

Strengths and challenges in lesbian parenting: giving a voice to lesbian mothers

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In order to understand and give voice to lesbian-parented family lived experience in greater depth, participants in the McNair et al (2002) study (see papers in current AIFS symposium) were given the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions seeking parents' views on the strengths and challenges of lesbian parenting. Sixty-seven participants contributed written replies. Some went to the effort of adding additional pages with copious notes, and a number specifically thanked the researchers for the opportunity to share their experiences of non-traditional parenting.

Parents' and children's concerns about discrimination—particularly at school

The greatest challenge for lesbian-led families was ongoing concern about discrimination and prejudice—much of which was based on prior experiences of homophobic rejection and non-acceptance. Parents were concerned about their children being bullied and harassed at school and feared their children might also be concerned about discrimination. Such concerns are not groundless. A recent study involving 48 Victorian children with gay fathers or lesbian mothers reported that just under half (44%) of the children in grades 3 to 6, and approximately one-third of secondary school children had experienced teasing, bullying and homophobic language (Ray and Gregory 2001). Similarly, in stage three of the National Lesbian Families study 18% of children had experienced some form of discrimination by age five (Gartrell et al. 2000).

Some participants' teenaged children had expressed fears about talking openly to their peers about their parents' sexuality. Other participants had experienced the extent to which some schools could be non-responsive when overt victimisation of children from lesbian-parented families had occurred:

Our son faced daily taunts and jibes which culminated in a violent altercation with the boys concerned. The school was notified of the social ostracising but took quite some time to take action.

Non-acceptance and rejection of the lesbian parents by family and friends

Perceived rejection by family and friends, notably grandparents, created sadness and disappointment for some participants:

Having the kids has actually amplified our lesbian relationship and forced them to think and talk about it—as a result we have been pretty much ostracised—so much for grandchildren bringing us all closer together!

Non-acceptance by the gay and lesbian community

Several participants noted that it had only become fashionable to raise children within the lesbian community in recent years and others suggested that the earlier rejection of children by lesbian peers related to the non-acceptance of boys in separatist communities. Some participants had been subjected to disparaging comments from other members of the gay and lesbian community, and in some instances childless lesbians were perceived as drifting away from friendships because the lesbian parents could no longer socialise with freedom and flexibility because of the demands of raising young children. There was also perceived to be an ideologically correct way to conceive children in lesbian relationships:

I find myself under pressure to explain my daughter's conception (I had my baby after a casual encounter with a straight man—so I don't quite fit into the donor model). This is easier among straight friends than among lesbians. I have been subjected to a *grilling* by lesbians...I am often asked in public by lesbians about my daughter's 'donor'—I feel like I'm being a bit out of date by thinking of him as her father." I find there is a "right" way to be a lesbian family and a 'wrong' way.

The burden of absent social and community support and social isolation

Perceptions that social and community support for lesbian families was available were by no means universal. Some participants lamented the dearth of adequate social support for their families, and others had experienced social ostracism of their children. Lesbians living in outer urban areas and rural communities reported feeling particularly isolated:

Not living in a big city I feel very isolated. I would really enjoy lesbian mother playgroups where I could relax and not feel 'other' and 'odd'.

Legal, political and social non-legitimation of same-sex relationships

Participants highlighted the absence of legal recognition as a major source of concern, disappointment, grief, and anger for families. Participants were also keenly aware of a lack of social and political recognition. One woman took stock of precisely how 'difference' impacted on her and her family's daily life:

On a day to day basis I am continually reminded that I am 'different'. I sat down and wrote a list of all the things that had occurred in the last couple of years that had caused me a degree of grief and had occurred due to the fact that I'm a lesbian: Applying for a home loan—broker just couldn't seem to understand that we were a committed couple; going to our local GP—assumed I had a husband; Census—no facility for same-sex couples on the census form; Centrelink (and taxation)—they have no idea of how to cope with same-sex couples; Antenatal classes whilst pregnant—the nurse kept referring to 'husbands' ; Tennis club—homophobic references and jokes; Dealings with real estate agents, utilities (eg. electricity, phone) all seem to have problems when it comes to same-sex couples.

Non-recognition of the non-biological mother or co-parent

There were many challenges identified for the non-biological parent: feeling out of place; being ignored and rendered invisible by health service providers; not being acknowledged as a 'real' mother; and not having the language or the legal or social responsibility that accurately reflected having a parenting role in one's child's life:

I'm not entirely a 'mum' with respect to the birth/breast feeding...nor am I a 'dad'—what am I?
How do my daughters place and identify me adequately when there is no generic label for me that is identifiable by other people.

The non-biological mother's need for legal recognition of her parental status may not become apparent until couples separate and the birth mother begins to refuse contact with the child:

I was the non-biological mother in my previous relationship. When this broke down I initially had our daughter half the week. My ex-partner slowly decreased this and then she refused me any contact. I went through family court and mediation but there was no law to protect my rights and the primary bond I had with my daughter. This is shocking, devastating and has to change!

Issues of 'coming-out'

Challenges in relation to the 'coming-out' process were many and varied and they ranged from the perceived burden of having to maintain total secrecy and hide one's sexuality, to the irritation of having to constantly explain 'our situation' to others, and of having to deal with 'the constant process' of coming-out and 'dropping the lesbian bombshell'.

Parenting pressures

Although there was recognition that the challenges of parenting are universal, and 'new parenting' can place particular stresses on the couple relationship, some couples felt that they were under 'extra' pressure to prove that they could parent effectively:

Everybody has an opinion on two women raising children and you constantly feel under scrutiny. This puts extra pressure on to do 'OK' in raising 'normal' kids—you almost overcompensate to show that 'we can do this too!'

