

Creating **Welcoming** and **Inclusive** Environments for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Families in Early Childhood Settings

Tracy Burt, Aimee Gelnow, and Lee Klinger Lesser

“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you’re not in it, there’s a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.”

—Adrienne Rich

A MOTHER’S EARS PERK UP when she overhears her 7-year-old daughter say to a friend, “I hate having two moms.” “Why?” asks the friend. “I hate when the teachers say, ‘Take this home to your mom and dad.’” Her mom exhales.

Upon hearing the first part of this story, this mother and most educators would immediately assume the child is talking about a problem within her two-mom family. After hearing the rest of the story, educators should reflect on those immediate thoughts and see where the child’s painful feelings



Courtesy of Corri Planck

really come from—not from her family but from a teacher’s assumption that every child has a mom and a dad.

Children’s identities and sense of self are inextricably tied to their families. The experience of being welcome or unwelcome, visible or invisible begins in early childhood. Our goal as authors and as early childhood professionals is to ensure that *all* children and their families are welcomed in early childhood settings and provided with quality care and education. Early childhood settings should recognize, value, and include every child and family they serve. This article addresses four main points: (1) children are being harmed; (2) all educators have a responsibility to make things better for children; (3) educators can take steps and actions that will make a difference; (4) support is available for educators who want to take action.

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The authors developed the first three-unit early childhood course in the country on this topic and co-authored the curriculum *Making Room in the Circle: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Families in Early Childhood Settings*.

An expanded version of this article is available online at www.naeyc.org/yc/pastissues.

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Breaking the silence and talking about LGBT families in early childhood settings requires understanding, commitment, and concrete tools.

The importance of supporting LGBT families

Extensive research shows that children thrive when their families are involved in their education and when a positive relationship exists between schools and families (Galinsky & Weissbourd 1992; Redding et al. 2004; Caspe & Lopez 2006; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez 2006). When early childhood settings focus on engaging families, children perform better, both socially and academically, and they have higher self-esteem. Yet, LGBT families are pervasively rendered invisible throughout the early childhood field, from teachers' college training to their classroom practice.

The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct says, "Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children. This principle has precedence over all others in this Code" (NAEYC 2005). All too often, without even realizing it, educators harm children and families through personal assumptions or biases and institutionalized silence. When children never hear words nor see images that reflect their families or themselves in positive ways, they are being harmed.

The impact of invisibility

Brian Silveira, a teacher, wrote a story titled "On Being a Gay Five-Year-Old." In it Brian states,

My parents did not want me to grow up gay. My teachers did not want me to grow up gay. In doing what they felt was in my best interest, denying me

the right to grow up positively gay, they each, in their own way, contributed to my feelings of isolation and of being wrong and bad . . . [Teachers] should have stopped homophobic remarks and used them as a springboard to discuss fairness, equality, and the contributions made by gay people so that I could be proud of myself. I should have grown up with their support and love because it was their ethical responsibility to me, a 5-year-old gay boy in their care. (Lesser, Burt, & Gelnow 2005, 111).

Children like Brian, who feel isolated, wrong, or bad because of ridicule or invisibility based on their identity or their families' identity, compel us to do this work. Without thinking about it, many teachers act on the assumption that all children in their class are or will be heterosexual. And yet we do not know the sexual orientation or gender identity of the children for whom we care so deeply. We do not want any child to grow up in a world that says, "You are not welcome here." All too often this is exactly the message we are conveying to a child who will grow up to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, or to children who have LGBT parents.

As educators begin to realize the impact of invisibility on children's self-concept and connection to their family, they are moved and inspired to take action. Breaking the silence and talking about LGBT families in early childhood settings requires understanding, commitment, and concrete tools.

The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct as a foundation for action

Powerful social forces propel the controversy around LGBT families and often lead to the fear and confusion that affect so many early childhood educators. Often, discussions of LGBT families get tangled in issues of sex, religion, or politics. Many educators are afraid to even say the words *lesbian* or *gay*. They think talking about or even acknowledging that LGBT parents exist is akin to talking about sex.

