Different Storks for Different Folks: Gay and Lesbian Parents’ Experiences with Alternative Insemination and Surrogacy

Valory Mitchell
Robert-Jay Green

SUMMARY. When gay and lesbian couples decide to become parents, they are unique as a group in always requiring the involvement of a facilitating other: a donor, surrogate, or (in the case of adopted or foster children) birth parents. This clinical paper explores common psychological and social challenges gay and lesbian couples face when using alternative reproductive technologies to attain parenthood. Between the wish and the actuality of being at home with their baby, gay and lesbian parents travel a long and winding road of choices and chances taken. The parenting partners often consist of one biological and one non-biological parent. Issues of psychological/emotional parenthood as opposed to merely biological parenthood (including assumptions of potential inequality or differential legitimacy) must be reconciled in the minds, couple relationships,
family of origin relationships, and friendship support systems of the partners before and after the child’s birth. The family must also navigate others’ questions and assumptions as they venture ever further beyond their intimate circle and as their growing child forms relationships with peers. Specific guidelines are offered for helping couples surmount these psychosocial challenges. doi:10.1300/J461v03n02_04 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Gay parents, lesbian parents, insemination, surrogacy, GLBT parents, reproductive technology, alternative parenting

**INTRODUCTION**

When gay and lesbian couples decide to become parents, they are unique as a group in always requiring the involvement of a facilitating other: a donor, surrogate, or (in the case of adopted or foster children) birth parents. Unlike heterosexual couples, for whom alternative reproductive technologies are usually viewed as a last resort, lesbian and gay prospective parents turn to medical assisted reproductive technologies joyfully as a doorway to parenthood. Because alternative technologies are universally necessary for gay and lesbian couples who wish to create their own biological offspring, they carry none of the stigma or sense of failure within the GLBT communities that many heterosexual couples must lay to rest.

Nonetheless, between the wish and the actuality of being at home with the baby, gay and lesbian parents travel a long and winding road of choices and chances taken. And, as their children grow, they cannot rely on a legacy of cultural givens, but rather must establish—in their own minds, in their couples and families, within their extended families and friendship networks, and in the larger world—the meaning, significance and legitimacy of their parental roles and family structures.

This clinical paper explores common psychological and social challenges gay and lesbian couples face when using medical assisted reproductive technologies to attain parenthood. Each of the authors has a private practice of gay affirmative psychotherapy. In developing our ideas, we have drawn from our clients’ experience as parents as well as our own experience and that of other parents in our personal networks.
We focus first on the prenatal period, when reproductive decisions are reached, when others provide their genetic and gestational help, and when the intended parents encounter initial questions and reactions from their social networks. We then consider challenges that emerge after the child is born—during the transition to parenthood when parents and others encounter a real baby and parent-child relationships for the first time; and later as children grow and their development takes the family increasingly into the social institutions of a largely heterosexual milieu where alternative reproductive methods may be seen as anomalies. Finally, we offer some specific guidelines for helping couples surmount these psychosocial challenges.

Themes are illustrated with quotes from gay and lesbian parents. In these quotations, all names have been changed to protect privacy. All parents have given their consent to have their remarks quoted in this paper. Some quotations have been edited for readability, and some are composites. Parents quoted are not part of a random or representative sample, and quotes are intended only to illustrate themes.

WELCOMING THE STORK(S):
GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS
AND THEIR NECESSARY OTHERS

Gay and lesbian couples never become pregnant by accident. The decision to parent is followed by a series of careful deliberations: Will either partner contribute to the genetic heritage of their child? If so, which partner, and why? Will the egg donor also carry the fetus? Will the sperm or ovum be donated by a stranger, a friend, or a family member? If a stranger is the donor, will that person’s identity remain forever unknown, or if not, under what circumstances can it be known? If the donor is a friend or family member, what will that person’s relationship to the child and parents be? Each of these choices can contribute effectively to the formation of a vibrant and viable family; each choice can also stimulate concerns, doubts, and fears.

Donna, whose daughter just started kindergarten, recalls:

What a journey! We’d come home from the sperm bank with pages of listing—one line of description for each donor—and we’d pour over them, kind of like the way you make lists of good baby names. You know, ‘Oh, here’s a French/Italian heritage, chemistry major, who likes hiking.’ Then we’d imagine what that genetic
contribution would bring. But we were also thinking of asking a gay couple, David and Frank—friends we’d made in college.

Polly and I decided to invite them to talk about it... and we all talked a lot! And it was clear that this was something we all really wanted. We were a little self-conscious at first, especially when they’d stop by with two little jars (one from each) for us to use. But it’s been great. Amy lives with us—Polly and me—and sees her dads about once a week, and we all get together for birthdays and holidays. Just right.

Donna’s story is sprinkled with happy moments and gives a glimpse of the eagerness and openness that move many gay and lesbian couples forward during those early days. She sees her daughter Amy as comfortably enjoying the love, continuity, and attention of Amy’s four parents. In the story of Polly and Donna’s decisions about conception, Donna has not included a differentiation of which parents’ genes, or whose womb were utilized. Perhaps this reflects the custodial realities of five years of daily parenting in which she and Polly are the primary parents. Perhaps it is a deliberate choice—to equalize the parents’ status, to legitimate their family unit, to de-emphasize biology, and privilege psychological parenting.

