

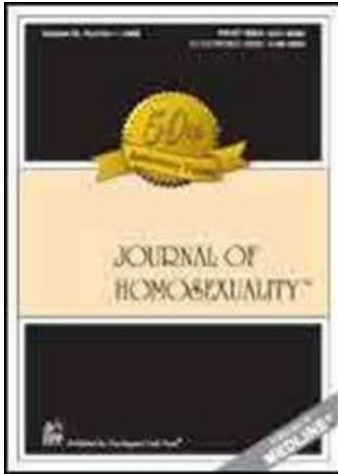
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### For the Love of the Children

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# For the Love of the Children: The Coming Out Process for Lesbian and Gay Parents and Stepparents

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**ABSTRACT.** This research investigated the coming out decision and process for 23 lesbian and gay custodial stepfamilies. We argue that lesbian and gay stepfamilies represent a unique type of family, distinct from heterosexual stepfamilies and from lesbian and gay families who have children within the context of a lesbian or gay relationship. The coming out process is one developmental challenge that distinguishes lesbian and gay stepfamilies from these other types. Through interviews with both lesbian and gay parents and stepparents we explored their coming out process to significant others: the children, families of origin and ex-spouses. We discuss those factors influencing the decision and the consequences that developed in light of these decisions. Findings show that the coming out process for lesbian and gay co-parents is a flexible and familial one, primarily influenced by and centered around the needs of the children. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: [getinfo@haworthpressinc.com](mailto:getinfo@haworthpressinc.com) <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

**KEYWORDS.** Stepparents, gay and lesbian families, coming out as parents, gay and lesbian parents and stepparents

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on family structure in the past 20 years addresses the changing nature of the family, noting that the nuclear family is no longer modal (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994) and confirming the prevalence of alternative family forms. For the past 25 years, the traditional nuclear family has represented less than 1/3 of all families with children (Bozett, 1987b), with stepfamilies a more prevalent family structure (Visher & Visher, 1990). As a consequence of these changing demographics, studies concerning mixed sex stepfamilies<sup>1</sup> have increased. As Pasley, Ihinger-Tallman and Lofquist (1994) note, some 880 articles and books have been written investigating various aspects of stepfamily life. The original research in this area emphasized problems in stepfamily formation and functioning, thus utilizing a model that perceived the nuclear family as superior or even ideal in comparison to stepfamily forms. More recent investigations note that this "deficit comparison conceptualization" (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993: 256) ignores the realities of successful stepfamily functioning and disallows us from perceiving the strengths of these families (Anderson & White, 1986; Coleman, Ganong & Gingrich, 1985; Knaub & Hanna, 1984). The present challenge for family researchers is to understand the stepfamily as a structure unique from but no less functional than the nuclear family and to investigate those factors which support the creation of successful stepfamilies (Anderson & White, 1986; Coleman, Ganong & Gingrich, 1985; Knaub & Hanna, 1984; Visher & Visher, 1990).

One type of stepfamily that is frequently invisible and even more misunderstood is the lesbian and gay family (Baptiste, 1987a; Benkov, 1994; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Pennington, 1987). The majority of lesbian and gay stepfamilies with children are formed from previously married individuals who later come out as homosexual. Campion (1995) estimates that there are 3 million to 5 million lesbian and gay parents who have had children in their prior mixed sex relationships. The numbers of these stepfamilies is expected to increase as more and more individuals realize and accept their sexual orientation and gain divorce and custody of their children (Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994; Pill, 1990). The stepfamily literature notes the existence of lesbian and gay stepfamilies; however, the attention given to them is a cursory examination, as the assumption is frequently made that these

families experience the same challenges and strengths mixed sex stepfamilies face. We accept that lesbian and gay stepfamilies share commonalities with their heterosexual peers, yet would also support other researchers' arguments that they experience problems and benefits not found in mixed sex families (Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Bozett, 1987b; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). Our approach assumes that investigating lesbian and gay stepfamilies as a separate and unique type of alternative family allows us to consider how they differ from their heterosexual counterparts and thus, advance our knowledge of those factors which contribute to successful family functioning for these families. Similar to the way stepfamilies are compared to nuclear families, most of the literature comparing mixed sex and same sex stepfamilies assumes a superiority of the mixed sex stepfamily (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). In addition, the majority of the research to date focuses on children, comparing their psychological and social functioning to those of children raised in mixed sex families (Aldrich, 1993; Bozett, 1987c; Campion, 1995; Golombok, 1983; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Patterson, 1992; Pennington, 1986; Steckel, 1987; Sullivan, 1996). Very little literature addresses how parents structure and cope with the challenges of lesbian and gay stepfamily life (Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Bozett, 1987c; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993). Crosbie-Burnett and Helmbrecht (1993) call for more studies on lesbian and gay stepfamilies, particularly with respect to how and if such families come out to significant others. While other researchers have considered coming out a significant aspect of stepfamily functioning, few studies voice both parents' and stepparents' experiences with this process (exceptions to this include, for example, Aldrich, 1993; Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Bozett, 1987a). Thus, even though the number of books on lesbian and gay families has tripled in the last ten years,<sup>2</sup> one area still lacking in the literature is qualitative data which investigates in depth the process of "coming out" for lesbian and gay parents and stepparents (Aldrich, 1993; Baptiste, 1987b; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Falk, 1994; McCandlish, 1987).

