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of Children in LGBTQ Families**

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The Struggles, Experiences and Needs of Children in LGBTQ Families

Carolyn Thompson



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It is estimated that between 12 and 15 million children in the United States are being raised by gay and lesbian parents.¹ These children are the workers of the future, yet how much do we know about their unique experiences and needs? How much do we know about the needs of youth and adults raised by bisexual, transgender and queer parents who are not even included in the statistic above?

Sidebar

[Glossary of Terms](#)

If we were to base our knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) families on the media's limited representation, we would likely believe that all LGBTQ families are white, middle-class, two-parent families who have been together for many years. In actuality, these families are a small percent of the larger LGBTQ family community.

LGBTQ families come in all different shapes and sizes. There are single-parent families, two-parent families and multiple-parent families. LGBTQ parents are biological, adoptive and foster parents. Many youth who have LGBTQ parents were conceived in heterosexual relationships, while others were conceived through alternative (artificial) insemination and surrogacy. LGBTQ people are also raising nieces, nephews and grandchildren. LGBTQ families live in rural, urban and suburban areas and span the spectrum of racial and economic diversity. In short, LGBTQ families are just as diverse as the rest of the U.S. population.

This article is based on my personal experience as the Executive Director of Mountain Meadow, a position that has allowed me the privilege of working with hundreds of children and adults from diverse LGBTQ families. Over the last six years I have learned a tremendous amount about the unique experiences, struggles and needs of this community.

In this article I outline common experiences of people with LGBTQ parents and guardians, and examine the effects of homophobia and transphobia on their lives. I also provide answers to several commonly-asked questions, discuss the diversity of LGBTQ families, offer tips on how to be an ally to this community and provide a glossary of terms (see sidebar).

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Experiences of Youth from LGBTQ Families

The experiences of youth growing up in LGBTQ families are as diverse as the experiences of any identity group. Some youth are vocally proud of their families while others go to great lengths to hide their secret from others. The one unifying factor for all youth from LGBTQ

families is the effect of homophobia and transphobia on their lives. Homophobia and transphobia are both blatant and subtle, and affect all youth from LGBTQ families regardless of their individual sexual orientation or gender identity.

Youth from LGBTQ families are faced with the same homophobia and transphobia that LGBTQ adults face, but they experience it at a younger and more vulnerable age. For example, a five-year-old entering kindergarten discovers that everyone except her — from classmates to storybook characters — has a mom and a dad. Other youth struggle to understand why both of their parents are not welcome at teacher-parent conferences or family events. For other youth, homophobia and transphobia is more direct and often violent. Some youth are physically threatened by other students on a regular basis at school, while teachers often refuse to intervene. One youth I work with was kidnapped by his extended family in an effort to "save him" from his lesbian mother and her partner.

The effects of this daily oppression are profound. Some youth from LGBTQ families act out, while others withdraw. The response I see most frequently, especially in younger children, is a painful confusion. I too often hear the question, "Ms. Carolyn, why do people hate my family?" This question is always accompanied by a very perplexed and confused expression. Without support, youth from LGBTQ families internalize the messages they hear and often believe there is something wrong with them, rather than with the society we live in. With support, however, youth from LGBTQ families become confident in who they and their families are. These children are typically advocates for diversity of all types and many actively work for LGBTQ rights.

Understanding the Levels of Oppression

In order to understand the oppression youth from LGBTQ families face on a daily basis, one must understand the different levels at which these dynamics play out.

Interpersonal Level: Oppression experienced at the interpersonal level is often the easiest for people to see and articulate. The most common complaint I hear from youth with LGBTQ parents and guardians is that their friends' parents will not allow them to visit their home. Heterosexual parents often prohibit their children from playing with youth from LGBTQ families out of fear that exposure to family diversity will turn their children gay. Other parents believe the myth that all LGBTQ people, especially gay men, are child molesters. This irrational fear keeps youth from LGBTQ families isolated from their peers. The homophobia these youth encounter is often internalized, making them hesitant to invite friends over to play. This internalized homophobia further increases their isolation.