When we tell our stories, we create a way of talking about our families. As narrative therapists tell us, when we create a discourse we create a reality (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Although genetic and biological links may be valorized by others, gay and lesbian people have long privileged their families of choice (Weston, 1997), placing emotional loyalties and commitments equal or above blood relations. These criteria hold for gay and lesbian families of procreation as well. They tell stories that make clear, both by what is said and by what is not said, that they have viable families where both partners are regarded as full parents as a result of their shared psychological investment. For gay and lesbian people, this is simply true; however, we are aware that these truths are denigrated and denied by many segments of the larger culture in which gay and lesbian families live. For this reason, gay and lesbian parents may feel a particular need to establish their equality, legitimacy, and the centrality of psychological parenting.

Protecting the Safety of the Family from Invasion

Historically, decisions about sperm donors have been strongly influenced by fears that, sooner or later, this person might come forward to
challenge custody and try to take the child conceived in this fashion. In the gay and lesbian communities, these fears are substantiated by widely known instances where children were forcibly removed from their mothers, solely because the mother was a lesbian (Hartman, 1996). Where second parent adoption is unavailable, non-biological mothers and fathers are particularly vulnerable to legal challenge. Gay men sometimes feel added worry because men are stereotyped as less capable or less invested in infant and child care. However, Ehrensaft (2005) has also seen heterosexual parenting couples who worry that someone with biological claims will rob them of their child and suggests that there are archetypal psychological qualities to this fear.

Despite these worries, for several decades some parenting couples (like Donna and Polly) have successfully constructed families where the child has two moms and a known dad, two dads and a known mom, or two moms and two dads. As these families form, the primary parenting couple reaches agreements with the third (or fourth) parent(s) about the expected extent and nature of their involvement with the child—from very occasional (less than yearly) contact, to frequent (weekly) visits and care. Often, in an effort to protect the reliability of these arrangements, all parents consult attorneys and draft notarized parenting agreements. Donna Hitchens, founder of the National Center for Lesbian Rights and currently a family court judge in the Superior Court of California, has informed us that although these documents may not be legally binding, they have been so psychologically binding that, to date, none have been challenged in court (Hitchins, 2003). The National Center for Lesbian Rights is available online and can provide templates for these agreements.

**Knowing the Genetic or Gestational Other**

For many couples, pregnancy involves a relationship with a former stranger who is now providing eggs, sperm, or a uterus for their child. For some, these relationships are full of fantasy (Ehrensaft, 2005); for others, they remain largely a pragmatic solution. Intended parents usually form ongoing relationships with their traditional surrogates (those who provide both the ovum and carry the baby during pregnancy) or gestational surrogates (those who carry the baby but do not provide the ovum) because that surrogate is necessarily part of the pregnancy for its duration. Direct relationships between parents and egg or sperm donors are less common because donors’ involvement can be quite brief. Intended parents weigh the balance between fears of intrusion and wishes for increased knowledge about donors, along with varied access
to intermediaries such as donor banks and surrogate agencies, in their
decisions about relationship.

Randy recalls:

\[ \text{Wes and I are an inter-racial couple, and we wanted our child to re-} \]
\[ \text{flect this. Working with medical experts, we established the viability} \]
\[ \text{of our sperm, and chose an egg donor whose genes would} \]
\[ \text{create a baby that would carry both our racial heritage. Our} \]
\[ \text{medical provider helped us find her and obtained a very thorough} \]
\[ \text{health history from her, so our child will know whether} \]
\[ \text{there are any vulnerabilities she should watch out for.} \]
\[ \text{What a lovely young woman! I can only speak about our} \]
\[ \text{donor, but it was clear that not only was this a great way for her to} \]
\[ \text{make money to pay for college, it also reflected her values and her} \]
\[ \text{wish to help people have a child. She knew we were two men and} \]
\[ \text{that was fine with her. And we’ve had a very parallel experience} \]
\[ \text{with our gestational surrogate.} \]
\[ \text{I doubt we’ll stay in touch with our egg donor. She didn’t} \]
\[ \text{express any wish to, and we don’t really have a basis for ongoing} \]
\[ \text{relationship. On the other hand, over the months we really got to} \]
\[ \text{know Julie, our gestational surrogate. From the very beginning,} \]
\[ \text{we talked with Julie and her husband about getting together—maybe} \]
\[ \text{once a year or so—and occasional phone calls, holiday cards, and} \]
\[ \text{graduation photos, things like that. It was important to sort out} \]
\[ \text{what they did and didn’t want—and what we did and didn’t want,} \]
\[ \text{too. And it’s good—kind of like extended family—they catch us up on} \]
\[ \text{their family’s news, and they’re always so tickled with the little} \]
\[ \text{baby stories and photos. A very dear, caring thing, really. Both} \]
\[ \text{our donor and our surrogate helped us get across this river to the} \]
\[ \text{other side; we will always appreciate them, and they will always} \]
\[ \text{be a special part of our family.} \]

