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**Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins**

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# Introduction

*OUTspoken Families* came out of my experience of raising three children in a rainbow family for the past twelve years. There are many things that my family share with other families: we all have to adjust to the changes children bring to our lives; we all want our kids to grow up secure, healthy and happy; we all worry and hope and fear. And we all have to deal with nits and homework and fights over screen time.

But there are some things that are unique to rainbow families; small day-to-day challenges and bigger questions and concerns. *OUTspoken Families* aims to address those differences. Over a period of twelve months, I spoke with a broad range of parents on all sorts of subjects. Their ideas, suggestions and advice – their collective wisdom – form the basis of this resource.

So much of what I've learnt about parenting my kids has come from conversations with other same-sex parents – there are no magazines or websites or books about raising a rainbow family. *OUTspoken Families* is like having all those conversations gathered together in one place.

*OUTspoken Families* provides a snapshot of how we, as a community, are faring in this particular time and place. To have that on record is important for our community and important for the world. We need honest and accurate stories of our experience to reflect the past and help us step confidently into the future.

I also hope this resource will be of value to service providers who work with rainbow families. I hope it will provide them with insight and understanding and answer some of the questions they are too nervous or embarrassed to ask. Most of all, I hope it will give them the confidence to offer their LGBTI clients a respectful and informed service.

Many people in the public sphere talk about our families and make statements that come from a place of ignorance. It's important that we continue to challenge those statements and the people who make them. Our collective voice needs to be louder than the collective voice of those who rail against us. *OUTspoken Families* is filled with courageous voices that speak loudly and proudly and do exactly that.

Thank you.

**Jacqui Tomlins**

**2015**

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# Lesbian mums and known donors or dads



Some lesbians use a known donor to create their family, rather than using an anonymous or identity release donor available through a fertility clinic. That donor may be someone already known to them – a friend, colleague or acquaintance – or may be someone sourced for the specific purpose of being a donor or a dad.

Some men may donate to a lesbian friend with the stated intention of being involved in an ongoing, co-parenting relationship where they are clearly identified as the child's father. Other men, however, donate with no wish to be involved in parenting in any way.

The language used to describe the donor or father in any of these circumstances may vary and can include 'dad', 'donor dad', the donor's first name, or 'uncle', or some variation. The names, the relationship between all parties, and

the role and responsibilities of the donor or father are unique to each family.

This topic provides some advice and suggestions that may be helpful to potential lesbian mums and donors or dads when deciding whether they might be a good match for each other. Maintaining a positive ongoing relationship between everyone involved is extremely important whatever the circumstances, but is especially so where there is a co-parenting arrangement.

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## Matching mums and donors or dads

The process of lesbian mum(s) and a donor or dad coming to a positive and workable agreement can take many months and involve lengthy and detailed discussions.

It can be helpful for all parties to discuss the issue with a professional counsellor at various stages of the process, both individually and as a group.

Writing a detailed agreement can help everyone clarify their expectations and make sure mums and donors or dads are thinking along the same lines.

Important factors to discuss might include:

- the donor or dad's level of involvement in the child's life
- his role in decision making
- the role and expectations of his extended family
- financial matters
- expectations of education, religion and core values.

It is advisable to see an appropriate family lawyer to clarify the legal rights and responsibilities of everyone involved.

It is important that all parties discuss the matter with their general practitioner or a fertility expert and undertake appropriate health checks.

It is advisable for everyone involved to give careful consideration to the name or title ascribed to the donor or dad.

Some factors that may contribute to positive relationships between mum(s) and donor or dad are:

- a high level of trust and a capacity to communicate openly and honestly
- an ability to manage change and conflict
- a solid grounding of shared values and priorities
- holding the other person in high regard and seeing them as a 'good person'
- a level of emotional maturity.

The expectations, feelings and needs of everyone involved often change over time, and especially once the child is born and the discussions are no longer theoretical, but about a real person. Successfully managing these changing expectations can be fundamental to ensuring positive outcomes for the family and, most importantly, for the child.

# Parents say ...

## Making a choice

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The girls and I had known each other for a few years through our mutual involvement in a club. I saw a counsellor independently and we also saw a counsellor together. The whole premise was that the girls wanted their child to know their father and that the father would have some involvement. **Brad**



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I started writing a list of who would be happy to give me sperm and not be a parent ... I asked people who I thought were trustworthy and potentially open to that scenario: good men who were happy to be known to the child purely as a donor. There was no question in my mind of having a father.

**Lesley**

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I feel really lucky that we met a donor who had similar ideas, and lives in a different state and has a very bachelor lifestyle; an older guy not really interested in having a toddler around, but very happy to be available and come to birthday parties, and who loves showing him off. **Joanna**

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The agreement was that he would be happy to be known if and when the child wanted that, or if and when I thought it was an appropriate time. So it was very clear that I wanted someone who was doing it for altruism, as a favour, not because they wanted a child. **Lesley**

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We met and spent about three or four hours together and we just drank coffee and talked and talked. He was doing it for the right reasons; he wanted to have a child, but he didn't want to be a full time parent and that suited me fine at that point. **Maryann**

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For me, as a dad, I recognise that I have a son who I don't have all the time, and for some men that's not going to be acceptable. Where you are on that spectrum of your involvement is probably a question for all parties to consider. **Brad**

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It was always important to me for the kids to know who their donor was because I'm adopted. I don't know my biological parents, so I just really felt this strong need for them to know where they came from because I don't. **Kate**

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I thought, if someone else hadn't donated for us we wouldn't have our child, so I said, 'Yeah, I'll do it, but we'll really need to talk about how this is all going to work'.

**Rodney**

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My initial reaction was excitement and I almost had to restrain myself; it's all well and good, but let's think about what it really means. What would it look like? What would my involvement be? What would be the repercussions of such a decision? **Brad**

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Nobody made assumptions, or presumed they had entitlements, I suppose. We probably had similar values and David is really clear that he doesn't have decision-making responsibility. **Susan**

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## The process

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They [the prospective parents] had a copy of some Rainbow Family guidelines which were really useful and, even though it wasn't legally binding, we came up with a written agreement – a kind of symbolic contract between us – and it helped clarify our expectations.

**David**

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You know, that bit of paper that we wrote our agreement on has never been looked at again. You write it and you won't need it. You don't write it and you'll wish you had. **Susan**

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We had a contract which wouldn't be worth the paper it's written on legally, but we've always both stuck to our end of the deal and he's always done what he said he would do.

**Maryann**

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A few months after we'd first met David we'd gone overseas for a month-long holiday so we'd really had time to think about it. We'd met him in a variety of places, out at a restaurant, with his partner, without his partner and at our house. **Susan**

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We used a lawyer to produce a memorandum of understanding or whatever the term. I'm mindful that none of that is legally binding, but it was a very helpful process and it would be foolhardy not to do it. The things we covered were levels of involvement – time and financial – legal issues and how decisions would be made. **Brad**

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Susan is so methodical and we didn't want to leave anything to chance. We found this person who looked interesting and had the same sort of values and beliefs and we organised to hook up. Susan was very particular about meeting several times and making sure we got to know him and then writing the contract. I think perhaps because we did it so meticulously, it all seemed to work. **Kate**

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The other thing we did before trying is that he went off and got a whole lot of medical tests to confirm a clean bill of health; checks for STDs, sperm count and that sort of stuff. **Susan**

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He'd already done all the tests – sperm count and medical tests – so then we did the next lot of tests three months later, and six months later, and he came back clean so then we started.

**Maryann**

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It was more than a year between meeting him and starting to try to get pregnant, which I think was the right thing. **Joanna**

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I think it's worked because we talked about everything from the start. I know heterosexual couples who don't know half the stuff I know about Mark! I made a very conscious decision to have a child; it took me a lot of work and effort and planning. **Maryann**

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I think the process we underwent at the start helped because I was flying blind, so to speak. The guidelines document was great and then just meeting them and talking; I told them what I wanted and they told me what they wanted. **David**

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## Thoughts and suggestions

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Seek the input of as many people as possible; the advice of professionals and friends and family. *Mandatory* is a strong word, but you'd be well advised to do that. **Brad**

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For anyone considering a co-parenting arrangement, I'd say get professional counselling – separately and together – because you need to understand why you want to do it and that your emotions are going to change once that child is born, because they will.

And you need to learn about how the other person feels and about how this journey is going to work. The journey will not work like it says on paper; it's an emotional journey. **Rodney**

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The overarching understanding I still live with is that as long as we can negotiate, and as long as we are all reasonable people and can have these conversations and appreciate there are always going to be differences, we'll be okay. **Brad**

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If you don't want your child or other people to think of your donor as a dad, then really think carefully about whether to use that term. **Lesley**

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Situations and expectations will change. The reality of the child being in the world is different to the discussions you have where it's all theoretical, so you need to be able to cope with changing circumstances. **Brad**

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There is an element of luck, but there's also an element of maturity and education and self-awareness. **Rodney**

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We have a known donor who is a dad, but not a parent in the sense of having responsibility. His role is to build a nice relationship with the kids and to have a nice time with them. Our relationship is much closer, I think, than we envisaged. We would see him anyway; he has become part of our family. **Susan**

I think it's worked well partly because he's a really nice, decent person and because we're nice, decent people and we're all reasonable. I think no one had ideas that were so fixed that they weren't moveable. **Susan**

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For co-parenting, I think you would need to be really careful. You would need to know the person well and have a really good capacity to talk. You wouldn't pick them willy-nilly. **Joanna**

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What kills these arrangements is fear and conflict; when it all becomes about the parents and they forget it should be all about the child. That's why I think counselling is so very important, because it can help you refocus on what this whole thing is about. **Rodney**

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You know, it's not a little project. It's something that lasts your whole life, so you want to make sure the person you're having the child with, in whatever way, is the right person. **Maryann**



# Telling the kids: What? When? How?



Rainbow families can be created in lots of different ways, including with a sperm or egg donor known to the parents or sourced through a fertility clinic; through traditional or gestational surrogacy (usually overseas); or through previous heterosexual relationships.

Rainbow families might have two dads, two mums, a sole parent, more than two parents or step-parents.

At some stage, all parents will want to talk to their children about how they were created and this can raise some significant questions:

- What's the best time to start this conversation?
- How much information should I provide?
- What exactly should I say?

All children are different and develop at different stages and parents need to decide what's best for their child. This topic provides some broad

guidelines and suggestions on how best to begin this conversation with your child.

## **When and how**

Start talking to your child as early as possible – any time between when they are babies and before they start school. It can be helpful to practice talking to them out loud before they are even old enough to understand.

Be open and honest with your child and tell them the truth. Use clear and accurate language that is

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age-appropriate; most children can understand the idea of sperm and egg at a very young age.

You can tell your child about how they were created without talking about sex; that often comes much later. Some people use imagery of seeds, planting and growth to help explain the process.

## Things to consider

Your child is much-wanted and is much-loved and it's important that you are positive about the journey you took to create them so they can also be positive. Be guided by your child and the questions they ask – they will generally let you know how much information they want.

It's important to acknowledge and be respectful of everyone involved in creating your child, including former partners, a sperm or egg donor and/or a surrogate.

Try not to let anyone make you feel embarrassed or shameful about how you created your family.

## What can help

Conversations often happen in stages over time; you don't have to cover everything in the first discussion. To assist you with these conversations you might consider:

- talking to other parents whose family formation or experience is similar to yours
- creating a book or journal that explains the journey you took to create your child and includes names and photographs of all the people involved
- using published books and other resources that explain how families like yours are created.

# Parents say ...

## Starting the conversation

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Our first discussions with Ethan occurred when he was about three years old. We just basically told him about Kelly, our surrogate, and how she's important to our family and that she is part of our family and that he grew inside her.

**Rodney**

My daughter knows that you have an egg and a sperm and the doctor puts them together in a dish and then puts an egg back into mummy – and she's four. I guess it's more the terminology and the process I want to get right before I say, 'A very generous man deposited sperm and that's how you came about'. That will come when she's a bit older and able to grasp that concept better. **Helga**

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It just started naturally coming into conversation when he was about three years old. We just told him, 'You've got two dads,' and then we would expand on that naturally as it came up. **Jason**

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We've talked about it very openly and very honestly right from when they were babies. The first time we actually sat down with them in any kind of formalised way was probably when Harry was about three. The initial conversation was about how our family came to be – how you need an egg and a sperm – and because he had two mums, we needed to use a donor. **Camille**

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I think we've just always talked about it. It was really important to me, because I'm adopted, and I asked my mum, 'When did you tell me?' And she said, 'When you were old enough to ask me,' which, I think, was when I was about four. I can't even remember exactly when we told our kids. They have just always known.

**Kate**

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I would say it's never too early to do it and in my experience kids just stop listening and walk away when they're getting more information than they need. They just kind of tune out and they tell you by their behaviour. When Xavier had had enough, he just changed the topic. **Susan**

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Jenny's two and we've had lots of conversations already. Up here in the hills, heterosexual families are everywhere and there aren't so many other types of families. We told her a special person donated his sperm so that we could create her and that she is part of our family and that we love her. From day dot we have basically been telling her about how she was conceived. **Karla**

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I think I want him to know before he remembers knowing, if that makes sense. So I want to keep the conversation going, particularly given that a baby is coming and there is an opportunity for that. **Joanna**

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## How to tell

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I think you need to be honest from the very get-go, so as soon as they start asking questions, tell them the truth. Say, 'Mum and mum or dad and dad ...' – or whatever the family make-up is – '... really, really wanted a baby and this was the way we could do it'. **Maryann**

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We explained that some people have a mum and a dad and that the dad is the source of the sperm, but in our case we had a donor who was the source of the sperm, and then a nice doctor assisted with the process to create them. **Jacki**

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When you feel they are starting to learn about different things, you read a storybook about our type of family, or catch up with some friends with a similar family situation. **Jason**

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I think it's important to be transparent, straightforward and age-appropriate. **Brad**

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The important thing for us is to own the experience and always be proud of it, because we just know if we don't show pride in what we did, he won't have pride in where he came from.

We have to reflect what we want him to take away from the whole process. **Rodney**

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I'd say, take a chill pill, because we work it up to be such a big drama in our heads whereas, in their little minds, it's not such a drama if they feel safe and secure with who they are and their environment.

I just told Stella from the very beginning, so it wasn't going to be this big earth-shattering discussion that came out of the blue. It was just a part of everyday conversation in a very informal way. **Helga**

I think it comes down to how relaxed or how anxious you are about describing it and I know that with my daughter – I'm actually in a wheelchair and none of her friends' parents are – and I've said to her, 'You know, everybody is different and mummy is different'. So she knows being different isn't a bad thing. **Helga**

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I think that kids drive this conversation by their questions, but you also don't want to give them too much information, so I think you need to be guided by them. **Maria**

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He's not that interested in the mechanics yet; he's interested in football. So, what we've been doing is introducing the concept of the people involved and how they relate to us, and how we describe them as part of our extended family. **Rodney**

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Recently, a friend was asking how they should respond when their child said, 'If Brad likes boys how did Jake come about?' And another friend chipped in, 'You just say, "The doctor helped"'. I thought, well that's not a bad answer at this point in time. Later on, you can go into more detail. **Brad**

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At the moment we just say, 'A very nice man donated something, a part of him that we needed to make you'. When she's older, we will say, 'A very nice man donated his sperm and this is what we know about him'. **Eli**

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## Books and resources

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We managed to find a book that talked about how two mums get a donor and it was exactly our story. So we started using that book and he really loved it, and from there, questions came up. **Camille**

I have been making a book for him since before he was born. We've got everything in there from the donor profile, the photos of our first appointment, his birth, his naming day ceremony and his first birthday party. He always wants to look at the pictures and if I go too quickly he wants to turn back. **Pia**



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We created an electronic photo book of all the people involved in the journey – the surrogate and the egg donor. It shows who those people are, with names and dates. It's been really useful, especially because young kids respond to the visual, so it's easy to pull up a photo of our surrogate and her family and talk about how her family was created and how they helped us create ours.

**Rodney**

For me, using books was really helpful in explaining her situation. She knows she's got two mummies and other people have something else and if she ever seems confused about it, then we read her one of the books and it definitely helps. **Ell**

## Thoughts and suggestions

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We have always tried to be as ethical and considered as we can. I would say, for anything to do with children, honesty is important. If I give my son facts, simple facts, he will ask when he wants more information and then I will answer those questions. Try to be honest, factual, keep it simple but respond when they ask questions. Don't try to sweep it under the carpet and don't say, 'I'll tell you later'. **Pia**

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It's outing yourself in public appropriately, without any shame or embarrassment, that's really important, I think, so you are setting the tone. **Jason**

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Over the years, we've introduced more information about how Daddy Rodney and Daddy Jeff wanted to have a family, but we couldn't have a baby by ourselves, because only women can carry babies. So we had to find a woman who would carry a baby for us, and we met Aunty Kelly, and she was a really wonderful person and she helped us. **Rodney**

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I don't have any concerns about having that discussion with Jake, only because I anticipate taking a very factual approach. **Brad**

It's more than just telling him a story about how he came into existence. It's teaching him about tolerance and acceptance of other people's families as well, because he does know that other people have two mums or a mum and a dad. So, it's really about getting that context: that there's a variety of families and his is just one of them. **Rodney**

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We'd spoken to lots of friends and we'd had lots of discussions with people we knew who had older children. **Camille**





# Talking about how your family was created

Same-sex parents are often asked about how their families are created. Questions may come from your immediate or extended families or from people in the broader community: friends, neighbours, colleagues, health professionals, child-care workers and other parents.

Often these questions arise out of innocent curiosity and are asked in an appropriate and respectful way, making it easy to respond openly and positively. Sometimes you may have to deal with questions that are inappropriate or intrusive and which make you feel uncomfortable or judged.

How you handle these questions will depend on a range of factors. This topic provides some broad suggestions for dealing with conversations about how you created your family.

## Managing questions

People may ask questions that appear judgemental or homophobic, but which might just be clumsy, ignorant or not thought through. It can be helpful to give people the benefit of the doubt sometimes, and perhaps offer some advice for next time.

People are commonly curious about:

- whether you used a known or anonymous donor
- whether you conceived at home or using a clinic

- 
- how you decided which partner would carry your child or provide sperm.

It's helpful to decide what information you are happy to divulge at various stages and to whom: immediate family, close friends and the broader community.

Gay dads may choose not to reveal who is the biological father of their child born through surrogacy and lesbian mums may not wish to share information about who is the biological mother once the baby is born.

## Difficult conversations

You don't have to explain or come out to everyone all the time. Some days it might seem too hard or too complicated, or you might just not have the energy or the inclination.

If someone tells you, the non-biological parent, your child looks like you, you can just smile, or say thank you. You don't have to explain anything more.

Similarly, if someone starts up a conversation with a non-birth parent about pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding, you may choose to correct their assumptions, or you may choose not to, especially if that person is a stranger.

Conversations may change over time as circumstances and personal feelings alter and you may find you become more confident in handling difficult conversations.

## Privacy

Talking to people can dispel myths, correct inaccuracies, or just make people feel more at ease with you and your family, which can lead to positive outcomes for your children. However, you may sometimes need to be very direct with people and explain that certain information is private, off-limits or belongs to your child. You may feel that the process of conceiving a child is personal and private and nobody else's business.