Group Level: Hateful words and phrases, such as "that's so gay," "faggot" and "dyke," hurt youth from LGBTQ families at a group level. These words are degrading to their parents, themselves and all LGBTQ people. The term "that's so gay" is often seen as benign, but is extremely hurtful. In this context something is "gay" when it is bad or not hip. In contrast, phrases such as, "Are we straight?" translate as "Are we okay with each other? Are we good?" Equating "gay" with "bad" and "straight" with "good" reinforces societal inequality on the basis of sexual orientation. People from LGBTQ families live in a society that uses these phrases everyday.

Cultural Level: In U.S. culture the ideal family is portrayed to be a mom, dad and two children. Youth from LGBTQ families constantly have to explain their families to people because of our

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narrow cultural lens of what constitutes a family. In addition, nearly every child in the U.S. dreams of growing up and getting married. Youth who have same-sex parents are constantly forced to defend why their parents are not married, despite the fact that U.S. law will not permit them to do so.

Institutional Level: In many states LGBTQ parents have no legal guardianship rights for their non-biological children. Even in states that do allow for second-parent adoption, the legal process is not economically accessible to many LGBTQ people. The end result is that many youth from LGBTQ families live in fear of being separated from their parents. If a child is injured, their non-legal parent may be denied access to them in a hospital. Even worse, if their biological or adoptive parent dies, the child has no legal rights protecting them from being separated from their other parent. This fear is heightened for bi-national families.

Some Frequently Asked Questions

Will the kids be gay? This common question stems from our society's views that homosexuality and transgenderism are abnormal and therefore should be prevented. Allies of the LGBTQ community have conducted numerous studies that "prove" that youth from LGBTQ families are equally likely (and equally unlikely) to be gay as compared to youth from heterosexual families. These studies are well meaning, but stem from societal beliefs that homosexuality and transgenderism should be prevented. This question would not be asked if all sexual orientations and gender identities were equally valued.

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Do LGBTQ parents want their children to be gay? Some LGBTQ parents hope their children will come out as LGBTQ themselves so that they can share in that experience; others hope their children will be straight and gender normative so that they won't have to encounter the same struggles their parents have experienced. At a deeper level, however, LGBTQ parents want the same thing all parents want. They want their children to be happy. Happiness comes from being loved and supported in who you are.

Is it ethical for LGBTQ people to have children in today's intolerant society? This common question is the same one my aunt and uncle heard only 25 years ago when they wanted to have children as an interracial couple. It is true that youth from LGBTQ families must overcome obstacles that youth from straight families do not have to face, but this does not make having children unethical. If this argument were true, then only white, upper class, heterosexual, married people could ethically have children.

How do children feel about having one or more LGBTQ parents? The answer to this question depends primarily on the person and their support system. The most challenging situation I regularly see with the youth I work with is a mother and father who divorced as one parent came out as being LGBTQ. It is challenging for a young person to separate the pain from the divorce from their feelings about having an LGBTQ parent. This challenge is more pronounced when their straight parent blames the LGBTQ parent or is openly homophobic or transphobic.

How a youth feels about having an LGBTQ parent often changes with age. For example, I frequently receive calls from distraught parents who are concerned as to why their child is suddenly ashamed of their family when they never had been before. I always ask the age of the child and I nearly always receive the same response — he or she just started middle school. Few youth in middle school aren't embarrassed by their families, no matter what their family structure is.

Typical, healthy, age-appropriate behavior is often over scrutinized by both LGBTQ parents and the rightwing as having to do with the parents' sexual orientation or gender identity. A parent recently told me that their newly-adopted children were adjusting well to having two gay fathers, but they weren't completely comfortable yet. Their only source of perceived discomfort was that the children didn't like it when their dads kiss in front of them. What child hasn't gone through a stage where they didn't want to see their parents kiss?

LGBTQ people in our society have been so deeply wounded by prejudice that most are hypersensitive and are always subconsciously on alert for traces of discomfort with their sexual orientation or gender identity. The result is that LGBTQ parents, as well as gay hate groups, often read more into a child's reaction than is really there. This scrutiny is never placed on heterosexual parents. It would be absurd to say that a child's discomfort with his or her parents kissing was due to heterophobia, yet our society constantly places that scrutiny on same-sex couples.

