



family pride coalition

Talking to Children About Our Families

By Margie Brickley and Aimee Gelnaw

po box 65327
washington dc 20035
202-331-5015
fax 202-331-0080
www.familypride.org

The mission of the Family Pride Coalition is to advance the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and their families through mutual support, community collaboration, and public understanding.

info@familypride.org

po box 65327
washington dc 20035
202-331-5015
fax 202-331-0080
www.familypride.org

Introduction

Initially, like all children, our children wonder where they came from. As they grow older and gain information about biology and how babies are conceived, they may come to ask questions about the creation of our families. The presumption of a mother and father creating a child (which may be valid for some of our children) is one with which our children will be saturated through their daily interactions with children's books, the media, school personnel, peer discussions and exposure to family models.

Very young children are not naturally inclined to make judgments about family structure. They see family configurations as a matter of fact. As children become a part of the larger peer culture, they will be exposed to other peoples' judgments of their families. The earlier children are given appropriate information about their lives and our families, the easier it will be for them to understand and appreciate them.

The information that follows is divided into developmental stages based on the types of needs children have at different ages. It is intended to support parents in responding to their children's (spoken and unspoken) questions as they come to understand who they are in the context of their family and who their family is in the context of their community.



Children under 3 years old

Babies and most toddlers do not ask us questions about their families. However, they do notice what goes on around them, and those observations form the basis of their thinking about families. Here are some of the thoughts they may have:

"Who are these people who take care of me?"

Infants and toddlers are focused on developing relationships. Their families are and will remain the most important relationships they have. Their sense of self is connected to their sense of family, and their way of being in the world is modeled through these early relationships. Infants and toddlers view their families as extensions of themselves.

Celebrating your family and affirming those relationships is what is important at this stage. Parents can do this by:

- Using the chosen name for a parent when talking to the child as in, "Here comes Papa."
- Giving and showing affection to their children and one another through actions and words.
- Creating rituals, ranging from special times with a parent (that might, for example, include a song or game known only to that child and that parent) to parties welcoming a new child.

"I call her my 'mima' but my grandmother calls her my 'mommy'."

As children learn to talk, they need to have their significant adults speaking the same language as they are. The terms used by others to discuss family members need to be consistent with those that are familiar to the child.



Parents can inform other people about the name or names they use to refer to family members. Childcare providers, extended family and friends should all use the same language to name the members of the child's family.

"These people are fun to be with. My moms seem to be having a good time with them."

People in a child's extended family and community are important in the child's life. If possible, create a community of other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender families similar to yours or who are supportive of your family. Doing so can create a network of people who communicate warmly and positively to children about their families and reflect similar family structures.

For example, this is possible when children who visit a family just like their own have adults who point out and reflect on the similarities between families by saying something like, "You have a daddy and a papa and so does Juan." The more they see and hear about similar families, the more it reinforces what families are.

"Who is mine? Who is yours?"

Anyone who has been around toddlers knows that they are learning about and focused on "mine." This is a natural part of their development and of coming to know who they are. This is a good time to begin talking about who "belongs" to them.

Children need to hear about their families from an early age and be told who is in their family. They never tire of hearing who loves them and how they are wanted. Simple language and family pictures can help children become aware of how their family came to be.

When they become older toddlers, they will be interested in other families. Specifically, they will want to know who belongs to whom. Talking about the many ways to be a family becomes important, as in: "Thomas has two moms, and Evan has a mom and a dad. You and Kati have two dads." Children learn about the world through their own personal experiences and therefore, think all families are like theirs. These simple statements help children develop a concept of "family" that includes others' and their own.



Children age 4 to 7

One of the keys to talking to children in this age group is finding a balance between too much information and too little information. Giving long-winded answers may often result in confusing children. Assuming that children who don't ask questions don't have questions may lead to children thinking that there is a need for or expectation of silence about their families. Here are some of the spoken and unspoken questions our children may have:

"Where did I come from? ... I meant what place?"

Responding to a question with a question often gives us the information we need to determine what it is the child wants to know. "What do you think?" or a similar question will help you understand exactly what is being asked and help the child clarify his original question.



Offering honest, simple answers is the best strategy for answering the many questions that children will ask during these years. Children will naturally push for more information if what you have offered is not enough.