# Parents say ...

## Talking to family and friends

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I explained it to my parents like I explained it to everybody else; just very straight-up and honest and answered their questions. **Maryann**

It's a real journey when you start wanting to have a child so we decided to tell our immediate family. We are both very close to our aunts and uncles so we told them as well – and some very close friends. We were not going to tell the world, but we knew we would need that support, especially if we did get pregnant and something happened. **Eli**

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My immediate family knew we were embarking on surrogacy so we had a full and frank discussion with them. The only thing we held back was the identity of the egg donor, because we didn't want them to guess at biology. It's kind of obvious now – we've got two boys – but at the time we thought it was important and I suppose because my family is from Vietnam, blood is important to them. **Vien**

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When I told my mum she said, 'Oh I don't know how we're going to love this child,' and I said, 'Get lost mum, I'm adopted! I'm not even related to you'. And she said, 'Ah yes, I suppose so'. She hadn't even really thought about that ... and Hannah was her first grandchild and she was all over her from the minute she was born. **Kate**

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I think with your own family it's challenging to confront their ideas of norms about families – they want to know if they are really aunties, if they are really grandparents. I would reassure them that they are. **Mary**

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With both Jeff and I – and I think this is fairly common – our mothers asked who was going to be the bio-dad and it was quite apparent they wanted to know because there was a sense of ownership over the grandchild. And I understand the reason they asked. Our response was always the same: the child has two fathers, the biology is not important and if you are going to be the grandmother of this child you'll love the child regardless of the biology. **Rodney**

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We kept IVF very close to our hearts, along the same lines as straight people. They don't talk about their sex lives and whether they're trying to have a baby so we didn't want to do that either. **Helga**

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I'm delicately balancing the situation with my family and I think I need to give them the space to talk to me about things, but I have also set up some limits as to what I will accept in conversations. **Mary**

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Probably the most difficult conversation would have been with my grandmother who was of a much older generation, obviously, and less open in terms of perceptions of what acceptable relationships are, or acceptable families. I think she required time to absorb the information and really come to terms with it. **Jacki**

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## Talking to others

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I spoke to one mum at school and explained how we talk about our family. I sent her the Rainbow Families Council link so that she could look on there at some of the resources.

She wrote back to me and said, 'Thanks, that was really helpful'. **Camille**

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It's a bit different if you see two mums together – people assume so much more – whereas I'm dealing with it more as a single parent and people assume that I'm straight. But I think people are generally sensitive, so if you say up-front, 'She's an IVF baby,' they tend not to want any more information. **Helga**

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From day one, be out – proactively out – in a simple way. Answer people's questions honestly, but if they ask you something ridiculous or you don't want to answer their questions, you just say, 'I'm not going to answer that,' or ask them the same question back. **Jason**

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I'm a community worker. I work for a small faith community and a lot of assumptions have been made and I've just clarified them. **Maryann**

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I do get a bit of curiosity and, I must admit, most of the time where it's a casual encounter I generally ignore it or don't go into detail. Part of it is convenience – taking the path of least resistance – because it's not straightforward; it's not a one-liner to explain the whole thing. **Vien**

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You get the question about who is the bio-dad and most of the time you say, 'Ethan has two fathers and we don't talk to people about his biology because that's Ethan's information'. We're probably a little bit more concise than with family, and probably sometimes we're a little bit more blunt! **Rodney**

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I work in the call centre industry and there's a large gay population so I probably had an easier experience than some. We believe in educating people; we think it's best to be up-front and educate them about your journey so if they come across anyone else in the same situation they can help. **Eli**

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I'm in the corporate world and you talk to your clients about what you do at the weekend. I say, 'I've got a son,' and I'll pause and 90 per cent of the time I go on and say, 'It's kind of unusual circumstances – I've got a son with two mums'. I let them join the dots. To be honest, it's a delightful icebreaker; it takes the conversation to a deeper level in a lot of ways. **Brad**

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I suppose what really comes out is that people are fascinated with how you have a baby. With my mother's group they really wanted to know how IUI works, how IVF works. So I suppose it's being comfortable enough in yourself to be open with people. You just decide what you're going to say. We're really open with our story. **Karla**

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The first piece of information to divulge is that the child has two mothers and the nature of that relationship. So, I guess, make it clear that there is no father in the picture. I don't think I really had any in-depth discussions with anyone about donors. **Jacki**

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## Thoughts and suggestions

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I'm really happy if people want to ask questions. I'm not offended because I'd rather just educate people and show them that it is a thought-out process and why I am confident that it's going to be okay. **Pia**

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People at work asked me and I got a bit annoyed, because I thought: I didn't ask you how you conceived your children. But then I think: well I wouldn't ask you, but maybe it's about education – and then you have the conversation. I wouldn't necessarily tell everybody that asked; sometimes I don't really want to go there. It just depends on the situation. **Kate**

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I've lived out east for a long time now and I've never experienced any homophobia. I say it how it is, not in a nasty way, just in a straight-out way and I think if you answer people's questions honestly, then there's no reason they shouldn't respect you. **Maryann**

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Other people might say it's not anyone else's business, and I understand that, but I'm all for just giving the facts and having a more open, educational approach. If you just tell them, there is less mystery and they don't wind themselves up so much thinking about it ... it normalises it, I think. **Pia**

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I was very up-front and straightforward – we both were – and just said, 'If you have any questions, please feel free to ask'. We preferred to give them the information. We think it's best to be up-front with people so if they come across anyone else on the journey, they can help them. **Eil**

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I guess there's a little of the advocate in me. The more people who know about these stories, the better it is for us and for our community. So that they can recognise the people down the road aren't the only ones who are a same-sex couple with kids – there's also that guy they met at work during the week. **Brad**

I think the more open we are, the more people understand and the less they fear. The less fear they have, the less hate they have. **Eil**

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It is very important for your children – once they are more than one or two years of age – that you are out and answering questions honestly because you don't want them to see you ashamed or embarrassed or uncertain. **Jason**

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Some people will ask very probing questions and I don't have a problem with that at all. I think the more I can explain to people, the more they understand, the better for everyone, so there are very few things I won't answer. **Stephen**

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I have to admit that in the first year or two, questions infuriated us. We felt judged, so our responses were often curt, but as your child gets older you think, *Okay, I need to have this discussion because I'm trying to prepare the landscape for my child to grow into.* **Rodney**







# 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.

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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

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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**

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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**

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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

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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## Biology

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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## Thoughts and suggestions

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

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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**

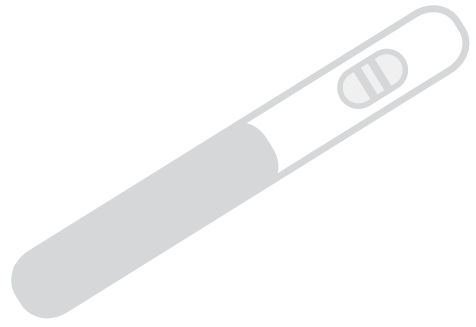
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I wish someone had tried to explain things to me more, because everyone just said, 'It's fine, it's not a problem'. I think having a conversation about it really helps. **Eli**

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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**





# Pregnancy and antenatal classes

Probably the biggest issue for lesbians in pregnancy is ensuring that they get quality, non-judgemental care and treatment from health care providers. Many lesbians have entirely positive experiences of pregnancy with health care workers who are supportive, include both partners equally and, in some cases, celebrate their patients' relationship and family.

The public health system involves contact with a larger number of health professionals, which inevitably involves having to come out and explain personal circumstances more often. This can sometimes be awkward or frustrating. It also means that when you see a supportive doctor or nurse for one appointment, there is no guarantee of seeing them again for your next appointment.

In the private system you only have to deal with one obstetrician who will be familiar with your personal circumstances, though you will likely still encounter a number of nurses and midwives when you come to give birth.

Some lesbians choose to engage an independent midwife to assist them throughout their pregnancy and manage the birth. There are, however, a range of factors to consider before choosing this option.

## **Choosing an obstetrician or independent midwife**

One of the key things lesbians look for is an obstetrician or midwife who acknowledges and includes the non-pregnant partner or co-parents, and who doesn't ask intrusive questions. Bear in mind that health providers will often ask

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questions that can seem inappropriate, but may also reflect a genuine desire to learn more about your family.

Doing some initial research and asking people in your social networks for a recommendation for a lesbian-friendly obstetrician or midwife can be very useful. A trusted local general practitioner may also be able to make an appropriate referral.

Having a support network of friends and family can be very helpful, especially in the final stages of pregnancy and when giving birth. However supportive everyone is, though, you may sometimes still feel a little awkward or uncomfortable because your family is different to other families and you don't fit neatly into the system.

## Antenatal classes

Antenatal classes present some challenges for single lesbians and lesbian couples. Because classes are designed around the different roles ascribed to men and women – and activities are often run in gender groups – a female partner can find herself in a kind of limbo, wondering,

*Do I go with the men or the women?* Some partners choose to go with the men and some with the women, depending on the subject being discussed and on their own level of comfort.

It's not uncommon for the non-pregnant partner to feel excluded or just not sure of their role in the class. Experiences can range from mildly awkward to very uncomfortable, though couples often find ways of managing these potentially difficult situations. Some people try to make light of the situation or use humour to manage an awkward moment.

Antenatal classes can be difficult because of their gender focus and can require some thought and preparation beforehand to ensure the experience is as positive as it can be. Talking to the person running the class before it starts can be a useful way to break the ice and explore options. It may also be helpful to introduce yourselves to your group at the beginning to ensure the non-pregnant partner isn't mistaken for a friend or relative.

Your experience might just depend on the individual midwife running the class and how she deals with the situation.

# Parents say ...

## Obstetricians

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We did some research about obstetricians. The first one I went to was a woman and that was partly why I picked her. She seemed to be good at listening and being encouraging, but also provided a lot of information and she gave us choices, which was really good. **Ruth**



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I did a bit of research because I knew I was going into it on my own and I decided straight up that I would get myself an obstetrician who I trusted, so I went private. Instead of dealing with a hundred different obstetric nurses and doctors who I had to come out to over and over again, I thought it best if I just found myself someone who knew my whole story and was supportive of what I was doing. I didn't have to explain to someone over and over that I didn't have a partner and, if I did, it wouldn't have been a man. **Alison**

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I think we were the first gay couple to go through with our obstetrician and it wasn't a major issue. We were treated pretty well and he welcomed Elizabeth into the consults the same as anyone else. It was a very positive experience. **Jenny**

For my pregnancy and birth I had a universally good experience. You do wonder if people are going to be accepting, but a number actively said, 'It's wonderful what you are doing'. **Mandy**

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Our obstetrician was perfectly fine with the same-sex couple thing; he was really comfortable with it. With some other people it was hard to tell, but you never know whether that's just the person's nature. **Ruth**

## Non-pregnant partner

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Everybody was completely fine about the fact that there was another woman. We didn't have any trouble with any of the sonographers or anything and we went to a lot of appointments together. **Ruth**

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The main thing was including Jo and talking to her like she had something to do with it. I think there's probably been a lot of exclusion, but at the same time when people are more comfortable, they just seem to include her in the conversation. **Pia**

Apart from one doctor, they were all, 'Yep, so you're partners' and that was fine. You got the impression that we were by no means the first they had encountered. **Patricia**

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A couple of times we had experiences with doctors who just didn't cope and ignored my partner completely, or were just unable – or unwilling – to take it in and that was very difficult. **Bec**

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## Antenatal classes

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The antenatal classes were through the hospital and I was the only single woman there, let alone lesbian. The woman I had was very warm – a sort of hippy type – and she was really lovely. **Alison**

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We did go to a few antenatal classes and we were the only same-sex couple. The midwives barely blinked – they were great. **Bridget**

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If there was a sort of a rainbow family network of expectant mothers who could form an antenatal class together, that would be amazing. It would be amazing to have that in place and not feel like you are doing it so very alone. **Alison**

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Everyone was in quite late pregnancy and the woman running the class said, 'Now, every woman in this room right now is lactating', and everybody looked at Jo and laughed, including Jo, and it was fine. It was all in good humour and she just kept going. **Pia**

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In the antenatal classes they didn't quite know how to manage my partner. She wasn't a dad and she wasn't pregnant, so they struggled a little with that. But mostly they were well-intentioned and asked questions about how we wanted it to be handled. **Nicola**

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We did this antenatal breastfeeding class and we were the only same-sex couple there. The woman who was running the class was not old – probably thirty-something – and she was pregnant herself, but it was like she just could not deal with Jo being there. **Pia**

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They asked a few questions about the father, but I didn't feel that that was discriminatory or intrusive; it was more that they wanted to educate themselves as health professionals. Sometimes they ask out of genuine interest and it's helpful for them in learning about same-sex families. **Mandy**

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## Separating the mums and dads

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Going through the process of getting pregnant and having babies together is like a whole other wave of coming out. It reinforces that this is never going to end, this coming out stuff. **Michelle**

The antenatal classes were a big issue because it was, *Do you go with the fathers or do you go with the mothers?* I went with the mothers. I felt really uncomfortable going with a group of men who were talking in slightly derogatory terms about their wives. I remember having a debate with other same-sex couples and some went with the fathers and some went with the mothers. **Mandy**

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It was a bit awkward when they separated into men and women because they didn't know what to do with us. As it happened, there was another lesbian in our group, but she was co-parenting with a gay man, so they just passed as a hetero couple. But I knew, and that was kind of nice. **Bec**

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The antenatal classes were fine. We were the only same-sex couple and I'd say we didn't have any problems. I remember one class with the dads on one side of the room brainstorming something and the mums on the other and I was with the dads. If anything, I would say I probably knew more than most of the expecting dads. **Michelle**

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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**

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We started antenatal class at the local hospital and it was a bit of a shocker. When we got divided off into mummies and daddies we decided this wasn't really going to cut it and we did antenatal classes privately in Melbourne. **Katrina**

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It was funny because they would say, 'Men over here and the women over there', to talk about different things and my partner would go with the men and was pretty comfortable. She's pretty relaxed, so I think she handled that reasonably well, although it was certainly strange for everyone. She just made a joke out of it and it wasn't really a big deal. **Jenny**





# Birth, midwives and nurses

The experience of lesbians giving birth in hospitals and birthing units has improved in recent years and for many it has been entirely positive. Labour, birth and breastfeeding are particularly vulnerable times for any woman and inclusive, non-judgemental and knowledgeable staff can be critical to ensuring a lesbian mother's positive experience.

Male co-parents and gay dads through surrogacy can also be involved with the birth process and may interact with hospital staff. They may sometimes find themselves feeling excluded.

Hospital experiences vary widely – some parents have unexpectedly good experiences in small rural hospitals and less good in large inner urban hospitals. In any hospital stay, you will encounter a number of different staff and the response of those staff may vary significantly. Just because a hospital has policy or guidelines on working with lesbian

mothers, doesn't necessarily mean all individual staff will respond in the way you would like.

Some difficulties may arise with the hand-over of staff from one shift to the next and patients may find themselves having to explain their personal circumstance several times.

Some parents have experienced direct or indirect discrimination and homophobia during their labour and immediately afterwards. More often, they may encounter staff who are well-intentioned, but who are uninformed, ill-prepared or clumsy in their approach. On the other hand,

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staff may be very respectful and extremely supportive.

While you can't control everyone's response to your family, there are things you can do to help foster a smooth hospital experience.

Having a detailed birth plan that includes reference to the non-biological mum – and donor or dad where appropriate – can be very helpful. Stating the nature of your relationship when you are admitted and asking that to be conveyed to each new shift at handover can also be helpful.

Some parents like to take a friend or family member who can advocate on behalf of the couple or single woman and manage these conversations.

It can be useful to ask about private or family rooms, and clarify whether partners can stay over, before you are admitted.

Make sure the hospital is aware that you expect the non-biological mum or co-parent(s) to be fully involved in all aspects of looking after your baby as soon as s/he is born.

## Parents say ...

### Hospitals

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Staying over at the hospital, they were really good. I think we are fortunate – knowing other women who went through this five or ten years ago – things were more complicated then.

**Michelle**

I do remember a wonderful experience at the hospital when I went to have our second daughter. I fronted up to the receptionist and said, 'We're a same-sex couple and this is our second child', and the receptionist said 'We have a lot of same-sex couples now and you are very welcome here. We accept everyone'. It was just a lovely thing to say and it made a huge difference to us in feeling comfortable going through that service. **Mandy**

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It was funny because they put us in a private room, which we were told we should have no expectations of. It seemed pretty clear to us that they put us in a private room because they didn't want to put us with other families. **Nicola**

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I thought the hospital wasn't keen on the idea of Sally staying over. They never put us in a double room even though we were there for five nights and I had twins. Normally, people with twins would get offered a double room, although the babies weren't in with us – they were in the special care nursery – so that may have been a reason. **Ruth**

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We had a family room and no dramas. We didn't experience any problems. **Jenny**

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They didn't have stuff in place and we knew they wouldn't; that's why we had our own friends there to support us. That was at the local hospital about five years ago and it was pretty rough. **Katrina**

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I remember getting the contraception lecture when I was leaving hospital. I was a bit out of it and I should have just let it go, but I said, 'I don't need to know', and the woman is saying, 'I have to tell you to use contraception', and I'm saying, 'It doesn't matter, I don't need contraception'. In the end, on my discharge notes, it said: *Patient is choosing not to use contraception.* **Pia**

In the actual labour and birthing, Jo was asked if she was my sister a number of times. We look nothing alike and it's pretty ridiculous to think we were sisters. It was like they could only place her if she was my sister. **Pia**

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We had two friends come in, one to be the door bitch and deal with homophobia, and the other to support Rachel and me in labour. Because John is the dad, and he was there when Rachel was giving birth, we had a real concern that they were just going to trundle Amy off and give her to him. **Katrina**

## Staff

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To my knowledge, we were the first gay couple going through it in our region, but now there's a heap of us. A friend of mine who is also gay – her mother was our midwife and we felt very comfortable with her. We were in a very big hospital and there were lots of other midwives as well, but she happened to be there for the birth and it was all very good. **Jenny**

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The hospital was very mixed. There were at least ten nurses over the course of the time I was giving birth and they're just on shifts and it's the luck of the draw – some were fantastic and really progressive. I reckon you just always end up with at least one who's going to say some stuff that you don't want to hear at the time when you're giving birth. **Alison**

We went through a birthing unit at the hospital and had a fantastic experience. The midwives had pretty much seen it all anyway, so a lesbian couple wasn't too out of the block for them. **Bec**

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Because I have two older boys, and we had made plans and had support in place early, we were able to recognise it for what it was: a whole bunch of people who really didn't have any clue what was going on. **Katrina**

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The theatre nurse we had was a gay man who lived in a big house in the hills. He lived at one end of the house with his partner and a lesbian couple lived at the other end, with a kids' room in between. **Ell**

I got some very middle-of-the-road, white-bread nurses who just couldn't fathom that I was doing this on my own and they either felt sorry for me, or felt sorry for my baby, or both – because I was single and a lesbian and there was no daddy. **Alison**

## Non-bio mum

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All the nurses were just overjoyed that a child was brought into this world who was going to be so loved; they treated me as a parent. **Ell**

Frances had a lot of medical issues early on so there were a lot of hospital visits. I also had quite bad postnatal depression. All the stuff in relation to her was handled really well and we were always both considered parents by everybody – doctors and nurses – without exception. **Trudy**

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Just to complicate things, Rachel, I guess, would probably identify as trans, although that's not public knowledge. She had serious breast surgery when she was eighteen, but I guess that qualifies as a reduction. She was unable to feed Amy and I started breastfeeding in the hospital. It was a little challenging for them. I think it was a lot for them to take on board. **Katrina**

The midwives were a bit unsure as to how to include my partner. We have always parented very equally – right from birth. Even the labour and the birth itself was very much a joint thing, which I think they found a bit unusual. They did adjust and they respected our wishes in relation to all of that, but it was clear it wasn't what they were used to. **Nicola**

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I remember one midwife in particular who came in and wanted to show me how to change a nappy and I'm like, *I couldn't give a f\*\*k right now. I've just had a caesarean. I'm exhausted. Show the other mother.* And she just wouldn't do it. She was just holding our baby and she wouldn't give him to Jo. She might have been like that with a father, but I don't know. **Pia**

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They saw me as the patient and they weren't really interested in Sally, even though she was doing half the work in the special care unit. But I don't think we had anyone questioning why she was there. **Ruth**



# Maternal and child health nurses and new parents' groups



New parents are referred to a maternal and child health centre in their local area. The maternal and child health nurse (MCHN) will provide ongoing care and support for the family, including regular health check-ups.