Randy and Wes tell a story of four adults working together to make
new life. While all were clear that this was a financial arrangement, the
financial realities nonetheless left room for appreciation, kindness,
mutual respect, continued caring, and gratitude. However, like Donna’s
story, this one is noteworthy for what it doesn’t say. Randy does not
dwell on the importance of physical similarity between both Randy and
Wes and little Annie, so that he and Wes will be seen as having equal
legitimacy as parents. Neither does he discuss their decision that the egg
donor not be the gestational mother. Perhaps this decision was intended
to insure less of a feeling of potential claim by either woman to be part of the ongoing family life. At the same time, making separate decisions about an egg donor and a gestational surrogate also allows the intended parents to choose among very many egg donors and select a donor whose physical, cultural, and vocational characteristics are similar to themselves. Since there is a much smaller pool of gestational surrogates, once the egg donor has taken care of genetic concerns, the surrogate choices needn’t be constrained.

When donors or surrogates are friends or family members, patterns of relating have long been in place. Often, these patterns change only briefly and then return to the ways they were before the pregnancy. In other families (like Polly and Donna’s), the parenting couple may invite a friend to be a donor and to be known or even to be known as father or mother and to have ongoing involvement with the child and a changed relationship to the parents as a result.

Even when the intended parents have no direct relationship to a donor, the recognition of the child’s link to that person establishes him/her as having some place in the family tree for all gay and lesbian parents and their children. For all couples, the actual or phantom presence of the donor creates a demand to locate a place for him/her that all family members can accept.

Beverly, looking back over 15 years in her son Eddie’s life, had this to say:

> From the first days of, ‘Where did I come from?,’ we’ve always talked with Eddie about the sperm bank and the sperm donor. We don’t know much about him—just what was in their donor catalog—but Eddie knows what we know. Over the years, we’ve all wondered at times, ‘Who is this person?,’ and when Eddie is especially good at something or especially not so good at something, and it’s not like me or Elizabeth, we all speculate: ‘Well, maybe it’s in the genes!’ He’s great at math and a real poet. We each write as part of our work, but Eddie’s the ONLY one in the house who’s good at math, so . . . So our donor has a presence in our family, but it’s never seemed like a problematic presence or a problematic absence either.

Perhaps the easygoing inclusion of the donor’s genetic role has allowed Beverly, Elizabeth, and Eddie to all live with a comfortable acceptance of his exclusion as well. In addition, like many gay/lesbian headed households, this family has made efforts from the beginning of
Eddie’s life to insure that they know other children with similar family structures. Feeling neither unique nor isolated may help the family in their matter-of-fact approach.

Increasingly, both our clients and parents in our networks tell us that interest in keeping donors permanently anonymous is declining. Perhaps with the visibility and prevalence of planned gay- and lesbian-parent families, the felt risks of knowing (and being known by) the donor are diminishing. Donors are less likely to fear exposure as egg and sperm donation becomes more widely recognized as a socially useful undertaking. Similarly, as society begins to recognize the role of donor, both donors and families may have become less likely to fear unwanted involvement or intrusion from the other. More donors are willing to be contacted and meet the child than was true in the past, and some agencies require that parents and donors who use their service be willing for the donor to be known should the child request it.

**Whose Child Is This? Establishing Parental Legitimacy**

Most couples enter parenthood with the belief that they are both fully committed parents, with all the pride of ownership and all the obligation that accompany parental status. This expectation echoes the cultural prescription for heterosexual parenting couples, although some heterosexual parents view their commitment differently than the norm.

However, unlike heterosexual parenting pairs, gay and lesbian couples cannot define their parenting roles by relying on unconscious internalization of gender linked roles. Coontz (1992), for example, has described contemporary Americans’ cultural devotion to a model mid-twentieth century family image that bears little resemblance to actual family life in the 1950s let alone now. Perhaps because of this cultural investment, some intended parents find that it is a struggle to bestow legitimacy on a family with two mothers or two fathers. Although who-does-what in our families is an open question, gay and lesbian couples are no strangers to role and relational ambiguity (Green & Mitchell, 2002), having dealt with the freedom (and lack of support) from social norms and institutions throughout our relational lives.

In addition, gay and lesbian parenting partners differ in their genetic contribution to the child. Even before a child is conceived, gay and lesbian parents typically assert the primacy of psychological parenthood over biological parenthood (Nelson, 2007). Like adoptive parents who acknowledge a child’s birth parents, gay and lesbian parents bestow a separate status to those people whose involvement ends at birth and who
are not part of childrearing. Nonetheless, for some, these differences in genetic or gestational participation may allow uncertainty about equal parental legitimacy to emerge for an individual parent or within the couple—and may well be echoed by others.

Validity and Visibility of Parents

Before they allow themselves to begin parenting, gay and lesbian parents usually have constructed a network of accepting and supportive friends and family (Brinamen, 2000) that they will join with to rejoice. As the intended parents announce their happy news, others may respond with tremendous variability—ranging from full acceptance and joy all the way to horror and dire predictions.