When we speak about the parents of a child who has one mother and one father, no one assumes we are talking about sex. Yet, if we speak of a child's two mommies or two daddies, all of a sudden, the topic of sex often seems to be in the forefront. It is important to examine this discrepancy, explore where it comes from, and understand that in both instances, we are simply speaking about families—the most constant, central, and formative presence in children's lives. Gay dads and lesbian moms change diapers, make lunches, wash clothes, read bedtime stories, play in the park, and do all the other things straight parents do in caring for their children.

Some religious traditions hold that being LGBT is wrong. Because faith and religion are such a deep and important part of so many people's lives, it can be very intimidating to do or say anything that might offend or contradict someone else's beliefs. Many educators are hesitant to offend the religious beliefs of parents or other staff, and fear they may do so by supporting acceptance and visibility for LGBT families in the program. Some may struggle with the tension between their own religious beliefs and their

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commitment to treating all children and their families with respect.

And yet, what happens to a child if we imply, or directly tell them, that their parents are “wrong”? It is not up to teachers to choose who is in a child’s family. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (2005) is very clear about the importance of respecting children within the contexts of their families and provides us with these core values as guidelines for action:

- Appreciate and support the bond between the child and family
- Recognize that children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society
- Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague)
- Respect diversity in children, families, and colleagues
- Recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect (pp. 1–2)

The Code also states that an ideal (I-1.10) for early childhood programs is

- To ensure that each child’s culture, language, ethnicity, and family structure are recognized and valued in the program.

Used in conjunction with the four goals of anti-bias education (at right), as outlined in the new NAEYC publication *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010), the Code of Ethical Conduct offers sound guidelines for our work in creating welcoming environments for LGBT people. If we are truly committed to the well-being of children, keeping these goals in mind will guide the decisions we make and the interactions we have with all young children and their families.

Respecting diverse religious viewpoints *and* fully including LGBT families are both important. Educators’ ethical responsibility to all children is to create a safe space in which they can grow and flourish. No one’s beliefs

The Four Core Goals of Anti-Bias Education

Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep, caring human connections.

Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

From L. Derman-Sparks & J.O. Edwards, *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2010), xiv.

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can take precedence over children's safety and protection. If we do not fulfill this ethical responsibility to children and families, silence, fear, and the power of a topic being taboo overshadow the wholeness of family life. Ultimately this can have dangerous consequences, especially as children move to later grades in which bullying incidents and name-calling are often based on gender or sexual orientation.

As trainers and instructors, we have heard from early childhood educators throughout the country that they can understand the need to address the issue of isolation/inclusion of all children. They "get" that it is inevitable that silence around this issue will have damaging outcomes for children. And yet, they fear raising the issue in their programs for a host of reasons: (1) lack of comfort with their own knowledge of and facility with language regarding issues affecting the LGBT community; (2) personal dissonance regarding their own personal, cultural, or religious beliefs about homosexuality; (3) discomfort resulting from their assumption that if they advocate for engaging LGBT families, people will think they are LGBT; and (4) fear of reprisal from their supervisors, peers, other parents, board members, or others associated with the setting in which they work.

To address these often well-founded fears, early childhood professionals need tools that outline the rationale within the framework of developmentally appropriate practice for engaging and supporting LGBT families. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (2005) Preamble states, "NAEYC recognizes that those who work with young children face many daily decisions that

have moral and ethical implications," and thus it sets the stage for guided decision making based on core values (some of which are listed earlier). The code gives educators a foundation from which to approach colleagues and other families and through which we can assess our own actions in protecting and caring for children. There are also practical steps to take.

Steps to including all families

While we live in a society that surrounds children with negative stereotypes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and families, there are tangible and significant steps educators can take to create an inclusive curriculum. Teachers can make a difference in the self-esteem and safety of a child in simple ways—through the language they use and

by including children's books, matching games, and puzzles that reflect diverse family structures. For example, instead of saying, "Take this home to your mother and father," we can say "Take this home to your family."

Many opportunities exist to develop curriculum that includes all families:

- Consider whether your language consistently includes all children. If it excludes any child, it is not the right choice of words.
- Review and choose children's books that portray many different types of families.
- Celebrate a "Person You Love Day" (see Lewis 1996) or Family Day instead of celebrating Mother's Day or Father's Day. This way, all children, in all kinds of families, are included.
- Adapt stories and songs to reflect and include LGBT families.
- Make a display showing "Who lives with you?" for all children and staff.
- Discuss similarities and differences.
- Represent different kinds of family structures with curriculum materials such as posters, puzzles, photos, and dolls.
- Create matching games or puzzles that reflect different family structures,



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**Change happens when
a person steps forward
to make a difference.**

including those with lesbian moms or gay dads.