The MCHN will generally ask if parents would like to be part of a mothers' or new parents' group. New parents' groups can provide a supportive space for parents to share their experiences, ask questions and learn about the early days of parenting.

In some cases both mothers or fathers choose to attend the group, in others the primary carer, regardless of biological relationship, might attend. Early group sessions tend to cover the experience of birth, hormones and physical changes to the body, and breastfeeding.

The groups are facilitated by the MCHN for a set period of weeks, but parents often decide to

meet independently once the group has finished. Some lesbian mums and gay dads form lasting friendships; some find they don't really connect with the other group members at all.

Being clear with your MCHN about your family structure at your first appointment can be helpful. It can also be useful to discuss any concerns you may have about participating in a new parents' group with the MCHN before the group meets for the first time. It might then be worth going to the first few sessions to see how inclusive the group is and how comfortable you feel.

Lesbian mums and gay dads may find themselves on the receiving end of curiosity and questions.

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Some questions may be appropriate and asked in the spirit of understanding your family. Some may be intrusive.

Lesbian mums may have reservations about new parents' groups, but the groups can be welcoming and supportive and a valuable source of information.

Gay dads may find it hard to find a group in which they feel comfortable, but some certainly do.

In some cases, it may work better for you to connect with other new parents in the LGBTI community.

# Parents say ...

## Maternal and child health nurses

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Our maternal child health nurse was just absolutely glorious – a wonderful woman. We just really lucked out there. **Bec**

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We attended Tweedle – the sleep school – as well, and Carol was certainly very included in that. Pretty much everything to do with Frances – maternal and child health – was all perfect. **Trudy**

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Certainly, the treatment from the hospital and the maternal and child health nurse was great; everyone was lovely. **Michelle**

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When we had Naomi in 2002, we lived in a new estate where there was nothing, and we did feel like trailblazers out there. I was really anxious, but I struck it lucky with a really great maternal health nurse. **Bridget**

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Our maternal child health nurse was great and was very inclusive and on board with Jo. She always acknowledged Jo and included her. I think that was just her own personal approach, because I don't think all the nurses that she worked with had the same kind of attitude. **Pia**

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The maternal and child health nurses were a mixed bag, but I would say, on the whole, I find them very staid and old-fashioned in their approach to the business of giving birth and bringing up a newborn. But they were never negative and I never had anyone make any judgement or anything. **Alison**

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We had a visit at home from a maternal and child health nurse who was perfectly fine. The only problem was that we would have liked them to come more because it was very hard to get out with the twins. **Ruth**

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If service providers were a little more aware – if they had a little bit more experience, that would be better. I do remember one woman saying, ‘Oh goody. I’ve been on a course about this’, which was cute. She was really positive about it and that’s fantastic, if slightly patronising, but that’s okay. I’ll take that above total ignorance. **Alison**

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I think Rachel was on the vulnerable register with maternal and child health and they were pretty concerned about her. She was certainly very unwell, but she was well-supported. **Katrina**

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I must say that after the first 5-6 weeks we were an absolute mess because we weren’t getting any sleep. This midwife came over and said, ‘I’m taking the babies, you two are going out. Go and have coffee. Go!’ We went to a local coffee shop and sat there and cried. Then we pulled ourselves together and decided it was going to be okay and it was a huge turning point. **Jenny**

I did get misplaced sympathy from a couple of people about how hard it must be because I was on my own. I think they’re just trying to be kind at a time when you’re feeling pretty tired and vulnerable. **Alison**

## Mothers’ and new parents’ groups

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We requested to be in a mothers’ group because normally, for a second child, they wouldn’t do that. But it had been nearly nine years and we were in a different area. They were okay with that and the group included both of us. People responded to us really well. There was some curiosity and, when they got to know us, they asked questions but there were no issues whatsoever. **Nicola**

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We ummed and ahed about who was going to go along to mothers’ group. Lara went and formed great friendships and everyone was quite comfortable. Basically, all the other mums were jealous because I actually helped around the house and none of their partners did. **Patricia**

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One very early comment at mother’s group was, ‘I don’t know, but are you guys finding it really hard to get your husband’s tea ready by 6 o’clock?’ I just thought, *That’s it. I’m done.* As it turned out, she and I never hit it off, but there were two women there whose friendship lasted me through those early years. **Bec**

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Mothers’ group was fantastic and we’re still friends with them all. They’ve all been absolutely wonderful. I think in the hills people are slightly more alternative, which helps. **Eli**

We asked about parenting groups and I think we were dissuaded by the early childhood nurse. She said, ‘Oh there aren’t really any twins’ groups at the moment’. I’m not sure if it was her get out. My hunch is that she just didn’t think we would fit into a parenting group. **Anthony**

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With my mothers' group, it took me about eight meetings to tell them my partner was female and I was very nervous about it, but they didn't blink. I never quite connected with them the same way as I did with a same-sex playgroup later on, but we were always treated well.

**Bridget**

I'm still in a mothers' group and I was a bit surprised that it was all straight couples and that there wasn't another queer family. They've been pretty good, but I've probably had to educate them a bit. They're all young, in their early 30s, so hopefully that means they are open-minded anyway. **Pia**

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My partner went to mothers' group because she had our first child. That was always a bit of an issue because it would be, *Mum's night out* and then, *Dad's night out*, and I didn't go to the *Dad's Night Out*, so that felt a little bit odd. **Mandy**

## Rainbow Families' groups

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Yes, there was a mothers' group. I was the birth mother and I was the stay at home mum for a period so I would go to the group. As the kids got older, we started to see more rainbow families and we formed a little connection, which was good. **Jenny**

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The parent groups we were offered were teenage mums and just weren't really our thing. We hung out with rainbow families in Melbourne and other friends who were having babies. **Katrina**

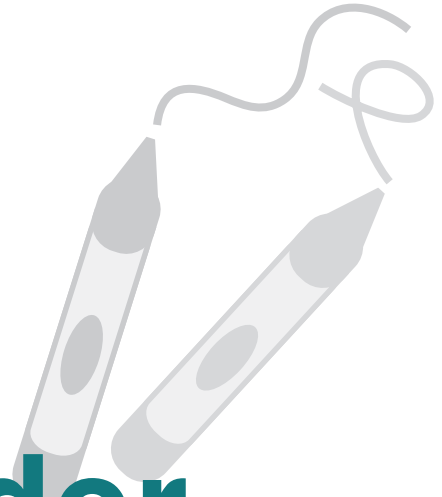
I went along to Rainbow Families Playgroup and that pretty much saved me, because we could talk about all sorts of things and I just felt that I wasn't the weird one. **Bec**

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The lesbian parent playgroups were really useful at that time and made a huge difference to us feeling like we were not the odd ones out. That was really positive. You could share your experience with other women and we could all talk about being non-biological parents or other issues. If they hadn't been there, I think it would have been a lot harder. It made us feel like we were understood somewhere by other people who had similar experiences, so it was really useful. **Mandy**

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We found support through the Multiple Birth Association and I'm actually their gay and lesbian contact person. They realised it doesn't matter what sex you are, having twins is hard. So we had this common bond, a different shared experience, which gave us a completely different basis for relating to and understanding each other. It's a lot easier to forget about other differences when you've got this massive commonality. **Ruth**



# Starting kinder or day care

Kindergartens and childcare centres can vary significantly, with different programs, philosophies and management styles. You may have a number in your area from which to choose, or you may only have one within travelling distance. Some will have experience working with rainbow families, but many may not and yours may be the first rainbow family to attend.

How a centre supports you as a rainbow family is important, but will likely not be your only consideration. A range of other factors may come into play including: the approach to learning, the age or experience of staff, buildings and outside space, location, diversity of children attending, involvement of parents, cost and whether the centre feels like a 'good fit' for your child.

## **Choosing a kinder or childcare centre**

Unless you know exactly where you want to send your child, it makes sense to visit a number of centres before choosing. You can often get a sense of how diverse and welcoming the centre is from posters, notices, artwork and books.

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Taking a tour of the centre during daytime hours, talking to staff and observing the children can give you a real sense of whether it's what you are looking for. Ask the coordinator if they have had same-sex families attending the centre; their response will give you a sense of whether the centre is going to be supportive of your family.

Once you've chosen a kinder or centre, you can help foster positive relationships and a supportive environment for your child by:

- attending centre functions, volunteering to help, or being involved with the management committee
- providing your child with some age-appropriate responses to questions they may be asked
- providing information and being willing to educate staff about rainbow families.

Being open and willing to engage in up-front discussions will enable you to manage any issues as they arise.

## Parents say ...

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### Choosing a kinder or childcare centre

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The first thing is about his needs, what kind of kid he seems to be and therefore what kind of learning environment we want for him. Then I guess a question about their attitude: Do they have other same-sex families and if not, how would they handle that? **Pia**

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My approach has always been to be very out, very early. I spent a year working in an early childhood centre and I knew what was important to me. I chose the one that felt the best, that felt right to me, and I spent a lot of time there. **Bec**

We went to all the kinder open days we could get to in our area, plus a few others. We visited while the classes were in session and talked to the kids and the teachers. I was more concerned about how they handled the students' welfare than how they handled the gay and lesbian thing in particular. I thought we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. When we found a quality kinder teacher the other stuff followed naturally. **Ruth**

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When we looked at kinders, I thought inner city was going to be friendlier and, in fact, it was; ten years ago things were a bit different. **Trudy**

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We only approached one day care place. We've got a friend who works at this one and we had heard positive reviews about it. We had a look at it and it really exceeded our expectations. I couldn't have imagined a day care centre that would be so well set up and such a positive environment. **Anthony**

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We chose the kinder because it was down the road from my work. We both had a look around and we had a conversation about the fact that we were a same-sex family. The director was very honest and said that they hadn't dealt with a same-sex family before, but that they were open to working with us to make sure our needs were met. **Nicola**

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There was one kinder where we both found the teacher really cold and standoffish and I wondered whether that was the whole lesbian thing. I think probably our anti-gaydar was working subliminally. **Ruth**

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We made an assessment based on an initial conversation; you just get a feel for a place. They were very inclusive of Carol, but there was also a range of other considerations about the quality of care, how we connected with them, and did Frances seem to like it. I thought the way they were with us as a rainbow family was important, but one of a range of things. **Trudy**

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I got in touch with a few families I knew; it's good to talk to them because they've got older kids so I've been able to ask them about kinder and school. **Pia**

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I think a good kinder is mainly about the programs. I'm a teacher myself and so really value the education experience our kinder offers. **Ruth**

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I think we chose our first kinder because the teacher was a man, which was quite unusual. I felt it would be a bit different. I was still in that stage of making sure everybody knew that my partner was female and I think being up-front like that meant it was never a big deal. **Bridget**

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We didn't specifically quiz them about how they would handle the whole gay and lesbian thing, but finding out about their policies generally was enough to give us a good understanding of whether they were likely to be flexible, inclusive, diverse and welcoming. **Ruth**

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The kinder staff were just good people and they seemed nice. They had a beautiful outdoor area and all the stuff that is probably important to most parents, so I didn't overly pursue whether they were okay with same-sex couples or not. I just sort of assumed they'd be okay, but we were always very straight up about it. **Bec**

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## Staff and parents

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There were occasionally problems with other kids at kinder who were clearly repeating something they had been told by their parents. One child said, 'A child having two mummies makes God cry'. Luckily, that wasn't said to our children, it was said to one of the staff members who said, 'No, no – keep that to yourself'.  
**Patricia**

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Pretty early on one of the parents offered to help. She said, 'I'll give you my number and just ring me any time'. She has twin boys, too. **Anthony**

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She went to kinder locally [in a small regional area] where she had attended occasional care, so she was well known and they were absolutely fine. Not particularly aware, but because we had a personal and ongoing relationship, whenever stuff came up there was always a phone call. **Katrina**

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All kids at this age, including mine, are absolutely sure they're right. What they have been told is the truth because they believe everything their parents say and if you've been told you need a mum and a dad to make a baby then you believe that. It's not that the kid is coming from a bad place, they're just certain about their own reality and their parent hasn't introduced any possibility of there being multiple realities. **Claire**

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If the staff read her a book they will change mummy and daddy to mummy and mama. **Eli**

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He went to day care in the city and he has just finished kinder there. They have mostly been really good, but there have been a few hiccups. They asked questions and they were really receptive to things that we asked them to do and not do. **Nicola**

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A couple of people probably thought we were interesting and that they might like to get to know us because we were different – because we were a lesbian couple – and then they found out we were just as normal as everyone else. **Ruth**

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Lucy, my daughter, has a kinder that she goes to now and we've been educating the kinder teachers all year. **Alison**

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There is one worker who's been a bit prickly about what time we bring the children and little things. I feel really uncomfortable about stuff like that and I don't know how to handle it. I'm not really sure if that's just the way she is, or whether she's a little bit directive to us because it's us. Apart from that, everyone else has been really friendly and flexible and accommodating.  
**Anthony**



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## Thoughts and suggestions

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Other families have been fine; we haven't had any problems at all with friends coming over, or the kids going to their houses. We're pretty open around the school and the kinder. At events, we're both there and involved so we're not hiding it and we haven't met any resistance at all. **Nicola**

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We try to join things and not let our fear of not being accepted stop us. You've got to try to overcome anxiety about those things in order to go along to social nights or whatever. The best approach for us has been thinking, 'Too bad, we're part of this community, we're going along'. We're not going to let those fears stop us because we can't communicate that message to our kids. That's not easy and I'm not the most super confident person in the world. **Mandy**

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When possible, both of us try to do pick-up and drop off. It's very affirming for your kids if you're both showing up; it means your child has got a strong sense of your family being involved. **Alison**

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We had a few more issues at kinder with our son. He is a little bit gender creative; his favourite colour is pink and he likes to wear dresses. Once they got to know him – he's a beautiful, lovely little guy – they just accepted him for who he is, but some of the other kids made comments. The staff responded to our requests to address that and they talked to the kids about diversity and about how everyone is different and about celebrating uniqueness; they had Diversity Day and they called it Rainbow Day. Each year it has taken a bit of work and some conversations, but they've got there and it is a really safe place for him now. **Nicola**

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There was a good preliminary orientation period the year before she started. They hosted a couple of family barbecues which was fantastic so we basically got to come out and all the parents got to know each other. And the kids didn't have to feel like they were coming out as well. **Alison**

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I think if you are confident and positive about it all you just don't give people the space to criticise or be negative and I find that works quite well.

**Patricia**

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At pre-prep, the manager of that section was very inclusive and said, 'Tell me what books you want and we'll go and buy them'. So they've got lots of books that they just toss in with the others and the kids can pick up a book about mum and dad or mum and mum. **Jenny**

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When they were in kindergarten we equipped the kids with things to say like, 'I've got two mums and that's okay', but the other kids kept coming back and saying, 'But you have to have a dad. Why haven't you got a dad?' So they actually killed off their 'dad', but unfortunately they used different stories; in one he died in a skiing accident, in the other it was something else. **Claire**

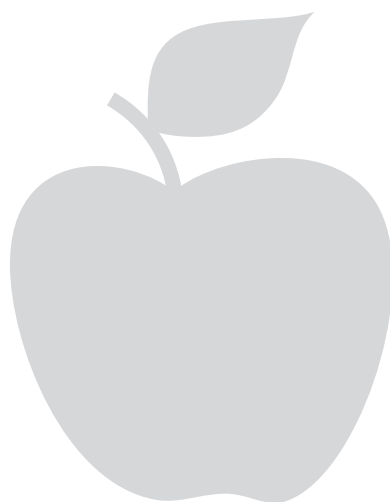
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We gave them the *Love Makes a Family* posters and they put them up. **Nicola**

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# Rainbow families and primary school



There are many factors rainbow families consider when choosing a primary school. These include: whether the school is local, or in an area thought to be open-minded and rainbow family-friendly; whether it has good policy and practice in relation to bullying; the diversity of the children attending the school; the philosophy of the school and its education programs; whether the school has lesbian, gay or bisexual staff; and whether it meets the educational and personal needs of their child.

In addition, parents will want to know how supportive the school is likely to be of their family and whether staff will be inclusive, respectful and sensitive to their family's particular needs. How the school will deal with any teasing, name-calling or bullying in relation to their family is of concern to many parents. You may want to seek clarification of the school's approach to these issues before you enrol your child.

There are many ways parents can engage with their child's school to ensure it is a positive and safe environment for their family.

## Choosing a school

Talking to people in your own rainbow family or local networks who have older children can be a good place to start when choosing a school.

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You can get a feel for how inclusive a school is from a visit, tour or parent information night, where you can ask a general question about the school's experience of working with same-sex families.

It may be helpful to meet with the principal or vice principal to discuss your concerns and assess their level of support. You can also ask about the school's approach to bullying and ask to see their policy.

## Supporting your child

You can support your child by talking to them before they start school about how they will deal with questions about their family.

Once enrolled, it can be helpful for you to be involved with your school in different capacities, including:

- attending working bees, barbecues or social functions
- volunteering to help in the classroom
- helping with excursions or sporting events
- joining a school committee
- becoming a member of school council
- volunteering with the Parent Teacher Association.

Talking openly and directly to staff about any issue that arises, as soon as it arises, can be useful. You can also suggest books, posters, websites or other resources the school could refer to or buy to help improve understanding in the school community.

# Parents say ...

## Choosing a school

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We chose the school because of their capacity to support kids who come from a really interesting and challenging range of backgrounds. The town has a very significant proportion of highly-disadvantaged kids, so they've got some very good strategies in place around inclusiveness, which we really liked. **Katrina**

I looked at the three closest schools and I wrote one off immediately. Then I chatted to people at the other two and I asked them, 'Have you got any other same-sex-parented families here?' One principal showing me around said, 'No, but of course there's no issue'. He was lovely and I believed him. **Bec**

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Our approach to parenting has very much been that we want our kids to know what the general mainstream world is like and we want them to be able to cope with that. We wanted them get to know that world of heterosexual parents and fairly conservative views, so we just chose our local school. **Mandy**

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A lot of people advised us to send our son somewhere close to home because he would make friends with people in the neighbourhood, so we sent him to the local state school. We certainly discussed our family situation with the principal and the teacher and we talked about how they would handle that and any bullying. We made sure – as a deliberate strategy – that we were very visible in the school and that we were very active.