Randall recalls:

_I work in a medium-sized company, and as our due date approached, one of our secretaries, Suzanne, told me she had organized a baby shower for us. The whole company gathered the next week at lunch hour. Well, I guess Suzanne was an old hand at baby showers. There was special food, gifts, and party games, and when they opened the presents they took each ribbon from the gift and put it through a paper plate to make two decorated hats. We have the photograph of Nathan and me in our hats on the mantel, right next to Audrey’s baby pictures._

_It was a fabulous experience for us. While I work with these people, they aren’t really our close friends. And who knows, maybe some people stayed away on purpose. But it was like the world was welcoming Nathan and me and our baby. It really meant a lot to us._

Randall and Nathan’s shower is a delightful example of the power of social support. The ritual of a baby shower signals their impending parenthood both for themselves and their work associates in a way that would be extremely rare for heterosexual fathers. The fact that coworkers are hosting a baby shower for these fathers implicitly signifies an understanding that these men may be playing a larger role in parenting than would be the case for most heterosexual fathers. However, there are several common ways that parents-to-be do not always encounter such a welcome.

Where only one parent has a genetic link to the child, some families of origin may be slow to accord full parental status to the other partner. Families of the biological parent may see the baby as belonging only to
their own family; families of the non-biological parent may fail to regard the baby-to-be as theirs. In lesbian couples, before the baby is born, the presence of one visibly pregnant partner may heighten this response.

Aspects of the pregnancy may become too visible. Many couples become uncomfortable with pervasive questions about just how—exactly—this baby came to be.

As Sandra commented:

> From now on, whenever I learn that a heterosexual person is pregnant, I’m determined to ask how their baby was conceived, and whether they used any sort of donor. I mean, we’re a same-sex couple; you don’t need to be a rocket scientist to figure out how our baby was conceived. There’s a way that it feels just a little intrusive and maybe something more insidious too.

Questions that emerge from a premise that only one partner is the real parent are especially unpleasant. For example, questions about the source of sperm may privilege one partner in a male couple or imply that to be a real parent, the non-biological mother needs to be somehow genetically represented (through a family member, or through similarity to the donor’s physical appearance). Even among people who feel they are not homophobic, questions may emerge about whether a child can thrive without a mother, or a father, or a same- or other-sex parent in the home. The disguised homophobia of these questions becomes evident when they are compared to the (relative) acceptance and support given to single parent mothers and fathers nowadays.

On the other hand, gay men and non-biological mothers may sometimes feel that their pregnancy is being ignored or that they are unseen as parents-to-be. In lesbian couples, only one will be visibly and biologically pregnant. So, particularly for lesbian couples, the asymmetry of the pregnancy experience can underscore fears that the non-biological parent will not hold a full place in the family. Muzio (1993) has argued that the use of the term *non-biological* to designate one parent frames the discourse about gay and lesbian families in terms of missing ties. However, Gartrell et al. (1999), in a study of over 150 lesbian parenting couples, found no support for felt damage from this designation. Nonetheless, even when partners profoundly feel and fully understand their shared parenting, experiences of invisibility or second-string status can be unnerving, coming as they do at a time of openness, expansion, and vulnerability, and before the reality of the parent-child relationships can offset these concerns. Such comments can be especially anxiety-provoking
for the non-biological parent in states that do not permit second parent adoptions. Lacking legal security as a parent to their partner’s biological child, co-parents may feel especially vulnerable when their lack of a biological connection to the child is publicly discussed.

Some couples manage the asymmetry by trading off aspects of the conception process. One gay father said:

*I was telling Sally, our upstairs neighbor, that I ended up taking the lead in screening and narrowing down the choice of egg donors from agency websites because I had more time to do so, while my partner Ricardo (who ended up being the sperm donor) selected among the egg donors I presented to him. In that sense, I felt that I, too, had played a major role in genetically creating our baby from the start even though I wasn’t the sperm donor. Sally joked that not only had I selected the egg donor, but that I had selected the sperm donor too. The baby was entirely my genetic creation! We all laughed.*

This story illustrates the unique blending of psychological and biological aspects of co-procreation when lesbian and gay parents choose reproductive technologies. As with heterosexual parents who intentionally procreate, the baby of a same-sex couple is literally conceived in the minds of both parents and co-created by their decisions and actions, even if only one parent contributes genetic material. This internal experience of shared emotional and behavioral creation of the baby, however, is sometimes at odds with the outside world’s purely biological view of the baby’s conception (Hequemourg & Farrell, 1996; Triffin, Moses-Kolko & Wisner, 2006) as signified by the inevitable questions about, “Which one of you is the mother/father”; or “Who’s the real mother/father”; or (in the worst case) comments about how the non-biological parent lost out, as if it were an athletic competition between the two intended parents’ gametes.

**AND BABY MAKES THREE (OR MORE . . . )**

All parents enter a new world when they transition from pregnancy to parenthood. Once the baby is home, fantasy meets reality in the immediacy of all the senses—there is soft baby skin to touch and a little body to hold; there is the sweet smell of a baby (and the not-so-sweet odor of
digestive by-products). The new parents spend much time—to the amusement of friends—delighting in the little ears, the five fingers, and toes.