This article focuses on the developmental task of "coming out" and identifies both the decision making process and the consequences lesbian and gay stepfamily parents experience in coming out to significant others. We chose this area because it clearly differentiates the lesbian and gay stepfamily experience from both mixed sex families

(Nelson, 1996) and from alternative forms of lesbian and gay families. Because heterosexual stepfamilies are accepted by mainstream society and their union is accompanied by rituals, their first developmental task is to "become a family." Lesbians and gays who choose to have children, whether through adoption, artificial insemination, or some alternative form also have to learn to adjust to parenthood in the absence of legitimacy, acceptance and rituals (Baptiste, 1987b; Barrett 1989; Bigner, 1996; Benkov, 1994; Pennington, 1987). However, since theirs is a choice made as a unit, they are more similar in structure to heterosexual nuclear families; in addition, they are more likely to be comfortable with their gay identity and are more likely to be "out" to a number of people (Nelson, 1996; Burke, 1993). For lesbian and gay families choosing to have children, there is less fear of losing custody since no legal ex-spouse exists to threaten the family.<sup>3</sup> In stepfamily situations custody battles often resolve the issue by awarding the child to the heterosexual parent (McCandlish, 1987; Falk, 1994; Duran-Aydingtug & Causey, 1996); in addition, stepparents in lesbian and gay families have no legal recourse (Hartman, 1996). Thus, the challenges lesbian and gay stepfamilies face are monumental and unique, as they exhibit characteristics dissimilar to both heterosexual stepfamily and lesbian and gay "nuclear" parents.

We argue that the process of "becoming a family" is more complicated for the lesbian and gay stepfamily. Not only do they have to learn how to become a stepfamily like heterosexual stepfamilies and deal with the illegitimacy of their relationship like other lesbian and gay couples, but unlike either, they have to decide within the context of and as a family whether to come out, to whom, and how to deal with the consequences of such a decision. The transformational process of coming out is frequently incomplete for many previously married women and men (Benkov, 1994; Bozett 1987a; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Siegel & Lowe, 1994) and thus is experienced in conjunction with the developmental tasks of "becoming a stepfamily." In addition, the stepfamily member may have already completed the process of coming out but not as a lesbian or gay co-parent member which may require a "second coming out" (Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Clunis & Green, 1993; Barret & Robinson, 1990). Because these families must develop a sense of family within the context of coming out, they suffer from both types of transitional status demands; similar to mixed sex stepfamilies, they must "become

a family” and transfer identities from single to conjoint. Unlike heterosexual families, however, gay and lesbian families have had no courtship nor rituals which validate their relationship or the stepparents’ relationship to the children (Baptiste, 1987a; Benkov, 1994). The stages of becoming a couple occur simultaneously with becoming a family and the stages of becoming a family occur concurrently with coming out (Aldrich, 1993; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Nelson, 1996). We focus on the area of coming out then as exacerbating the complexities of becoming a family and argue that it clearly defines the lesbian and gay stepfamily as experiencing different challenges from both their heterosexual and lesbian and gay counterparts.

### **COMING OUT MODELS AND LESBIAN AND GAY STEPFAMILIES**

In the lesbian and gay literature, the coming out process receives a substantial amount of attention. Very often this process is seen in terms of developmental stages (see Cass, 1979; Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988) which the individual experiences. These stage models do not assume linearity, however, and most researchers caution that “coming out” is situationally defined and certainly not an all or nothing status (Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett, 1987a; McDonald, 1990). People who come out may alternate between different stages depending on their comfort in a variety of environments and interactions. Typically, the final stage in the coming out process concerns a gay person’s self-acceptance, which includes an ability to see being gay as one aspect of an individual’s overall personality. Finally, lesbian and gay individuals synthesize their identity so that they accept and are comfortable with members of both the heterosexual and lesbian and gay community, perceiving both as an essential aspect of their lives (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988). For the most part, the research which investigates the coming out process has found that individuals who do successfully come out experience less stress and are more satisfied with their lives than those who remain “closeted” (Falk, 1994; Morrow, 1997; McDonald, 1990).

