

## Welcoming Children from Gay Families into Our Schools

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Five strategies allow students from all types of families to gain acceptance and thrive in school.

School is about to begin. A friend asks Trey if he is looking forward to 4th grade. He shrugs his shoulders and remembers last year when all the boys called any kid who was different a "fag." Trey is afraid they will find out he has two dads and tease him.

Dalisha has a dilemma when her physics study group suggests meeting at her house. Her mom, a teacher, and her mom's partner are not "out," so Dalisha wants to avoid letting her friends meet them together.

When Christie's dad tells her that he is gay, she is shocked. She can't find any books in the school library about gay parents. She never learned about gay families in sociology or sex education classes, and she is too scared to tell any of her friends. Christie feels that her family is probably the only one in the world like this.

Like Trey, Dalisha, and Christie, 6–12 million children in the United States have gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender parents (Pellissier, 2000). More lesbian and gay couples are deciding to have children than ever before. Many of these children will find their school climate to be hostile and the curriculum exclusionary. At the beginning of the 21st century, it is time for schools to become safe and welcoming for children from all kinds of families.

### Understanding Gay Families

Gay is an inclusive term that refers to sexual orientation. It includes gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (G/L/B/T) parents face many legal restrictions. They cannot marry; only in Vermont do they currently have equivalent rights of civil union. In many states they face barriers when adopting or fostering children. Many of them live in areas unprotected by nondiscrimination laws—in 39 states, it is legal to fire people because they are gay (Human Rights Campaign, 2001). Many gay parents say that

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they remain "in the closet" because they fear discrimination toward their child at school (Bliss & Harris, 1998).

There are many different kinds of G/L/B/T families. Many gay families are closeted; others are "out" or partially out. Parents can be partnered, single, married, divorced, or partnered with another gay couple. Families can be rich or poor, religious or nonreligious, biracial or multicultural. Children enter gay families in many ways: through birth, adoption, surrogate parenting, foster parenting, and artificial insemination. Research studies conclude that children with lesbian and gay parents can develop psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally in positive directions—and that the sexual orientation of parents is not a predictor of successful child development (Fitzgerald, 1999). For the most part, family life for children who grow up in lesbian homes is similar to that experienced by children in heterosexual families (Tasker, 1999).

Regardless of their own eventual sexual orientation, these children become de facto members of the gay community. As such, they likely face a homophobic, heterosexist, and anti-gay society, particularly at school. For example, 84 percent of students in four San Francisco area schools never heard an adult intervene when homophobic remarks were made in school (Pellissier, 2000). Likewise, more than one-third of G/L/B/T students do not feel comfortable talking with school staff about G/L/B/T issues (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2001).

If we seek to make our schools truly accept all students, our work is clearly set out for us.

### **Become Informed**

One of the first ways we can improve our school climate is to become informed about G/L/B/T people and the issues that influence their lives. When reading or listening to the news, pay attention to gay issues. Learn about gay perspectives on topics in the media by consulting gay online news sources, newspapers, and magazines. Become comfortable interacting with gay people: Make friends with some G/L/B/T individuals and ask them questions. Elicit strategies from gay parents in your schools for improving your school climate. Visit a gay-affirming church like the Metropolitan Community Church.

The difference between gay families that are "out" and those that are closeted or partially closeted is vital to understand. Children from "out" families may feel like representatives of their community, constantly required to explain their situation and defend their home life. If a family is even partially "in the closet," the children are often doubly afraid: They fear that they could be harassed and lose friends if the family secret becomes known, and they fear that their parents could be persecuted—perhaps losing their jobs or home—if they let the secret slip. This fear can be a paralyzing burden. Besides carefully choosing their words every time they speak of their parents, children from closeted families can be afraid to invite friends over to their house or to form any close friendships.

## Create a G/L/B/T–Friendly School Climate

There are many ways for school faculty, administration, and staff to create a welcoming environment for students from gay homes. The first step is to provide diversity training for all school personnel and students, especially peer mediators. An excellent option for training is the resource module *Tackling Gay Issues in School* (Mitchell, 1999). Another step is to display pro-gay symbols in offices and on school walls, such as rainbow stickers and "Friends of Gays on Campus" and Gay and Lesbian Student Education Network logos, and to wear pro–G/L/B/T buttons and T-shirts.

Likewise, you can join with all school personnel in refusing to tolerate any harassment in your school, including the use of homophobic terms like *faggot*, *dyke*, and *queer*. Many school personnel would never allow racist terminology yet are hesitant to address the equal repugnance of anti-gay terminology. Hateful remarks should never be acceptable in an educational environment.

It is also important to counteract harassment with positive actions that make schools inviting for students from gay families. There are many ways to promote positive attitudes toward gay families. Celebrate Gay Pride Week just as you would Black, Hispanic, and Women's History months. Encourage parents who are gay to speak at school or to volunteer in other ways. Use Gay Pride Week as an opportunity to infuse famous gay people into your curriculum and to address important events in gay history. The film *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996) features teachers at all grade levels celebrating gay pride with their classes.

It is important to take positive actions throughout the year and not just during Gay Pride Week. You can

- Support the establishment of advocacy and support groups, such as school gay-straight alliances, to counter feelings of isolation, which can lead to depression and poor academic progress.
- Provide library and Internet resources on diverse families.
- Ensure that your school media center has a strong collection of books on sexual orientation and gender identity as well as a selection of fiction with G/L/B/T characters.
- Distribute research and publications on G/L/B/T issues to faculty, counselors, and other staff.