Several single lesbian parents reported that their identity as a single mother was as relevant to their parenting as their lesbianism. Moreover, the social and economic circumstances of single lesbian parenting contributed to even greater marginalisation.

Despite these challenges, the lesbian mothers in this study reported many positives. The major strength identified by lesbian-led families was their pride in successfully raising well-adjusted, happy children

despite the constraints and challenges of living within a homophobic society. Participants described their families as: thoughtfully planned; tolerant and accepting of diversity; flexible in gender-roles; and having interesting, supportive, extended kinship networks that included a wide range of positive role models for children.

Greater tolerance and experience of diversity

Benefits for children growing up with same-sex parents have been repeatedly emphasised over the last decade (Patterson 1992, Allen 1997). In the current study, many participants emphasised the benefits of bringing up children with a greater tolerance for, and experience of, diversity. The positive views about difference and diversity were not confined to sexuality, but included broader statements about non-judgemental attitudes to a wider range of socio-cultural and family differences. Children and parents were variously described as appreciating, valuing, celebrating, being more understanding of, and broad-minded about, difference and diversity in general, and minority groups and multiculturalism in particular.

Related to the idea of greater tolerance of diversity were parents' statements of pride in their own and their families' difference to mainstream families, and the idea that the differences of lesbian-led families can offer alternative perspectives to family life more generally. Participants also commented on the opportunity to be politically active in support of these alternative family structures and to take action in the face of prejudice:

It's an opportunity to be political. It confronts people's preconceptions about homosexuals and family structure and hopefully challenges them.

Pride, happiness and self esteem as a result of being a parent and creating families

In addition to being proud of their difference in a broader social context, participants also described their individual sense of pride and commitment to parenting:

I'm extremely happy that we're thriving as a family unit, in spite of a poor support network...I'm glad we have survived and are expecting another child, conceived in the 'traditional' lesbian 'known donor' way. I take great pride in seeing my children grow and develop well, outside a 'mainstream' family.

Several respondents highlighted the fact that having a child had significantly changed their lives for the better. Enhanced self-esteem for children and a sense of self-worth for parents was not only attributed to effective parenting and children being loved, wanted and secure, but living in homophobic socio-cultural contexts was also seen as contributing to increased inner strength, self-esteem and resilience.

Planned parenting is effective parenting, and planned children are loved, wanted and respected

Literature comparing the process of decision-making to use donor insemination between lesbian and heterosexual couples indicates that lesbians consider the decision for longer (Jacob, Klock and Maier, 1999). The actual act of planning that was deemed to be important in raising children and identifying key values to assist in effective parenting:

Being in a lesbian relationship and wanting to have children for us has meant a lot of thinking, discussing and planning because you don't have children 'accidentally'...I feel we are better prepared to be parents because we have put in and will continue putting in more energy into what parents need to do in their parental roles. I am still amazed at how little investigative effort heterosexual couples put into becoming parents.

A second aspect of planned parenting was the idea that many people within the community, including family and friends, could become involved in the planning:

Our decision was a very conscious one, and I like it that so many other people contributed to our decision-making. It makes me feel like our family was planned and wanted by a whole community.

Many participants believed the difficulties and constraints involved in organising conception increased the likelihood that the children would feel wanted, loved and respected.

Flexible, non-traditional parenting/gender roles

One of the key strengths found in lesbian parent families in the literature is the prevalence of supportive and egalitarian co-parenting relationships and positive couple relationships (Dunne 2000). Patterson (1995) showed that co-mothers share parenting tasks more equally than fathers in heterosexual families, and 75% of co-mothers in the longitudinal lesbian families study considered they were equal co-parents (Gartrell et al, 1999).

Participants contrasted their own arrangements to those among heterosexual couples, citing more equitable arrangements with shared household tasks and responsibilities; child-rearing and financial arrangements; greater empathy and understanding about parenting issues between lesbian partners; and shared experiences of pregnancy, birth, breast feeding etc when both parents had experienced birth:

We have more freedom to define our parenting roles than heterosexual couples who have to cope with social pressure about mother/father roles...heterosexual people find it harder to share parenting and feel that two women may find it easier.

This applied not only within the same-sex couple relationship, but also in relation to the gender roles played by donor/fathers:

[My child's] two gay fathers are utterly devoted, incredibly good with him, not scared to show him affection and 100% reliable. It's like having two husbands who I don't have to sleep with/live with...but who still come around and put my rubbish out without being asked.

Positive role models and extended kinship networks

Parents viewed as strengths the potential for wider networks of potential role models within lesbian parent families. Both sons and daughters raised by gay male parent/s and/or lesbian mothers were perceived as having a real choice regarding their own sexuality rather than being pressured towards heterosexuality. Sons having greater contact with women role-models was also seen as a positive:

I think he has benefited by not being forced into a macho role. He is a very expressive, creative, strong, loving child.

The extent and variety of biological and social kinships was emphasised, some citing the joy and pride experienced by grandparents in their gay children being able to be parents themselves. The idea that the extended 'family' could be chosen was presented as a positive:

Our daughter has very important relationships with other adults, somewhat independently of us. These include a bevy of adoring lesbian 'aunty' types. Because we question so much of the way(s) 'family' is constructed, we place a lot of importance on these other relationships.

In summary, the diversity and complexity of perspectives reported by these lesbian parents highlight the wide range of experiences in non-mainstream parenting, and the creative and positive ways that families cope with, and adjust to the challenges of raising children in heteronormative, heterosexist and at times homophobic social and family contexts.

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