Although the stage models of the coming out process may be useful for describing the experience of many lesbian or gay individuals, we argue that the models are inadequate to explain the lesbian and gay stepfamily members’ experience for several reasons. One, the individ-

ualistic emphases of the coming out model do not describe the experience of stepfamily members who undergo decision making as a unit. Second, we agree with Morris (1997) who has noted that the coming out models fail to consider the diversity of the coming out process which is affected by a number of demographic characteristics, such as age. The stage models typically cover a period beginning at pre-adolescence to adulthood, with the majority reaching identity integration at approximately their mid to late twenties, typically five years after self labeling (McDonald, 1990; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993; Troiden, 1988). Such a model does not reflect the experience of most previously married lesbians and gays. Third, we believe that one very important independent variable is prior marital status as well as the presence and ages of children. The previously married person loses heterosexual privilege and confronts stigmatization (Thompson, 1992); however, for the never married individual, the presence of children alters one's location within the lesbian/gay community and, at the same time, redefines one's status and positioning within the heterosexual community (Aldrich, 1993; Bozett, 1987a; Campion, 1995; Clunis & Green, 1993; Hare, 1994). For both, the decision is no longer an individual one, nor is it just situationally specific, but is dependent on the family as a unit.

Some research has been completed on the "coming out" process for lesbians and gays with children. Depending on the study, reports vary concerning the number of parents who do come out to their children. For example, in some studies very few have been honest about their homosexuality (Dunne 1987, Nelson 1996),<sup>4</sup> while in other research, the vast majority of those interviewed have come out (Golombok, 1983; Lewin, 1993; Schulenberg, 1985). Questions regarding the decision to come out center around the child's age (Hare, 1994), concerns about homophobia and the well being of their children (Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett, 1980; 1987a; Clunis & Green, 1993; Hare, 1994; Nelson, 1996), fear of rejection (Bozett, 1980; Clunis & Green, 1993; Dunne, 1987) or custody or other legal issues (Baptiste, 1987b; Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett 1980; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lewin, 1993; McCandlish, 1987; Nelson, 1996; Pennington, 1987; Rivera, 1987).

Despite variations in the numbers coming out to their children, most of the literature reports that both lesbian and gay co-parents and researchers feel strongly that being out is the best course of action for

everyone (Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett, 1987a; 1987b; Bigner, 1996; Clay, 1991; Clunis & Green, 1993; Dunne, 1987; Hare, 1994; Lewin, 1993; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; Pennington, 1987; Rivera, 1987). Although lesbian and gay stepfamilies must weigh the risks of coming out for themselves, the pressures of the family closet can often produce harmful side-effects. Research finds that children who are encouraged to “keep the family secret” exhibit symptoms of depression and moodiness; they also tend to be withdrawn, and feel isolated (Baptiste, 1987a; 1987b; Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bigner, 1996; Pennington, 1987).

Most of the research finds that the majority of parents delay coming out to their children (Schulenberg, 1995) despite indications that revealing one’s homosexuality to one’s children prior to puberty meets with the most positive reactions (Baptiste, 1987b; Barrett, 1989; Benkov, 1994; Bigner, 1996; Bozett, 1987a; Pennington, 1987). Baptiste (1987b) found that by age five, children are old enough to understand what lesbian and gay means, but parents frequently prolong coming out to until their children are approximately age twelve. Many researchers encourage talking to the children when they are young, since by puberty they will be aware of and may agree with society’s intolerance for gay and lesbian relationships (Barrett & Robinson, 1990; Benkov, 1994; Bigner, 1996; Bozett, 1987b; Kirkpatrick, 1987).

