pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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Ask Pact

Lesbian and Gay Adoption in Children's Books

by Shannon Riehle

Q: *Q: Ever since we adopted our daughter, friends have been giving us books like "Tell Me Again About the Day I Was Born," but none of these books reflect our family, which is made up of two white mommies and a biracial girl. I haven't had any luck at our library or local bookstore. Do you have any recommendations?*

A: Books play an important role in supporting children. Reading books that reflect their identity, family make-up, and experiences can be very affirming for children. That is why there are so many books about common childhood milestones such as starting school or the arrival of a new sibling. But when a child is adopted or has same-sex parents, books that offer this kind of "mirror" are even more critical, because their experiences are much less common. Depending upon where we live, our children may have few if any peers with similar experiences.

Books that touch on the subject of adoption or gay parents offers a powerful message to our children that they and their families are not alone or unique. Equally important, these books can give children an opportunity to bring up things they may be wondering or worrying about in the context of discussing what is happening in the story.

But finding books like these is a challenge. And since gay parents and adoption are two big–and very different–topics, it's hard to find books that deal with both, and harder still to find books that do it well. Fortunately, progress has been made since Heather Has Two Mommies. (Although the updated version of Heather has been significantly improved: the text is now more age-appropriate and the discussion of artificial insemination, which was really beyond the understanding of preschoolers, has been eliminated).

Broadly speaking, there are two different types of books for our children, and both are important. One specifically addresses the subject of families with two moms or two dads, creating opportunities for children and adults to talk about their own family formations. The other contains a good story that just happens to center around a child with same-sex parents without making that the focus. This second group of books is wonderful for normalizing the experience of growing up in a family that is a little different from other families.

Todd Parr has made some wonderful contributions in the first category, writing books that depict adoption, same-sex parents, and multiracial families together in a way that feels natural and positive. The message of The Family Book is that there are many ways to be a family and all of them are special. Families with two moms, two dads and adopted children are shown as just some of the many ways families can be. It's Okay to be Different and The Feel Good Book communicate a similar message. Ironically, the one book by Parr that I would not recommend is the one specifically about adoption, We Belong Together, because it focuses just on what the parents give the child, implying that children are lucky to be adopted.

The idea that there are many ways to be a family is a common theme in books that include the subject of same-sex parents, but not all of them work as well for our children.

Who's in a Family? by Robert Skutch is mostly wonderful, but doesn't represent same-sex couples who are parenting together. One page shows a girl who lives with "her dad, Clifford [and] his partner, Henry." There is also a mom and a "partner" but not two moms or two dads. Adoption is not mentioned at all. Sol Gordon's All Families are Different does include the topics of adoption and gay parents, but its focus is on kids who are having problems and need help with issues such as divorce, illness or being teased.

Books that take this same subject and put it into a story include Molly's Family by Nancy Garden, Is Your Family Like Mine? by Lois Abramchik, and Heather Has Two Mommies by Leslea Newman. All three center around a small girl, take place in a school setting, and begin with the main character realizing that her family is different. The resolution in all three is that the girls compare their families with those of their friends and realize that there are many ways to be a family. Is Your Family Like Mine? stands out because the main character is a child of color and because her parents give her a different explanation about her family. While Molly and Heather are told they don't have daddies and that is okay, Arametha is told that, "There are many kinds of daddies. One kind of daddy helps create babies and another kind helps raise them. You have the first kind of daddy." For adopted children, this could connect to the subject of birthparents. Parents have to decide if they are comfortable with this language. Another fun book for preschoolers is One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dad by Johnny Valentine. Obviously a play on Dr. Seuss's One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish Blue Fish, it features a boy who has two blue dads. He explains to a curious friend that his blue dads are really not so different from other dads. The book focuses on the unusual color of Lou's dads, but it offers an easy opening to discussing other types of differences. It is a light, funny story that appeals to a preschooler's sense of the ridiculous.

There are a few books that are actual adoption stories. In Felicia's Favorite Story, also by Leslea Newman, a young girl asks to hear the story of her moms flying to Guatemala and bringing her home with them. It starts with Felicia's mothers' decision to adopt and ends with them flying home together. In that sense, the experience of the parents rather than the child is central. While not perfect, this is one of very few books in which both adoption and gay parents are themes.

Another is And Tango Makes Three by Justin Richardson, a fun story about two male penguins in the New York Zoo who are given an egg to hatch and raise. This book is the clear winner among this group (even if the parents are penguins!). I was disappointed by In Our Mothers' House by Patricia Polacco, in which a grown adoptee reminisces about her two mothers and scenes from her seemingly perfect childhood—I kept waiting for an actual story to start. King and King and Family by Linda de Haan is the only gay adoption book I've seen featuring two (human) dads, but it is so problematic that I would never recommend it. The two main characters take a trip through the jungle and when they get home, they find a child hidden in their suitcase, so they adopt her! No mention of who she is or her family of origin. She's a living vacation souvenir.

Sometimes, it's just nice to see yourself reflected in a book that contains a good story. In The Different Dragon by Jennifer Bryan, the boy in the story has two moms, but that's not the focus of the book. He and his Go-Ma make up a bedtime story about a dragon that doesn't want to be fierce. The wise little boy helps the dragon feel okay about being different. Best, Best Colors (Los Mejores Colores) by Eric Hoffman is another book about a boy with two moms who comes to realize that he doesn't have to pick a favorite color, or a favorite mom, or a favorite friend. He can like them all.

I was very pleased to discover Antonio's Card by Rigoberto Gonzalez. Antonio has a very sweet relationship with his mother's partner, Leslie. But the other kids start to tease, not because Antonio's parents are lesbians, but because Leslie does not look like the other moms. "Why does she look like a boy?," the kids ask. Antonio has to decide how to respond. This is the only book I've found that brings up the issue of gay parents who may not fit gender stereotypes.

This is certainly not a complete list, but hopefully it offers a way of thinking about different books and what they have to offer, from "issue-oriented" books about having gay parents, to books where gay parents are an integrated element of the story. There is still a dearth of well-written books, especially about two-dad families, so we have some work to do!

Shannon Riehle is an elementary school teacher who loves children's literature. She and her partner are the moms of a beautiful one-year-old son.