



CEIEC Equity Issues Paper

July 2004

Lesbian mothers on 'Playschool' - what's the fuss?

In early June, the ABC's Playschool program featured a scene in which Vicki Harding appeared with her daughter, Brenna, and her partner Jackie Braw. This scene in which a child with two mums appeared on Playschool has created considerable media response and government and wider public comment. Playschool was chastised for being an 'unlikely collaborator in the assault on childhood innocence' (Letters to the Herald Sun – 6.6.04) and the Federal government expressed concern at the exposure of young children to the idea of same-sex parenting (Peterson, Sydney Morning Herald – 5.6.04). Playschool was also congratulated for reflecting the diversity of family life in Australia ((Peterson, Sydney Morning Herald – 5.6.04).

What issues do early childhood staff face in deciding whether to take an inclusive approach to family diversity?

Issue 1: young children meet lesbian and gay people in their lives

Young children are likely to meet lesbian and gay people among their parents, early childhood staff, family and friends. It is generally believed that ten per cent of the population identifies itself as 'non-heterosexual' and so some young children will grow up to identify themselves as gay or lesbian.

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we ignore the reality of many young children's lives by ignoring the fact that they will know and meet lesbian and gay family members and friends?
- Should we ignore nearly 10% of the population in the materials we offer to young children about family life?

Issue 2: for some young children lesbian and gay families are their normality

Sexuality is a complex topic that can sometimes be a sensitive and contentious topic among adults, as the current concern about "Playschool" demonstrates. Many parents and early childhood staff believe that young children are innocents, who can't understand the complexities of sexual matters. For these adults, sexuality has no place in a young child's life - whether in an early childhood centre, in the media or elsewhere - and so they seek to prevent young children from encountering what they regard as expressions of sexuality.

That clear – and clear-cut – view of children and sexuality becomes complicated and contradictory in practice, as the current "Playschool" controversy illustrates. Critics of 'that episode' claim that by including a child referring to her 'two mummies', the program implied that families based on and around homosexual relationships are normal – just like families based on heterosexual relationships. The critics seem to believe that "Playschool" might lead young children to regard one's sexuality as a 'lifestyle choice' between equally attractive choices, while for the critics heterosexuality is the only valid choice, because it is *normal* and anything else is abnormal or

deviant. In short: under the guise of protecting 'innocents' from sexuality, these critics actively encourage children to be heterosexist (to see heterosexuality as right and every other sexuality as wrong) and to be homophobic (fearful or hateful of 'non-heterosexual' people).

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we stop children who live in lesbian and gay families from talking about their families?
- What does it mean for children who live in lesbian and gay families to have their family lives considered abnormal?
- What ethical responsibility do we have to all children to respect their family lives in all their diversity?

Issue 3: Lesbian and gay families face discrimination

Gays and lesbians face personal and social discrimination, including verbal and physical stereotyping, harassment and abuse; and, legal discrimination in areas such as property rights, inheritance rights and rights associated with being a (heterosexual) spouse and/or parent. Young children need to know that some people face such discrimination *and* that they are likely to meet such people in their everyday life. From this perspective, "Playschool" didn't go far enough! Its one fleeting and casual reference to lesbian mothers as if heterosexism and homophobia don't exist misleads young children into believing that sexuality is simply a matter of personal choice.

Early childhood staff who might otherwise wish to challenge heterosexism and homophobia in their service— as they challenge other forms of discrimination – can be wary of addressing the issue, especially where none of the parents or staff identify as homosexual. However, children can benefit from living in an anti-heterosexist environment, irrespective of whether any particular adults around them identify as gay or lesbian, just as they can benefit from an environment that actively challenges racism and sexism. They can broaden their understanding of the diversity of human relationships and strengthen their commitment to equity and fairness.

Some questions facing early childhood communities:

- Should we encourage children to challenge all forms of discrimination?
- What limits should we place on what children learn about diversity?

Responding respectfully to the issues

A respectful response to the questions about lesbian and gay families in early childhood services starts by respecting the diverse ways in which families live their lives. In practice, this means finding ways to create an environment in children's services where all children feel that their families are respected and where all children can learn to respect diversity. Some simple ways to do this follow:

- Offer children stories and games (and television programs!) of people in various forms of relationships, including different sorts of families
- Include pictures of notable lesbians and gay men among the images around the service or centre
- Use open-ended and gender-neutral play materials
- Arrange play materials in particular spaces (e.g. home corner, block corner) in different ways and encourage children to play differently with them
- Challenge children's and adults' discriminatory behaviour.

Its also important that all adults feel respected in a service. Some simple ways to do this follow:

- Don't assume that someone (child or adult) is or will be of a particular sexuality
- Make a particular point of discussing the program with parents or staff who identify as gay or lesbian
- Where and when appropriate, discuss diversity, difference and discrimination with children and adults (perhaps use Diversity Dolls to encourage this discussion)
- Use inclusive spoken and written language (e.g. "parent" or "carer" rather than "mother" and "father"; "dominant" or "widespread" rather than "normal") wherever possible
- Include in your publicity, etc. images of people in relationships other than heterosexual nuclear families
- Challenge children's and adults' discriminatory language.

Inspirational quotes to engage your local early childhood community in discussion and debate about the issues in this paper.

The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.

John (Lord) Dalberg-Acton (English historian and theologian, 1834-1902)

No government has the right to tell its citizens when or whom to love. The only queer people are those who don't love anybody.

Rita Mae Brown (U.S. novelist, 1944-)

As professionals who work with families, our willingness to talk openly about identity and to help foster a positive sense of self in children can make an enormous difference in affirming the rich diversity of our human community and helping children make bridges across cultures and traditions. ...The more that children have a solid grounding and understanding about who they are and where they came from, the more they learn to move with grace and confidence among communities different from their own, and the closer we get to building a world of respect, curiosity, sharing, and humanity.

(Adapted from *A Place to Begin: Working With Parents on Issues of Diversity*, by Dora Pulido-Tobiassen and Janet Gonzalez-Mena, reprinted by California Tomorrow.)

Our mission is to foster the growth of daughters and sons of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents of all racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds by providing education, support and community on local and international levels, to advocate for our rights and those of our families, and to promote acceptance and awareness in society that love makes a family. (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere [COLAGE]).

For further discussion and/or information CONTACT:

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Resources, references and further reading

Lesbian and gay lives

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Alpert, H. (Ed.) (1988). *We are Everywhere: Writings By and About Lesbian Parents*. California: The Crossing Press.

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Singer, B. (Ed.) (1994). *Growing up Gay/Growing up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology*. Washington, DC: New Press.

Thinking about and working with gay and lesbian families

Cahill, B. & Theilheimer, R. (1999). Stonewall in the housekeeping area. In Letts & Sears (Eds.) *Queering elementary education: Affirming diversity in elementary schools*. Rowman & Littlefield.

- Carter, M. (1993). Supporting the growing identity and self-esteem of children in gay and lesbian families. ED377985.
- Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) is the only national and international organization in the world specifically supporting young people with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents. A helpful website with resources and good links: <http://www.colage.org>
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