

**Anna Paula
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Preschool



Supporting Gay and Lesbian Families in the Early Childhood Classroom

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.

— Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985*

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS TODAY work with an increasingly diverse population of children and families. This diversity can include children from nontraditional families, such as families headed by a single adult, families of divorced parents, families headed by a relative other than a parent, families headed by gay or lesbian parents, and other types. Yet some teachers and administrators of early childhood programs have minimal access to training about ways to support nontraditional families—and specifically same-sex partnered families (Jennings & Sherwin 2008; Jennings & Macgillivray 2011). This article provides practical strategies for supporting children and parents in gay and lesbian households.

Current issues of gay and lesbian families

Children's success within their communities is largely determined by socialization that begins early on, as babies interact with their families. Families transfer their values and beliefs to children through modeling and language, which shapes children's views of themselves and of the world around them. While such enculturation serves to connect and differentiate communities (Barrera & Kramer 2005), in some cases it isolates groups whose cultures differ from the norm.

Families constitute the most basic component of young children's self-identities. The concept of family is a central part of the early childhood curriculum (Welcoming Schools, n.d.). Therefore, negative views of same-sex partnered families in early childhood settings can be damaging to young children and parents who may feel stigmatized or uncomfortable about participating in practices not supportive of their family identity.

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The inclusion of nontraditional families in the early childhood curriculum often depends on individual teachers' understanding of its importance, the prior training and mentoring teachers received, and their comfort level in discussing issues such as homosexuality. Children of gay and lesbian parents who begin school life feeling pride in their family may be silenced by negative direct and indirect messages they receive (Litovich & Langhout 2004), lowering some children's self-esteem (Hedge et al. 2014). Given that positive relationships between families and schools support children's social and academic development (Beveridge 2005; Fedewa & Clark 2009) and their later success in life, how can early childhood professionals support these children and their families?

Strategies for providing support

While it is difficult to precisely estimate the number of children living in same-sex households, given the reluctance by some parents to divulge that information (Fedewa & Clark 2009), it is estimated that three out of every

thousand children in the United States live in a same-sex household (Gates 2013). That number continues to increase, accompanied by corresponding shifts in cultural and legal acceptance of gay and lesbian families (Hicks & Lee 2006). For early childhood teachers to welcome and affirm such families, they need strategies that enable them to create safe spaces. The strategies presented in this article revolve around three main areas: communication, bias awareness, and construction of inclusive environments.

Communication

Kelly, who teaches 4-year-olds, sends home "All About Me" books for families to work on together. The book contains sentences with blanks to be filled in with information about the children's homes, their favorite toys, favorite foods, and of course their families. Each page also has space for children to draw pictures.

When Jorge's family does not return their completed book, Kelly contacts Mario, the only parent listed on

Books for Preschoolers About Gay and Lesbian Families

- *ABC: A Family Alphabet Book* (2001), by Bobbie Combs, illus. by Desiree and Brian Rappa
- *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illus. by Henry Cole
- *Daddy, Papa, and Me* (2009), by Lesléa Newman, illus. by Carol Thompson
- *The Different Dragon* (2006), by Jennifer Bryan, illus. by Danamarie Hosler
- *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two Mom Story* (2005), by Kaitlyn Taylor Considine, illus. by Binny Hobbs
- *Everywhere Babies* (2001), by Susan Meyers, illus. by Marla Frazee
- *The Family Book* (2003), by Todd Parr
- *Flying Free* (2005), by Jennifer C. Gregg, illus. by Jenna Richards
- *In Our Mothers' House* (2009), by Patricia Polacco
- *Mommy, Mama, and Me* (2009), by Lesléa Newman, illus. by Carol Thompson
- *Monday Is One Day* (2011), by Arthur A. Levine, illus. by Julian Hector
- *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads* (2004), by Johnny Valentine, illus. by Melody Sarecky
- *A Tale of Two Daddies* (2010), by Vanita Oelschlager, illus. by Kristin Blackwood and Mike Blanc
- *Who's in a Family?* (1997), by Robert Skutch, illus. by Laura Nienhaus

About the Author

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Jorge's school enrollment form. Mario tells Kelly that his family feels uncomfortable participating in the activity, but does not explain his reasons. (Kelly later finds out that Jorge has two fathers.) A strong advocate of family-school relationships, Kelly reaches out to Mario to resolve any concerns he has with the assignment. They schedule a meeting for the following week.

