

Belonging: Including Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents – and All Children – in Your Program

by Aimee Gelnow

As human beings we are driven to make connections and establish a sense of belonging. We see this in newborns as they enter the world, seeing everything through their inescapable need to form attachments. Our survival and wellness are contingent upon forming bonds from which we venture forth to view and become in the world. Research shows us that even when children's physical requirements for survival — such as food, clothing, and shelter — are met, children who are deprived of social connection suffer from failure to thrive. As T. Berry Brazelton says, we need “emotional food” to secure our existence.

Attachment

As early childhood educators we understand the importance of attachment. There are many occasions where I have challenged the assumption that the initial phase of a child's orientation into a new program is about overcoming separation from their loved ones or caregivers. I think what children must do in this early stage of establishing their place in early childhood programs is more accurately described as forming attachments. As they develop connections — attachments — to caregivers within the early childhood environment they become better able to separate from the family bonds that previously created the glue that held them together. Children become better able to transfer that dependency to a trusted



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caregiver as they find their way into the *family* of the classroom or center.

Care in a family context

Young children's sense of self is inextricably tied to their sense of family. As they negotiate the attachment-separation-individuation process, they take their most salient cues of how to be and who they are from their parents. For children to form the attachment necessary to free them to explore the world of the center, they must feel that the center welcomes, includes, and celebrates their family. It is only in this context that they can realize their full potential.

In order for a child to feel valued, included, respected, and welcomed, they must know that their family is. If the center does not include their families in both overt and covert ways, children get a subtle but clear message that their family somehow does not belong. This impacts their own sense of belonging. Children are more sensitive to the social-emotional currents of their environments than are adults. They may not be able to voice these sensitivities, but they feel them and are impacted by the tone that is set by the adults who create and sustain the rhythm of the environment.

Forming a family construct occurs in a social context; therefore, environment is the shaper and teacher. Children's initial assumptions about families are that families are all like their own. As they leave the world of their family and enter the world of child care, they come to know about other families. Absent negative input, they see different families as just a matter of fact. Like different colored houses on the block in

their neighborhood, they come to know them as just different houses — but houses just the same. Beginning around age four, children absorb definitions of family from the attitudes of their family members and others, cultural and social constructs, and images available through toys, literature, and other media. The environment of the center both deliberately and inadvertently creates these social and cultural constructs in verbal and nonverbal ways.

Children of gay and lesbian parents

So, what does this mean for children of lesbian and gay parents? When the early environment outside the home fails to represent imagery or conversation about their families, children come to understand themselves and their parents as invisible. Very early on children understand belonging and the degree to which they belong in a community. When the environment has no books, no conversation, no toys, and no means of representing lesbian- or gay-headed families, they understand that their family exists outside the circle of those who are fully included.

Including all families

To serve all children we must find ways to include all families. Some strategies for doing this include:

- writing center non-discrimination policies that explicitly state that all families are welcome and celebrated here including same-sex parents in family handbooks and welcome letters that describe the different families that are part of the family-center community (see Sample Welcome Letter to Families)
- creating a family gallery including photos of each child with his/her family displayed in a place where conversation is likely to naturally flow
- equipping classrooms with toys that offer a variety of ways to construct families for play, such as materials that allow children to self select the groupings that have meaning for them
- displaying and reading children's books that fully represent the diversity of families including lesbian and gay families
- conducting daily conversations with children about each child's family, who they are, and how they come together to meet one another's needs.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DONNA RAFANELLO

Opportunities in play

Supporting children's play offers infinite opportunities to explore assumptions and expand the horizons of their understanding of family. In dramatic play, for instance, caregivers can suggest that different kinds of families be included. One possible way to gently guide children might be to say, "I see that today you are playing about a family with a mother and a father. That reminds me of some of the families of our children like Janine and Carlo and Sarah and Ezra. Perhaps tomorrow we can play about Justin's family. Justin lives with two dads, his sister, and his cat, Pepe." In talking about differences, it is important to comfortably use the language of difference. Matter-of-factly using the words, lesbian, gay, and terminology such as same-sex adds to the vocabulary that children can use to describe the world as they see it.

Family involvement

One of the best ways to incorporate knowledge and familiarity with each child's family is to find ways to include them in the activity of the school. Children and their families are well served when parents play a vital role in the classroom.

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Encouraging parent volunteering and making your center a comfortable and welcoming place for parents creates endless opportunities for children to experience sameness and difference. When children have the opportunity to form relationships with others, they come to know and value them for the ways in which they are the same as well as the ways in which they are different.