Do children need a mom and a dad? It is extremely important for youth to have role models who are similar to them in gender, race and other areas of difference. There is no reason, however, that these role models need to be a child's parents. In fact, there is a great deal of benefit that comes from having non-parental role models. Youth continue to look up to these role models during the teenage years when they are fighting for independence from their parents. Youth from all families, including those who have a mother and father, benefit from having other adult role models in their lives.

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Do children from LGBTQ families turn out okay? I am disheartened by how frequently I am asked this question by LGBTQ parents. LGBTQ people often internalize the messages they hear, including that they can't be good parents. The rightwing has based their arguments against LGBTQ parenting on the misconception that LGBTQ parents somehow damage their children. Heterosexual parents have never been forced to prove that their sexual orientation does not harm a child; the LGBTQ community has.

Our nation's leading children's health, children's welfare and mental-health organizations have issued statements declaring that a parent's sexual orientation is irrelevant to their ability to raise a child.² These organizations include, but are not limited to: the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Bar Association, American Medical Association, Child Welfare League of America, National Adoption Center, National Association of Social Workers, North American Council on Adoptable Children and Voice for Adoption. It is the quality of the home environment, not the sexual orientation or gender identity of the parents that matters.

What do youth with two moms or two dads call their parents? There is no universal answer to this question. A few of the common ones are: mom, mommy, ima, mama, dad, daddy, aba, and papa. Some youth call their parents by their first names.

How do LGBTQ people have children? Many people are surprised that LGBTQ people can have children. Children become a part of LGBTQ families in many different ways. The majority of the youth I work with have a mother and father who divorced as one of their parents came out; others were adopted into LGBTQ families. Alternative insemination and surrogacy are also available to those who can afford it.

Do all LGBTQ families look gay? No. Many bisexual and transgender people partner with people of the opposite sex, and therefore don't "look gay." In addition, many LGBTQ families are headed by single parents. Single people in our society are typically assumed to be straight. Sexual orientation and gender identity are personal identities independent of the sex or gender of someone's partner. For example, a bisexual woman who is in a relationship with a man is perceived by most people to be heterosexual. Bisexual people remain bisexual whether they are partnered with a man, a woman or someone who identifies as transgender.

Why are marriage rights such a big deal? The federal government often takes the lead in protecting minority groups from discrimination, but the federal government penalizes same-sex couples based on their inability to marry. Same-sex couples are excluded from 1,138 federal policies and protections conferred by marriage.³ These policies and protections are not extended to any same-sex couple, even those who have the ability to marry at the state level.

The word "marriage" is important beyond the legal protections it offers. It is part of the American dream. I have never heard a child say they dreamed of growing up and obtaining a civil union. Marriage rights under a different term, such as "civil union" or "domestic partnership," will never be the same as marriage. Our country's history has shown that separate cannot be equal.

How to Become an Ally

Educate yourself: Most people know very little about the experiences of people from LGBTQ families, including LGBTQ people. Take the time to learn about this unique sector of our society. Read and ask questions. Visit Mountain Meadow's website at www.mountainmeadow.org for a list of resources.

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Make LGBTQ affinity groups inclusive: LGBTQ affinity groups in schools and workplaces are typically open only to people who self identify as LGBTQ. These restrictions exclude straight people from LGBTQ families. Many people who grew up in LGBTQ families identify as culturally gay, even if they identify as romantically and sexually straight. Excluding them from affinity groups excludes them from their own culture and denies their experience in the LGBTQ community.

Become involved in LGBTQ activities in your workplace and community. Many people shy away from LGBTQ activities because they are afraid others may think they are gay. If this fear has ever stopped you from attending an event, ask yourself why. What would happen if someone did think you were gay? When you are ready, attend an event. Keep an open mind and be ready to learn.

Become aware of and shift your language: For example, don't assume people have a mother and father. This can be challenging, as it is ingrained in us by our society. Even after six years of working with youth from LGBTQ families, I still catch myself asking questions such as, "Is your mom or dad home?" Or to adults, "What is your relationship like with your mom and dad?" Try counting how many times you say "mom and dad" in a week. You might be surprised how frequently one word follows the other. Work to catch yourself and replace "mom and dad" with "parents" or "family."

