



Non-biological parents

Most non-biological parents will, at one time or another, think about what it means to parent a child to whom they are not biologically related. For some, being a non-biological parent raises few concerns and those concerns are easily and quickly resolved. For others, the implications are significant and require time to work through.

Lesbian mums and gay dads share some of the same concerns, but others are unique to one group or the other. Dealing with these issues and managing them over time can be challenging for some parents. This topic provides some thoughts and suggestions that may be helpful.

Bonding, roles and relationships

One of the most common concerns shared by non-biological parents is whether or not they will bond with their baby. However, most non-biological parents say that once their baby

is born, they are surprised by how easily and quickly they bond and how natural it feels.

Many non-biological parents worry about their role in the family and, in particular, their role in relation to the child. This can be challenging for some parents, especially as there are few established societal norms for their particular relationship. Parents often overcome this by paying close attention to how much time they spend with the child, and sharing the practical parenting responsibilities of feeding and caring. In some circumstances, families can arrange for both parents to work part time and to share the primary care role.

For non-biological mums, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding can sometimes be difficult and they may experience feelings of grief and loss or feel excluded.

What helped?

Most same-sex parents say that biology is not unimportant, but it makes no difference at all to how they love their children. If you do have anxieties, talking them through with your partner – and with other parents – before the baby is born, and during the first year, is important and can be very helpful.

Acknowledgment and support from family and close friends can also be extremely valuable in

helping the non-biological parent feel secure and validated in their role.

Non-biological gay dads may experience anxieties where a surrogate has been involved, or where they are co-parenting. However, many of the anxieties experienced by non-biological parents dissipate over time and parents often look back and realise their early worries have ceased to exist. For example, once their child stops breastfeeding, lesbian mums often say there is no longer any difference between them and they feel more secure in their role and in their relationship with the child.

Parents say ...

Bonding

I think for the non-bio dad there is an initial question of, *Will I have the same connection to the child?* But what happens very quickly is that there's a realisation that the child doesn't know who the bio-dad is. The child just knows there are these two adults who are feeding, nurturing and loving it and the non-bio dad essentially forgets he's the non-bio dad – he's just a dad. **Rodney**

I think the biggest anxiety about being the non-biological mum is bonding with your child, because every non-biological mum I've spoken to has been anxious about that. And I think what they need to know is that as long as you are the child's mother, that child will bond with you, so take comfort in that and just do what comes naturally and there will be no bonding problems. **Eli**

You just realise that, as time goes by and you develop that bond, the biology doesn't matter as much. I think that happens very quickly after they're born. I think most of my concerns were before. Once they're born, you're in the thick of it looking after them, and you develop a bond very quickly. **Vien**

I was the non-bio mum the first time and I did have anxieties; every now and then I'd feel nervous about how it would actually be and how other people would view me. But when he was born I just felt completely bonded to him immediately. I got to hold him and cut the cord and I felt completely connected and very protective! **Camille**

Over time, my anxieties disappeared. She was equally our daughter and nothing's coming up for me now, so it just became a non-issue, I suppose. **Kate**

Roles

There might be some anxiety that you may not have as valid a role and really there is no societal construction of that role, so it's very unclear. I've had to get my head around the idea of playing a supportive role during the pregnancy and breastfeeding, which makes the whole family function really well as a unit, and you're an essential part of that. **Mary**

I think Mary has been much more focused on what her role is going to be when the baby is born. She wants to be the one who does most of the bathing and maybe has Saturday mornings with the baby while I sleep ... fine by me! She's focused on carving out a role which I suspect you need to think through more when you are the non-biological parent. **Joanna**

I would say there can be anxiety around the grief of not being able to do what comes naturally to your body, because you're not the one having the child. You've grown up as a woman and that's always been a part of your identity and someone else is taking on that role that you could have planned for yourself. **Mary**

There was a lot of anxiety in that early time about how to answer questions and whether I was being honest or misleading. That was all about the fact that I was a parent, but not the biological parent and I just had to get used to that role. **Camille**

I think one of the main issues is feeding and with a bio dad and a non-bio dad you're both feeding exactly the same way – not like a lesbian couple where one may be breastfeeding – and I think that helps. **Rodney**

Once the breastfeeding stops, the difference between whether you're a bio or a non-bio mum is gone; you're now on an even playing field. **Camille**

Biology

Parenting is not about genetics and both of us are equally his parents. We are both on the birth certificate, so we are at least protected in that sense.