The reactions of the children differ depending on ages, but it is unclear what other factors affect their level of comfort. For example, in some samples researchers found most children reacted positively (Bozett, 1987b; Clunis & Green, 1993) or at least did not suffer negative consequences (Hare, 1994). Lewin (1980) noted that while young children experience a sense of separation from peers, they also express positive feelings about their parent (Falk, 1994; O’Connell, 1993). Others report some negative reactions; for example, shock (Nelson, 1996; O’Connell, 1993), anger (Baptiste 1987b; Bigner, 1996; O’Connell, 1993) and resentment (Bozett, 1987a). However, it should be noted that these negative reactions were not tied to homosexuality as such but were a response at having to adjust to living within this illegitimate family structure (Baptiste, 1987b; Nelson 1996). Children realize that they have to choose confidants with care, learn to “manage information,” and develop strategies to help them cope with outsiders (Bigner, 1996; Benkov, 1994; Bozett, 1987b; Lewin, 1993; Nelson, 1996; Pennington, 1987).

Research on coming out to families and to ex-spouses is less well researched and, similar to the research on children, the results are often inconsistent. Dunne (1987) reports that the majority of his sample were out to their parents. Others, however, report that lesbians and gays with children tend not to tell ex-spouses, families of origin and other relatives about their sexual preference or even that they are in a coparent relationship (Baptiste, 1987b; Bozett, 1987). Bigner (1996) reported that gay fathers and stepfathers are usually isolated from their parents and from the gay community. Baptiste (1987b) also noted that it was the family of the biological parent, not the stepparent's family, who tend to react negatively when their child becomes involved in a romantic relationship.<sup>5</sup> Despite this negative reaction, some research finds that these parents do rely on their families of origin for support (Hare, 1994; Lewin, 1993), although others report stepfamily members turn to their friends more often than their families (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993).

Research documents the severity and pervasiveness of custody issues for lesbian and gay stepfamilies. Rivera (1987) discusses custody issues and other legal problems that can occur when lesbian or gay parents tell their ex-spouses about their sexual orientation. Many report that parents are concerned about custody, child support and harassment from their ex-spouses if they decide to come out (Benkov, 1994; Bozett, 1987b; Falk, 1994; Lewin, 1993). Because of fears of losing custody, many lesbian and gay parents actively distance themselves from their ex-spouses. This fear is grounded in reality; compared to heterosexual women, the outcome of lesbian custody cases is uncertain at best, and the statistics present a bleak picture of the potential for winning in these cases (McCandlish, 1987; Duran-Aydintug & Causey, 1996). We can only reason that gay men would fare even worse, considering society's proscriptions against gay men and children.

### *PROCEDURES*

In order to explore and document the complexities of the coming out process as experienced by the parents and stepparents in same sex stepfamilies, we conducted face to face and telephone interviews with 23 couples, including the biological parent and the stepparent. We defined a lesbian or gay stepfamily as one in which one or both of the

partners came to the relationship with children from a previous mixed sex marriage and in which the child(ren) were living or had lived with the couple for at least 6 months during the year. The one to two hour interviews with each partner covered the couple's relationship from inception to the present, each person's relationship with the children, and the partners' perspectives concerning how and if they came to feel a family bond. We also investigated each partner's relationship with their own and each others' family of origin, extended family, and ex-spouse. We specifically asked about coming out, including decision-making with regard to significant others and reactions and consequences of these decisions.

As noted above, coming out is a process with clearly delineated stages; however, its theoretical usefulness is minimized when applied to the lives of real human beings. In addition, "coming out" is a difficult if not impossible concept to operationalize. One significant task in the process of coming out is clearly that of sharing one's identity with significant others, yet the quantity and quality of these experiences is certainly important to consider. Thus, if parents have shared their lifestyle with their children but have hidden their gay identity from neighbors and coworkers, would we designate them as "out" or in the closet? Would we consider gay fathers or lesbian mothers out if they would not deny their lifestyle if asked, yet fail to introduce their partners as such? For purposes of analysis, we considered a person to be "out" when she or he had self-disclosed to family members or reported that someone else had told the children. We did not include people who indicated that they assumed or believed their children, parents, or ex-spouses knew of their circumstances. We focused on whether the parents were out to their children, the parents of both partners, and, for previously married respondents, their ex-spouses. Our qualitative results delineate the decision making process of coming out, that is, whether individuals were out, the factors involved in these decisions and the consequences of their choice.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Sample Demographics***

Our respondents included those currently parenting as well as those who had completed the parenting process. Our sample consisted of 23

couples, 6 male and 17 female unions. With the exception of 1 family, both the biological and stepparent were interviewed in all families (one stepparent was deceased). The number of years couples had been living together ranged from 1 to 31 years with a mean of 8 years. Individuals had been married from 3 to 19 years. For the vast majority of biological mothers this was their first lesbian relationship, and for the majority of stepparents, this was their first stepparenting experience. We did have 3 couples in which both were biological parents, but in only 1 of those did both children live with the parents. The respondents came from a variety of geographic areas, including many of the New England states, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas. The vast majority lived in suburban/urban areas. Age range was extensive and we were able to access parents who ranged from the beginning and the "empty nest" stages of parenthood. Unfortunately, racial and ethnic diversity was minimal, consistent with the majority of samples gathered for lesbian and gay research.

