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Why Combating Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Elementary Classroom Makes ALL Kids Feel Safer

by Aimee Fisher

> *"My son came home one day from school crying because his best friend told several children in school that his mom was a lesbian. A couple of the children started to tease him intensely and called him gay."*
> *Lesbian mom of an 11-year-old*

During the past decade, the number of same-gender couples with children has grown by 700% in some states. It is estimated that approximately 2 million children under the age of 18 are being raised by gay and lesbian parents in the United States. One third of lesbian couples and one fifth of gay male couples are raising children. Schools and teachers must consider how they will support the children from these families because family acceptance is directly related to school achievement.

In elementary school, children become increasingly aware of differences, and for children with lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT) parents, this awareness in others can play out in very intense ways. Children as young as six or seven are witness to and the perpetrators of homophobic language such as "that's so gay." Elementary school is often where children first encounter attacks against their families. Although children of LGBT parents may not identify as gay or lesbian themselves, they experience anti-gay slurs as direct attacks on their families and thus on themselves. These types of attacks affect students' feelings of safety and therefore their ability to learn and succeed in school.

This dynamic is mirrored in other family types. We often see children targeted for being adopted, having parents of different races, having divorced parents, being raised by a single parent, or being raised by a guardian. When children do not feel safe, validated, and included in the school community, their self-esteem suffers and in turn their academic performance. That is why it is so important for educators to facilitate classroom conversations about family diversity in all its forms. As a parent in your school community (whether straight or LGBT-identified), it is important to make sure these classroom conversations are happening.

Many well-intentioned educators do not have the language or tools to make their schools more welcoming and inclusive. With assistance, open and safe dialogue, and the tools to help them succeed, schools can truly welcome all family structures.

If you are an LGBT parent, you are in a unique position to educate your school about the needs of your family. If you are a parent who is an ally, you can have a tremendous impact by making clear that this is a school community issue and an important discussion to have with students of all family types.

By the way, there is a perception that talking about LGBT identities in the classroom means that teachers will be talking about sex with children and are therefore required to notify parents. However, conversations about LGBT identities, community, history or family life that do not discuss human reproduction are not "sex education" and should not require parental notification.

"When the [homophobia] issue came up in school, one of our son's teachers called our house to ask about our son's experience with this. We told her our concern, that if our son identifies as gay, the fact that you are not mentioning the word gay would make him feel like it is not OK. She was initially defensive about it, and yet, after this conversation, I think she really started to understand her role. As a result of that conversation, the teacher decided to show film on different families (That's a Family). This started a whole thing with the school showing the film to parents before Open House."

Parent at a private school

As a parent, here are a number of things you can do to make your school welcoming for students of all family types:

- Stand up for your rights as a full member of the school community, and be proactive about making your school environment safe. Volunteer in the school and participate in your school's PTA.
- Introduce your family to your teachers and administrators at the beginning of every school year.
- Arrange an LGBT family potluck at your school to meet other LGBT families, discuss school climate, and build community.
- Get on the agenda at your school's PTA or School Site Council meetings to discuss what your school can do to support family diversity.
- Organize a community screening of "That's a Family" at your school. This film profiles many different family types including adoptive, mixed race, LGBT, single parent, divorced, and grandparents raising grandchildren. It is intended to be shown in elementary classrooms. Create a flyer to send home with all students.
- Encourage your school to post artwork and posters with inclusive messages in classrooms and hallways.
- Encourage the school library to purchase LGBT-themed books and display prominently as a collection. Also, encourage your teacher to have age-appropriate books accessible to children in the classroom.
- Suggest that teachers include examples of LGBT individuals in history lessons, math problems, and language arts.
- Encourage your school to include family diversity lessons each year in every grade as a regular part of the school's curriculum.
- Initiate a school-wide training on LGBT family diversity at your school. Our Family Coalition can provide these trainings if you live in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- Organize a school-wide assembly celebrating LGBT diversity.

By taking action at your child's school, you can help ensure that every child feels safe, supported, and ready to learn.

Aimee Fisher is the Program Director of Our Family Coalition (OFC), where she develops and implements educational, support, and social/community-building programs for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) families. OFC promotes the civil rights and well-being of Bay Area families with LGBT parents through education, advocacy, social networking, and grassroots community organizing. Ms. Fisher is a graduate of UC Berkeley with a degree in Social Welfare and minor in Public Policy, and a proud lesbian parent of a 13-year-old son. She can be reached at Our Family Coalition, 870 Market Street, Suite 872, San Francisco, CA 94102; 415-981-1960; www.ourfamily.org.