Jason

You don't feel any differently about them – I feel that it's not an issue at all. You know that there is a biological difference, but it doesn't change how you feel about them. **Stephen**

I can't say it's true for everybody, but I've yet to meet anybody who's done surrogacy where the issue of a non-bio dad feeling excluded or sidelined or uncomfortable has actually been an issue. **Rodney**

Lots of people, including complete strangers, asked who the biological father was. We didn't tell them. Anthony just said, 'It's not important for anyone to know'. **Jason**

I think biology is definitely an issue and it has to be thought about. Whether your child looks like they're part of your family – like they're your child – is a concern at the beginning, but I must admit, as time has passed I've found it not to be an issue. **Vien**

It's no different – and I want to use this idea loosely – from an adopted baby, because you trust the love you give that child. We do that naturally because it's our child – not biologically – but it's still our child, and we have to have faith in that. **Ell**

That was my concern: whether other people would see me as being a legitimate parent or not and that lasted ... I don't remember, because it just doesn't enter my brain now at all. I reckon it was a good few weeks, maybe even two or three months. **Camille**

With our youngest it's quite obvious I'm not the biological parent because she looks so different. People might assume she has an Asian dad, but then they look a little bit puzzled when they see Hannah and Xavier and her. And then they just think, *Oh the quirks of biology, she looks a bit different*. So, I haven't felt as though it's been a big deal, really. **Susan**

We don't officially know which of us is the biological parent of either child. When they were conceived, half the eggs were fertilised by me, half were fertilised by Vien. **Stephen**

Thoughts and suggestions

We had chunks of time home together on maternity leave and we both worked part time, so some of those issues that might come up because one parent assumes a stronger parenting role weren't there. And I think that probably helps to some extent.

Susan

I remember when he was first born there was a real distinction between people who would say congratulations to Frances and me – to both parents – and that was so validating, and the people who didn't. And I just thought, *Here it is, this is my anxiety: people who don't see me as a parent.* **Camille**

There were those awkward moments all the way through pregnancy – and I imagine it'll be the same right through school – where you're fitting your family's structure into the norm.

Mandy

I think getting validation from people in our circle was important.

At work, they had a baby shower for me, and all our close friends – not just our lesbian friends – said, 'You guys are having a baby!' And just hearing that rather than, 'Susan's having a baby', was very reassuring. **Kate**

I'd almost say that the majority of people – especially before the baby is born – would experience a little bit of anxiety about their role, and I think a lot of the anxiety could be overcome by having really good conversations with your partner. **Mary**

I couldn't breastfeed, obviously, but when Susan expressed I said, 'Oh I'll do the feed'. I tried to be there for Hannah as much as I could when I was home and always be the one pushing her, carrying her in the hugabub, or doing whatever I could to have that connection and build that relationship. **Kate**

I thought, *Right, I'm going to be involved as much as I can. I'll just be right there and I'm the Mama. It will all be 50:50 and I'm going to do everything I possibly can to be just as much a parent.* **Kate**

Before they were born we were adamant that we didn't want people to ask who the biological parent was and I know some of our friends are still quite like that. But since they've been born – and we've realised it makes no difference to how we feel about these two children – we kind of don't mind. **Stephen**

I wish someone had tried to explain things to me more, because everyone just said, 'It's fine, it's not a problem'. I think having a conversation about it really helps. **Eli**

It's interesting, because with some parents, they're not both 'mummy' and one of them is known by their first name. Kate and I were 'mummy' and 'mama' from the outset. **Susan**



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Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins.

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