### *Coming Out to the Children*

We asked respondents whether they were "out" to their children and what factors had influenced this decision. Parents described how and in what circumstances they adjusted their behaviors to reflect "family" needs rather than individual desires.

The vast majority of our families were out to their children at the time of the interview. Two, however, had waited until their children were adults to inform them and one relatively new family was planning on coming out to their child within the next two years. Some had waited until the children's teens. Most of the decisions about when and how to come out centered around the fear of losing custody (discussed in the section on coming out to ex-spouses); however, a second and equally significant factor was how children would be affected by their parents' lifestyles and by the potential impact of external homophobia.

All of the families we interviewed emphasized common concerns about coming out, with most centering around the effect their decision would have on their child. For those who did not come out or came out relatively late in the children's development, concerns centered around fear of putting their children<sup>6</sup> through unnecessary stress. In the words of one respondent who had not come out to her children until they were adults, "I didn't have the right to put them through {that}. And I thought about that choice. Do I feel badly about it? I don't feel badly

about it. There have been people who have said to me, you know, this is how you change the world. That could be true, but I just didn't see it as not so much changing the world as my kids getting through life."

Perhaps the most significant result was that coming out issues extended beyond being truthful. Even in those families where the children were aware of the relationship, parents primary responsibility was to their children and their children's needs. Thus, most seem to structure their degree of openness based on their children's comfort level. Children's degree of acceptance frequently depends on their developmental stage. Although children are different and experience varying levels of comfort depending on their personalities and experiences, children's reactions tend to fall into some general developmental patterns. Consistent with previous research, younger children typically have the least difficulty and adolescents, the most. In one lesbian family with younger children, the parents decided to reveal their identity to them from the beginning, telling us the kids "were delighted": "We always had gay and lesbian friends-this was not an issue for them whatsoever. They thought it was hysterically funny actually, that I might like ladies." We found similar patterns of acceptance among the families we interviewed; in fact, in none of the families with young children did anyone report a negative response to discovering their parent's homosexuality. Several of the families with teenagers, however, reported that children's difficulties with their parents' lifestyle typically began in junior high and continued through high school. One parent of a teenager reported that although her son had already accepted the relationship, when he entered junior high it became a problem, and he requested that his parents sleep in separate bedrooms. Although this pattern of nonacceptance during adolescence is typical, it is by no means universal. Another stepparent told us the story of her partner's coming out to her teen-age son: When Michael's mother came out to him, she asked him if he could put the magazine down so they could talk. He did and she told him, "Michael, I'm gay." After he reacted by saying "ok," and started reading the magazine again, she said, "Michael, I just told you that I'm gay," and he told her, "Get over it, Mom, it's the nineties."

Age was not the only definitive factor affecting children's level of comfort. Children experience temporary and often varying degrees of acceptance unrelated to age. And parents are willing to adjust their degree of openness accordingly-even if it means partially going back

in the closet. One stepmother reported that their daughter “went through a time where she did not want any show of affection. She went through a two-day period when she wanted us to walk down the street on opposite sides—but that didn’t last. Then there was to be no touching. So there was no touching. Now, we walk down the street and she’s got her arm around both of us. . . . So, you just kind of go with the kid-flow.” Decisions about coming out can be situational as well. In another case, the partners decided not to go to bed together until the daughter’s boyfriend left, “because we don’t want to embarrass her, you know, this is a new boyfriend.” These examples reflect the type of consideration most of the lesbian and gay parents allowed their children when determining as a family, how out they would be and what accommodations the couple were willing to make for their children.

Some teenagers’ greatest concern is acceptance from their peers and it is typical for parents to respond sensitively to these fears. Some children express to their parents the sentiment that, “It’s okay if you’re a lesbian as long as nobody else knows.” Lesbian and gay households frequently have a separate bedroom that can be assumed to be the partner’s room, whether the children request this or not. We found it more typical that parents voluntarily yield evidences of their intimacy in order to prevent difficulties for the children. In one family a stepparent noted “it was very difficult for Jerome to adjust to—he didn’t want any of his friends to know, and there were some times when he’d come home after school, and if he had anyone with him, he would quickly run into the house and close all the doors, all the bedroom and bathroom doors, so that there would be no tell-tale signs as to how many bedrooms there were to how many people.” Even in relationships in which the children did not live with the couple until later, parents made adjustments in their home and relationship after the children moved in: One couple, Bill and Dan, who were already comfortable with their level of outness, voluntarily adapted their relationship and living arrangements when Dan’s ex-spouse asked him to take the children. Bill, the stepparent, reported, “out of respect for Dan’s kids, we chose separate rooms because we didn’t know what to expect and they didn’t know . . . so we chose to live as roommates totally.”

