homoparental families, like their peers, will become heterosexual adults, they must still endure the stigmatization caused by their parents’ status as sexual minorities. While their parents must cope with homophobia and heterosexism in the workplace, their children experience it at daycare and at school. In Québec, schools are still rampant with homophobia, heterosexism and heterosexist language. While school policies and practices no longer tolerate racism, homophobic attitudes and insults still go unnoticed and unchallenged. Even if children with gay or lesbian parents are not directly targeted, the harmful effects of homophobia and heterosexism are still felt when discrimination and victimization occur—at times incessantly—in their environment. Luckily, schools have the power to help children from homoparental families cope with homophobic incidents.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Studies show that children with gay fathers or lesbian mothers are afraid of being rejected by their peers, so they keep their family situation a secret. Interviews with 74 American 10-year-olds with a lesbian mother revealed that 43% of these children had dealt with homophobia. Children felt angry, overwhelmed or saddened after experiencing homophobic reactions in their environment.

Of the 74 children interviewed, those who had experienced homophobic situations were also slightly more likely to be described by their mothers as having behavioural problems. These results suggest that children with gay or lesbian parents would fare better in a more supportive social environment. Along the same lines, a self-esteem assessment of a group of 76 adolescent girls with a lesbian mother shows the negative consequences of stigmatization. Those that felt stigmatized felt less socially accepted, had low self-esteem, and a more negative evaluation of their own behaviour, physical appearance and group of close friends, compared to those that did not feel stigmatized.

Furthermore, studies suggest that if children keep their family situation a secret, they may be teased and bullied less by their peers, but may nevertheless suffer from the stress of keeping the secret, and the indirect impact of a homophobic environment.
THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY STRUCTURE IN CHILDREN’S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Family is a fundamental factor in the identity development of young children. Family, and the quality of relationships within it, contributes to creating young children’s sense of self and their position in the larger social environment and the world. When they go to daycare or school, they often experience diversity for the first time, realizing how similar or different their family is from others.

To succeed academically and socially, children need to feel (among other things) that their families, and by extension, they themselves, are “right.” In other words, they need to see that their family fits within the school community in order to develop a sense of belonging. Studies show that there is an important link between children’s perception of teacher, parent and school support and their academic success. Students that feel well supported at school and at home have better grades7 than those that feel that they and their family are marginalized.

Everyone laughs at Philippe and calls him “gay.” I’m afraid they’ll call me gay too if I ask them to stop. The teachers don’t say anything. When I hear it, I feel like they’re making fun of me and my family too.

MARC, 9 YEARS OLD
I know there’s nothing wrong with being gay, but the other kids don’t even know what it means. They just think it’s bad. When I hear them use that word as an insult, it’s like they’re attacking my family.

**MONIQUE, 11 YEARS OLD**

At school, the teacher explained to us what a family tree is. She showed us how to write in the names of our mom and dad. Since I have two moms, I didn’t know what to do, so I didn’t do anything.

**CAMILLE, 8 YEARS OLD**

A mommy and a daddy, a mommy and a daddy. Why is it always a mommy and a daddy?

**JULES, 7 ANS**

Children whose family structure mirrors the traditional family (a mom and dad with the same cultural background, with children biologically linked to both parents) see this type of family represented and valorized all around them. Children from homoparental families, on the other hand, see their family ignored or even denigrated.

As the poet Adrienne Rich says so well:

“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.” (Adrienne Rich, Blood Bread and Poetry, 1986)
CHILDREN’S STRATEGIES TO COPE WITH DISCRIMINATION, HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

At daycare and at school, children must deal with homophobia and heterosexism due to their parents’ sexual orientation. By sharing their family with the outside world, children with gay fathers or lesbian mothers must learn to maintain a fragile balance between feeling true to themselves with their friends, and the fear of losing friends or being rejected by peers. The worries and problems of these children are most often related to rejection and bullying, or the fear that others will make assumptions about their own sexual orientation based on that of their parents. Fear of losing friends, being judged, or hearing their peers make homophobic or anti-gay remarks have been reported by numerous studies.
Children sense that their environment is homophobic not only through a direct confrontation about their families, but also by hearing the homophobic taunting in the schoolyard that goes unnoticed or unaddressed by those in authority.