**Jenny**

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We chose a school in a place where we thought we would naturally meet other rainbow families, but that didn't really happen. But I think [closer to the city] you do just find a more open-minded community, or at least you are not the first lesbian couple they've met, which is how it always was when we were in the outer suburbs. **Bridget**

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The first thing I think of is more the kind of personality he has and then what does that mean in terms of the kind of environment. So: *Does he need this, that or the other?* But obviously, if the school is not comfortable with him having two mums, he's not going to get support if he gets bullied or if kids make disparaging comments. We need to have him in an environment where they will respond seriously to those sorts of things. **Pia**

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We didn't ask a lot of questions about same-sex families or anything like that. There weren't any stupid questions like, 'Which one's the mother?' The principal just straight away picked up what was going on and who we were and was absolutely comfortable with that. **Patricia**

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I walked around with the acting principal and one of the lead teachers and when I asked her about same-sex families she said, 'As far as I know, we don't have any same-sex-parented families, but I can tell you there's at least one gay teacher'. It was hilarious; I thought that was pretty cute. **Bec**

At one of the schools – a public school – the principal wore a prominent crucifix, so I wondered whether that meant anything in terms of being homophobic. I'm just not religious and I don't want any Christianity involved in my kids' education, so that turned me off that school straight away.

**Claire**

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I've never seen their policy, to be honest, but you walk into the school and you can just see it: it's all over the walls. It's the photographs, it's how the staff interact with the kids, it's the number of integration aides they have, it's the way they run their assemblies. They are very broadly aware of the needs of every child and how they need to be accommodating those.

**Katrina**

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We weren't too impressed with the first school we saw. Their approach seemed to be a bit of don't ask, don't tell. It was sort of, *We treat everyone the same, so we ignore any difference*, which I don't think is a very useful approach. **Patricia**

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She went to a local, very rainbow school. The principal is a lesbian and she's very out and there are quite a number of lesbian families. But while the school was very friendly, it was very elitist in some respects. There was a lot of snobbery and it was very competitive and that drowned out a lot of the rainbow family stuff. **Trudy**

I think we just assumed the school would be okay because of the area. **Bridget**

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Marg and I are both in education, which is probably not a good thing in that we were picky about getting the right match for our kids. We have a niece who had been through primary school, so when we came to look, we were really drawn to her school. At the time, the principal was an out lesbian and sixteen years ago that wasn't a particularly common thing. **Julie**

## At school

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There's always that awkward moment when I'm meeting a new teacher where I don't know if they know about our family. **Bec**

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Annie came home with a book one day, which was *Where's your daddy?* I spoke to the teacher about it being somewhat insensitive. She was almost in tears. She said she didn't think about it and immediately went through all the books and took out any that might have been of that sort of ilk. **Patricia**

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Where we are now, we're the only same-sex family and it's like they are proud of that and want to celebrate it, rather than hide it. **Patricia**

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At school, people know not to say anything negative. They know they are in an inner-city area and they have to be cool enough to take on same-sex families. **Mandy**

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We went to talk to the principal, who was wonderful and responded very well. She actually had a conversation with our daughter about how she's not the only one in the school who has two mums and said if she ever has any problems she can come and talk. **Nicola**

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There are so many different families around these days. The other kids all knew that Tyler had two dads. **Peter**

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When we separated, I found the school really supportive, and that was important. Noah was in Grade 2 and his teacher told me they were having a circle-time conversation and he said something like, 'My mums have broken up', and another kid said, 'Oh, my parents have broken up too,' and they had a little conversation about it. But it was no big deal and no-one blinked. **Bec**

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## Thoughts and suggestions

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Having a gay dad was something that was presented very matter-of-factly. He was very comfortable with it. All his friends knew and their parents knew. For him, it has always been out there and there's been no secret. His mother is very comfortable with it and his stepfather; they've all been very supportive. **Mark**

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I was on school council and that's my approach. You ingratiate yourself and people's ideas and perceptions about lesbians are altered. I spent a lot of time in the kids' classrooms chatting to their teachers. The principal has always been incredibly supportive. **Bec**

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In the very early years I would go in and do reading groups. I did friggin' tuckshop and all the mummy duties and Elizabeth would go and help out on the sports field. She rode a motorbike and wore a leather jacket and it was kind of funny that she was the cool mum. That was a strategy for us – to be visible. Then it's not a secret and nobody can use it against you. **Jenny**

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I think we are coming to a place where Amy has an increasing understanding of her family as perhaps not being just like everyone else's. Having said that, at school, family is incredibly diverse, so having two mums and a dad is not that unusual – lots of other people have got two mums and two dads and step families all over the *wah-hoo*. **Katrina**

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We taught Chris some things to say. If somebody says, 'Are your parents gay?' you just say, 'Yes, they are. Do you have a problem with that?' **Jenny**

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We're very visible and they are great about it. I took in the posters from the Rainbow Family Council and they've put those up in the school. **Patricia**

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They do have some rainbow family books in the library and that's been at my instigation. **Jenny**

I think being visible in the school helps a lot. They had a working bee recently and Lara went along. I think pitching in and lending a hand is helpful. I think it makes it easier if everyone can see that she's got two mums and one time I'm there and the next time it's Lara. **Patricia**

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I was actually more apprehensive about his friends staying over. I would always make a point of actually meeting the parents and making sure they knew I had a partner. I made sure they knew I was gay somehow and just gauged reaction. I never, ever had a negative reaction. **Mark**

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My tendency is to just get really cranky and righteous, but then that puts everyone offside, so if I'm going in there all angry that's not going to work. But at the same time you've got to get your point across. **Pia**

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We know more gay families at our current school. We haven't really made any friendships because of that, but I do think my kids are happy to know that there are other gay families there. **Bridget**







# Mother's Day and Father's Day

Mother's Day and Father's Day present some challenges for rainbow families. Almost all schools, childcare centres and kinders have events or activities around these days and they are often important fundraisers. They can be a difficult time for rainbow family kids, and other children who don't have a mother or a father.

Many places – but certainly not all – include *Special Person* in the title of their day to ensure that children are not entirely excluded from the day's activities. A few schools have replaced Mother's Day and Father's Day with *Family Day*, and children are able to invite whomever they like.

Schools and centres vary in how well they handle these days, but many are sensitive to the concerns of rainbow families and will happily discuss the issue with parents. Many kids with two mums or two dads produce two of whatever card or gift they are making in class. Sometimes,

this is at the instigation of the teacher, while sometimes it is at the instigation of the parents.

Prior to Mother's Day or Father's Day, it can be helpful to discuss how you want to manage the event and come up with an idea or strategy that works for you. Also consider your kids' feelings and how they would prefer to approach the days. If you have concerns, you may want to raise them with your child's teacher or principal before the day.

Some rainbow families make the day about other people in their child's life, including

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grandparents, older siblings, or friends of the family. Others allocate one day to one parent, and the other day to the other parent, but this doesn't work for everyone.

# Parents say ...

## Experiences

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Our childcare centre and kinder had a really great approach to Mother's Day and Father's Day. They simply had Family Day around those times and anyone could come along.

That was a really nice thing.  
**Mandy**

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There were no discernible problems until we got to Father's Day and we had to work out what to do. It was great that they actually asked, 'What shall we do on Father's Day?' We decided that one of us would do Father's Day and the other would do Mother's Day and that was easy. **Alison**

Sally got her own set of paintings on Mother's Day and her own set of cards from the girls. That was all at the instigation of the teacher. She told us the girls had been *very busy* – in other words they'd been trying to make a double lot of everything! **Ruth**

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They always included both of us and always had two presents for Mother's Day. That was really good the entire time we were there. **Trudy**

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In relation to Mother's Day, the teachers are always great. We are also quite lucky because they do have their dad in their lives and he actually has a male partner as well. At kinder this year, my daughter made two things for them as well. **Bridget**

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The little kids make something for Chris, their big brother. And because there's a 10–11 year age gap with them, it's kind of like he is the man of the household, so to speak. **Jenny**

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They do a *mama's* card and a *mummy's* card, and for Father's Day this year they had *Special Person's Day*. Last year they did *grandpa* cards. We make it about the men in her life. **Eli**

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From grade one, the school has just instinctively made two Mother's Day gifts or cards. That was never at our instigation, always the school's, or maybe it was at the kids' instigation. To be frank, I never asked, but it has just always happened that they came home with two Mother's Day cards. **Jenny**

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We decided that Mother's Day would be my day and that we would celebrate my partner's day on Father's Day. That works, and the school has been really responsive to that. **Nicola**

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At the occasional care place, they didn't do very well on Father's Day and Mother's Day. On Father's Day, they asked if we wanted the kids to do a card and we said, 'Yes', but they stuck *Happy Father's Day* all over it. And for Mother's Day, they only did one, and they knew the girls had two mothers. They were late middle-aged women with their ways set in stone – a little bit *old biddy*. **Ruth**

For Mother's Day, we didn't say anything, but Annie did some paintings in art and she did two. I do think that, luckily, she's a strong and forceful personality. She needed to educate everyone and say, 'I've got two mums', at least when she first started there. And that seems to have gone okay. **Patricia**

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They would ask how many Mother's Day or Father's Day presents we wanted and that was it. We're probably the first and last rainbow family they're going to see for quite some time. **Katrina**

## Concerns and challenges

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I went to the principal and said, 'Look, this is the one day of the year when our kids can feel left out'. I explained that at other schools they call it *Father's and Special Person's* or *Special Friend's Day*, and that seems to be a much more inclusive approach. The kids can bring along grandparents or whoever they want. She was embarrassed that we had to raise this with her. She said, 'My father died when I was very young and I always hated Father's Day. I can't believe this needed to be brought to my attention'. And when the newsletter came out the next week, the headline was *Father and Special Friend's Day* – a great success. **Patricia**

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Our kids mostly handle it okay. But there are other kids who don't have parents – or might have a single parent, or a mother who's died – who really are struggling with some of these situations and just have to put up with these days. I think that's a real shame. **Mandy**

It's a tricky one, because a lot of the mothers volunteer to make the Mother's Day and Father's Day craft, and they put in a lot of hard work. You don't want to say, 'Let's just wipe it all out and not have it'. It's about finding a compromise that the community will accept. My preference would be a universal approach, where the child can choose whichever family member they want to, and it's just a family day. **Mandy**

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Mother's Day and Father's Day just irritate me, but we talk to the kids about it. Now that they're older, we just don't do it and we say, 'Don't worry about it'. We've got a relationship with their donor dad, so if they want to give something to him, that's great. If they want to do it for a grandparent, that's fine too. I just want them to put the apostrophe in the right place!

**Bec**

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We went with what the girls wanted to do. For a few years, they allocated Mother's Day to me and Father's Day to my partner. Last year my partner decided that she was a bit sick of that and that she really didn't want to do that anymore. They had a stall at school and my daughter bought a mug that said: *World's Best Dad*. The great irony, of course, was that the *World's Best Dad* is a mum. That was quite hilarious. **Claire**

We realised that a lot of school activities were structured around Mother's Day and Father's Day, and the issue for us was not only about our own family, but what happened in other families that didn't have a mother or a father. There was a kid in our daughter's class whose mum had died a couple of years ago and some of the kids were quite upset for that child on Mother's Day. **Mandy**

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We went with allocating the days, but now we actually don't like what that says about our family – we don't think it reflects our family. So, we will need to support them come next September in how they talk about that. They will work out the default position, but we're not going to have a default father. We don't want to do that. **Claire**

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Chris's dad passed away when he was eight. Prior to that we did Father's Day. Afterwards, we thought, *What do we do now?* Basically, Father's Day became about Granddad, so he would make something for Granddad and on Mother's Day he would make something for us. **Jenny**

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The kinder is changing the way their forms are written and putting *Special Person*. It used to be *Bring your dad to kinder day* and now it's *Bring a Special Person*. There is an acknowledgement that there are plenty of single parents out there and different family makeups. So I consider that great progress. **Alison**

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In relation to things like Mother's Day and Father's Day, they followed our lead. There was an incident around language on forms, and they also had a roster displayed of which kids were attending on which day. It had a Mother column and a Father column. So, it had me as the mother and Laura just wasn't anywhere. Our son wasn't the only one who just had one parent listed and we suggested that wasn't particularly appropriate. **Nicola**

# Teasing, name-calling, and bullying



Parents of rainbow families worry a lot about whether their children will be subject to teasing and bullying because of their family structure. Most schools have a policy on bullying, and procedures in place to deal with incidents as they arise. Schools vary in how effective they are in dealing with this problem.

Many rainbow families report that their initial fears are unfounded and that their children experience no more or less teasing or bullying than other kids. Where teasing occurs, it is just as likely to be about the things kids have always teased each other about: weight, height, hair colour, glasses, cultural background, interests or ability.

*That's so gay* as a general insult or term of criticism still seems to be fairly common, starting in the higher grades of primary school and becoming more entrenched in high school. Some teachers challenge this language telling students it is offensive and explaining why. Many, however, do not.

Sometimes your child having a sense of humour, or not taking things too seriously, can contain a problem or reduce its impact. Giving your child strategies and language to deal with any potential teasing or bullying can also help them negotiate difficult situations.

If you are worried about how bullying is handled, you can ask to see the school's policy (often it's on their website), or arrange to see the principal to discuss your concerns. Keeping the channels of communication open with your child's classroom teacher and talking to them about your family structure can be helpful.

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Discussing the issue with your children and asking them how they would like you to handle it – especially as they get older – can be a good idea. It may be that your child has the skills and resilience to cope with minor incidents on their own and you may only need to get involved if the behaviour becomes harmful or persistent.

## Parents say ...

### Experiences

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I never got any sign that there were any conversations going on in the schoolyard that were uncomfortable or difficult, or any teasing or anything like that. I certainly appreciate that we have had quite a fortunate journey on this and that was part of the reason I wanted to speak to you. It's not always difficult. **Mark**

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You get all this media about cyberbullying and we talk about that stuff a lot. If they are telling me the truth, it has never been something that they've experienced to any degree that has caused them concern. **Julie**

We've had no problems with bullying. As an educator, I think it is unfortunately one of the biggest fears of parents generally. And unnecessarily so, really. I think that all the early years of parenting we do (and gay parenting is good parenting in my view), helping kids to have good self-esteem, have a bit of a sense of humour, not take themselves too seriously, and become quite resilient – hopefully does make them into pretty resilient kids. **Julie**

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Most of the kids at school know that Frances has two mums and there have been a couple of tiny incidents, but really it could have been about her red hair or her glasses. And certainly, the school administration is very supportive. **Trudy**

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We went to a parents' orientation evening and I got a really bad vibe. I asked about their approach to bullying and their response was that they think it's a term that is bandied around too much and often it's about teaching the child who has been bullied some resilience. I just didn't like that approach at all. **Patricia**

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## Strategies

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I actually raised the issue of a diversity or inclusion policy with the junior school principal a while ago. They've got a strong anti-bullying culture and policy and he said he thought it was inclusive enough. He didn't really see that we needed a separate policy, because it was included in the anti-discrimination policy.

I do understand that to some degree. They are aware of the issues and sensitive to them. **Jenny**

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They did have an anti-bullying policy and, by the time he got to trade school, they had all the LGBT support and counselling and awareness. It was a good school. **Mark**

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She's occasionally got, 'You must be a lesbian because your mums are'. Her response to that has been, 'No, I'm not'. She came home and talked to me about it and I said another possibility would be, 'Maybe?' She said she tried that and the reaction was hilarious so she's going to do that again. **Nicola**

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We chose not to send her to the local school because the school is not across bullying. They don't have good strategies around it and they don't know what to do. They can't articulate what to do with the bully, the onlookers, the families, the broader circle, and we just didn't really feel safe about sending her there. **Katrina**

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The only thing I would say in terms of this bullying thing with Chris was that it did end up escalating to the point that the principal of the middle school pulled both boys up to have a chat to them. They wouldn't go so far to say that the other boy's behaviour was discriminatory – they said both boys were behaving inappropriately and I guess they were. But some of the stuff this kid was saying was really vile; that we were going to hell and that he felt sorry for Chris growing up in our household. It was nasty and I think the school probably could have handled that a little more firmly. **Jenny**

We chose the school because of their capacity to support kids who come from a really interesting and challenging range of backgrounds. The town has got a very significant proportion of highly-disadvantaged kids and the school she goes to is now has some very good strategies in place around inclusivity, which we really liked. It's working really well. **Katrina**

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Some kids would ask, 'So is your dad gay?' and he would say, 'Yeah', and they would say, 'Okay, right', and that was it. That is the nature of conversation when they are kids; it's quite funny and it's such a non-event. **Mark**

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They have an anti-bullying policy, not that we've ever talked about it that much. They're more focused on the cyberbullying stuff and are pretty on the ball with that. **Nicola**

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## That's so gay!

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'That's so gay' was sort of standard practice for a little while. I don't know that it is anymore. I don't hear it now.

**Mark**

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When he was about nine – that bullish boy age where they start hanging out with the lads – I had a couple of his mates staying over for the weekend. We were in the car and one of them said, 'That's so gay', which Jeremy never used at home. Then the kid said to me, 'You're not gay, you're homosexual'. I said, 'It's not nice', and they said, 'Yeah, yeah, sorry'. They were completely aware of my sexuality and my partner and all the rest of it. **Mark.**

My daughter says that everyone says, 'That's so gay', all the time and that some of the teachers have said that it's not okay, and some of them don't intervene at all. I wish they would do more about it. There doesn't seem to be much impetus to deal with it. My partner is a high school teacher and she talks about it with her class; it's not hard. **Nicola**

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The kids have never said anything about hearing, 'You're so gay' or 'That's so gay' in the playground. **Julie**

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From time to time my son does use the term, 'You're so gay' or 'That's so gay', which I hate and he knows it, but I think that's part of the age and the culture. But, fundamentally, he will stand up for anyone. He has that real sense of justice: *this is right, this is wrong*. **Jenny**

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Our daughter says it is too exhausting to fight all the time in relation to some of the comments. Even though she's an early adolescent, she is very focused on her peer relationships, being popular and not being different. She keeps quiet a bit. She used to pull people up if they said things like, 'That's so gay', or made homophobic slurs, but she doesn't anymore. She lets it go. She doesn't join in. If her friends do, she will pull them up, but not the wider class or in the playground. **Nicola**





# Older kids and adolescents

Parental involvement in school decreases significantly once a young person starts high school and teenagers will likely want to manage things by themselves. In many ways, the capacity of a young person to negotiate being part of a rainbow family will have been established at primary school. Many young people find good strategies and have any easy journey.

In addition to the usual factors parents consider when choosing a high school, rainbow families may also be interested in:

- whether the school has previous experience of working with rainbow families
- the school's policy on bullying, diversity and discrimination
- whether it has a gay/straight or rainbow alliance
- whether there is a secular welfare officer
- the extent to which the principal and staff are welcoming and supportive of diverse families.

Factors that may influence the high school experience of rainbow family teenagers can include:

- the extent to which they are out and open about their family structure
- who they tell and how they talk about their family
- how their friends – and their friends' parents – respond to their family
- discussions about their own sexuality
- their own level of confidence and resilience in dealing with any negative reactions from peers.

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Visits to the school, questions to staff and the principal, a detailed look at the school's website and discussions with your own social networks can help in choosing the right school.

Most grade six kids will have their own view about the school they wish to attend and will need to participate in any discussions.

Parents can check out whether any school is part of the Safe Schools Coalition which commits the school to providing a supportive environment for LGBTI students.

It can be helpful – if sometimes difficult – to take a step back and allow teenagers to manage any issues that arise on their own.

Keeping the channels of communication open, letting them know you are there for support and back up, and offering suggestions or advice can be helpful too.

Other young people from rainbow families can provide teenagers with an important outlet and can be a great source of support.

# Parents say ...

## Choosing a school

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With high school, you've actually got a 12-year-old who is going to tell you very clearly what they want. We wouldn't have chosen a school that we felt was very conservative or had no history with rainbow families, but there was never any issue with any of the schools we looked at.