As is frequently the case, when lesbian or gay parents feel that their homosexuality interferes with their children’s sense of well being, these parents accommodate their children. Sometimes children may not even introduce the stepparent to their friends. In making adjust-

ments, however, they also let their children know that they, too, have limits and these limits tend to be tied to the values they want to instill in their children. One respondent, Sam, talked about the difference between making accommodations and setting limits, saying “not being introduced at a choir concert was not a serious enough slight for me to care.” This child had lived with the couple from her toddler years and was very comfortable and out to most of her friends. However, on the day she was scheduled to host a large party, he found her turning over the family pictures: “We sat down and I said, ‘here’s why you can’t do this thing. Because then you enter my environment where I have to be ashamed of who I am. And if I allow myself to be ashamed of who I am, you will ultimately be ashamed of who you are, and that can’t happen in our house. In our house, these are our walls; this is where we come for safety where I, as a gay man, come to be safe. I can’t do that if my own child is turning my pictures upside down.’ And it took awhile, and she understood that. She never did it again.” Another parent summed up the sentiments that many of those interviewed seemed to feel: “They’re real clear in the sense that they don’t go talking about it with their friends . . . but they also know that it’s okay. So they’re walking this fine line of there’s nothing wrong with it, but a lot of the people in the world think so. . . . So it’s a pretty difficult message to give kids.”

How peers might react is a reality most children fear, so parents often promote certain strategies to help their children deal with external homophobia. Many of the parents told their children that others might not accept their lifestyle and included the admonition that friends, and even family members might react negatively. Despite all these fears from parents and children, very few of the families in our study reported anything other than minor experiences of discrimination. Very few respondents told of circumstances in which friends’ parents refused to let them come over. One parent told us that other teenagers had cautioned her daughter’s boyfriend, telling him, “Don’t you know her mother’s a lesbian? How could you keep on going out with her?” Families can’t always predict how accepting others will be toward them, so most parents prepare their children for possible incidents of taunting. Even in these instances, most parents seemed to allow their children to react however they felt most comfortable. Yet most also helped their children understand that discrimination was not only wrong, but did not really reflect on them or their family. Sam

advised his children, "Ok, so you might hear the word 'fag,' you might hear the word 'queer,' so you need to understand that that's kind of what we are in some people's language. But to me, it's just me and your dad and we love each other. And we're a family and we love you and that's who we are."

In virtually all of the families, however, both the biological parent and the stepparent believed that the children's needs were primary. The decision of whether to come out, and how out to be, reflected a family decision rather than a parental or individual one. Results showed that the coming out process in these families was not only cooperative, but flexible and ongoing, one that could be adapted to circumstances, developmental stages and specific day to day realities. As one parent summed up, "If they want to present us, 'This is Momma and Mom,' that's fine-or 'This is Momma and Karen' and sometimes they call us, 'This is Momma's roommate,' or sometimes, 'Momma and Karen are lesbians,' . . . what they most feel comfortable with, we go with that." In almost all of the families, the children's level of comfort defined how out they would be, a factor that clearly differentiates them from both mixed sex stepfamilies and from lesbians and gays who "choose" to have children. The lesbian and gay parents in this study taught their children that the family was different from dominant cultural stereotypes; however, at the same time, lesbian and gay stepfamilies know this sense of acceptance and open-mindedness is not often reciprocated by other family members, friends and outsiders. In all of these cases, however, the interviewees agreed that ". . . it is a real mistake for not telling your children from the onset." While some of their responses might be interpreted to reflect internalized homophobia, most of the parents' decisions were reflective, sensitive and unselfish. Thus, parents' reports seemed to echo a careful consideration of the reality of external homophobia and its potential detriment to the entire family.