Now it’s time for both parents who walk-the-talk about shared parenting enacting their new roles in the sensitivity, attention, and care they give their baby and one another (Mitchell, 1995). We feel that as in other areas of domestic life, being a same-sex couple frees the partners to be flexible, responsive to what’s needed, and able to consider the particular gifts and preferences of each parenting partner (Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996) as the 24/7 job and joy of parenting unfolds. In our experience, there is unlimited variety in how parenting couples organize their lives as a family.

Occasionally, the baby may choose a parenting balance that is different than what the parents would prefer. For example, babies with one nursing mother may be more or less willing to also drink from a bottle in the early months. Because nursing brings such contentment, these babies sometimes prefer to be comforted by a nursing mom. While both parents are deeply committed to equality, they may discover that their child already recognizes that equality is not interchangeability. In these instances and in very many others, insecurities are offset when the parents acquire an accurate understanding of infant development and become better able to look at the world through their child’s eyes.

Mei-Ling recalls:

There were times when Alicia and I would just look at each other. Our son Ben only wanted her, and we understood this from his point of view. But still, I so wanted him to know that I could be a comfort too. At least I knew it wasn’t Alicia’s issue—it was mine! We talked about it, and we were amazingly undefensive. Once we really got what the issue was, we’d talk to Ben while he was nursing and make up stories about the good times ahead with Mama (me) . . . I know it didn’t comfort Ben, but it sure comforted me! And now that he’s 10, I can say for sure that those nursing stories have come true. Ben and I have found our way—we both love to snuggle and read silly stories and do magic tricks and make up and tell dumb jokes; I’m his Mama and he’s my son, and there’s no doubt we have our own unique and irreplaceable relationship that we live in every day.

Like Mei-Ling, doubtful friends and family members often find that they are won over by the actual experience—the wonderful baby, who
they are told will call them grandma and grandpa or the tender relationship between their son’s partner and their baby.

Bill recalls:

My sister phoned me after our first visit back to my family home. ‘Bill,’ she said, ‘it just made Mom and Dad warm up and shut up!’ Well, that’s my sister; but she really named it. My parents fell in love with our baby, and they couldn’t deny the closeness of our little family. There just wasn’t any more to say.

What Bill doesn’t say here is that he and Dennis carried the worry and sadness as they waited for the baby to come that Bill’s family would never be willing to be part of their child’s life. His family knew that Bill was not the biological dad and to make things worse, they shared the widespread view that men cannot care for young children.

Bill continues:

My parents thought we were crazy, and eventually it was clear that they were horrified. It was as if we were bringing a baby into the world and then planning to abandon it. My parents would say, ‘But where’s the baby’s mother?’ Finally I just said ‘I’m the baby’s mother. If I was a woman, you’d believe that.’ Well, it didn’t help on the phone, but I guess seeing is believing.

Even when seeing is believing, our culture is deeply invested in invalidating male caregivers. Most gay fathers can tell stories of walking down the street, at the grocery, or in the park when a stranger will remark on how good they are to help the mother out by taking the baby. This is one of very many situations when lesbian and gay parents choose, on the spur of the moment, whether to swallow others’ incorrect assumptions or take the time and risk explaining the truth about their families.

STEPPIN’ OUT WITH MY BABY
(OR KINDERGARTNER, OR TEENAGER)

The gay and lesbian communities, like any communities, provide welcome and acceptance and allow us to take for granted some understandings that are shared within our communities, however much they require explanation and feel foreign to others. This is an important reason why so many GLBT people seek psychotherapy with practitioners
who are members of the GLBT communities (Browning, Reynolds, & Dworkin, 1991; Rothblum, 1994), just as people of ethnic and religious communities seek practitioners who are like themselves in these ways.

Having a child, however, requires us to step out from the comparatively greater familiarity, understanding, and acceptance of alternative reproductive technologies in our home community and become involved, along with our children, in social institutions that are firmly situated within largely heterosexual milieus where these practices may be regarded as exotic or illegitimate. When seeking paid childcare, choosing a pediatrician, or just walking the baby stroller past the neighbors, we are called upon to explain and to convey not just the facts but the meaning and values we hold about one another as parents and about the how and why of our family’s structure and way of living daily as a family.

Randall recalls baby Audrey’s operation for a stomach defect:

Of course, we were so worried about Audrey. But then, on top of that, it is a teaching hospital, and there were so many doctors and nurses and interns coming and going. So we had to be sure that, whoever was there, they understood that Audrey has two dads and that each of us would be there with her at different times. We had no idea how they’d feel about that, but Audrey needed easy access to whichever dad was there, so that settled it. Actually, they were great. One of us got to sleep in the room with her on the night she stayed over, and it seemed like they treated us with the same compassion they’d feel for any other scared parents.

In this coming-out episode, Randall and Nathan faced the risk of anti-gay prejudice, rejection, and perhaps even some sort of aggressive use of institutional power. But unlike other coming-out experiences, they feared that Audrey might pay a price at this vulnerable time for someone’s bigotry. Some have argued that lesbians and gay men should not have children for this reason. The hidden homophobia of this view emerges into the open as we see that the same logic is not applied to other minority groups such as Jews and African-Americans whose children also are targets of bigotry.