Don't use the terms "dyke," "faggot" or "queer" to refer to people without their permission. While some people within the LGBTQ community have reclaimed these terms, they are hurtful

and offensive to many. Use the term "homosexual" sparingly. This term carries a history of our culture's former commonly-held belief that "homosexuality" was a curable mental illness. The terms "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "transgender" are the most universally accepted terms, but whenever possible, use the terms people use to describe themselves. Never use the phrase "that's so gay."

Don't make homophobic and transphobic comments, and stop others from doing so: Straight, gender normative people who have LGBTQ parents or guardians are often seen by the world simply as straight, due to the invisibility of their families. Because of their ability to "pass" as heterosexual, people from LGBTQ families often hear more homophobic and transphobic comments than LGBTQ people. It is not acceptable to make homophobic and transphobic comments or jokes regardless of who hears them. Allowing someone else to make these comments without intervening is equally as hurtful.

Don't assume that people with LGBTQ parents have two moms or two dads. LGBTQ families are far more diverse than that!

Curb your curiosity. When people come out about having an LGBTQ family, they are often flooded with questions about what it is like. LGBTQ families are just like other families; each one is different, yet similar. LGBTQ families fight over money, chores and teenage attitudes. They go through good times and hard times. How would you answer the question, what was it like being raised by straight parents?

Don't tokenize people from LGBTQ families: Never ask someone from an LGBTQ family to speak on behalf of the community. LGBTQ families are far too diverse for one person to be able to represent the whole community. The only experience they have had is their own.

Make forms inclusive: It is customary for youth forms to request information about the child's mother and father. Every time a child from an LGBTQ family encounters these forms it sends a message that they and their family are not welcome. The simple act of changing a form to request information about "parent/guardian 1" and "parent/guardian 2" makes a huge difference to youth from LGBTQ families.

Donate books to libraries: Most schools and public libraries do not carry children's books that are inclusive of LGBTQ families. It is extremely important for youth to see their families represented in the books they read. Help make inclusive books accessible to all families by donating them to schools and public libraries. A list of inclusive books is available at www.mountainmeadow.org.

Conclusion

This article has presented you with more information about youth from LGBTQ families than most people in this country have ever been exposed to. I hope you will continue to educate yourself and become an ally to the community. This population is large enough, and the silence

Tips for Supporting Youth from LGBTQ Families*

1. Don't treat us different from other kids.
2. Don't judge us.
3. Be supportive.
4. Learn about us and our experiences so you can imagine walking in our shoes.
5. Don't assume that a family is heterosexual just because they appear to be.
6. Stop people from talking bad about us and our families.
7. Stop people from saying things like "that's so gay."
8. Don't assume that we are gay just because our parents are.
9. Don't out youth from LGBTQ families without their permission.
10. Don't discriminate against anyone no matter what.
11. Be nice to everyone.

*Written by a group of youth at Mountain Meadow

surrounding the issues is strong enough, that the odds are good you work with or know someone from an LGBTQ family and don't realize it. Make a difference to the people who live everyday in silence about their families by bringing the issue to the table among your friends, family and coworkers. If you want to learn more, or have any questions, don't hesitate to contact our office at 215-772-1107 or inquiries@mountainmeadow.org or visit our website at www.mountainmeadow.org

Sidebar: Glossary of Terms

LGBTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer.

Lesbian: women who are romantically and sexually attracted only to other women.

Gay: men who are romantically and sexually attracted only to other men (is sometime used to refer to homosexual men and women).

Bisexual: people who are attracted in varying degrees to both men and women. The term "bisexual" is often critiqued because it reinforces a gender binary system.

Transgender: a person whose gender identity (male, female, neither or both) does not match their assigned gender (the gender assigned to them at birth based on their biological sex) Transgender is a gender identity; it is not a sexual orientation.

Queer: an umbrella term used to refer to people whose gender identity and/or sexual orientation do not conform to a gender normative society. This term is considered offensive to some.

Homophobia: the fear of, hatred of, or discrimination against people who are, or are perceived to be homosexual.

Transphobia: the fear of, hatred of, or discrimination against people who are or are perceived to be transgender.

Ally: a person who understands and supports the LGBTQ community, but does not necessarily self identify as LGBTQ.

Gender Normative: a person whose gender identity matches their assigned gender (the gender assigned to them at birth based on their biological sex).

Second Parent Adoption: the adoption of a partners' biological or adopted child.

Endnotes

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