### *Coming Out to Families of Origin*

In addition to coming out to their children, a second significant "other" with respect to coming out is the gay or lesbian couple's family of origin. While this is important for all couples as they discover same sex attraction, it is even more so for lesbians and gays with children. For many of the lesbians and gays in our sample, their present relationship was their first lesbian and gay relationship, and so

the process of coming out occurred simultaneously with establishing a family. Biological parents, many of whom had gone through a period of time as a single parent, typically had relied on families for social support and practical help (e.g., babysitting). Stepparents, who already had been accepted by their parents and significant others as gay now had to contend with asking them to accept not only a partner but their role as a stepparent to someone else's children. Both had to deal with coming out issues as a family, taking into account not just their own feelings and living situations but their children's as well.

For some lesbians and gays the particular milestone of disclosing to their families of origin meant losing their families; reactions can range from "I've lost my parents completely over this relationship—they have completely disowned me, having nothing to do with me" to some eventual level of acceptance. And even accepting reactions can seem changeable and tentative, similar to how one participant described her mother's reaction: "'no no no no . . .,' she really couldn't believe it and then she took a deep breath and said, 'okay, okay, all right,' and she just kind of said 'I love you; whatever's going to make you happy.'" The reasons for coming out to parents vary, although in many cases it is promoted because of the children. Another respondent said, "I didn't want to put my children in the position of having to lie. So that meant I had to come out to everybody." This same person reported that when she came out, her parents refused to speak to her and although her mother has since mellowed her position, she has not spoken to her father for years. A few participants reported a surprisingly pleasant "coming out." One told us that her father replied, "I'm so glad I don't have to worry" because he realized that there were "two people to take care of each other."

For gay and lesbian families, the process of coming out to others is similar to that of coming out to their children—both are continuous. Lesbians and gays "work" on their parents to eventually accept them, their partners, and the children as a family. Over time, parents go through different levels of adjustment to their son or daughter's coming out. One woman recounted her experience after someone told her father at church that his daughter was living in sin. "Well, he confronted me and I told him 'yes' and he basically said 'you're not welcome in my house anymore.' So he disowned me basically as I would put it. He has since come around over the four years—every Christmas I get a card and some money from him. The first two years

was 'you're living in sin, but here's your \$50.00'; the year before last it was 'I don't agree with your lifestyle but I still love you'; and I guess last year was 'you're living in sin but I miss you' and this year it was 'I don't agree with your lifestyle but you are my family and I still do love you. Please come and see me.' So he has, I guess, realized that family does have some importance, which is what I tried to tell him on the telephone when he first confronted me with it."

As this last example typifies, most parents become resigned to the situation over time. They accept that their daughter or son is lesbian or gay; however, it is typical that their overt behavior belies an attitude of acceptance. There is often the understanding that the issue will not be verbalized nor made overt. Thus, while a heterosexual couple might be affectionate or talk about their relationship in front of in-laws, by tacit agreement the lesbian or gay couple understands that this is the price they agree to pay for "superficial acceptance." One couple talked about how one of their relatives refused to put up their picture with other family photos. Others expressed difficulties with parents who refused to invite their partner to family functions. "They did not want Brenda to come anywhere with me. If I came, I could not bring her. So I didn't go." Over time, many lesbians and gays whose partners weren't invited to functions eventually either refused to go or forced their parents to include their partners. As the respondent above emphasized, "And there is one time that I did go without her and I regretted it. But I won't do it again." Sometimes the best reaction lesbian and gay families can expect from their parents is for their partner to be treated as part of the family and invited to functions with "nothing more formally said."

We asked our respondents if the nonbiological respondent was perceived as a stepparent and if the children were treated as grandchildren by the stepparent's family. Consistent with the research on mixed sex stepfamilies, the children were often not treated as stepgrandchildren by the nonbiological partners' family. However, unlike mixed sex stepfamilies, the stepparent was not perceived as an equal or even "step" parent. This was true even in families where the parents apparently accepted the relationship. For example, in a number of families, the stepparents' families of origin expressed concern and even stronger reactions to the fact that their daughter or son was using her/his finances and helping to support "someone else's children." Another stepparent reported going to her family to ask for financial help as the

lawyers' bill for the custody battle was interfering with their ability to pay rent and food bills. She reported being treated as if this shouldn't be any problem for her and was told that 'they couldn't' help as they were "buying furniture for their home."

