

# Shared Fate in Gay & Lesbian Families

by Julie M. Randolph

My partner and I began our adoption journey more than seven years ago. We sat through classes on "How to Adopt", "Parenting After Adoption", and "Open Adoption Relationships". We also immersed ourselves in everything that was available about parenting as a lesbian couple. Along the way, we were exposed to David Kirk's book *Shared Fate*, an adoption classic published in 1964, that redefined the adoption experience for straight couples who come to adoption after struggles with infertility.

When H. David Kirk first suggested his *Shared Fate* theory in 1964, the notion that it would be helpful in building the family relationship for adoptive parents to acknowledge to themselves and their children that adoptive families are different from families created through birth was revolutionary. For many years, only infertile couples could adopt, and the advice to them was to keep adoption quiet (don't "make an issue" of it). They were told to just act as if the child by adoption was in exactly the same situation as a child born to the family. But Kirk's idea was that the "shared fate" of two generations coming together through loss could be used to build empathy and connection between parents and child, and that loss shouldn't just be hidden away.

Kirk wrote eloquently of the woman and man who could not bear children struggling with the disappointment of infertility. For these couples, failing to meet their own, their families', and society's expectations created a crisis and they were encouraged to view adoption as a way to resolve that crisis. He questioned the assumption that because they could not fulfill their societally-expected roles of "mother" and "father" by giving birth to children they were somehow less valuable types of parents. The child adopted by these couples had also lost his or her original family and the genetic connection to parents. As such, the child also lost societal status. Being "given away" for adoption was not (and too often still is not) seen as a valued position.

Being raised as an "adopted child" marked them as different from the other children they knew. Kirk wrote that acknowledging these commonalities in the losses experienced by adoptive parents and adopted children honored the truth, created openness and trust, and gave adoptive parents and children common ground on which to stand.

Besides allowing adoptive parents to deal with real feelings of loss that go along with adoption – their own feelings as well as their child's – Kirk's perspective had an added benefit.

Adoptive families were no longer put in the position of pretending to be the "optimal" kind of family – the genetically connected family – and trying not to be the "lesser" kind of family – an adoptive family. According to Kirk, not only was it OK to acknowledge being an adoptive family rather than trying to hide it, acceptance of the differences inherent in being an adoptive family would actually strengthen the bond between parent and child. When adoptive parents become aware of their "shared fate" with their child, that awareness creates empathy and closeness.

Early in my own adoption journey, I did not see how acknowledging shared loss with my child would be helpful to my family. I remember sitting in the workshops with other adoptive parents-to-be discounting all of the discussions about infertility and loss. After all, my partner and I had chosen to adopt. We could have gone the way of many other lesbian and gay parents, and made sure there was a genetic connection between us and our kids, but we didn't – by choice. As far as I was concerned, that meant that David Kirk's ideas about "shared fate" were interesting, but didn't really apply to us. I was, like so many other parents who begin thinking about whether to adopt, trying to distance myself from the difficult feelings adoption can raise, and imagining that my family would be "just like" the traditional family that society has held out as the ideal.

As a lesbian parent, that denial of difference was vitally important to me. Celebrating my status as a lesbian mom-to-be, and insisting that my partner and I could raise a child "just like" any heterosexual couple was a response to all of the criticism, legislation, court rulings and general societal condemnation of lesbians and gays actually having the temerity to believe they could and should be allowed to openly raise children.

For lesbian and gay parents, refusing to accept the view that our parenting status involves some kind of "loss," becomes a necessary defense. In our journey to become parents we tell ourselves that – unlike straight couples – we don't need to be defined by biology.

There is no imperative for lesbian and gay couples to reproduce. We have the complete freedom to decide on our own to parent or not – or at least, we should have. There are kids out there who need us, and if we adopt it is a wonderful thing for everyone involved.