**Debbie**

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When we were looking around, we noticed at several schools the counsellors had posters up about same-sex attracted youth, which indicated to us, at an institutional level, that they were not discriminating.

**Debbie**

In my head, I had already chosen her high school because our local school is really progressive and they have a Gay–Straight Alliance. But when the time came, Ella actually said she wanted to do the test for this nerdy school down the road, so that's where she's going. I did get a heads-up from someone saying there's a person in their welfare team who is awesome and really doing some good stuff, so that was nice to hear. **Bec**

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We had people within our own social networks who knew about the various different schools and which schools had participated in Pride. We also knew about schools that had education about same-sex attracted youth, and that was all part of our decision. **Debbie**

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He moved schools and that was a very positive experience. Everyone there was aware that I was gay and they met my partner. He was very comfortable there and I think the school itself actually made the difference. He was very happy to talk about it and everyone knew. He had a wide circle of friends and it was a non-event. **Mark**

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## At school

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Our philosophy in terms of handling schooling changed as he got to senior school. In primary school, we would speak to the teacher each year and disclose who we were, but as he got to high school it just naturally wasn't an issue and we didn't do that. **Jenny**

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This first couple of years in high school were probably the most difficult. It wasn't a great school experience and that was probably the only time where I got the feeling he wasn't completely open with all his friends. His close friends and the friends he'd known since primary school, yes, but it wasn't just generally known. It wasn't a nice school. **Mark**

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Once he started to go to all the different classes and had a maths teacher and an English teacher – it's not relevant to speak to them all and they don't actually care, anyway. They are there to teach maths or English. **Jenny**

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With the primary school, we did ask specific questions, but at the high school we didn't. That was partly because we felt – and this has been borne out – that at high school you've actually got far less to do with the school. It's much more to do with the child; they have to make their own way with the resources that they've got. **Debbie**

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I guess the best thing we can do to support kids going off to high school is to be open and honest. So, the first thing is that there are no secrets and everyone is comfortable with the situation. It's really useful if kids have a good social network. We would disclose whenever kids came over to our house; we would make sure that either both of us greeted them at the door, or otherwise make it very clear that this was our situation and it wasn't anything to be ashamed of. And the kids were very accepting. **Jenny**

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The enrolment forms are really good about the two family thing and parent/parent. They have an additional family form for her other family so she had her dad and his wife on that. The first time we got a letter it was addressed to me and her father at my address. We raised that and they fixed it. **Nicola**

As a parent, it's an interesting transition to high school, because you know so much less about what is going on and you have much less involvement. That's one of the reasons I am on the school council – because I want to know what is happening. **Nicola**

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I think, in terms of high school, you really have to do the groundwork before they get there. When they're at high school, it's much more hands off. You have set the scene in primary school and by the time they get to high school, to a large degree, they are on their own. You're just there to support them if anything happens. **Jenny**

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They had a parent information session about sex education and they talked about how it is really important to talk to your kids about sex and to be open. But then they made the point that there are certain things they will not talk about and will refer back to parents – and they were things like abortion, contraception and same-sex attraction. They were giving mixed messages and they weren't very responsive. Very friendly, very open, but that wasn't done very well. **Nicola**

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## Out of school

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She has a good, supportive group of friends – a good, little core group. She talks to them about stuff and they don't give her a hard time about anything.

**Nicola**

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He's still very good friends with my partner who I went out with when he was younger. When they see each other, he is comfortable being affectionate with him – he'll give him a hug, a kiss on the cheek or whatever. **Mark**

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I think it's really important to give our kids some tools. They are going to be faced with stuff they don't know how to handle and, like any parent, you want to give them the skills to help. We talk about when people say, 'Are your parents homosexual?'

You just say, 'Yes, are yours heterosexual?' It was never a secret. I think if it's a secret it's something that people can use against your kids, but if it's not a secret, then it's really not a drama. **Jenny**

He has a really close group of friends, amazingly close. They're all boys – they're all tradies. When Jeremy was living with me, we had two of his mates living with us as well, so there was me, my partner, Jeremy and either one or two of his mates. It was great. It was just a really good household. **Mark**

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They both talked about choosing who to tell and that you don't tell people, particularly in high school, until you've built up some sort of trust with them. Noah said that if you do tell them and they don't accept it then obviously they are not very good friends. **Julie**

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We've had conversations about sexuality. Chris is very heterosexual and he has said from very early on that he's got no doubts about that. If he was gay, that would be okay. **Jenny**

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He is very clear about his own sexuality. It hasn't confused him at all. He's comfortable with his mates and they are reasonably affectionate for young men. They seem to be a lot more balanced and just down to earth. All his mates seem quite aware and worldly and they don't have hang-ups. They're not trying to be big, macho men. **Mark**

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She's done projects and assignments on marriage equality. She gets really passionate and she talks about why we can't have rights like everybody else. She's very much taken it that it is her fight which is lovely because she is pretty sure she is straight, but she's open. **Nicola**

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My ex-wife was Malaysian/Indian so Jeremy is multi-racial. He went to a very multi-racial school and knew my sister, who is a lesbian. And with gay parents, and lots of heterosexual parents of all different nationalities in his life, trying to illustrate diversity was really easy because he was surrounded by it. **Mark**

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He is quite militant because of his strong sense of justice. He went on this *Insight* program – so, national TV, when he was fifteen. It was huge. He was obviously very clearly identified, and people talked about it, and he is very comfortable with that. I organised a Marriage Equality forum and we had a panel of speakers and one of them was Chris. He said he would like to speak for the children.

He's quite comfortable standing up in a forum and talking about what it's like to be a kid growing up in a gay family. He said, 'It's just normal; my parents are pains in the arse sometimes, and they're good sometimes'. **Jenny**

Georgia said that being in a gay family helps her have more understanding of others, and an acceptance of diversity, which I am sure is true. She said we've taught her to stand up for what she believes in. She talked about going to the Pride March when she was little and said it was really fun and it made her realise that she was part of a big community. **Julie**



# Rainbow families in rural and regional areas



Rainbow families are living in small, rural communities and regional centres throughout Australia. For many families, the experience is extremely positive and they find that the people in their community are welcoming and supportive. Some have a local network of other rainbow families; some are the first or only rainbow family in their area.

A key factor in how they are regarded seems to be the extent to which they are involved in the community. Making an active contribution to the civic life of a small town or regional centre is highly valued and there are very positive outcomes for families who are able to do this.

Becoming involved in your local community can help demystify your family and create positive relationships for you and your children. Being out, open and honest about who you are and the

nature of your family can help you to integrate into a community. Rainbow families might explore any of these pathways into a community:

- kinder committees or school councils
- sporting or social clubs
- religious or political groups.

People in rural and regional communities may have less experience of rainbow families than people in inner urban areas and may not be as

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well-informed. Many rainbow families recognise that this does not necessarily constitute prejudice or discrimination and are happy to take on an educative role and give people time to adjust.

You may be surprised to find welcoming and inclusive medical facilities, community services, kinder staff and teachers in regional communities.

# Parents say ...

## Experiences

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There are no real negatives for us. We've got this old couple next door, so I think if anyone was going to have an issue, they would, but they're just ... I mean, they bring our washing in if it starts to rain. **Ell**

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It's hard to work out the difference between people's perceptions of surrogacy, and the number of children we've had (three), and the fact that we're gay parents. There are two or three different things there and it's hard to separate reactions to that from the fact that people might just think gay men shouldn't have children. **Anthony**

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My partner got a promotion at the school down here, to second in charge, and for next year he has been promoted to principal. We're in a Western District regional town and we've had no issues. We're known as 'Peter and Hamish with the kids' and no-one has ever blinked an eye – it's amazing. **Peter**

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I'd say our experience of being gay dads raising three kids in the country has been mixed. Since we've had kids, we've been quite surprised that a lot of people have drifted off, and some people we never expected to get support from have popped up. It's not always clear why that it is and it could just be because things change when you have three very young kids. **Anthony**

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We live in a very small town in the north east. There are 1500 people in the broader district and about 600 or so in town. I guess they are all Nationals voters. I wouldn't say that people have a particular view about us one way or the other, really. We are just part of the furniture. **Katrina**

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We live in a large country town, which used to be very Anglo-Saxon, but it's slowly become more diverse. Our son is one year old, and I'm expecting triplets, and so far it's all been fine. People are generally quite positive and we've both worked at very supportive workplaces. **Michelle**



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We live in a tiny community of about 2500 people, about 150 kilometres from Melbourne, and it's heaven on earth. When we set about trying to find a community that met our needs, one of the important things was that it was a small, rural community that was progressive and rainbow family-friendly. **Trudy**

We live in a semi-rural area which you might call a slightly upper class hills area. So far, the community has been absolutely fantastic. We've only heard one negative comment about Jemima not having a father, which we expected at some point. **Ell**

## Community

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Part of my strategy is that I've got really involved in Cubs. There's a very significant Christian component in this community, and one of the things I've done is to try to get in with those people, so they get to know us as a family. It seems to be working really well – we're not a *thing*, we're an *us*. And we're still new, and you're going to be new for about five or ten years in this community. **Trudy**

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The measure of worth in the community is the capacity you have to contribute, to create, to keep that community functioning, and we're pretty big community involvers. **Katrina**

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We live in a large, rural, regional city in Queensland. It's got a bit of a reputation for being a redneck town, but we haven't found that particularly. I think it depends where you go and how you conduct yourself. We find it quite welcoming and we haven't had any issues here. **Jenny**

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The town operates on the basis of its networks and contributions. There is a lot of civic participation and that is what's valued. It works for the girls for us to be involved in things. **Claire**

Most rural communities are very happy with new people coming in, but what they like – more than in metropolitan communities – is that people get involved. If you get out there and meet people and join in with local community activities, I think you'd generally integrate pretty well. **Jenny**

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People in our community are on a journey, too, and that was actually our strategy: to bring people with us on our journey. **Trudy**

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We found our community very positive. We've got great neighbours and it's like, *Hello! This is who we are and we're pretty nice people, come and have a coffee with us*. So we make an effort, I guess. **Jenny**

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## Services and schools

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We spoke to the school and were comfortable with the principal's reaction, though he is on a journey, obviously. He wasn't entirely comfortable, but there wasn't anything that raised alarm bells. In terms of the parents, we haven't encountered anything that's been problematic at all. **Claire**

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I guess you can work out fairly quickly which facilities and businesses are friendly. If you go in and you don't have a good experience, you just don't go there again. I remember one of our first experiences at a beach café. There was a big group of men and I sensed the staff weren't sure about how they were going to react to us. The staff looked after us and made sure we felt safe. **Anthony**

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It's not always easy to get in to doctors in the country. We met our GP through the hospital. He came from somewhere in Victoria – Melbourne, I think – so he was quite receptive to the whole idea of these new baby boys and he wanted to be their doctor. He's been pretty supportive and friendly, and every time we go he makes a demonstration of how glad he is to see the boys. **Anthony**

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We had an issue with a young male teacher in his first year out who yelled a lot. I raised it with the principal and was told very clearly that the teacher didn't yell and that my children mustn't be used to men's voices! Hilarious. Extraordinary. **Claire**

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I'm interested in making more rainbow connections, but I'm also tapping into the multiple birth community. Locally, the group is lovely, and they are super excited that we have come along and we're having triplets. Certainly, the treatment from the local or public hospital and the maternal health team was great. **Michelle**

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There's a really impressive medical clinic. We had assumed we would just use the local one for coughs and colds and we'd keep going back to town for other things, but we haven't. They've got posters up, which the kids have seen, and it's all very inclusive: *Some boys like boys and some girls like girls and some boys like girls and boys*. It's gorgeous. **Claire**

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## Thoughts and suggestions

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I think if you try to put yourself on a pedestal and be separate to the whole community, people don't like that. **Peter**

My advice to people moving to a regional area would be, just go and take people at face value. I think you need to not make it a secret. What people don't know, they make up. So, if you just go out and introduce yourselves, then if people want to have a little gossip and say, 'Ooh, they're gay', you go, 'Yeah', and then it's yesterday's news. **Jenny**

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We took posters to Jemima's childcare about the different types of family you can have: single mothers or single fathers or two dads or two mums, and they put them up and asked for more. We're not the only rainbow family in the area, so that helps, too. **Ell**

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People are people. You're going to find arseholes everywhere. There are arseholes in Melbourne and arseholes in regional centres and you just deal with it. **Jenny**

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We don't avoid places. We'll go where we need to, but we are discreet. We're sensitive to perceptions in the community, but you can't not be out. **Anthony**

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I think it's critical to be connected with other rainbow families. We can tell the kids as much as we want that we're normal, but if their outside reference points aren't telling them that, then that's a problem. They really feel extremely normal. They don't feel like they are odd. **Claire**

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There is a group on Facebook, but it doesn't seem to get beyond that. I think it would be good for us to have more same-sex friends with kids. I wouldn't want the kids to think we are the only family with two mums. I'd say it's hard to meet other same-sex families. I know they are out there, but it's not that easy to make it happen. **Michelle**

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We had more trouble as a couple in the city when we didn't have kids than we do now in a regional area. **Peter**

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My experience is that being a mother softens the impact for people that you are queer. I reckon they are able to focus on you as a parent and that's a leveller for their anxieties. I think if you were a queer couple without kids in the country that might be a slightly different experience. **Claire**

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I think this is quite confronting for people and it's going to take time for them to get their heads around it. **Anthony**

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We don't hide. I think some people hide who they are and I think that makes it harder. **Ell**

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I would tell any other gay couple thinking of moving to this area that it would be fine to come up this way. As long as they were open and didn't make an issue out of being gay or being a gay family. **Peter**

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We are fairly well known in the region. We were invited to do a fair bit of publicity and for a while Rachel became the 'go to' girl around any kind of gay issue. Funnily enough, we have now got five or six gay couples in town who also moved here because they saw our media, which is nice. So we created a community in that sense. **Katrina**



# Educating the community



Many parents recognise the benefits of educating the broader community about rainbow families and are happy to take on this responsibility. In fact, parents often welcome the opportunity to talk about their families with other people. However, parents also draw a distinction between questions they regard as appropriate and helpful and questions that are intrusive or inappropriate.

Sometimes, it's difficult to assess the level of knowledge and understanding of a service, a kinder or a school, and parents can find themselves teaching 'Rainbow Families 101', especially if they are the first rainbow family the organisation has encountered. People might just need a little time to process what they are learning and get used to the idea of a different family formation.

A greater awareness among any staff or parents is almost always seen as a good thing, with

positive outcomes for children. Often, that awareness is passed on to others within the organisation, or in the broader community.

Sometimes educating people is about explaining our differences, while sometimes it's about pointing out the similarities. Open and honest conversations with others can go a long way to making them feel comfortable with your family and making your family comfortable with them.

You don't have to come out every single time someone makes an assumption that isn't correct.

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Some days you will just want to let this pass.  
Once children reach a certain age, however,  
they will be aware of what you say, and in what  
circumstance, and you will have to manage that.

# Parents say ...

## The role of 'educator'

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I've got a large family in Melbourne and some of them have said our family has led to some really good conversations with their kids about queer families. **Claire**

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A lot of the time, what we have trouble with isn't discrimination, it's simply difference. That's how I see it. And people aren't horrible to us, but they do see us as a little bit different and some don't necessarily want to get to know us. But a lot of other people do, so that's fine. **Mandy**

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We do feel that we have an educative role in the school community and we're happy with that. One mother said to me that when our daughter said she had two mums, she assumed it was her mum and her stepmum. I said, 'No, no, she's actually got two mums', and she was fine about that. I certainly feel like we've got to be out there, visible and educating the whole time. **Patricia**

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I don't mind educating people, except when I'm in a clothing boutique and people start asking how I got my twins and was it natural or was it IVF? It's none of their business. We had a one-liner for a few people, which was, 'I had a really low sperm count'. **Ruth**

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We have a lady who is our cleaner and nanny. She popped up because she has a daughter who is lesbian who had just come out and she decided working for us was a good way for her to get to know more about gay people. I guess she's building some bridges and coming to understand her daughter. **Anthony**

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I was out at work, but not with the students – but they were all very young, anyway. If I hadn't been gay myself, I probably would have felt more comfortable advocating for gay people and talking about that stuff in the classroom. **Sally**

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I always felt that I had to do the coming out thing quite frequently. As time has gone on, I have learnt that I don't always have to. You don't always have to point out the error if someone uses 'he' for your partner, you can just let it slide sometimes. I think I was quite righteous about that at first – I really wanted to make it known every time. **Bridget**

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A lot of the time you are trying to show people that you are not very different; that we are actually fairly boring old people, like they are, who struggle with the same domestic issues that they do. **Mandy**

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I think we don't just educate people about the gay community; I think we educate them about gender diversity as well. What people do, who they are, and what they can contribute, is not necessarily based on their gender, even though that's been a perception for a long time. We make people stop and think: if it's not the same for us, it could be different for other people, too. **Ruth**

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It felt like, in the two years since we had had our first daughter, things had really improved. And I do think that that's partly because of the activism of rainbow families and other people speaking out. Things have shifted in the last ten years or so. **Mandy**

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I think being up-front about it helps our children be okay about it. Our kids haven't ever come across anything negative. In fact, they have had friends who have commented to their parents about how lucky they are, having two mums. **Bridget**

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Rainbow families put a huge amount of effort into parenting and school communities because we don't want our kids to feel different and we need to feel part of that process. It does require a huge effort on our part as parents. **Mandy**

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I wasn't aware of the lack of exposure that people had had to gay families, so I was probably a bit blasé to begin with. I expected they would be completely *au fait* with it all. Then I realised that they actually had no tools to handle this situation, and no precedent. I think we might have been groundbreaking at that particular kinder. **Alison**

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It's important to educate the staff so they can carry that on in the classroom with the kids and it's not all on our children's shoulders to be educating everyone. I don't mind doing it, but I think it's a bit much to expect children to have to be constantly educating their peers. **Patricia**

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It's hard for people to get their heads around – it took me a while to get my head around it. People say, 'Do the kids have contact with their mum?' And it's like, *Well, which mum are you talking about?* You try to explain it: you tell them there's a biological mum and then there's the surrogate mum. You can see people haven't had time to think about it and they're confused. **Anthony**

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I remember once I took David to swimming lessons and I was talking to a mum who assumed I was breastfeeding. I just thought, *I'm in the middle of a swimming lesson, I can't really be bothered explaining that I'm not the mum that gave birth and my partner is breastfeeding*. I wouldn't ever want the kids to think that this is a secret, but then it's just a mum in a pool, and you don't have to come out every time.

**Michelle**

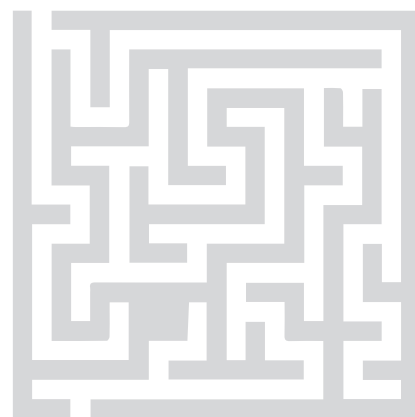
There are good family posters splashed all over the place. It's fantastic because people are being made aware that there are different sorts of families out there – people who would otherwise only meet heterosexual, nuclear families. **Alison**

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My 11-year-old had a play with a new friend and I dropped her off and sat down for a quick chat. The mother referred to my husband in one of those moments when I didn't bother to correct her. And then I thought, *I have just left Naomi there with that*. She had overheard me let it go and I had left her with the responsibility of coming out. I won't do that again. **Bridget**



# Rainbow families: The challenges



One of the biggest challenges for rainbow families is that we constantly have to come out and explain who we are, and there can often be a level of anxiety about how people will respond to us when we do.