Handling Intrusive Questions

Gay and lesbian parents using reproductive technologies almost universally report experiences of intrusive personal questions coming from strangers. It often is unclear whether the stranger is simply being curious
or is expressing judgmental criticism. With new parents, we emphasize that the most important goal is to retain our sense of control over personal boundaries in these situations. Not all questions have to be answered simply because they are asked nor do they have any obligation to answer them in detail or a personally self-disclosing way. Each lesbian or gay parent needs to figure out, in an overall sense, to what extent he or she wants to serve as an ambassador or educator from our communities to the heterosexual world or to other gay and lesbian people who have not used reproductive technologies to achieve parenthood. No one is obligated to teach the grocery store check-out line class on alternative insemination, surrogacy, and second parent adoption just because they are gay and lesbian parents. They have the same rights to privacy as everyone else. At the same time, many gay and lesbian parents want to serve this ambassadorial role, especially in situations where they feel it would make a positive difference in the way their families are perceived by the larger society.

In these kinds of public encounters, especially as children get older, it is important to consider the impact on them of observing such interactions with curious strangers. The way gay and lesbian parents answer personal questions about their child/ren’s conception inevitably models for them how to deal with similar situations they will face with their peers and other adults. In addition, any personal information that is disclosed to a stranger may inadvertently compromise children’s sense of privacy, so their feelings in this regard also need to be taken into account.

Thus, aside from the time one may have available to engage in such conversations, there are three key considerations in deciding how to respond to unexpected questions: the parent’s personal feelings of safety, desire for privacy in that context, and with the person asking the question; the extent to which the parent wants to serve as an educator on behalf of the communities and believes this particular stranger has the right motivations and is educable; and the impact a particular response might have on one’s children in terms of setting an example for them or compromising their sense of safety and privacy.

If the stranger seems motivated by simple curiosity and the parent feels positively drawn to respond, then it can be helpful to answer unsolicited questions thoughtfully but still being careful not to say more than parent and child might feel comfortable with later. This kind of interaction can leave parents and children feeling very good and whole for having made the world a slightly more enlightened place and sometimes for having bridged the divide between the gay and straight worlds or between...
the worlds of gays-in-a-family-way and those who do not have or want children.

Much harder, of course, is when a stranger approaches with what seems like an implied judgment or criticism in a very public context like a grocery store. It may be best under these circumstances to say something firmly evasive such as, “Thanks for your interest, but right now we’re just shopping like all the other families.” Obviously, this can be said with a smile or not, apologetically, or with an edge. If one doesn’t want further questions, this one-liner should be said matter-of-factly, and then the parent should turn her/his attention to something else (such as the child, a grocery item on the shelf, or a magazine at the check-out stand). Such evasive behavior may not win converts to the cause, but it will protect the parent’s privacy and sense of control over the family’s life—and that is most important.

A somewhat more engaged tactic in these situations is to say to the questioner something like, “Oh, I’m so glad you asked and want to learn more about this! Here’s the name of a book you can read about it.” Then say, “Have a nice day,” and exit the situation as gracefully as possible. For this purpose, we recommend The Complete Lesbian and Gay Parenting Guide, by Arlene Istar Lev (2004). This kind of response runs the risk of generating more questions. However, without divulging any more personal information, you can reassure the stranger that, yes indeed, the book addresses that question, too. In most cases, this approach will yield reasonably good will and still preserve your privacy (other than acknowledging that you are a lesbian or gay parent).

Depending on the child’s age, it may be important afterwards to discuss these kinds of encounters, explaining in simple terms why one chose to respond to this particular question in a given way. These discussions can be useful for teaching about homophobia, heterosexism, outsiders’ legitimate desire for information, our responsibility to educate them, and our right to protect our privacy and safety.

**Starting Preschool, Where “More Is Better”**

When we were looking for a preschool, we interviewed several places, and one of our questions was about whether their staffs would be okay with our two-mom family. So, when Amy entered preschool, that part of it wasn’t an issue. But there were still the other parents and all those four-year-olds. The school we chose was connected to a college, and about a third of the families were from other countries. We really had NO idea how the two-mom thing
would go over. We soon discovered that many families weren’t the Ozzie-and-Harriet-and-little-Ricky model. There were single moms and foreign student moms who’d brought the grandmother along and aunts and uncles and nannies, so we were just one more of Heinz 57 varieties. But the most amazing part was the kids. Here’s what Amy’s best friend Lauren said to her mom: ‘Mommy, aren’t I really lucky to have you and daddy to love me?’ ‘Oh, yes’ said Lauren’s mother. ‘Well, why aren’t I as lucky as Amy? She has two moms and two dads to love her.’

Donna’s story represents the prevailing response we’ve heard, at least from lesbian and gay parent families who live in the less conservative states and near urban centers. At this age, children are willing to take loving relationships at face value. Still very concrete and present oriented, they accept what is and may not have the cognitive development yet to think about what is not or what could be otherwise. Also, when families can financially afford to have a choice over pre-school or later school, they can select congenial climates.

