Creating Safe School Experiences: Strategies for LGBTQ+ Parents

"The good news is that, while we might have little control over what happens at school, we do have the ability to do a great deal—both emotionally and practically—to support our children as the children of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents. Parent involvement, on every level, is a key factor in the overall success your child will have in school."

—Ruti Kadish, Ph.D., Human Rights Campaign

School Days

Parents know that a lot changes when children begin school, including how they see themselves as part of the bigger world. Preschoolers often think that all families are like theirs. When they start school, they're frequently surprised to find out that not everyone was adopted, or not everyone lives with their grandparents, or not everyone has two moms or two dads. They might also be more cautious when talking about their parents and families.

One adult talks about drawing a picture of his two-mom family in kindergarten. The teacher asks who the second woman in the picture is. "I told her, Donna. I thought every family had a Donna." But later, when he realizes that not everyone has a "Donna," he is more hesitant to talk about his family.

In early elementary school, if children in LGBTQ-headed families hear negative or hurtful comments about their parents, their concern is usually focused on not wanting to hear mean things said about their family. As they grow and become more aware of sexuality, they may begin to fear being rejected by their peers or being harassed about their sexuality.

Connecting With Similar Families

Children and youth in LGBTQ-headed families may feel a bit lonely because they may not know anyone else at school with LGBTQ+ parents. One youth said it "made a real difference to know how many gay families there are out there" when he connected with others online. Young adults who didn't know someone else with an LGBTQ+ parent said they wished they had. They thought school would have been much easier if they didn't feel so alone. Researchers agree—studies show that it's beneficial when children know they are not alone and they have opportunities to share with other kids who have LGBTQ+ parents.

Amanda, a youth who attended Family Week, a week-long event where LGBTQ-parented families come together, said, "It's really nice to be able to go up to someone and say, 'So, moms or dads?'" (Amanda has moms). And Jesse (dads) said, "When I was in elementary

school, I used to get bullied a ton, so being able to come here is a breath of fresh air."

The advice from many experienced LGBTQ+ parents is to get connected to a larger community of LGBTQ-headed families. They say it's important for their children to see other families like theirs, especially as they get older. LGBTQ+ foster and adoptive parents often have networks that overlap, some as part of the adoption and foster care community and some as part of the LGBTQ+ community. There's a lot of common ground. And other parents often have helpful tips about dealing with bullying and teasing.

Bullying and Cyberbullying
Teasing, harassment, and bullying can make it hard to concentrate in class, can hinder making friends, and can take the fun out of being at school.

For most children and youth in LGBTQ-headed households, having an LGBTQ-identified parent is not troubling. It's only an issue when someone else makes it that way. "Because it's an issue for other people, it becomes an issue for me." One 16-year-old says, "The hardest thing is knowing that people can be mean . . . People don't even seem to try to understand."

In focus groups where children and youth were asked about what it was like to be part of an LGBTQ-headed family, 71.4% of the children and youth said that they were "teased and made fun of at school" (research by AdoptUSKids and National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections).

Bullying can also take place online. Cyberbullying means using the Internet, cell phones, and/or social media to harass, tease, or hurt another person. The impact of cyberbullying is multiplied; it's easy for someone to spread hurtful comments and pictures quickly and widely. And unlike

"traditional" bullying, cyberbullying can happen at any time of day and in any location. This can create anxiety that never goes away for children and youth who are bullied because even when they're not online, they might worry about what's being posted without their knowledge.

What You Can Do as a Parent
As with all bullying, experts advise parents to encourage children to let you know immediately when bullying occurs.

You can look for signs that a child is being bullied. Loss of interest or fear of going to school, a change in school behavior such as skipping classes or grades that suddenly drop, withdrawing from friends and family, or showing stress while using the computer are all clues that something is not quite right and a signal to parents that it's time to open a conversation.

What should your response be if a child comes home from school and tells you about teasing or harassing remarks? The resource *What Do You Say to "That's So Gay"* suggests to parents and teachers, "Don't excuse those remarks. Saying 'Josh doesn't really know what it means,' or 'Sarah was only joking,' excuses hurtful behavior."

You can help with teasing or bullying by working out strategies in advance.

First and foremost, **physical safety is essential**. If a child feels physically threatened, sometimes the best strategy is just to walk away.

Another strategy is to work together as a family to **come up with a standard response** that can be used in many situations. If a child hears slurs, jokes, or disrespectful language about people who are LGBTQ+, a good response might be, "Name-calling is not allowed in my family."

WISCONSIN FAMILY CONNECTIONS CENTER

1-800-762-8063
info@wifamilyconnectionscenter.org

© 2014; 2019; 2024

The Coalition
for Children, Youth & Families

Children and youth say that a common question is, "What's it like to have two moms (or two dads)?" A response that works for some youth is, "I can't answer that question because I don't have any experience with a mom and a dad." Children and youth who have a parent who identifies as transgender often get the most challenging questions. Many youth have expressed that the more they were educated about what their parent's gender identity meant to them, the easier it was to answer questions.

After you have the words to use, the third strategy is to **practice**. Saying the words out loud in the supportive environment of your home is obviously not the same as facing a bully, but it does prepare a child to have the words ready. Keep the responses short, respectful, and affirming. Consider role-playing where the child plays "the bully," repeating the hurtful comments heard at school, and you give a response. Then trade places, so you are playing the bully. Children might surprise you with some insightful responses!

Talk about how to tell an adult if they're bullied or cyberbullied. Consider teaching a child to copy and paste online conversations and encourage them to share those with you if they ever feel threatened or harassed.

All Children Should Feel Safe
School should be a safe place for children and youth, but we know that bullying makes some children feel unsafe at school. Bullying also occurs online through social media. Children who grow up in an LGBTQ-headed family may be bullied at school and online in ways that other children are not. As a parent in an LGBTQ-headed household, you can give a child strategies to respond to bullying so that they can go to school and go online and feel safe.

Resources

From the Resource Library
- *The Kid: What Happened After My Boyfriend and I Decided to Go Get Pregnant*, by Dan Savage
- *The Ultimate Guide for Gay Dads: Everything You Need to Know About LGBTQ Parenting But Are (Mostly) Afraid to Ask*, by Eric Rosswood
- Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is, by Abigail Garner
- *Gay Parenting: Complete Guide for Same-Sex Families*, by Shana Priwer & Cynthia Phillips
- *How It Feels to Have a Gay or Lesbian Parent: A Book by Kids for Kids of All Ages*, by Judith E. Snow, MA

Tip Sheet
- We Are Family! Tips for LGBTQIA+ Parents Caring for Children

Additional Resources
- Welcoming Schools
- PFLAG
- What Do You Say to "That's So Gay" and Other Anti-LGBTQ Comments?
- Resources for Parents From the Human Rights Campaign
- COLAGE