Just being different from the norm means we regularly have to negotiate things that other families take for granted. Often, we find ourselves having to educate people in our community, including other parents, childcare staff and teachers.

The lack of societal understanding and acceptance can be very difficult, especially when children reach an age when they start to understand the implications of this. Negative comments expressed by politicians, religious leaders and social commentators can be very harmful.

Perhaps the biggest fear is that our children will be teased or bullied at school because of their family structure. While this certainly can occur, many parents find their fears of this are unfounded.

For some parents, being isolated or not knowing other rainbow families can be hard. Other parents would like to see greater representation of our families in popular culture and in the media, and a formal recognition of our families through marriage equality.

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# Parents say ...

## The biggest challenges

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It's not that bad, it's just that coming out is never going to stop. **Michelle**

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I don't find it difficult, to be honest. It's awkward having to come out all the time and I guess it's particularly awkward having to come out post-separation. That makes it a little harder. **Bec**

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We've done quite a bit of travel and we have not always bothered to come out. You feel like you are misleading people a bit and my daughter will say, 'Hang on, what are you saying? What are you letting them think?' I do find that really hard and we have had to explain to her that sometimes it's easier to just let it be. **Bridget**

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The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is probably just always being different to the norm and having to manage that difference on a day-to-day basis. **Mandy**

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I think it's probably just that educative role – that you constantly have to explain your family structure to new people when you meet them. Constantly. **Patricia**

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The constant second-guessing about how much of an issue it will be – and you don't want to get into the whole internalised homophobia, transphobia stuff – but is it really an issue or am I just considering something that doesn't exist? **Trudy**

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I think it is challenging assumptions all the time. And not just us, the kids have to do it constantly, too. **Nicola**

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One of the most difficult things for us would be going to a large event – like a traditional, country concert – where there were lots of people I was unsure about. Knowing we would be very visible as a gay family and not knowing what the response was going to be. **Anthony**

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## Protecting our children

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Looking ahead, what I worry about for the kids is bullying, but we're not there yet. I have read interviews with people who say it does normalise your family a bit if you are involved, and that is something I would see myself doing – getting involved, trying to make a connection with other parents. **Michelle**

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I think when he was younger it was my own apprehension and guilt. You think: *What is going to happen when he goes to primary school? Who do I need to protect him from – teachers, school kids, parents?* Anticipating all of that was probably the hardest thing. And that was all in my own mind, as it turned out. **Mark**

Probably just normalising it for the kids, that's the main thing for me. If your kid was getting bullied – but, touch wood, we haven't had any major issues with that at all – that would be hard. **Jenny**

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The worst thing for me is anxiety for my child about discrimination or teasing, I think. **Alison**

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## Societal views

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The thing that annoys me is all these politicians saying that kids of gay couples are going to turn out gay, or that we're not bringing them up correctly. That really pisses me off. They grow up just the same as in any other family. **Peter**

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I think for Sally, it's probably that she's in the no man's land of, *You're not in the dad's movie-night crew, and you're not in the mum's movie-night crew, so where are you?* **Ruth**

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Our kids have lots of female role models. They experience all of that just the same as any other family and it annoys me when people say that our sort of families don't work properly, because they do. We probably make sure our kids have access to role models more than heterosexual couples do. **Peter**

I think it's that invisibility; you walk down the street and everyone who sees me with the children assumes that I'm straight. People assume – or forget – that my partner is a woman. **Ruth**

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For a while, we were doing a pretty awful impersonation of a straight family. I'm pretty butch, and Gab's not, and people thought, *Well you're not mainstream, but is that because you're from Melbourne?!* **Trudy**

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The worst thing is not being able to be recognised as a family properly. Marriage is not necessarily important, but for us it's about the recognition that we are a family like any other family, and that's pretty important. **Peter**

You're also just battling the media assumption. Every program that the kids watch on *ABC4Kids* is always mum, dad and kids, so they constantly get this saturation about what families look like. And then you're saying, 'No, families come in all shapes and sizes'. I guess it would be nice if there were some children's programs that were more diverse. **Patricia**

## Other challenges

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You don't have anyone else around who's in the same situation; we're miles away from anyone else. **Ruth**

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Being a lesbian primary school teacher, you have to be so careful. I remember one year I had grade ones and a couple of the kids came and stood behind me and started massaging my shoulders and I felt really nervous. **Sally**

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The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is that it's a bit like you're speaking in French and they're listening in Tswana. **Ruth**

I think there is a big lack of information out there for people wanting to start a family. It's not until you are really determined to have a family that you actually go to the effort of finding out how you can make this happen, and there are still a lot of hurdles to go through. **Sally**

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At this stage, watching Jemima play mummy and daddy with her dolls and getting her to understand why there is no daddy. She is so young and kids don't get things at this age. **Ell**

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I think just being a family in today's society – when you are trying to juggle all those balls – is tough. Trying to get the work/life balance is probably the biggest thing, which has got nothing to do with the fact that we're two mums. **Julie**

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Maybe just having to explain or justify things, but I don't think our challenges are very different from other families. When I sit down with my mother's group and we talk, it's just the same sort of things. **Pia**

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I don't find anything difficult about it, but I'm quite old now. **Claire**

# Rainbow families: The rewards



The rewards of raising a rainbow family are manifold. For some parents there is delight simply in the fact that they are able to have a family at all, having thought that being LGBTI would exclude them from the possibility of parenting.

Many parents enjoy the fact that they can create their own ways of doing things, and explore new and different approaches to parenting that are not influenced by traditional gender roles.

For lots of parents, being different is something to be celebrated and enjoyed. They recognise that diversity is good for their kids and good for society. They appreciate that they are contributing to the broader community's

understanding of, and respect for, different family structures and LGBTI people generally.

There is a sense that children raised in rainbow families are more open and accepting of difference and that they are very resilient. There is enormous joy and pride for parents in raising happy, healthy, thriving kids in the face of societal judgement and criticism.

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# Parents say ...

## The biggest rewards

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I think there's a huge pride in having such gorgeous kids and living and enjoying our life without any constraints. It's a very different situation than a lot of people live with, I think.

It's positive being a rainbow family anywhere and I can't think of any negatives. **Claire**

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We've had so much positive feedback about the kids – how well and how happy they are. They look healthy and they're really happy kids. We don't really know, because we've never raised kids before, but that's the feedback we get.

**Anthony**

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I think with the triplets we're going to have a tribe of children. I guess I'm comforted by a few research studies floating around that say kids with two mums do very well. That's pretty exciting. Having been through this year, too, it makes sense to me. David is so happy. If anything, becoming a family with children has really enriched our lives. **Michelle**

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I knew I was gay from when I was about 12 and I thought I'd never be able to have a family. I always wanted to have children. I think being gay and being able to have children is just the best of both worlds, really: I am able to have a family, but I can still be who I am. **Peter**

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There's been enormous joy about raising a family together. The huge support we've had has been one of the delights for us, sometimes from unexpected quarters. Being a parent is the thing that binds you to other parents and the fact that you are two women is really secondary – in our experience, anyway. **Julie**

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The positives generally come from the community, particularly family and friends. There's a lot of acceptance. It is lovely to have a baby and will be lovely to have three more. The first year was a big learning curve, but it's a whole new area where my partner and I have had to work together. We just both love being mums. **Michelle**

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The kids are all different. They've got their own personalities, their own strengths and differences. They are their own person and they are growing up to be positive in their own individual way. And it's not like it's any different because they've got same-sex parents. It's a positive experience and they are becoming the individuals they were meant to be. **Anthony**

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I get to have the family and I gave up on when I came out. So, having a family – just being together and living the dream I gave up on because I thought I couldn't have it. **Eli**

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## Openness and diversity

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Far and away the best thing is what it gives Frances in terms of the range of experiences there are in the world. She is different in lots of ways – she's got bright red hair and very thick glasses, so she has a number of things that set her apart from the average kid, but being in a rainbow family is something she is inherently very proud of. It's a really big part of her identity and she feels genuine pride. **Trudy**

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The best part for me is introducing my child to a world that's full of diversity. **Alison**

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I guess it's nice to be something really different and new, particularly for this area. I think that's what we are. As far as we know, we are the first rainbow family with two gay dads and it is nice when people are interested in a positive way. I think it helps everybody. It does help the community overall, although there might be some resistance and some fear. I think, eventually, it does change the community and I can't see how that's not a positive impact. **Anthony**

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There is a certain openness and a necessity to talk to children very differently from the outset about life – how they came to be and who they are – and I think that's actually a real positive. **Pia**

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The best thing is the difference. I love diversity and I love that we can add a bit of diversity to the school community and expose other people to it and hopefully produce a better generation that is more open to other sorts of family structures. It can be exhausting, but it is also rewarding when people say, 'Oh, you're the first rainbow family I've met'. **Patricia**

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One of the best things is raising a resilient child from early on, because you are aware that they are going to have to cope with difference. I think our kids will be more resilient and I think some of the research shows that they are, because we've put such effort into preparing for all of that and being involved and addressing issues. **Mandy**

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## Other rewards

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I think the kids do a lot more thinking about what family means and what their family means to them. We've got quite a large donor family and we know lots of the siblings. Having that broadening our concept of family, and who is important to us, is an advantage. **Nicola**

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I think it really probably comes down to having two nurturers, and we've got a very equal balance in terms of the different things we do, but we're both very engaged with our kids. **Jenny**

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We both love being mums and we've got a lovely little boy. Not to be smug, but I think, if anything, it feels like we are at an advantage, maybe because we are two women. We are very in sync. We really support each other and you can see the results of all our hard work: we've just got such a happy little boy. You walk in the room and his eyes light up. **Michelle**

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The best thing is that we've just got a wonderful relationship. I think we're very compatible and I think life is great. We often have a little joke with Chris because he dates girls and he will actually come to us for advice. There's a standard line in our household, 'There's got to be some benefits to having two lesbian parents – like, we know how to pick up chicks!' **Jenny**

I've made some amazing friends out here in a suburb that's not where I grew up. I found my people here and I think part of that is because of how open I am. And I think part of why I am so open is because I want to rule out all the people who don't want to be my friend because I'm queer. My mum's a lesbian and I learnt to do that in high school. I remember saying that to her when I was sixteen, 'I just tell everyone, because if they've got a problem with it, then I know not to waste any more time'. **Bec**

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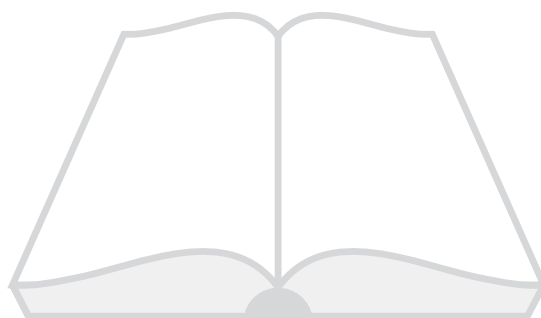
I think, in some respects at least, we are much more of a partnership than I've seen with heterosexual couples – although it might be a twin/multiple thing as well, because multiple dads are either 100 per cent or not at all. **Ruth**

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We had a boys' family and we'd do boy stuff, especially when he was a teenager. We were all on our bikes or we were out barbecuing. We'd go hiking and we would build stuff. It was just a bunch of blokes hanging out. I'm not particularly blokey, but it was nice. It was really easy and quite supportive because we were all on the same page. **Mark**



RESEARCH



# Child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: The evidence from Australia

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## Introduction

When making the decision to start a family, many first-time parents reasonably consider whether they can provide a healthy environment in which to raise children. For same-sex attracted parents, this question carries added weight in a society where many people promote traditional family values and two biological, married parents as the best way to raise a child. There are often questions around biological verses social parenting and whether this will cause problems. While every family is different,

and will therefore face their own challenges, it is helpful to have scientific, robust information about how children growing up in same-sex families are doing overall in terms of their health and wellbeing.

## The research

The Australian Study of Child Health in Same-Sex Families (ACHESS) provides the most recent Australian data on child health and wellbeing in families where at least one parent identifies as being same-sex attracted. It builds

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on around three decades of research on children with same-sex parents, but the ACHESS provides the largest set of data to date.

The ACHESS was conducted at the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne and collected information from families across 2012 and 2013. The aim was to capture the complete physical, mental and social wellbeing of Australian children with same-sex attracted parents. In other words, we wanted to find out just how well children in same-sex families are getting on, and how they are impacted by their non-traditional family situation.

## What we did

The study was advertised across a range of community settings, with families volunteering to take part. Special efforts were made to capture a range of family types so that our sample was as representative as possible. We had families with male parents, female parents and other-gendered parents. We had children born in the current same-sex relationship, in a previous heterosexual relationship and children with single parents. We had children born through sexual intercourse, donor insemination, surrogacy, and children who were fostered and adopted. The families came from all over Australia and the children ranged in age from two months to 18 years.

Two different types of data were collected. We used a survey to gather quantifiable data so we could make statistical comparisons against average scores from the Australia general population. Both parents and adolescent children completed surveys. We also collected interview data so we could make a more interpretive assessment of how children are doing. Entire families took part in family interviews, with children as young as three contributing.

## What we found

Our findings represented 500 children from 315 families. 80 per cent of the children had a female parent or parents, while 18 per cent had a male parent or parents.

Overall, children with same-sex attracted parents scored well in all aspects of their health and wellbeing, with few differences when compared to average scores for children in the general population. When there were differences, we found that the children with same-sex attracted parents scored better than children in the general population. These results were similar when parents answered the survey and when adolescent children answered the survey. The two areas where children with same-sex parents were doing particularly well were in terms of their overall general health and on measures of how well families get along, and how this impacts on their health.

While children are doing well overall, there are reports of experiences of stigma relating to their same-sex families. When this does occur, there is an association with poorer health outcomes on a number of measures. Clearly, there is a degree of resilience being instilled in children to maintain a good picture overall, but vigilance is required by parents to ensure that societal stigma does not have an adverse impact at an individual level.

From our research, however, what does not seem to be import in how well children are doing is the gender of their parent or parents.

When talking to children in the family interviews, they described their health in rather normal terms. They didn't see their families as being particularly unusual. They often talked about the benefits of having multiple parent figures, a combination of biological parents and social parents. Friends were often described as being important and even included as part of the family. There were some descriptions of times when people directly or indirectly made negative comments about their

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families, and while this was upsetting, it rarely had long-term impacts.

## What this means

Children with same-sex attracted parents in Australia are developing well in terms of their health and wellbeing, and this supports previous international research. The way in which same-sex parents construct families, not necessarily sticking to traditional parenting roles, helps families to get along well, which in turn is good for overall health. Families are aware of stigma in society and this is related to child health, but through strong resilience-building there is little overall impact on these children. Resilience-building is key and is developed through

resilient individuals, resilient families and resilient communities. Strong supports through rainbow family groups can assist in this resilience-building, as can openness with children about where they have come from and how their family is formed.

Families come in all shapes and sizes, enjoying different successes and facing different challenges. What the ACHESs suggests, however, is that parental sexual orientation itself does not negatively impact on child health and wellbeing and may even provide some benefits. Deciding to have children is always a big step, but same-sex attracted people should enjoy the journey knowing that their children will most likely be just fine.

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## Further reading

[www.achess.org.au](http://www.achess.org.au)

Crouch SR, McNair RP, Waters EB and Power J (2013). What makes a same-sex parented family? *Med J Aust* 199(2): 94-96

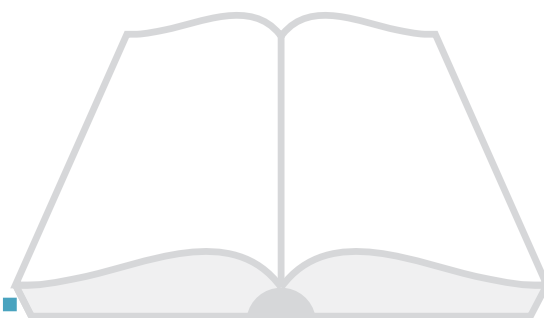
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## RESEARCH



# Work, love, play: Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families

## Dr Jen Power

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*Work, Love, Play* is a research project focusing on the health and wellbeing of same-sex attracted and transgender parents living in Australia and New Zealand, conducted between 2008 and 2014.

## Introduction

Anecdotally, there has been a massive increase in the number of LGBT-parented families in recent years. Reasons for this may include: changing societal attitudes; an increasing visibility and acceptance of non-traditional families; increased legal recognition of same-sex attracted couples; the changing culture within the LGBT community, wherein having

children is more accepted; greater awareness of surrogacy services; and decreased legal impediments to same-sex couples accessing fertility treatment.

## The research

For this study, LGBT parents were surveyed on three separate occasions and asked about:

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family formation, household organisation, parental wellbeing, social connectedness, experiences of discrimination and general challenges and strengths of family life.

The study also looked at the experience of LGBT parents in accessing health and welfare services. This involved focus groups with LGBT parents and also with mainstream service providers.

The study looked at what kind of training and information would be required by service providers to enable them to be more inclusive and better meet the needs of LGBT-parented families. This aspect of the project led to the development of a set of guidelines for working with LGBT-parented families<sup>1</sup>, as well as a training program for health and welfare staff.

## What we found

### Parents

Some possible experiences of LGBT parenting had already been identified by service providers and in previous studies. Non-birth mothers may experience insecurity or feel excluded when young children are highly dependent on the biological mother – during breastfeeding, for example. LGBT parents may feel the pain of family rejection more intensely when they have their own children. LGBT parents may have difficulty acknowledging they are not coping, and may feel pressure to be 'better than the rest'.

The Work, Love, Play study also identified other experiences amongst LGBT parents. The research confirms that the experience of LGBT parents is, in many ways, similar to that of heterosexual couples: there is less time for the parents' relationship as the couple suffers tiredness and fatigue and faces new and difficult challenges. In addition, the study identified the following:

- LGBT-parented families are diverse and include single parents, couples, step and blended families, as well as families where three or more adults share parenting together.
- Co-parenting relationships involving more than two parents are increasingly common within the LGBT community.
- Some bisexual parents are raising children with an opposite sex partner but still identify strongly with the LGBT community.
- The language used to define parents is often very important to LGBT parents.
- LGBT parents may – but certainly not always – have less support from their extended families, although children may also draw families together.
- LGBT couples manage household tasks more evenly and experience less relationship tension related to division of household labour than heterosexual couples.
- LGBT-parented families do not necessarily live in 'gay' areas. Many LGBT parents raise their children in the outer suburbs or regional/rural areas.
- While LGBT parents and their children encounter some homophobic discrimination or bullying, most families experience a lot of support and openness from their local communities and other (heterosexual) parents.

### Service providers

LGBT parents were asked about concerns or problems they had when using service providers. The study identified concerns about the following:

- How and when to come out to new service providers, particularly in relation to home visits.
- A lack of acknowledgement by the service provider of their relationship and family status.

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1. The Guidelines can be downloaded from : <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/guidelines-for-health-care-providers-working-with-same-sex-parented-families>

- Being asked invasive or insensitive questions about how children were conceived or their children's biological heritage.
- Misunderstanding of the parental role played by both partners, for example, the service providers not recognising the non-biological mother as a parent.
- Dealing with wrong assumptions, for example, that their partner is a sister or other family member.
- Anxiety or frustration about having to educate service providers about their lives.
- In some cases, dealing with obvious discomfort, judgement or discrimination.
- Providers not considering whether other services are LGBT-friendly when making referrals

Service providers were asked about their concerns in relation to working with LGBT families. The study identified the following:

- Feeling they had a lack of 'cultural competence' in working with LGBT families which led to anxiety about asking the right questions or 'messing up'.
- Not having sufficient knowledge about LGBT relationships and parenting, particularly the role of non-biological parents and how best to include them.
- Feeling confronted or challenged by motherless or fatherless families and confused about how to deal with this.
- Not having space in the workplace to talk openly about these concerns for fear of offending people.

