

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families

Tools for directors in supporting staff discussion dealing with fears

by Tracy Burt and Lee Klinger Lesser

Building a staff team and community that addresses controversial and difficult subjects involves creating space where we can take risks; disagree with and honor each others' perspectives; build strong, authentic relationships; and provide resources and support for ongoing learning. While accomplishing this in the context of supporting LGBT families brings challenges, it also brings opportunities for renewed growth, professional development, and deeper relationships. Engaging in this process strengthens the capacity of educators to fulfill our responsibility to support all children in the context of their families and their own emerging sense of self.



Together the authors have shepherded hundreds of early childhood educators through short- and long-term dialogues and learning about supporting LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) families in early childhood settings. They developed the first three-unit college course in the country on the topic and co-authored the curriculum: *Making Room in the Circle: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and*



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The importance of inclusion

One of the first steps is to understand why it is important to engage in this work. The *NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct* states in Principle 1.1 "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.*" When a child's family is rendered invisible, the child is harmed.

Silence has a powerful voice, especially when it excludes the people most important to children, the people who keep them safe, and tuck them into bed at night and feed them and love them — their family. Even when it is not the intention of an educator to create harm, it may in fact be the result. Here is an example:

A lesbian mother overheard her second grade daughter, Jenny, and her best friend, Rita, having a conversation in the other room:

Jenny: "I hate having two moms!"

Rita: "Why?"

Jenny: "I hate it when the teacher says 'Take this home to your mom or dad.'"

The educator involved probably had no idea that her words would impact Jenny this way. Through our everyday actions and language in the classroom, we convey messages of acceptance or rejection, of 'normalcy' or strangeness that teach a child whether or not they are welcomed, valued, and included in this world. Jenny was given the message that she and her family didn't belong.

The silence and invisibility about LGBT people in early childhood settings lays the foundation for the harassment that begins in elementary school and leads to bullying, violence, and teen suicide. Some of the most common insults used by children on the playground beginning in elementary school are 'gay' or 'faggot.' These are often words that children do not even understand, and yet are allowed to use in derogatory ways without adult intervention.

The Yes Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to preventing youth suicide, provides the following statistics:

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- 33% of all teen suicides are lesbian and gay youth
- 50% of lesbian and gay youth are rejected by their own families when their sexual orientation is disclosed
- 80% of youth harassed as gay actually identify as heterosexual, and are five times more likely to commit suicide than other youth
- 97% of high school students hear anti-gay epithets¹

There is at least one child in almost every early childhood classroom who in later years will recognize their identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Silence, fear, negativity, or avoidance about LGBT people in educational settings gives them the message that they are neither welcome nor safe in this world.

Even around a topic that is so emotionally and politically charged, when an opportunity is provided, most people are eager to explore their own

fears and beliefs along with their desire to provide the best care they can to children and families.

Opening the dialogue

Addressing issues related to LGBT parenting is complex: personal religious conflicts, safety for LGBT staff, and lack of experience talking about the issues are often layered upon discomfort with conflict and/or lack of experience negotiating conflict successfully with colleagues. Creating room for dialogue and allowing space for people to wrestle with their own dilemmas is fundamental.

Here are some strategies that help to open and sustain dialogue:

Set the Context — Begin with this shared core belief: We want to do what is best for the children. Acknowledge everyone's commitment to serving the children in their care. Honor every

person's right to their own beliefs, and invite people to consider other perspectives. Relate your conversations about supporting gay and lesbian families to your mission and philosophy.

Open Conversations Thoughtfully — Acknowledge that it can be difficult to talk about topics that we feel strongly about and also that you are committed to ongoing dialogue. Introduce the topic by connecting your support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families with your commitment to fully serving all families and honoring the fact that everyone enters this conversation from a different place.

Be Prepared — Collect some articles with information about LGBT families including research and resources for early childhood curriculum. We recommend *Belonging: Including Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents — and All Children — in Your Program* (Gelnaw, 2005) and *Lesbian and Gay Parenting by*

the American Psychological Association (2005).

Ask Questions — Help people explore and ask questions about their own practices. What is the impact of children learning that they don't belong? If children learned to accept LGBT families, how might that later impact bullying and violence?

Tie Your Conversations Back to Practice — Ask: "How does what you learned today relate to your interactions with children and families? What will you do differently?"

Common fears and strategies to address them

Below we list common fears and concerns of educators, along with strategies to work with each of them:

I want to do this but don't know how.

Practice Reading LGBT Inclusive Children's Books. Bring several children's books to a meeting and read one to your staff. Invite them to pretend to be children and to ask the questions they are afraid children or parents might ask them. Model how you would respond to the questions and take turns practicing reading books and answering the questions. Support staff to begin reading books in their classroom.

Explore the implications of Mother's Day and Father's Day Celebrations on children who do not have (or live with) a mother or a father. Use the article *What Mother? What Father?* (Lewis, 1996) to stimulate discussion. How can you ensure that all children and families are included in your celebrations?

Brainstorm curriculum ideas.

Create activities that include LGBT families for all aspects of the environment and curriculum. Support staff to begin implementing new curriculum at the level to which they are ready. A

simple way to enhance curriculum is to adapt common children's songs with new words that describe the diversity of families. Some examples of these songs developed by different educators are available at www.parentservices.org.

I don't understand or feel comfortable working with LGBT families.