In a way, as their parents had to before them, these children have to go through a process of disclosure, a kind of “coming out” when they decide to tell their teachers or peers that their parents are homosexual. They must face all the issues related to this “coming out” process, such as asking themselves if they should do it, and if so, when, how, and to what extent to disclose to peers, to teachers and to other adults. By deciding to disclose, children have to weigh the potential risks and benefits of revealing their parents’ sexual orientation. Thus, while they risk rejection by confiding in others about their family, they also experience the positive consequences of this revelation; the burden of carrying the secret can be lifted from their shoulders. Research shows that children who are encouraged to keep their family a secret tend to present signs of depression and to feel lonely and isolated.

Faced with these difficulties, children generally use one of three “social regulation strategies” to cope with their parents’ homosexuality: 1) Boundary control; 2) Non-disclosure or 3) Disclosure.

1. BOUNDARY CONTROL

Children regulate their parents’ behaviour, their own behaviour towards their homosexual parents and the interaction of others with their parents.

- I’m always really careful about who I invite home.
  CYNTHIA, 8 YEARS OLD

- I asked my dads not to come together to my judo tournament.
  NOUR, 7 YEARS OLD
2. NON-DISCLOSURE

Children deny their parents’ homosexuality, or refuse to disclose it. Children become enigmatic and very cautious about how they describe their families. They do not want to discuss their families, either because they are bullied or teased, or because they are afraid of being victimized. A recent study in Québec showed that the majority of children from homoparental families do not immediately disclose their family situation.

I have always known my mothers are lesbians and it doesn’t matter to me, my family is like any other family. But when I got to primary school, I heard other kids use the word “gay” as an insult and laugh at the word “lesbian,” and I said to myself, “They’re talking about my moms!” After, it was out of the question that I talk about my family to anybody.

CLARA, 15 YEARS OLD

One day I was at my friend Eric’s house, and we went to the park. Eric’s whole family knows about my family and it doesn’t bother them. But, at the park, one of Eric’s friends asked me if it was true that I had two mothers. I just ignored his question and changed the subject. I just didn’t feel like explaining everything all over again, with no one believing me and everyone making fun of my family.

STEVE, 13 YEARS OLD

3. DISCLOSURE

Children share their personal information with selected individuals.

I don’t talk about it with people I don’t think will agree with it or that I don’t know very well. I have talked about it with my good friends and there are no problems with them, but most people don’t know. Sometimes, I’m worried that other kids will find out and I’m afraid of what they’ll think of me; it would be embarrassing.

BASMA, 12 YEARS OLD
PARENTAL STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH DISCRIMINATION, HOMOPHOBIA AND HETEROSEXISM

When, how and to what extent to come out is an important question for gays and lesbians. Coming out becomes even more complex when gays and lesbians become parents. They must balance a number of contradictory elements: the desire to live their life in the open; the desire to show pride so their children don’t feel ashamed of their family; and the desire to protect their children from discrimination and respect their children’s privacy.

A longitudinal study of American homoparental families indicated that the majority of lesbian mothers did not hesitate to disclose their sexuality at work and with daycare personnel when their children were young, but that they were less willing to do so when their children were 10 years old and up. This change in visibility reflects mothers’ sensitivity to their preadolescent children’s growing worries about homophobia. In fact, a British study on homoparental families showed that parents considered their children’s well-being as the most important aspect of family life. To protect their children from a potentially homophobic world and rejection by peers, parents would sometimes hide their sexual orientation.

To deal with ever-present discrimination, homophobia and heterosexism, gay and lesbian parents use various strategies that are qualified as passive or selective disclosure.
The personnel at our son’s school and a good number of his friends know that we’re a family with two dads. However, when we go pick him up, although we’ve never openly discussed it, we don’t arrive together as a couple when all his friends are there.