- Create curriculum that challenges gender stereotypes, expanding what is typically considered acceptable for girls and boys. Support children's choices—in play, clothing, activities, toys, or future career plans—that break gender stereotypes.
- Maintain awareness of the language you use, especially if it implies differences based on gender (for example, complimenting boys on what they do and girls on how they look or implying that the only love relationships that exist, or are possible, are between a man and a woman).
- Interrupt children's potentially hurtful behavior that denies or ridicules

some families. Treat these incidents as teachable moments, and follow up on children's questions.

- Find ongoing opportunities to help children see the similarities and differences between families and the importance and value of each.

In *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*, Derman-Sparks and Olsen stress the importance of supporting *all* families:

Some adults mistakenly assume that teaching children about diversity in family structure devalues "traditional" families or promotes certain other family configurations. The purpose of anti-bias education is to enable teachers to support *all* children's families and to foster in each child fair and respectful treatment of others whose families are different from the child's own. Anti-bias education does not disparage or advocate any particular family structure—but it does adhere to early childhood education's fundamental ethic of positively representing and supporting every child's unique kind of family. (2010, 116)

**Tips for Administrators
for Working
with LGBT Families**

- Include LGBT families in promotional materials, such as brochures and Web sites, through photos and inclusive language
- Address family diversity in the mission statement, explicitly including LGBT families
- Use gender-neutral terms like *parent* or *guardian* on forms
- Provide the same benefits for domestic partners of LGBT staff as for legally married staff
- Conduct ongoing diversity training related to LGBT families for staff
- Implement an anti-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity
- Create a safe environment in which LGBT staff and families can come out
- Ask families to tell you the language they use to describe their families and how they would like you to describe their families

Taking Responsibility for Change

The lessons and best practices described in this article grew out of the work of many dedicated pioneers in the early childhood field who are committed to raising awareness and taking action to include LGBT families in early childhood settings. Among these initiatives is one that spawned the creation of the first three-unit early childhood course in the nation focused on supporting LGBT families in early childhood education settings. The success of the course, initially offered at City College of San Francisco, motivated the publication of a text titled *Making Room in the Circle: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Families in Early Childhood Settings*, written by the three authors of this article and published by Parent Services Project.

This early childhood education course is now offered regularly at City College of San Francisco and Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts, and has been offered at University of North Carolina–Greensboro, De Anza Community College (San Jose, California), and Chabot Community College (Hayward, California). Other colleges are developing ongoing courses or integrating the course (or aspects of the course) into their current programs.

Parent Services Project is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to integrating family support into early childhood programs and schools through training, technical assistance, and education. For more information on these initiatives, visit www.parentservices.org.

Conclusion

Change happens when a person steps forward to make a difference. Each step will look different and is important. Whether an educator reads a new children's book that is inclusive of LGBT families, gathers information for self-education, builds a new relationship with an LGBT parent, leads a staff training, or changes policy in a school, each step brings that person further along the path that contributes to a safer and more just world for children and their families. It is up to each of us to do whatever we can do. If we don't, we inadvertently support the exclusion and harm that currently exist. As Lin Yutang wrote, "Hope is like a road in the country; there never was a road, but when people walk there, the road comes into existence."

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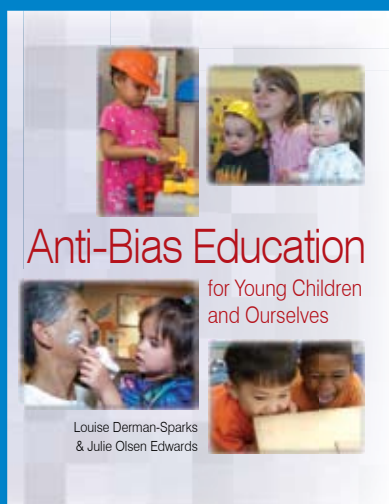
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