The study identified a number of practical things service providers could do to make their practice more inclusive of LGBT families. These included:

- Provide indications that the service is LGBT-friendly, such as stickers and posters in the foyer, or advertising the service in LGBT publications.

- Create systems that make it easy for clients to 'come out', for example, intake forms that are inclusive and provide an opportunity for people to disclose their sexuality and/or gender of their partner.
- Make a habit of telling new clients a little about the service to indicate it is LGBT-friendly, for example, 'We regularly see all sorts of people: parents, non-parents, LGBT people, heterosexual people'.
- Guard against heterosexual assumptions, but also don't assume a LGBT person has never had heterosexual relationships or sex.
- Use gender-neutral language when referring to partners.
- Have conversations with the staff about working with LGBT people and give them an opportunity to raise their concerns without judgement.
- Provide staff with appropriate training.
- Spend time preparing for new clients.

### **'Door-opening' questions**

One of the concerns identified in the study was that service providers were anxious about saying the wrong things or asking the wrong questions, especially at intake interviews. The following 'door-opening' questions were identified as helpful:

- Tell me about your family life? Do you both work? Do you use childcare?
- Who are the significant people or caregivers in your child's life?
- How are you both adjusting to parenthood?
- How are you going with establishing a sleep routine for the baby?
- How is it going with the breastfeeding?
- How about we draw a genogram of significant people in your child's life?
- What do the kids call you both?

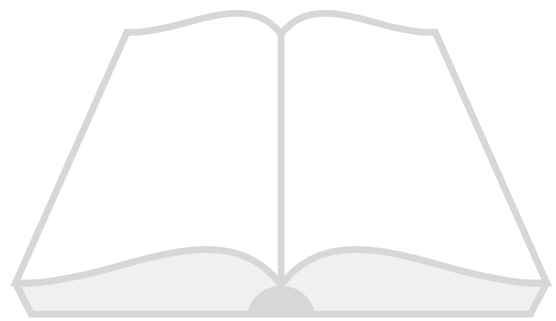
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Finally, the study identified some broad, general advice for service providers:

- Don't be scared about 'messaging up'. LGBT parents will generally notice and appreciate it if you just assume they are a family and treat them as such.
- Don't underestimate how powerful it can be for LGBT parents when a service provider makes some simple gestures that indicate they acknowledge and respect their relationship.
- Don't worry if you don't know who is a biological parent or who isn't. In most cases, it is not important, and some people will feel judged or belittled as a parent by your asking. If a client feels it is important, they will tell you.
- If you need to know about biology, then explain why it is important. For example, 'We like to keep track of the health of both parents, but we also need to check up on the physical health of the birth mother. Which of you carried the baby?'
- As much as possible, create opportunities for people to tell you about their families, including the names and language they use, for example, 'Do you call you donor "the donor" or "dad" or something else?'

For more information about the *Work, Love, Play* study, visit the Bouverie Centre website, **[www.bouverie.org.au/research/current-bouverie-research-projects](http://www.bouverie.org.au/research/current-bouverie-research-projects)**, or email Dr Jen Power at **[jennifer.power@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:jennifer.power@latrobe.edu.au)**.





## RESEARCH

# Transgender men and women and parenting

**Henry von Doussa**

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## Introduction

Over the past decade there has been increasing academic consideration paid to the health and wellbeing of LGBT parents and their children. However, despite the use of LGBT as an umbrella term, the majority of the research has focused on the experiences of lesbian parents, with little focus on other family types.

The experiences of transgender parents and their children are only recently receiving more research attention. In 2014, a joint research project between La Trobe and Flinders Universities sought to contribute further to the growing knowledge base regarding transgender

and gender diverse people's experiences of family, intimate relationships and parenting.

## What we did

The project gathered information from over 170 transgender and gender diverse people, and interviewed 13 people either face-to-face or over the phone. The interviews allowed us to really understand in detail the different lived experiences.

Of the 13 people, ten were transgender women and three were transgender men and the average age was 47 years. Five people were parents (one being a foster-parent) and one was

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an expectant parent, having a partner who was currently pregnant. We heard from people living in all Australian states and territories except for the Northern Territory.

## What we found

Transgender people have often been regarded as having relinquished the possibility of parenthood when transitioning. This research shows that transgender identities and parenthood are not mutually exclusive.

In the survey, we also asked participants to tell us about support and discrimination from their family of origin. Those who experienced more discrimination from their family of origin felt less supported as parents. Those who were closer to their family of origin felt more supported and, in turn, were more likely to want to have children.

In the second part of the study, where we conducted in-depth interviews, we gained a greater understanding of people's experiences with parenting and their use of health services.

One of the things we heard from participants was that they often put their transition on hold to avoid potential damage to their existing relationships. Participants were very thoughtful about the relationships around them. One participant explained that she didn't need her aging mum to know that she was gender diverse and that she spent a good deal of time living as a woman. So, while she was at home with her mum, she continued to present as a man. She would go out with friends and change at someone else's house or wait until her mum had gone to bed. She said, 'It's a small kindness I can offer mum at this late stage in her life.'

For transgender people who come out post parenthood, maintaining relationships with children and partners is a primary concern. One trans-woman who has two sons, for example, had decided not to transition fully until her boys were older. She waited until she thought her

sons were old enough to know that their dad was cross dressing and was involved with a support group. She said that in the end it came down to a sense that if she didn't transition she wouldn't be around much longer. She had waited as long as she could – transitioning became a life or death necessity, not a choice.

Another trans-woman who had her child post transition was really struggling with what she called her *authenticity*. She explained that as part of a lesbian rainbow family she'd done pretty well and had found parenting a joy. She'd made some really good friends as a parent and had been included in the local community, but she had only been out as a lesbian and never as transgender.

She explained that she wanted to take her friendships with other parents to the next level of honesty and authenticity, but didn't trust that she could. She was concerned about rejection or being treated differently if she disclosed her gender history. She was also concerned about how she would explain to her child the entirety of her life; how she'd tell her trans story as her child got older. These are the kinds of questions transgender parents may struggle with.

## Health care providers and support services

Participants were asked what a service provider could do to provide a meaningful and sensitive service encounter for people who are transgender or gender diverse. The majority said something like, 'Listen to us carefully and ask us about our lives.' They wanted people to be respectful, to ask about how they would like to be addressed, and to use correct pronouns.

Participants told us how important it is to make the healthcare environment welcoming and have identifying symbols and posters and things that say *you're welcome* so that people know right from the word 'go' that they are in a supportive space. All that can make a significant difference

to people accessing services and getting their needs met when they are there.

Some people said it annoyed them that, although there was an increasing amount of information about transgender healthcare needs available on the internet, it was not often utilised by service providers. Some participants said they understood that service providers may not always know how to offer an appropriate service to transgender or gender diverse people because they see so few transgender clients that they don't really get the chance to test their knowledge or practice their skills. Participants said, however, that preparation by a service provider before seeing a transgender or gender diverse client is always useful.

When reflecting on health services, one interviewee noted that service providers may only see transgender people when they are transitioning, which is a difficult time – often a time of crisis – and they don't see them at other times when they are okay. Because of this, some service providers may end up seeing transgender people in a pathologised way, because they don't see them going on to have fulfilled, happy lives; they don't see their lives unfold after gender transitioning.

## **Societal attitudes**

Some of the younger people told researchers they were frustrated by people around them thinking that being transgender is a major disability. It was important that people were positive and understood that transitioning was a positive life choice.

An older trans woman told researchers about service providers who had been thoughtful and done really kind things for her at her time of transitioning. One service provider took her yet-to-be-changed male driver's license at an intake interview and looked at the license, then looked at her and said, 'Well, I'm guessing there

is another name you want me to use.' She said that was just lovely.

That same woman, however, also reminded researchers that all transgender experiences will be different. She told the researchers, 'I'm an older woman and I work in the university sector. I'm very well educated, well resourced, and my health literacy is high; there will be other people who won't have those same privileges.'

A transgender grandmother reported that she would love it if she was included in Mother's Day, but it was fairly clear that wasn't going to happen. In her life, there was a disconnect between her sons accepting that dad had transitioned and was accepted as a grandparent, but not as a grandmother. 'I would love it if I was celebrated on Mother's Day,' she said.

A trans-man we interviewed spoke about his regret at not being able to become a biological parent because he'd had a hysterectomy as part of his transition. He felt he was rushed into transitioning surgically by health practitioners who pushed the health benefits of a hysterectomy, like reduced cancer risks and no longer needing pap smears. He was also told he'd be better off having all the surgery at one time. He said no one talked to him about fertility preservation or the possibility of having children biologically in the future.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health and the Endocrine Society clinical guidelines both say that bringing up the topic of parenthood or fertility preservation is part of best practice and it should happen at the time when people talk about beginning hormones.

This research reminds us that transgender and gender diverse people may be parenting in a variety of contexts. Some become parents before transitioning and some after; some are step-parents; some are parenting in larger

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co-parenting families with more than two parents; and some are foster-parents. A number of people in our research wish to have children in the future. Service providers can offer a service

that respects the family life of transgender and gender diverse clients by enquiring fully about how partners and children figure in their clients' lives now and into the future.

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This study was undertaken by Dr Jennifer Power and Henry von Doussa from La Trobe University and Dr Damien Riggs from Flinders University.

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## RESEARCH



# Intersex status and parenting: Organisation Intersex International

**Jacqui Tomlins**

Intersex status is a human variation that occurs at about the same frequency in society as people having red hair.

There is very little information available on the experiences of intersex people and parenting and little research has been undertaken in this area. Many – but not all – of the conditions that fall under the term ‘intersex’ result in infertility. However, intersex people may be actively involved in parenting as co-parents or foster parents.

## Definitions

The term ‘intersex’ is an umbrella term for a number of different conditions where a person may have biological attributes of both sexes, or lack some of the biological attributes considered necessary to be defined as one or

the other sex. A simple working definition used by Organisation Intersex International (OII) Australia is:

Intersex people are born with physical, hormonal or genetic features that are neither wholly female nor wholly male; or a combination of female and male; or neither female nor male.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights uses the following definition:

An intersex person is born with sexual anatomy, reproductive organs, and/or chromosome patterns that do not fit the typical definition of male or female. This may be apparent at birth or become so later in life. An intersex person may identify as male or female or as neither. Intersex status is not about sexual orientation or gender identity:

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intersex people experience the same range of sexual orientations and gender identities as non-intersex people.

## Service providers

The following information is from OII and offers some guidance on good practice for service providers:

Respectful assistance is the key to intersex-friendly service. Creating a safe and welcoming environment will build honesty and trust and ensure better service delivery. It is important for services to provide clear messages that allow intersex clients to disclose their intersex history or status if and when they want to and on their own terms.

Before you ask for client information, ask yourself if this information is actually relevant. Intake forms could ask: "Are you intersex?" with a simple yes or no answer required. If you are unsure about what pronoun or title to use, politely ask the client.

Intersex is a biological state rather than a sexual orientation or gender identity. Being inclusive of intersex people may mean changing your language and frame of reference.

Intersex people typically discover their intersex status when told by their parents or doctor. This is a different experience to the LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) concept of 'coming out' to family and friends.

Intersex people should not be presumed to be part of a lesbian, gay or bisexual community or collectively labelled as 'queer' as many intersex people are heterosexual. Being straight or heterosexual is therefore not the

opposite of LGBTI. When discussing outcomes/experiences of LGBTI people, consider using the term 'non- LGBTI' to represent people who do not identify as LGBTI.

Terms to avoid include pathologising language such as 'disorders of sex development'. The word 'hermaphrodite' is also regarded as stigmatising by some intersex people. Use the word 'intersex', or refer to intersex traits, variations or characteristics.

Most intersex people are not transgender or gender diverse. Avoid making assumptions that intersex people have, want to, or need to, transition.

Families where a parent or parents are intersex may experience isolation and secrecy and may not be comfortable to disclose the struggles they experience in starting a family.

Although many intersex people are heterosexual, some have formed strong alliances with LGBT communities because they face similar experiences of stigma and social exclusion based on assumptions and expectations about gender, sex and the body. Like LGBT people, intersex people often find they do not see their experiences reflected in the resources, language or stories around them. Anything that service providers can do to increase their understanding of intersex status will help to validate and normalise the lived experience of intersex people.

Further information is available at **[www.oii.org.au](http://www.oii.org.au)**.



## CASE STUDY

# Corin: 12 years of wisdom

Corin was conceived using identity release sperm through a Melbourne fertility clinic. He has been raised by two mums in a family that has always been very out and open. He goes to the local state school in an inner suburb. He loves reading, Minecraft and Lego and is highly indifferent to all types of sport.

In the following interview, Corin talks about school, friends and bullying. He also offers some advice to other kids being raised in a rainbow family, and provides some pointers for their parents, too.

### **Can you describe your family and school?**

I have two younger sisters and two mums. My school is very multicultural; we have lots of people from all over the world. There are very nice teachers – they are kind and if you need

help you can ask. If you are hurt they have an excellent sick bay. If you have any medical issues you can tell the office and they can make special arrangements.

### **Have you ever been teased at school?**

Yes. In grade four I had really long hair and people said I looked like a girl. Lots of people called me *Rapunzel* and I just said, 'Look at the people who go surfing!' And that shut them up.



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## What about other kids, do they get teased?

People do get teased at school. I mean, we don't have a lot of racism or sexism, which is good. It's mainly about ... well, we have lots of footy fans and people say, 'Oh my God, you're so dumb because you barrack for Collingwood'.

## But what about having two mums?

One person tried to tease me. I just looked at them straight in the eyes without smiling and said, 'If you have nothing better to do than tease me about having two mums, that is just sad – that is really sad', and they just walked off. I made them see sense because, honestly, kids won't really get teased about having two mums – it's about football, soccer, competitive stuff.

## What do other kids think?

Well, my friends think it's great because they like my mums and they're fine with it. People in my class, when they found out, nobody went, 'That's weird'. They all said, 'Oh, hmm, good'. Nobody has teased me. Some of them didn't even care and I'd rather that. Like, I was happy that some people actually thought it was pretty cool, but I don't really care.

## What advice would you give to other kids?

I would suggest to other kids not to tease anybody because they will tease you back. Tell this to your kids – trust me, it will help them. If it turns out that these kids tease people behind their backs, don't become friends with them.

I would try to make good friends. Don't become friends with someone just because you like the same footy team as them, become friends because you actually really like them.

You don't have to share the same interests. Like Jack – he is my best friend – he loves

baseball, but I don't. But I've been to watch his team and I'm really supportive of him. I think you should do what you love. So I'm friends with him because, even though we don't share the same interests, we acknowledge that and we learn about each other's interests.

If you are being teased at school, always tell your parents. This is how I dealt with it: if it goes on for a day, tell your parents, but tell them not to tell the teacher. If it goes on for a week, tell your parents to tell the teacher. If it goes on longer than that, keep telling your teacher every time it happens. If it still goes on, then it can become bullying and that will get the principal involved, so hopefully you can stop it before then.

I knew a situation like that, where someone got teased so much it eventually went to the principal. It wasn't because of gay mums and dads, it was something else, but I'm not going to say. I swore not to tell because it makes the person feel really uncomfortable and they probably don't want it to be public.

## And what advice would you have for parents?

Don't get too involved with the child. I know some kids – and I'm not mentioning any names here – their parents have too much to do with their kid's life and it's just really not good because they are too protective. I honestly think that's a really bad thing because if the parents are too protective, the child gets no opportunity to explore. If they get no opportunity to explore, their lives are not going to be amazing like other people's who do get to explore. And kids need that little freedom; it's really handy for them and it will help them develop social skills.

I would also say to the parents, *Try to talk to the teacher*. That always helps. My parents did that just to make sure there was no teasing going on. If your child comes home looking really sad or looking like something has happened, ask them what's wrong. It can really help. My parents ask



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me if I come home looking sad and I tell them if something bad has happened.

### **Does it come up in any other context at school, the having two mums thing?**

I'm going to explain about *That's so gay*. This is very handy for parents. At school, kids probably will experience a lot of this. They say, 'Oh my God, that's so gay!' And most times people don't know what it means. In prep it never happened, but in grade three I heard it and it's just stupid. They use it to mean bad and that can really hurt someone's feelings.

It's hard. There were kids saying it at school, so I challenged them and said, 'Do you even know what it means?' And they said, 'Of course we do, we're not idiots. It's two people who love each other of the same sex.' And I'm like, 'Yes, so why are you using it in that context? You say "That's so gay", but not in the right context and that's pretty offensive. Actually, no, that is really offensive. It is offensive to every gay mum and dad out there. Saying "That's so gay" is like teasing all gay people. It's super offensive'.

### **How did that play out?**

I ran off and I told my teacher. She's a really nice person – she helps me whenever I'm stuck. She dealt with them and said thank you for telling her and that I did the right thing standing up for my parents.

And last year I had a severe case of *That's so gay*. I took a week of it and then told my teacher, because it was really hurting my feelings and I spent a whole lunch time crying. It can make people ... you can really hurt someone's feelings. I honestly think everyone should respect everyone else's family.

### **What did your teacher do?**

She spoke to the kids at circle time and she said it was like saying 'Oh my God, that's so Greek', and I thought that was a great example.

### **Anything else you would like to add?**

Yes, this is for the kids. If someone asks you about how you were born – if you don't have a dad – just say, 'I'm not telling you. That's private'. If they ask for the details, say, 'I'm not revealing the details. Your parents will tell you when you are old enough to understand'. I only tell my closest friends and I trust them because I know they will not go around saying, 'Oh my God, blah blah blah'. I tell them how I was born, but I don't really want to reveal that too often because it's private; it's my secret.

I just want to tell kids about one thing – parents and kids, actually. My mums have some friends and they have the same donor as us, so I have a half-sister and half-brother. We are half-siblings and we're fine with that. We get along really well. It's cool. So kids, if you meet someone and they have the same donor, it's okay.





## CASE STUDY

# Julie and Marg, Noah and Georgia: Talking with teenagers

Julie and Marg met at work in the early 1980s and have been together for 30 years. They have two children, Georgia, 17 and Noah, 15. The teenagers have the same dad who is a gay friend of Julie and Marg's. The family lives in an inner Melbourne suburb and both mums work in education.

For five years, early on in their relationship, they lived with Julie's lesbian sister, Pam. Together, they co-parented Pam's daughter, who is now twenty-five and, although she lives overseas, she is still a very important part of their lives. It was only after Julie's sister and niece moved out of their shared home that Julie and Marg started discussing the possibility of having children of their own. At the time (early 1990s) there was very little visibility of rainbow families in Melbourne and no internet. They relied on a couple of American

books from a gay bookshop to answer their many questions on same-sex parenting. In the following interview, Julie shares some of her family's journey since those early days.

### **How was the kids' transition to high school?**

I think the transition from primary to high school is a strange one for families, and particularly for

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parents who have had a fair amount of contact with the school. All of a sudden, you are a bit more invisible, and the kids don't expect you to be part of their lives in the same way.