LUC, 40 YEARS OLD

1. PASSIVE DISCLOSURE STRATEGY

Parents’ decision to disclose their sexual orientation depends largely on their particular context. An Australian study reported that lesbian mothers used a passive disclosure strategy in a healthcare context. While they were ready to disclose their sexual orientation if necessary, they didn’t readily provide this information to health professionals who did not specifically ask them. This passive strategy seems related to the fact that they only saw these professionals occasionally.

During our first visit with our new family doctor, she didn’t ask about our family situation, so I didn’t tell her my son had two lesbian mothers. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. But, looking back, I realize how that information is essential so that my partner can also be contacted in case of an emergency or so she can take him to another medical appointment.

MONICA, 39 YEARS OLD

2. SELECTIVE DISCLOSURE STRATEGY

In contrast to passive strategies in a healthcare context, in their children’s schools, parents are often more open about their sexual orientation, but more selective. The choice to come out to only certain people depends on many factors, such as the school’s general policy on inclusion of minorities, the degree of openness in communication with teachers, and the overall perception of the school’s sensitivity to homoparental families.

Every time Sophie starts a new school year, we make sure to tell her teacher that she has two gay dads. I don’t know if the school’s principal knows. It’s hard to know if she is open to a family like ours. She might not even know that there is such a thing as a homoparental family!

GREG, 43 YEARS OLD
A certain number of other factors are associated with disclosure or non-disclosure of parents’ sexual orientation at their children’s school. For example, middle-class parents and those whose children attend private schools seem more likely to disclose than working-class parents and those whose children attend public school. Urban parents were more likely to disclose than rural. The type of family structure is also related to the degree of disclosure. Parents who planned to have children in the context of a homosexual relationship seem more likely to disclose their sexual orientation than parents who had children in other contexts. This is most likely because the issue of coming out was already dealt with prior to starting a family. In the same line of thinking, it may also be the case that children who are born into a homoparental family are more comfortable with their family situation than those who started their lives in a family with heterosexual parents only to find themselves in a different situation following a divorce. One study found that the transition from a heterosexual context to a gay or lesbian context makes certain parents feel as if they must compensate for their children’s lost sense of “normalcy.” These children also have a mother and father, so can easily identify themselves as children of divorced parents, while camouflaging the homosexual relationship in their new, blended family. Disclosing that one parent is homosexual can be doubly difficult if the other parent is homophobic.

“My son already had such a hard time when his father and I separated that I figured telling him I was a lesbian would be too hard to accept. He didn’t need to be humiliated at school on top of everything else.”

JULIA, 37 YEARS OLD

Just like their children, homosexual parents use a wide variety of adaptive strategies to avoid being confronted with homophobia.
Although prejudice is deeply felt by homoparental families, school professionals are not well-informed about the existence and the nature of the problems faced by these families. Few parents and children feel equipped to confront homophobia alone. Therefore, lesbian mothers, gay fathers and their children can feel marginalized and stigmatized by the school environment.

It is likely that risk factors such as weak social support and a low socioeconomic status make certain families more vulnerable to the effects of homophobia and less likely to make changes to their environment in its wake. These factors could exacerbate the negative impact of homophobia on the well-being of children and parents. These issues must be better understood in order to design interventions to help homoparental families.

According to an American study, many children do not know how their teachers react to homophobic incidents. Many perceive teachers as being unwilling or unable to combat homophobia. Children report that certain teachers even participate in the propagation of homophobic comments.

School personnel’s passive or homophobic attitudes can discourage children from taking advantage of educational and recreational resources and support that are available in schools. To help all children feel safe and welcome, schools can take a proactive approach to preventing insults, harmful teasing and bullying. It is important for all children to feel recognized and understood at school. Avoiding a subject (that is already talked about negatively by other children in the schoolyard) sends a very powerful message to children, suggesting that the subject is not worthy of being discussed, or that it must remain secret because it is shameful.

Remember that preschools and primary schools, by welcoming children from homoparental families, can contribute to a positive transformation in our society.
END NOTES

4. Gartrell et al., 2005.
5. Gershon et al., 1999.
11. Perlesz et al., 2006b.
18. Gartrell et al., 2005.
20. Perlesz et al., 2006b.
22. Perlesz et al., 2006.