Opening a dialogue with families

Communication that relays traditional school values and conservative beliefs frequently hinders the creation of positive relationships (Jeltova & Fish 2005) between teachers and gay and lesbian families, leading these parents to feel unwelcome and unappreciated. For example, issues may arise if teachers rely on gender stereotypes to manage relationships, such as by requesting to speak to the female caregiver regarding children's emotional needs and the male caregiver regarding discipline. One effective method to address communication challenges is *skilled dialogue* (Barrera & Kramer 2012; Barrera & Kramer, n.d.), an approach that supports collaborative communication, understanding, and connecting diverse perspectives. To engage in skilled dialogue, teachers connect with families by focusing on building relationships to achieve a desired outcome. Kelly prioritized the connection she wished to make with Jorge's family rather than focusing on the completion of Jorge's book. She went into the meeting without a set agenda, open and ready to listen to and understand Jorge's family's perspective.

Early in their conversation it became clear that Kelly and Mario had differing views regarding the book assignment. Kelly understood that she may have unintentionally excluded Jorge and his family by including references

in the assignment to parents as a *mother* and a *father*. To resolve the problem, Kelly

1. Reflected on the beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts that shaped their individual perspectives
2. Remained open to collaborating with Mario
3. Acknowledged differences between her assumptions about family and Jorge's family
4. Remained open to and respectful of their different perspectives
5. Worked to create a third, inclusive solution that addressed the classroom's as well as Jorge's family's needs (Barrera & Kramer 2012)

The skilled dialogue approach allowed Kelly to collaborate with Mario in a respectful, reciprocal, and responsive manner. To establish respect, Kelly welcomed Mario and thanked him for taking time to meet with her. During the meeting, Kelly used statements such as "Can you tell me more" and "I see" to indicate her openness to Mario's opinions. Kelly's respectful tone acknowledged the importance of Mario's perspective and experiences and created an environment where he felt safe to share his reasons for not discussing his family structure with the school earlier. It also allowed him to share stories about his role as a gay father. Learning about and acknowledging differences in Jorge's family structure and her own assumptions about family structure, without being judgmental, supported Jorge's family's identity and consequently affirmed Jorge's identity.

Kelly demonstrated that she valued Mario's contributions by listening attentively to his views and opinions. To establish reciprocity, she showed appreciation, interest, and curiosity about Mario's perspective on the family book. When Mario noted his disappointment with the book's focus on heterosexual families, Kelly asked him to explain what he meant rather than telling him what she intended the book to be about. Kelly used phrases such as "I really want to understand what this book means to your family" and "I never thought of the book in that way."

To respect the connection they made and to demonstrate responsiveness, Kelly remained open to finding common ground between Mario's perspectives and her own. Her responsiveness to Mario's comments allowed them to move into what Barrera and Kramer (2012) refer to as a *third space*—a

Helpful Websites

- **Welcoming Schools:** This site addresses ways to promote family diversity while reducing gender stereotyping, bullying, and name-calling. It offers administrators, educators, and parents/guardians a variety of resources to create learning environments where all learners are welcomed and respected. www.welcomingschools.org
- **AMAZE:** This nonprofit organization focuses on creating safe and respectful communities for all children. www.amazeworks.org
- **COLAGE:** This organization provides LGBT parents with a network of peers focused on establishing a sense of community and validating the family structure and shared experiences of LGBT parents. www.colage.org
- **GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network):** This organization works to ensure that all students are valued and treated with respect and that school environments are focused on affirming identities and fostering personal growth and development. www.glsen.org
- **Teaching Tolerance:** This Southern Poverty Law Center project supports equitable school experiences for all children by providing free educational materials to teachers in the United States and Canada. www.tolerance.org

phase when the two can focus on their commonalities and when each person's perspectives and viewpoints are equally important.

Finding solutions together

Through skilled dialogue, Kelly and Mario coconstructed a solution that allowed Jorge to take part in the activity and was respectful of Jorge's family. Their solution involved not only re-creating the book, changing all references from *mother* and *father* to *parents* and/or *caregivers*, but also creating a more welcoming environment. Kelly did so by posting pictures and posters in the classroom showing non-traditional families and reading stories featuring gay and lesbian families to the children (see "Books For Preschoolers About Gay and Lesbian Families," p. 41). They worked together to find a solution, and Kelly established a respectful rapport with Jorge's father that would shape their future interactions and would support Jorge's developing sense of identity.