Share Stories. Find stories about real people that will help staff understand the impact of bias on LGBT families. Here is an example:

Charles and Milo were looking for a preschool for their three year old, Otto. On Wednesday, their friends (a straight couple), toured a prominent preschool and were offered a place in the program right away. When Charles and Milo toured the school on Thursday, they were told that someone would get back to them soon.

They were not offered a spot. The next day they heard from their day care provider that the director of the preschool had called her to ask questions about their parenting, and to find out whether Otto seemed happy having two fathers. When the director called them to offer them a spot, they declined. This school, that had come so highly recommended, had one standard for accepting children with straight parents and a separate one for a child with two gay fathers. It was not a reassuring or welcoming place to leave their child.

Invite LGBT parents to share stories with your staff. Show films, such as *Both My Moms' Names are Judy*, *De Colores*, *All God's Children*, *Straight from the Heart*, and *That's a Family*.

Partner with families. Work with LGBT and straight parents to open dialogue and to build a community commitment to support all children and families. Create opportunities to share your mission and commitment with families and to hear their perspectives, questions, and ideas.

I won't be supported by the administration if a parent complains about LGBT inclusive curriculum.

Assess your mission statement and forms. As a director, it is important to ensure your mission statement explicitly acknowledges your support for LGBT families and that your forms are inclusive. Use the story *Forms Loom Large* by Kaila Compton, M.D., Ph.D., a lesbian mother who describes the impact on her family of forms that have no room for them (free to download at www.parentservices.org).

Someone will say I am gay if I support LGBT families.

Express your support. Let your staff know that you will back them up when they include LGBT families in their curriculum. If they are uncomfortable or unsure about how to respond to a question, they should be welcome to refer a parent to you.

Provide support for straight allies. Straight allies are very important in the struggle for the inclusion of LGBT families. Part of what an ally may experience is 'suspicion' of being gay. Provide space for staff to talk about this experience and brainstorm how they would like to respond.

This is against my religious and personal values.

Acknowledge everyone's right to their own beliefs along with the core commitment to fully value every child in your care. Honor each person's right to their own belief system and also their commitment to serving families. Each individual family has the right to choose what they teach at their home. When we come together in community we are charged with reconciling diverse beliefs and creating acceptance for everyone.

If I talk about gay or lesbian families as normal, it will encourage children to be gay.

Share information. When we include LGBT families, we are reflecting the diverse sexual orientations and gender identities

that exist now and have existed throughout history. The American Psychological Association states “most people experience little or no sense of choice about their sexual orientation” (2008, p. 2). Studies show that extensive prejudice, discrimination, and invisibility cause serious negative effects on health and well-being for LGBT people (Ibid.). As educators, we do not get to choose a child’s family or a child’s identity. What we can choose is whether we support a child so he or she can thrive.

The story, *On Being a Gay Five Year Old* by Brian Silveira, is a powerful tool to help educators explore this topic (free download, www.parentservices.org).

I don’t know how to answer questions from children and parents.

Provide time for role plays and practice.

People are often nervous about answering questions from both children and adults. Give people a chance to practice with adults (or use yourself as a model). Remember, it’s not about doing it ‘right,’ but about practicing your response, and getting feedback from others.

Practice with Scenarios. Use scenarios with staff to explore and uncover their differing beliefs and perspectives. Scenarios for staff training can be downloaded free from www.parentservices.org.

I am afraid that talking about LGBT families means we will be talking about sex.

Clarify. We are talking about families, not sex. When we talk to children about mothers and fathers, no one thinks we are talking about sex. It is not different when we are talking about mommies and mommies or daddies and daddies. We are talking about families — the people who care for their children, take them to school, change their diapers, and comfort them when they are sad.

Provide information. Many stereotypes

and myths exist about LGBT families. It is important to provide accurate information. *Lesbian and Gay Parenting*, published by the American Psychological Association in 2005, reviews extensive research and cogently addresses the most common myths and stereotypes.

I am against ‘special rights’ for LGBT people.

Share information. Marriage confers over 1,000 federal and state rights to people who have the right to marry. Many states prohibit second parent adoption, which can have devastating impacts on a child. For example, a lesbian couple, Alma and Diane, lived in a state where only one parent could legally adopt their child. They were partners for eleven years and Alma adopted their eight year old son, Jeremiah, as a baby. Diane was the parent who stayed at home and provided more of the day-to-day care. One day, Jeremiah had severe pains and she rushed him to the emergency room. Because Diane had no legal status in relation to Jeremiah, the hospital would not allow her to accompany him when the doctors were examining him. He was terrified and in addition to being in severe pain with a ruptured appendix, he was left alone with strangers and taken away from his mother. Finally, the doctors saw that this was creating more harm for his health and went out to get Diane.

Many people do not realize the impact on children. Without these protections, children are left more vulnerable.

In opening up this topic with your staff, make sure to have a plan that includes dialogue, action, and follow-up. Allow enough time and numerous occasions to explore people’s fears and to provide support and information. This is not a one-time conversation or discussion. It takes time to build trust, to explore our own attitudes, and to create new practices with colleagues and families. Each real conversation that we have can help to

change lives and to prevent suffering for many children and families.

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www.includingallfamilies.blogspot.com
Resources for early childhood educators committed to supporting children and families across gender and sexual orientation.

Endnotes

1 Yes Institute Statistics

www.yesinstitute.org/resources