Noah goes to a local state high school and Georgia goes to a Catholic school. The transition for both of them was easy. We're a family that is certainly out, and I think that's one thing you learn pretty quickly when you have kids: they out you all the time. So we're certainly a very out family, but not necessarily a rainbow-flag-waving family if you like; that's who we are and how we are.

They are two very different schools – a Catholic girls' school was certainly an interesting choice and there have been a few raised eyebrows from some of our friends. It wasn't a choice we made lightly. Both Marg and I had single-sex schooling ourselves – me in the government system and Marg through the Catholic system – and both had really good experiences. Georgia is quite sporty – the school has a really good sports program and it seemed like the right match. She's heading into her final year as school captain so something has been right for her.

### **Can you tell me a little more about how you came to that decision?**

It's interesting because, as I said, Marg had the Catholic education and I didn't. I went kicking and screaming to the information night when Georgia was in grade five. I really didn't want to entertain the thought, but I came away incredibly impressed with what I'd seen. Confident young women took us on the tour and, without any adult supervision, were answering questions really well, and clearly had a passion for their school. The pastoral care there really impressed me and I liked the social justice foundation which runs through the school. And the fact that, from teenage girls, there was a lot of talk about 'us' and 'community' rather than 'me, me, me' was a great thing.

### **And how did the school respond to you as two mums, as a lesbian couple?**

They were fine with that. Again, you don't have a lot to do with school and luckily our kids haven't had any major problems, but we have been more involved in the last six months around some of the activities Georgia has been doing as school captain. So we've been to a few school functions and I've had a few conversations with the principal, but never had any sense that it's not totally cool. In fact, I would even go further than that and say I think there is definitely a small cohort of teachers who have celebrated the fact that there is a rainbow family in their midst.

Noah's school has been terrific. We chose it because of the vicinity and for some of the programs, but it also had a rainbow alliance which I think is a really nice, affirming thing. It's got diversity policies and it's just got a good feel about it.

Both schools know that there are two mums at home and are happy to talk to either of us. And little things have been important, like letters home have always been addressed to both of us.

### **Do Noah and Georgia have a supportive group of friends?**

They've got heaps of friends, some that they've had since kindergarten. One of Noah's best friends is a friend he's had since kinder and primary school. They went off to separate high schools, but they still hang out a lot. And Georgia's got a whole lot of friends at her school, too.

And we still maintain really close links with our lesbian parent playgroup, and that's great. When I was talking with the kids, they said they feel the playgroup really helped them over the years. There's about ten or twelve families and last weekend we had a picnic in the local

gardens. The kids are starting to socialise without us, which is sort of strange, but really nice. There's a real kinship there, I guess, and a tribe sort of feeling between all the families; it's very special.

Last night I asked the kids, 'What makes it hard for you being part of a gay family, and what helps?' One of the things they said was the fear of friends with heterosexual parents not accepting them, but they went on to say that hardly ever happens. But the thought that it might can be tricky.

Georgia said that explaining the situation to people can sometimes be hard and they often assume that her parents were together and then separated and then her mum came out as gay. That's often what you see in the media.

They both talked about choosing who to tell and that you don't tell people, particularly in high school, until you've built up some sort of trust with them. Noah said that if you do tell them and they don't accept it, then obviously they are not very good friends.

They said being honest about their story helped them, including the story of how they were conceived. That was just part of their story growing up and they've known forever about having two mums and a gay dad.

Georgia said she thought that being in a gay family helps her have more understanding of other people and acceptance of diversity, which I am sure is true. She said we've taught her to stand up for what she believes and she talked about going to the Pride March when she was little. She said it was really fun and made her realise she was part of a big community.

They both talked about not being too out and letting them decide who they tell about our family. They said it's really good to be able to joke about having two mums with the kids from playgroup who just get it. There's no groundwork to be done there – they've grown up together and they know what it's like. I'm

sure there are lots of raised eyebrows between the kids now about their doting parents. Let's be honest, none of the kids have been born by accident; we're all doting parents and very involved in their lives. I think it's nice they can have that outlet.

## **Have you had any problems with teasing or bullying?**

No. As an educator, I think it is unfortunately one of the biggest fears of parents generally. And unnecessarily so, really. I think that all the early years of parenting we do (and gay parenting is good parenting in my view), helping kids to have good self-esteem, have a bit of a sense of humour, not take themselves too seriously, and become quite resilient – hopefully does make them into pretty resilient kids.

I think we have to step back. We have to let kids fall and get up, dust themselves off and learn to navigate their way in the world. We're actually not doing them any favours by getting in and trying to ease the bumps of life because life's not like that.

Noah's school certainly has a well-documented diversity policy. It was one of a small group that piloted the policy and it's about making sure that diversity is celebrated and supported, and the rainbow alliance is part of that.

You get all this media about cyberbullying and we talk about that stuff a lot. If they are telling me the truth, it has never been something they've experienced to any degree that has caused them concern.

## **What would you say to parents with kids heading into the teenage years?**

I have often said I think teenagers get a really bad rap. I've enjoyed every stage of my kids. Certainly, when they are little, it's physically really hard. Someone said to me once, 'Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems',

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and that's true up to a point. You're dealing with some fairly big and messy issues when you're talking about young people trying to navigate their world, but it's also exciting.

For people with kids in the teenage years, I would say just go with the flow and you'll grow with your kids. When you've got a newborn, you can't imagine having a toddler and when you've got a toddler you can't imagine having a ten-year-old, but they do grow and this is a great age; we're really enjoying it.

Nobody told me how funny teenagers are and how they keep you very grounded. They're fun and we laugh a lot. We fight, too, and it can be quite loud, but they're at a very passionate age and it's wonderful to see all that work you've put in for all those years come to fruition.

I guess the other thing is that it's lovely to watch the sibling relationship develop and to know at some point in the future, when we're presumably not in the picture, there's still a really lovely bond there that will continue.

There's been enormous joy in raising a family together. The huge support – sometimes from unexpected quarters – has been one of the delights for us. Being a parent is the thing that binds you to other parents. The fact that you are two women is really secondary – in our experience, anyway. I'd say, don't expect bad stuff. It might happen and you will deal with it, but go with the flow and enjoy it. It's a crazy ride, but most of it is pretty good.



## CASE STUDY

# Fiona and Hamish: A response to teasing

Fiona and her partner, Camille, live in the inner-eastern suburbs of Melbourne where their eight-year-old son and daughter, Hamish and Sasha, go to the local state primary school. They are the only same-sex family at the school, but the school has acknowledged them both as mothers and been sensitive to them as a family. A while ago, they came up against a problem that worries many of us. Fiona describes how they, as a family, dealt with the issue.

### Can you tell me how this all started?

Hamish started saying he didn't want to go to school. Some of it was just normal separation anxiety, like after a holiday or at the end of the weekend. We spoke to him about it, and we spoke to his teacher, but he wouldn't tell us why; he just said he was tired.

Then, a couple of weekends later, he and I were lying on the bed reading books and he

was telling me a funny story. He's really quite humorous and I said to him, 'You've got a really good sense of humour. Do your friends at school think you're funny?' And all of a sudden he looked very sad – he was crestfallen – and I thought, *Something's going on and I've got to get to the bottom of it.*

But he just wouldn't tell me. In the end, I said that if it was something about Mama and me that we wouldn't be upset by it, that we'd help him

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work it out and that he didn't need to protect us. Then he said that some of the girls at school had said that it was weird having two mums and he'd felt really upset about it. He was clearly worried and he didn't know how to respond.

Sasha came along at that point and overheard the conversation, so we brainstormed what they could do or say. Sasha had lots of suggestions, including giving the girls '50 knuckle sandwiches'! We talked about how the knuckle sandwiches perhaps weren't the most appropriate response, but that it was really good to stand up for yourself.

Instead, together, we came up with some phrases: *There are all different types of families; there's nothing weird about ours.*

*I know lots of people who have two mums or two dads, and some people only have one mum or one dad and some people are adopted.*

*There are all different types of families and that's what makes the world go around. You know, everyone's different.*

*People come from different countries. People are different shapes and sizes.*

It was really a conversation about difference and diversity and afterwards Sasha wanted to role-play – we do a lot of role-play in our house. You know, *I'll be the bully and you stand up to me.* Hamish felt better after that; I think he was relieved.

We talked about me going to see the teachers. I told them we had some posters we could take to school and that we could go through the bookshelves and find all the books about families with two mums or two dads and show the teachers.

## **So you arranged to talk to the school?**

Yes. The following week I went off to school armed with my posters and books: *And Tango Makes Three*, a couple of Todd Parr's (*The Family Book* and *Everyone's Different*), and

one about a dragon with two mums. I sat down with the two teachers and explained what had happened.

They were really very accepting and wanted to know what they could do. They had already thought about how they could incorporate normalising our family into the curriculum. They asked whether there had been any issues in prep and whether anything had been done previously. I explained that this was the first time anything had come up, and that we only wanted to respond as and when the need arose, rather than making a big song and dance unnecessarily.

I planned to give them two posters, but I had ten rolled up in a bundle and they asked if they could have them all. They were going to raise the issue at a staff meeting and discuss how they could use the posters with all age groups. They said the posters would be really helpful in explaining diversity on all sorts of levels, including adoption and separated families. And they said they would read the books and think about how to include them unobtrusively at story time.

## **That's a great response.**

It was. So at the end of that discussion, I said that I was happy for them to ask me anything they liked, whether they were curiosity questions or anything they felt they'd like to know that would help their understanding of my family. I said, 'Don't feel like you need to be polite'.

One of them asked how we went about having the kids and who bore them. I explained it all, including the fact they didn't have a dad – they had a donor who was called Andrew, but who we didn't know.

The teacher said that she had come across a few lesbian parents – not just in teaching, but in her personal life – and they all seemed so loving and thoughtful about their families. She felt their families were so carefully planned and she'd been very impressed.



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Then she gave us a whole load of positive feedback about the kids – that they were just the most beautiful, kind and thoughtful children who were very engaging and considerate of other people's feelings. She said they were just the most delightful children she'd had in years. I was really chuffed with all that!

Then, after drop-off a few days later, I peeked through the window and saw her pointing to the poster and having a discussion with all the children sitting on the floor. She told me later that lots of kids put their hands up; a girl who was adopted, a couple of kids from different countries, and some in different family arrangements. Sasha put her hand up and told the class, 'One of my friends who's called Ruben has two dads. We know lots of people with two mums and two dads and they're called rainbow families'.

### **How did the kids react afterwards?**

When Hamish came home that day he was so excited. He had some friends over and he told them all about it – how the posters about rainbow families had been put up in the classrooms and how they'd talked about them and how they'd read the books. And it was all because he'd said something. He was really proud and impressed that speaking up about it had led to this really helpful course of action.

Afterwards, he was definitely a lot better, and I said to him that he seemed so much happier and he said, 'Yes, it's because they put the posters up'.

The very first time Hamish told me what had happened, I felt like crying. I was so upset and it was very intense. But then, it had such a good ending and Hamish felt so much happier, I felt really good. It was lovely; the teachers were so great. They gave us such positive feedback and they didn't treat us like we were a problem.

I think there is something about the attitude with which you approach this. We were not confrontational at all and I gave the teachers the chance to ask questions. Also, I explained I didn't want anything said to the girls who had made the comments in the first place; they're just children and they're learning. They need to understand about diversity and they don't need to be pulled up individually, unless it becomes persistent.

So, we didn't go in with a confrontational attitude like, *This is outrageous and it shouldn't be happening and what are you doing about it!?* We went about it in a collaborative way, so they weren't on the defensive with us, and I think that really helped.





## CASE STUDY

# Frances and her mums: Transgender parenting

Trudy and Gaby have been together for five years and they have an 11-year-old daughter, Frances. They live in Mirboo North, a small rural community in Gippsland, Victoria. I originally interviewed Trudy in 2013 and I caught up with her again recently for an update. Trudy talks about her experience of raising Frances, and the journey she is taking with her partner, Gaby.

### Can you tell me about your family?

My partner, Gaby, and I met about five years ago and last year we got married. Gaby is transgender and is in the process of transitioning to female. She started that process fairly seriously about a year after we met, in her mid-forties. We got married before she changed her name so technically she is my 'husband' at the moment.

Gaby had identified as trans privately since she was very young, but she was married for a long time to somebody who was never going to

accept it. They had three children who are now grown up. She kept it completely private, except for a couple of very close friends and it was never an option to transition, or even be out. Gaby's marriage ended 18 months before we met.

It is now pretty well established that gender dysphoria has a biological cause. The short version is that you are born with a male body and a female brain – or the other way around, of course. So if our brain is where our core self is – our memories, dreams, thoughts, passions and soul – it's not that Gaby is a man trying to

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be a woman, it's that she's a woman who is fed up looking like a man. In many ways, transition has not been so much about changing gender – because in Gab's mind, she's always been female – nor even about affirming her gender: it's about transitioning from feeling trapped to feeling free.

Gaby is currently nearing the end of her transition. She changed her legal name and gender last June and is now Gabrielle (the formal version) or Gaby. All this has had its own challenges and joys in terms of being out in the town we live in and the surrounding communities where we work. But now she/we are completely out to everybody, and it remains – for the most part – a good news story, which is great.

Gaby works in the building industry as a designer and was fully expecting some negative reaction, but sometimes it's good when you're wrong. It hasn't been perfect. Now that it's all public, some family and friends are struggling a little, but not very much, and there is much love and acceptance around.

Gaby's adult kids are all okay with the changes. Indeed, she recalls telling her oldest daughter (now 24) that she was trans and the reply was, 'No shit, Sherlock!' So it seems you can't really hide.

We have Frances, who is 11 now and lives primarily with us. She spends every second weekend and half the holidays with my ex, Carol. Frances' legal parents are Carol and me, and Gaby is a step-parent. From pretty much the time she could talk, Frances used to scream out in the playground, 'My name is Frances and I've got two mums!' She's always been like that, had that confidence and that pride.

## And tell me about where you live?

We live about 150 kilometres from Melbourne in a smallish community of about 2500 people, and it's heaven on earth. In 2009, when I met Gaby, she lived in much tinier community three and a half hours from Melbourne, where she'd lived for 27 years; a really lovely little community.

When we decided we were going to build a life together, we looked for a small rural community that was going to be progressive and a little closer to Melbourne. We drove through the town and saw the newsagent had a rainbow flag flying from it and found out it was owned by two men who are very much part of the community. There's a lot of acceptance here that doesn't always occur in other rural communities.

## How has the community responded to your family?

It's mostly positive. Gab did not come out to a lot of people in the community straight away, though I certainly am completely out. There was a sense that I used to be one of *those* – a *lesbian* – and now I'm not. When we got married it was like, *Everything is okay now; she wasn't okay, but now she's fixed*. They know better now ...

Most of the kids at school know that Frances has a 'different' sort of family, they are just not sure of the details. And to most of them it doesn't matter. There have been a couple of tiny incidents, but really it could have been about her red hair or her glasses, and certainly the school administration and her teachers are very supportive.

So we are seen as a rainbow family, not that many people in the community really understand what that is. With Gaby, it's a fairly complex situation and we wanted to take our time with it. It's that whole thing about: *Do you come out to everyone in the supermarket queue?* That can be so unbelievably exhausting. As Gaby's transition progressed, people could clearly see the femininity, her long hair and rounded features. I think they are on a journey too, and in fact, that was our strategy – to bring people with us on the journey.

## How has the journey been for Frances?

She said, 'OMG. Three mums! Mother's day is going to be a nightmare!'

Frances is different in lots of ways. She's got bright red hair and very thick glasses. She's also incredibly artistic but simply cannot understand maths, so she has a number of things that hold her apart from the average kid. But being in a rainbow family is something she is inherently very proud of. She's very proud of the fact that she's a little different, too; it's a really big part of her identity. But of course in that whole pre-adolescent way there's an edge of, *Oh my God that's so embarrassing!*

Frances sometimes used to get low-level freaked-out about Gaby's physical transition, because she was not completely clear about how Gaby would present. But she's largely fine with it and is pretty resilient. She's got a good social network and her friends and their parents have all found out in the last 12 months with very few problems.

There will always be little things and we are taking it very, very carefully. We were conscious of the burden of secrecy we were, by default, placing on Frances, particularly prior to Gaby's legal name change. I deliberately sought opportunities to talk to the parents of Frances' friends and so far it has been fine. We deliberately wanted to run ahead of the rumour-mill but it worked out to be a lot deeper than that; being honest, being genuine has a power. It is scary but, for the most part, it has been fine. Our openness has meant that even those people who are unsure are honest and are still our friends, and that means a lot. Frances' friends couldn't care less, which is as it should be.

Part of our strategy is that I've been really involved in a few community groups, including cubs/scouts, and that seems to be working really well. There's a very significant Christian community and my involvement means people get to know us as a family – we're not a *thing* we're an *us*.

We're still fairly new in this community but we've really been accepted and we know lots of people. For a while, we were doing a pretty

awful impersonation of a straight family. I'm pretty butch and Gab's not and people thought, *Well you're not mainstream, but is that because you're from Melbourne?!*

## **So what happens to your marital status now?**

We ummed and aahed about getting married and thought about waiting for the laws to change. But we love each other too much and decided we actually wanted to get married as quickly as possible. And we did and it was great.

When people ask if we are married, we say 'yes', but there are currently two things in the way of Gaby changing her legal gender on her birth certificate. Gender affirmation surgery needs to be completed (scheduled for mid-2015) and you actually have to be single. That's really awful, because the reason we would have to cite on divorce papers would be 'irreconcilable differences', which basically means we'd be committing perjury and Gaby is not prepared to do that. It's a stupid system. So we will have to wait for the marriage laws to change – and they will at some point – before birth certificate changes can be completed. And then I can legally have a wife!

What makes this even more ridiculous is that, almost without exception, every single organisation, professional body and government department has completely accepted Gab's change, including gender markers like *Ms* on all paperwork and forms. Banks, VicRoads, Medicare, superannuation and professional associations have all been fine with it. But Centrelink insist on calling her *Mr*. They are completely okay with her name change, just not the gender markers. Sheesh! On the one hand, we are incredibly lucky to already be married when so many others in our community cannot be, but there are so many inconsistencies.

How we got here – and how it all links together – is unique, but it works. It's a tricky journey but it's

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right for us. We celebrate a good day by having a great family dinner. We look forward to different events each week. We love birthdays and hate it when *Doctor Who* and *Master Chef* aren't on, or when someone forgets to put the iPad on charge. At the end of the day, we're just a family.

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**Jacqui Tomlins**

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# Resources

Jacqui Tomlins: writer | trainer | blogger  
**[www.jacquitomlins.com](http://www.jacquitomlins.com)**

Rainbow Families Council  
**[www.rainbowfamilies.org.au](http://www.rainbowfamilies.org.au)**

Gay Dads Australia  
**[www.gaydadsaustralia.com.au](http://www.gaydadsaustralia.com.au)**

Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria  
**[www.glhv.org.au](http://www.glhv.org.au)**

National LGBT Health Alliance  
**[www.lgbtihealth.org.au](http://www.lgbtihealth.org.au)**

Gay and Lesbian Switchboard  
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No to homophobia campaign  
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Organisation Intersex International  
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Transgender Victoria  
**[www.transgendervictoria.com](http://www.transgendervictoria.com)**

Bisexual Alliance Victoria  
**[www.bi-alliance.org](http://www.bi-alliance.org)**

Bouverie Centre  
**[www.bouverie.org.ua](http://www.bouverie.org.ua)**

Northside Clinic  
**[www.northsideclinic.net.au](http://www.northsideclinic.net.au)**

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