Adoption. Children who are adopted can be told the story of meeting their adoptive parent or parents for the first time, including the ways in which their family wanted and planned for them. Books with related themes can be used to help the child relate to other similar experiences.

Donor (alternative) insemination. Sometimes adults have a hard time discussing things like donor insemination. Preparing simple answers ahead of time to the questions you know are coming can help you feel more comfortable, such as: "Your mommy and I wanted to have a baby. You grew from a special people egg in mommy's body in a place called a womb."

If pressed further, you can discuss the introduction of sperm by saying, "We also needed a seed from a man, which is called sperm, to help the egg grow into a baby. Our doctor helped us find someone who wanted to help us make a baby. The seed and egg grew to be you."

Surrogacy. Surrogacy can also be handled with a simple explanation such as, "Your daddies wanted to have a baby. You grew in a woman's body in a special place called a womb until you were ready to be born. Then daddy and I were able to bring you home to our house." Later, language like "birth mother" can be included to help the child understand the relationships.

Note: Because children at this stage associate mother and father as relationships that children have with people, be cautious about using terms like "father" or "mother" to describe sperm donors or surrogates unless you have made the decision to include them in a parenting relationship.

Blended families. Children in blended families from previous heterosexual or gay or lesbian relationships need to be able to talk about their families of origin as well as the relationships they have with the people with whom they currently live. If you are able to discuss your new relationship honestly and openly by saying things such as, "Cheryl and I love each other and want to live together," it will help the children understand how their family has changed. Children need to hear that former partners still love them and that they can still love all their parents without hurting anyone. Allowing children to develop in their relationship with a new partner at a comfortable pace and using language that they choose (such as, stepfather, "Mom's friend," "my other Mom") gives them a sense of control over their relationships. Adults can point out language that might be suitable such as, "Do you think he's kind of your step-dad, like Eric is your friend Emilia's step-dad?"

"Why does Maria have a mom and a dad?"

As children go off to school, they become aware of other families. Other adults might approach these questions from a "deficit model" assuming that the child is "missing" a parent. Instead, the children may just be noticing and wanting to talk about similarities and differences. For them, family configurations are a matter of fact. They do not naturally attach value to a particular kind of family.

Children want to talk about their families. They define and redefine their own families to include people, pets and toys. They may even pretend to have brothers, sisters and extra parents or ask you to pretend that you are someone else in relationship to them. They are just playing. They are not trying to change who is in their family or be anyone else. It is important for adults to recognize this as play and to respond in a way that is playful and matter-of-fact.



"I was born far away and my daddies brought me here to live with them."

Children are fascinated by stories of themselves as babies. They may be driven to share their life stories, including stories about adoption and conception. They may ask to hear these stories over and over again and will share them with friends, schoolmates or anyone who will listen. Be aware that everything you tell them will potentially be shared with others.

Having photo albums or baby books that document their life in your family helps them reinforce their sense of belonging and understand their relationships. We play an important role by giving them words to talk about their experiences and relationships.

"Why am I the only brown one in our family?"

For multiracial families, additional questions having to do with skin color and identity may arise. Again, simple language to explain how your family came to be is the best way to approach these questions. Discussing differences as one part of families and pointing out other families and how they are the same and different can be helpful. For example:

"Some children and parents look alike and some look different. What is important is that we belong to each other. We take care of each other and love each other. That is what makes us a family."

Do not minimize or try to deny what children notice. It is part of their identity development and should be celebrated.



Children 8 and older

"Nobody talks about their parents."

For many children in the preadolescent and adolescent years, fitting in and being part of a group may be the most important thing. Around age 7, some children no longer want or know how to talk about their families. This is especially true if their family is perceived to be "different."

Children need others, including adults in authority, to bring up the topic of families and how they are the same or different for discussion within the peer group.

At this time, children also may need to be in charge of who they come out to about their family. Children often share intimate details ("secrets") of their lives with only a few close friends. They will learn where, when and with whom it is safe to talk about their lives. When this occurs, many parents feel like their child is rejecting them or is ashamed of their sexuality or gender identity. Most of this behavior, however, is typical. In fact, heterosexual parents may also experience a sense of rejection for other reasons.