When Sex Becomes Giggly: Donor Banks and Surrogates in Late Elementary

In the later elementary school years as children begin learning about reproduction and a bit about sex, they begin to wonder about same-sex parents and sometimes ask more pointed questions. That two moms or two dads are not just parents but couple partners can be a new and sometimes startling idea for kids—and with this recognition, homophobia or milder confusion and discomfort can find a place.

Like their parents, children raised with an understanding of alternative reproductive technologies do not confuse sex and reproduction. For them but not for some classmates, the idea of a sperm bank is not embarrassing or exposing (Mitchell, 1998). With the pride of new knowledge, some elementary students insist that there must be a man and a woman, a mother and a father in order to have parents. This can be a thorny semantic problem for the child whose oft-repeated “How-I-came-to-be” story is of Daddy, Papa, an egg donor, and a surrogate or Mommy, Mama, and the sperm bank.

Shakira recalls:

The teacher told us this playground story. Some of the kids were talking about where babies come from, and one little girl decided
she was The Authority on the subject. When Ben heard that every child has a Mommy and a Daddy who love each other, and that’s how babies are made, he spoke up: ‘I don’t have that.’

‘You have to,’ said the little girl.

‘No I don’t,’ said Ben, ‘I have my Mommy and my Mama and they went to the bank and got sperm, and that was all they needed!’

As heterosexual families come out of their closet about using alternative reproductive technologies, the next cohort of even relatively young children may learn that eggs and sperm are not the same as Mommies and Daddies, and that eggs and sperm make babies. In the meantime, fielding questions and comments about alternative conception and family structures can become more complicated as children get older. When peers are old enough to understand the biological aspects of conception, children conceived via reproductive technologies by same-sex parents do not have the luxury of silently concealing their facts of life the way similarly conceived children of heterosexual parents do. Lesbian and gay parents who have chosen to come out at school may want to talk with the school’s sex educators about emphasizing that, in all families, it is eggs and sperm rather than Mommies and Daddies that make babies.

The Teen Years: Whose Choice Is It?

As the teen years approach, children of gay and lesbian parents move into middle and high schools where they meet many new peers and new teachers who know nothing of their family structure. Some pre-teens and teens are adamant about being visible as the sons and daughters of gay and lesbians men born with the help of donors and surrogates. Others make careful discriminations about who to tell, how much to tell, and need time to assess their potential audience before they come forward. Many distinguish between friends who come to the house and meet their parents and acquaintances or classmates who will not and make decisions on what they perceive as a need-to-know basis.

While it may be important for some parents and some teens to consider carefully the implications of being out or of being closeted as a gay- or lesbian-parent family, all the families we have talked with feel that the use of alternative reproductive technology and the particulars of their child’s conception and pregnancy should not be of concern to others any longer.
Ramona comments:

At this point, I feel it’s inappropriate for anyone to ask who Javier’s biological mother is. This is our family, me and Yvette, and our son Javier. It’s been this way every day for over 15 years. I wouldn’t meet one of Javier’s friends or the parents and ask about their pregnancy! We’re proud of our family, and part of that pride is saying, ‘We’re Javier’s family, take us as we are. He does.’

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN MULTIPLE SYSTEMS OVER TIME

The psychosocial challenges that accompany gay and lesbian parents’ use of alternative reproductive technologies can be organized on a set of concentric circles like the ripples that move out from a pebble thrown in water (see Figure 1). At the center of the circles is the individual, and the challenges and strengths that come from within. The first ring that surrounds this center is the couple ring where issues can arise between partners and where help and support can emerge from one’s partner.

FIGURE 1. The Gay and Lesbian Parent’s Ecology of Nested Contexts
The second ring is one’s nuclear family: the parents, children, and the issues and support that are located there. The third ring contains the closest people beyond the family—close friends who have become one’s “family of choice (Weston, 1991) or relatives who have a central place. The fourth ring is comprised of a broader social network—neighbors, co-workers, friends and family who, while not central, are present and meaningful. The fifth ring is the close-range society—the school, the camp, the doctor’s office, the religious congregation, the townspeople. The sixth and largest ring is formed of the greater society and the largest and most distant institutions that affect us—governments whose policies bolster or undermine the legitimacy of our families, media who show us fairly or in biased ways or not at all, insurance companies that will or won’t extend coverage to all members of our family. This ecology of nested contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Carter & McGoldrick, 2004; Green & Mitchell, 2002) allows us to see more clearly the various stressors and sources of strength and support.