We tell ourselves that, and continue to insist on it as the adoption process underscores our “second best” status. In most parts of the county, lesbian and gay parents are advised to adopt as if they were single. Home-studies focus on one parent; in most situations couples cannot adopt jointly; most states don’t allow the second parent to adopt even after the original adoption is finalized. Then there’s the idea that far too many social workers hold on to – lesbian/gay parents should be happy to get kids that the system labels “hard to place.” Social workers will push to place kids with serious emotional issues resulting from abuse or neglect with unprepared first time lesbian or gay parents. Or they will urge white lesbian or gay couples who have never contemplated transracial adoption to parent children of color simply because “they’re the kind of kids you can get.”

And the questioning of our legitimacy as a family continues after the adoption is all said and done. Maintaining a family as a gay or lesbian couple without legal marital status underscores the differences on a regular, if not daily, basis. Too many of us are familiar with the following exchange with school (or pre-school or camp or daycare or medical care or insurance) staff: “No, I’m his other mother. Yes, he has two mothers. Both of us should be on the form. I know there’s no space for that, but you can just cross out ‘father’ and write in ‘other parent’.” Then come the questions of how open to be, how to handle disclosing, what to do about teasing in school, and how to handle the fact that the word “gay” is still an acceptable and all-too-commonly used slur on the playground. And what do we do when our middle-schooler begins to ask that we go back into the closet – “just sometimes, dad”?

Given the ongoing battle, being accepting of “loss” in our choice of how to become parents can feel like letting down the barricades. Acknowledging to ourselves and the rest of the world that our families come together through loss can feel uncomfortably close to the societal view that there is something inherently “wrong” with lesbian and gay families. I’m reminded of my mother’s reaction when as a young girl I came home after having been mercilessly teased about my hair by two white girls in my new first grade class. She told me to put out of my head what those girls said, and not waste my time crying. In other words, I had to be strong and keep going. In my mother’s world, black people did not show weakness, did not air problems and did not waste time “feeling sorry for ourselves.” White people tried hard enough to make us feel bad about ourselves – we didn’t have to help. As a lesbian, I carried my mother’s strategy for dealing with racism into battle with me. “Acknowledging loss” was not a helpful tool.

But I have come to see that David Kirk’s gentle urgings towards openness and honesty about the losses in adoption are useful for my family, too. It can be a relief to drop the barricades, for ourselves as well as our kids. Acknowledging that we are not “just like” all those other families, and that there are struggles and pain that we have to face just because of how our families came together can be strengthening. This is what we share with our kids:

- like other adoptive families, we don’t have that genetic connection – the little nagging “what if” question may sometime rise in the back of our minds as well as our kids’.
- we are “one down” in society’s eyes, and we have to deal with prejudice against lesbian and gay people, as well as the second class status of being an adoptive family as well as being a family and /or a person of color (for those of us that are)
- the one place we know our families can be open and not have to explain ourselves or answer questions is with other lesbian and gay adoptive families.

Most lesbian and gay parents have had years of experience with society’s prejudices, and have developed our responses. We have honed our coping mechanisms, and know who to ignore, who to confront and who will be able to laugh at the jokes we make in self-defense. Those of us who are people of color have been developing these skills since childhood. We all know the relief of being with the people who share our experiences. We hold tight to our relationships with folks who just accept without question our assessment that that woman in the store who stared so hard wasn’t “just being curious.”

That feeling of commonality and companionship with those who understand is what Kirk’s shared fate theory is about. Our children are learning how to face prejudice and how to cope with loss. We can teach them to do their best to push aside the painful feelings that come up and keep on going, holding their heads high. Sometimes that kind of “hold your chin up” pride is what they will need to get through a particularly bad day on the playground. But we can also create within our families that place where our kids can just relax and be who they are. It starts with us acknowledging and accepting the hard feelings that come up. This gives our kids permission to open up to their own emotions and lets them know we’ll listen. There are times when it will help for us to share our “war stories” and the strategies that we’ve developed to make it through. There are times when we’ll just need to be a listening, empathetic ear. But however we approach it, for us to explicitly let our kids know that we’re in this together and that we’re willing to share the burden of whatever they’re going through will make our kids and our families stronger.