When communicating with gay families, try to be sensitive to their special needs. If the family is divorced, send home two copies of everything, one for each branch of the family with whom the student lives. If the family is partnered, don't ask, "Who is the 'real' parent?" Children belong to both parents regardless of their genetic ties and are likely to be hurt if you treat one parent as less important. Demonstrate in your communications that you understand the risks associated with disclosure if the family is closeted; never ask students to discuss their parents in class unless you

have talked about it beforehand (Casper, 1992). Include G/L/B/T students and parents in prom planning, decorating, and chaperoning, just as you would for other events.

### Teach Respect for All

It is not enough to reject harassment and violence; students need to learn acceptance of all people. Establish an anti-bias curriculum for all grades, K–12. Students need information in their curriculum about all cultural groups, and you can mention gay issues when you discuss race and gender topics. For example, if students are discussing the harassment of innocent Islamic people following the September 11 tragedy, discuss also the harassment of others. Counter gender stereotypes in books, media, news, and curricular materials and teach students to be critical readers and to recognize assumptions or generalizations about gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation. Include in the curriculum positive examples of many different types of families (adoptive, single parent, or foster) and affirm that all types of families can have happy, successful home environments.

You must also counter misconceptions. Don't let gay stereotypes, whether male or female, pass unchallenged in class. Use inclusive language in the classroom and on materials sent home. Refer to *families* or *parents* rather than *fathers* and *mothers*; don't emphasize Father's or Mother's Day activities unless there is a clear, nonstigmatized alternative for children who may not have a parent of each sex. Eliminate gendered language and behaviors, such as lining up or segregating boys and girls during school routines. When their names come up in class, mention the orientation of famous gay people: Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Alexander the Great. In short, examine your course curriculum and include G/L/B/T content, where appropriate, throughout the school year.

### Provide Quality Counseling

Two groups of students need the attention of counselors: those who are the target of harassment and discrimination and those who exhibit homophobic language or actions. Steer the victims of harassment to the best resources for children of G/L/B/T parents, including Web sites like COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), which runs a listserv ([www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org)). You can also direct these students to gay-friendly teachers, administrators, or students. A sense of community can make a huge difference in their school experience.

Children of closeted parents in particular may feel that they are surely the only one in their situation and might be especially grateful for the chance to talk with someone who understands. If you have the opportunity, remind them that concealing the truth from a homophobic society does not mean they should feel ashamed. Assure them that gay families can be loving, religious, and stable.

## Encourage Activism and Inquiry

Faculty and staff can take action on behalf of G/L/B/T students and students with G/L/B/T parents in many ways. Most important at the middle and high school levels is a gay-straight alliance that allows students to discuss gay issues and provides a refuge from harassment. Students may share particularly helpful books or the names of understanding teachers. Those who are more open about their own or their parents' sexuality can tell the rest of the group what reactions they have encountered at school and elsewhere. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) Web site contains information about establishing gay-straight alliances ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)). There are about 700 gay-straight alliances nationwide, and the number is growing.

Faculty, administrators, and staff can show their support by joining national organizations that promote the health and well-being of G/L/B/T people and their families and friends. These groups often have local chapters that sponsor events and hold meetings. School personnel can also show support by participating in community gay pride events and by refusing to allow groups that discriminate to hold meetings at school.

## Resistance

School personnel ask whether there is likely to be a backlash from those who believe homosexuality is a sin. The answer is yes. The most commonly raised misconception is that creating a welcoming school atmosphere for gay students and students with gay parents pertains to sexual issues (Blumenfeld, 1999). The real issue is an educational environment free of harassment, homophobia, and discrimination. A second common concern is that schools will be promoting or advocating homosexuality. Providing students with a safe and caring environment acknowledges who their parents are but does not promote a "gay agenda." Providing information about gay issues and same-gender parents does not mean you advocate that children become homosexuals.

## A Friendly Environment

School is about to begin. Trey is nervous about starting 4th grade, especially because he heard some boys saying "fag" last year, but he remembers that his teacher reprimanded them, and he hopes his new teacher will do the same. Also, the assistant principal who met Trey and his dads at the Open House was very nice, and Trey feels sure that he could go to him for help.

When Dalisha's study group meets at her house, her mom and her partner are always available to help out. Dalisha knows that her friends might figure out that her mom is a lesbian, but because the local school board passed a

nondiscrimination policy regarding sexual orientation, Dalisha's mom isn't as scared about being outed—and Dalisha isn't as scared, either.

When Christie's dad tells her that he is gay, she goes to the library and reads a book that the librarian gives her about another girl with a gay dad. She talks to her counselor after she sees a rainbow sticker on his door and finds a Web site that he recommends where other children from gay families have posted messages. She still has some worries and questions, but she knows a lot of places to go to address them.

Most of the initiatives we discussed are easy to implement if school personnel want to create a truly friendly environment for children of G/L/B/T parents. A program that embraces these families also encourages the acceptance of other types of families—single parent, adoptive, or extended. Any progress away from the assumption that a family with one mother and one father is the norm is sure to make many students feel more comfortable. At the same time, affirming gay families supports gay teachers and students (Edwards, 1997). To become proactive about gay issues in schools takes courage, but, throughout history, all human rights campaigns have needed allies to achieve equality. All educators—gay and straight—can be powerful role models for students, demonstrating that they believe in treating everyone with dignity and respect.

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*Authors' note:* The vignettes in this article come from reports and communications from students involved in Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) and local parent-child support groups.

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