Kelly's meeting with Mario illuminated the necessity of creating activities that were inclusive of all families, not just those whose structures she was most familiar with. Reflecting on the meeting, Kelly realized she needed to spend more time exploring her own biases and the impact they might have on the children and families she worked with. She needed to examine her own background and reflect on past interactions with nontraditional families to understand and work through any biases she might have (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010).

Heightening awareness of bias

Kelly used the following questions to help guide her thinking:

- What does my use of language and choice of materials in the classroom indicate about the value and importance of diverse families—specifically, families of gays and lesbians? (Duke & McCarthy 2009)
- Are there differences among people and families that make me uncomfortable? If so, what are they?
- How do I respond to differences among people and families?
- Do I treat all of the children and families in the classroom the same? If not, why?

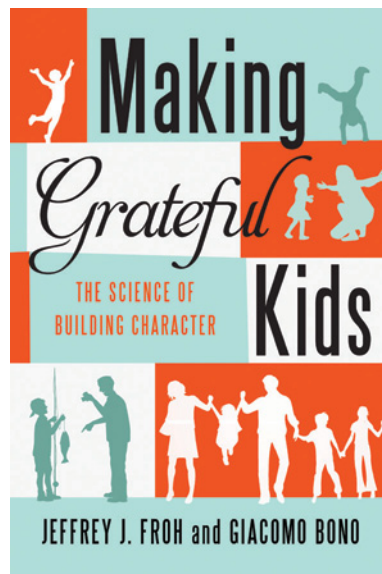
- How do I respond to children's comments and questions about gender roles and identities?

By answering these questions, Kelly realized that some of her past actions and language may have unintentionally conveyed an unwillingness to include all families. While she had always considered herself to be supportive of diverse children and families, that diversity had been limited to ethnicity and race. She realized that acknowledging her biases was the first step toward working through them.

Creating an inclusive environment

One important lesson Kelly learned from Mario was that families often choose to keep information about their family structure private. Specifically, she realized it was critical for her not to expect parents to self-identify as gay or lesbian before establishing a safe, inclusive environment for their children.

To provide a welcoming, accepting space that empowered children of same-sex partnered families, Kelly designed a classroom that was representative of children's identities and communicated the importance of all families. She worked to create an environment that was physically and emotionally safe for the children. That year, Kelly



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—SONJA LYUBOMIRSKY, PHD,
professor of psychology at
the University of California,
Riverside and author of
The How of Happiness and
The Myths of Happiness

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relied on Mario's assistance and online information to select classroom resources and materials that positively represented gay and lesbian individuals and affirmed the children's experiences (see "Helpful Websites," p. 42).

It is important that we teachers examine our early childhood classroom practices to ensure that we create environments that welcome all types of families.

Kelly placed age-appropriate books depicting same-sex partnered families in the reading center. She also added multiple male and female persona dolls of various ages and ethnicities to different areas of the classroom to allow children to represent in their play different family experiences. Although Kelly had concerns about other parents' reactions to the posters of same-sex partnered families placed around the classroom, she noticed that the images were interpreted differently by children and families. While children of same-sex partnered families saw two mothers or two fathers in the posters, other children saw a father and an uncle or friend and a mother and sister. If a family were uncomfortable with the posters, Kelly would respond by respecting their views while engaging them in skilled dialogue.

Other steps Kelly used to maintain an inclusive environment were:

- Using inclusive language in all written and oral communication (e.g., addressing communication to children's families rather than to children's parents)
- Using terms such as *partner* instead of *husband* or *wife* when communicating with parents
- Modeling respect for gay and lesbian families in all interactions and communication by listening attentively and addressing their needs
- Addressing children's comments and questions about different family structures with age-appropriate answers that focus on the love that brings families together
- Celebrating Family Day instead of Mother's Day or Father's Day
- Adapting finger plays and songs to include gay and lesbian families (e.g., changing the lyrics from Thomas Moores's "Family Jog" song from "Look at my father jog" to "Look at my fathers jog")
- Providing classroom materials (books, posters) to reflect families' unique contexts

The new environment and supportive behaviors Kelly modeled sent clear messages to Jorge's family about their importance . . . as well as the importance of everyone else's family.

Conclusion

Given the growing number of gay and lesbian households, it is important that we teachers examine our early childhood classroom practices to ensure that we create environments that welcome all types of families. There is a wealth of opportunities for collaborating and building relationships between teachers, schools, and families. This empowers children and strengthens our ability to respond to the families' diverse needs.

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