For people in each of the concentric circles, access to information and research can counter fears and worries with fact; many fears are born of isolation and ignorance. Brinamen (2002) has found that before gay men become fathers, they progress through an information-gathering stage when they confront their doubts about being a good parent. Ample research (for example, Drexler, 2005; Patterson, 2000, 2006; Steckel, 1987; Tasker & Patterson, 2007) has documented the efficacy of gay/lesbian parents as a group and the mental health and successful adaptation of their children. Many doubts about gay and lesbian parenting and about the depth and durability of children’s relationships with both parents can be dispelled through immersion in this research literature. Also, by meeting gay/lesbian parents and their children in person through friends or at alternative family events or by seeing them in documentaries (such as *Daddy and Pappa*, or *Beyond Conception* directed by Johnny Symons; *Our House*, directed by Meema Spadola; or *Both of my Moms’ Names are Judy*) or reading about them in books (Lev, 2004; Martin, 1993) or on the internet (for example, at the COLAGE Web site), visible realities offer direct evidence that many fears are groundless. Finally, all parents need to learn about child development so that they can stand in their children’s shoes and become more accurately attuned to their child’s experience, and so they do not worry needlessly about transitory distressing behaviors that are normal for young children and will disappear soon enough. Again, isolation with only knowledge of one’s own baby can lead to unjustified fears and anxiety.
We have found it valuable for prospective parents, individually and together, to articulate their hopes about the kind of parents they want to be. In the process, prospective parents can discover a great deal about their own and their partners’ expectations and values. They can also affirm and concretize their vision of good parenting and of a viable family. This step is useful for all parents, but it is especially important for lesbian and gay families whose children were born with the help of reproductive technologies. This is because they cannot rely on culturally-endorsed father and mother roles or allegations of biological drives or links to dictate either partner’s intentions or future action. Through this process, individual parents lay claim to a view of themselves as a parent-to-be, and the parenting couple bears witness to each others’ image of the family. With consensus about family structure and spoken or written parenting vows, each partner knows that s/he can look to the other for clarity and affirmation in times of doubt (as when Sandra and Alicia exchanged looks of understanding, and built stories of the future while baby Ben nursed). Having put their hopes and expectations into words when the baby is psychologically conceived, but before it is physically conceived, the couple is ready to present a clear and united vision of their family to those around them and to their growing child.

In the second circle, the experience of daily life as a family can counter a non-biological parent’s fears about being excluded or less real as a parent with the reality of experience. As the child matures, it will be important for each dyad within the family to discover the special things they share. Each parent needs time alone with the child, and the parenting couple needs time alone though these times must be brief when children are young. At the same time, pleasurable times for the whole family together make manifest the structure and integrity of the family group. Creating special family experiences and rituals (Muzio, 1996) with regular times for them establishes continuity and ensures that these experiences expand beyond their actual time through anticipation before and happy remembrance after. These special experiences will vary with children’s age and family members’ interests. Examples include having special meals, watching or listening to favorite shows/films/music/books together, playing favorite games (one family we know acts out Star Wars episodes with their six-year-old, while a family with an older child plays rounds of Scrabble and Sorry!), or walking in lovely places (one family gathers wild mushrooms). Families may want to make the most of family, religious, and local or national holidays which come at the same day and season each year, have repetitive and ritualistic aspects, and underscore the felt legitimacy of the family because they carry strong social
meaning. For some families, GLBT holidays such as the annual Pride march or Coming Out Day honor their special family and its place in the larger GLBT community. Tasker (2006) emphasized the personal family meaning of celebrating a child’s “Conception Day”—a date that gay and lesbian families using alternative conception technologies are unique in knowing.

The third circle, the family of choice, blesses with its welcome and acceptance or saddens through rejection or condemnation. While some family members are delighted from the outset, many members of the partners’ original family of origin may acclimate to a gay or lesbian parent family or to the realities of alternative reproduction only gradually and through contact and experience with the new parents and child. In contrast, families of choice with members who are close allies to the GLBT community may be much more able to embrace alternative reproductive technologies and same-sex parenting pairs. From the first decision to parent onward, the parenting couple can gain sustenance from frequent and regular involvement with close and supportive others, ensuring that the dream of family life is nurtured from its incubation period until long after the “chick is hatched.”

The fourth circle, the source of Randall and Nathan’s baby shower, can include allies who bring powerful messages of welcome and inclusion from the larger world. It’s useful to stay aware of these allies and cultivate as well as cherish the moments when they step forward and advocate for the family. The strangers who have become donors and surrogates, even when almost unknown, are usually experienced psychologically as powerful allies. We believe that this is why so many children are told stories of the nice man and kind woman who helped their parents and caused them to come into being, even when parents have no way to know whether their donors were actually nice or kind.

At the same time, the further away people are from experience with alternative reproduction, the more likely one is to encounter an almost prurient curiosity or a feeling of being displayed as an oddity. We have found it helpful when dealing with ignorance in the fourth or more distant fifth and sixth circles to plan ahead for these situations by rehearsing responses that set appropriate limits in a courteous and sometimes educative way. As children grow and move further into these circles on their own, we advise trusting them to set their own course. When family members remind themselves that they are safe and grounded in profound and loving connections with one another, they can more easily allow the growing child to take different paths than they might choose when finding their way through these more distant circles.
Each of these circles does not stand alone, and an action in any ring can set powerful waves in motion through all the rest. We encourage parents to seek out all the sources of welcome and understanding that they need and to make these available to their children as well.

REFERENCES


doi:10.1300/J461v03n02_04