Living amidst diversity diminishes the degree to which it becomes the focus. We all know this from our own experience. Our children can learn this early on before they form opinions of difference. They can classify and categorize families along with all of the other things in their environment: crayons in a box, houses on the block, goldfish in a bowl, and yes, people in their world.

The challenge for educators

Often educators voice concern regarding discussions of difference — especially when related to same-sex (or lesbian/gay) families. It is expressly for this reason that center policies and language need to be explicitly inclusive. The discomfort around the use of accurate language and inclusivity is often couched in the fear of being accused of *promoting homosexuality* by parents whose views may differ. This is an unfortunate misunderstanding. When we talk about children's families we are talking about relationships. We understand that children's sense of belonging directly relates to their perception of the degree to which their family belongs. When we speak to children about the most important relationship they have — that of their family — we are not talking about sexuality. We are talking about who takes care of them and to whom they belong. We very naturally discuss and celebrate these relationships with children from other families. If we believe that it is every child's right (and therefore our responsibility) to belong, then we must be committed to creating that same sense of belonging for all. If we know that inclusion of their family is the means through which children establish their belonging, then we have an obligation to facilitate and ensure that. In responding to the questions that may arise from other parents, we can simply respond, "We include your child's and all of our children's families in the culture of the classroom."

Sample Welcome Letter for Families

Dear Family,

I want to welcome you to our classroom community. Our school philosophy is one that places a great deal of value on the formation of parent-teacher partnerships. As a staff we adhere to the following definition of family (taken from a Boston Children's Museum Exhibit on Family Diversity):

FAMILIES:

We may be related by birth or adoption or invitation.

We may belong to the same race or we may be of different races.

We may look like each other or different from each other.

The important thing is we belong to each other.

We care for each other.

We agree, disagree, love, fight, work together.

We belong to each other.

Please share your family with us so that we can include, validate, and celebrate each child's family relationships as part of our ongoing interactions with your child and all of our children. We welcome you all and look forward to developing a rich and supportive relationship with you and your child and to learning from and with each other throughout the year.

Your Child's Classroom Staff

Conclusion

It is our children who will truly change the world. When we expose them to new experiences, ideas, and expectations, we actively participate in creating that change. It is the most precious gift we give ourselves and the children and families in our care.

Resources

www.familypride.org/library/pdf/opening_doors.pdf

www.familypride.org/library/pdf/openingmoredoors.pdf

www.familypride.org/library/pdf/talking%20about%20our%20families.pdf

A book I really like is *Gay Parents, Straight Schools* by Casper and Schultz (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

Opening Doors and Opening More Doors (in links above) are downloadable as PDFs or can be purchased as paperback book(lets) through the Family Pride web site.

A favorite video of mine is called “Both My Moms’ Names Are Judy.”

Also, “That’s a Family” — a more general family diversity one.

For a complete listing of Family Pride Coalition’s “Books for kids with LGBT parents,” go to www.ChildCareExchange.com under Training Resources Tab — go to “Free Resources”

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Understanding the message in our methods: Gelnow points out that we may, however inadvertently, give messages of exclusion, rather than inclusion, to children of gay and lesbian parents when the early childhood environment fails to represent and talk about diverse families. Explore the ways that differences are addressed both directly and indirectly in your program through curricula, communication, and interaction. Consider whether other families, such as single father families, grandparent-headed families, or co-parenting families, might also be excluded. Then, identify specific strategies to make sure the messages children (and their families) get from the early childhood environment are actually communicating inclusion.

Getting agreement about accurate language: Convene a task force that includes parents, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to discuss and agree upon accurate language to use about diverse families. Many variables will need to be considered including, for example, the cultural milieu of the program; staff and family understanding of diversity; children, family, teachers, and administrators individual experience with diversity, etc.

Write it down: Many of us may feel like we are accepting of diversity of all kinds. Yet, our policies, procedures, and written materials may not reflect this acceptance. A good place to start is by crafting a non-discrimination policy that reflects the program’s view of inclusion. Work with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to draft and approve a policy that spells out your program’s acceptance of diversity.

Practice makes perfect: Teachers may not feel competent to support children’s exploration of differences as effectively as Gelnow describes in the article. So, practice to perfect this on the job skill. Create scenarios for teachers to role play that give them practice exploring assumptions and expanding children’s understanding of family structure and diversity when they join in children’s play.

Welcome letter: Modify the sample welcome letter to reflect your program’s welcome wishes and institutionalize its distribution to each new family upon enrollment.