While the child may choose to be less open, you as parents do not have to make the same choice. Children still need models of us as proud and respectful of our selves and our relationships. Of course, the community in which you live impacts how comfortable you are with being out. You and your children should always be sure that you are not in danger if you are open about your sexual orientation or gender identity.

Offering opportunities to participate in activities within the gay and lesbian community is still important. However, we should anticipate that our children might make a choice to be less connected at this stage of development.

"Everyone uses 'gay' as an insult and the teachers don't say anything."

It is common for children in this age group to begin to call each other names like "gay," "faggot," "lezzy" and "dyke." Children recognize and are sensitive to attacks on people who are like the people in their families and communities. Our children often feel personally insulted when this name-calling occurs even if it was not directed at them or their family.

Parents can work with school systems to sensitize them to the impact of insulting language on their children. If this is not possible, parents can still talk to their children about their experiences and feelings and acknowledge how difficult this may be for them. Talking about the words, their meanings and the ways in which they feel hurtful to us in our community helps children identify their own feelings related to this kind of namecalling. It is important to help children separate their personal response to the namecalling from the intent on the part of the aggressor. In all cases, hurtful name-calling is wrong and our children can be helped to understand this.

"Some kids asked me if my mom is a lesbian. I don't know what to do."

This can be a scary time for our children. They need us to give them strategies for responding to the questions or insults of other children. Some strategies that have worked for children in this age group include:

Giving direct responses such as, "Yes, she is." Children have reported that this takes the power away from the child asking the question. If the child tries to keep it a secret, other children can use it to tease or bully him or her. If they are honest and matter-of-fact, the words may lose their power.

Making a joke in response. Some children feel more comfortable redirecting the questions or insults using humor. This may help children by getting them the approval of their peer group. They also do not have to directly confirm or deny the comment.

Seeking help from adults. Children have gone to teachers or principals to ask for assistance in stopping harassment or educating their peers. Some children have held discussions in their classrooms about their families and why the words children use hurt their feelings. Not every child will feel safe doing this but some have used it effectively.

Ignoring comments. Walking away from potentially inflammatory situations suits the personality of some children. They choose not to engage in discussions or confrontations. However, this may increase the teasing later on or cause them to worry about the next time it happens. These children may need additional help with strategies or may need their parents to communicate with the school.

Finding a supportive group of friends. For all children, this is a time where having one or more close friends who can be trusted makes them feel safer. Allies are important. Parents can try to encourage children to find friends who will be accepting of their families. Children begin to seek out friends who they perceive to be the same as themselves. Groups such as Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) can offer local peer groups or a pen pal so children have contact with others who have similar families and experiences.



"Do you have to wear that? My friends are going to be there."

During the preadolescent years and beyond, children focus on the ways that they are different from their parents. They talk about family less as they consider themselves more independent. Often, children are driven to disagree with and judge their parents' choices. Parents can continue to focus on family and support their children by giving honest information about who they are and choose to be. Often, a way to minimize the conflict is to agree to disagree while still maintaining a position of pride.

Explaining pride in our identity and culture along with our personal struggle in being different (something teen-agers can really relate to) shares our personal history and provides opportunities to talk. Often, these conversations create allies of our children and reinforce that home is the place where they can be themselves.

By the end of high school, some children celebrate things that are radical or different from the mainstream. Having gay and lesbian parents may become admired.

Concluding thoughts. As children grow in their knowledge and understanding of the world and issues of race, sexual orientation, relationships, gender identity and expression, their questions can become far more explicit. For example, they might ask:

"Did you know you were gay before you met Ray?"

"How did you choose the donor?"

"Why did you go to China to adopt me?"

"How did you decide to become a woman? Do you not like boys or men?"

Parents need to be careful not to read too much into their questions and use these as opportunities to educate their children about the full range of options available for creating families and expressing identity. The best way to teach about this is to tell your own personal story or stories of others you know. Read your child's cues for how much he or she can handle at each given moment. It is fine to offer some information and wait for them to come back for greater clarity or detail when they are ready.

Talking to Children About Our Families was developed for the Family Pride Coalition by Margie Brickley and Aimee Gelnaw under a grant from Human Rights Campaign FamilyNet.