### *Coming Out to Ex-Spouses*

A third "significant other" with respect to the decision of whether to come out is the biological parent's ex-spouse. Nearly all of the lesbian and gay parents were out to their ex. For many, same sex attractions were not experienced in youth, and telling their ex became a natural consequence of the intimacy and emotional closeness of their relationships. One woman, who described her ex-husband as a "good friend," explained her awareness of same-sex attractions, saying, "Something happened, and I literally just woke up one morning and felt like I didn't want to be with Harry anymore as a wife, and I wanted to explore relations with women . . . and it literally was out of the blue like that." Such "surprise" revelations of same-sex attraction were not atypical among the females we interviewed.<sup>7</sup> Even for some males, telling the person who had been their primary confidant seemed natural. Spouses' reactions ranged from "he thought I was nuts," to "God will cure him," to irate spouses who immediately served their soon-to-be ex with divorce papers. In one family in which both spouses had admitted to each other that they might be gay prior to marriage, after the woman decided to "come out" and seek divorce, he apparently "forgot" his earlier admittance to same-sex attractions and used his ex-wife's lesbianism against her in a bid for custody.

As this last example typifies, the decision to come out is wrought with fear of losing custody. In our sample, 7 had actually experienced a court custody suit, but the fear of losing custody was expressed in almost every one of our interviews. Such a fear is often at the heart of the coming out decision. For lesbian and gay individuals who are not out to their ex-spouses, children were often not told because the couple was afraid that the children will inadvertently reveal their life style. "The only reasons . . . I didn't discuss it is because Maria tends to chit chat around her father." One family who had not come out to the child reported the difficulty of hiding their relationship even within their own home: "The only time we can be a couple is on the weekends and after she goes to bed and even then we can't sleep together. We can on the weekend or during the day while she is gone."

Couples used a number of strategies to deal with the custody issue. Many in our sample who wanted full custody decided to settle for less rather than face the possibility of losing custody altogether; some of the parents had agreed to a 50/50 arrangement to avoid losing their children entirely. Others agreed to stipulations on their agreements. In one instance, although the parent and stepparent had been raising the child for 11 years, a revised court order included a new stipulation that the two men were "not allowed to spend the night in the same room" when the daughter was with them.

Lesbians and gay parents are all too aware of the reality of losing custody and, unlike mixed sex families, experience an enormous amount of social and legal vulnerability. Some of them acknowledged the low status they occupied because of this. In one family, where the ex-wife had requested that her children's primary residence change from her to her gay ex-husband's home, she later, after several years, served him with custody papers. His partner described the father's tearful reaction: "He thought he was going to lose them to the courts, like to a foster family, because he was gay." Another mother who lost custody temporarily also lost the loyalty of her own family because her ex-husband had convinced her parents that her gay relationship was "so damaging to the children." In this case, the lesbian mother temporarily lost custody, and her family of origin facilitated this.

For many families, the fear of losing custody of a child to an ex-spouse is expressed as an overwhelming and constant interference in their lives. Thus, many spoke of the continual feeling of dread they experienced throughout their children's developmental years. Even when the court order was in place, the fear of losing one's children had been, or continued to be, an ongoing and tremendous threat to the family unit. As one lesbian mother noted, "That was something I really had nightmares about, in the privacy of my own space, and cry about quite a bit because I couldn't bear losing Ann Marie. I would literally give up anything to keep her; and I did, in fact give up my life. This is not something I would want her to know."

### ***CHALLENGE AND BENEFITS OF COMING OUT***

For a lesbian or gay stepfamily, the process of coming out lacks a uniform identifiable pattern that similar families can imitate successfully. In every circumstance, lesbian and gay stepfamilies must weigh

the risks of coming out in terms of each family member's unique experience. Yet in spite of such uniqueness, gay and lesbian stepfamilies encounter similar difficulties with coming out, forming family bonds, setting individual boundaries and contending with heterosexism. These stepfamily members may not know any other gay or lesbian-headed families with children. As a result of the scarcity of role models, lesbian and gay parents and their children must rely on their inner strength and commitment to each other; these households must invent for themselves what it means to be a gay or lesbian family within a society that renders them invisible and threatens their very existence.

For the couple, hiding their identity and denying the significance of their relationship frequently works against establishing that degree of intimacy that is given in most heterosexual relationships. One couple in a relatively new relationship who hadn't told their child had to plan "intimacy" time for when the child was away. Others had noted the reluctance of their parents to "hear" about this very significant aspect of their lives. Families of origin and ex-spouses frequently refused to think of the family as a stepfamily or of the stepparent as a co-parent. Thus, for the lesbian and gay stepfamily, their very existence as a family is all too often denied by the significant others in their lives; such a reality mitigates against "becoming a family" in their own eyes, their children's and within the larger community.

This was true even for parents who were out—many parents recalled that they still were uncomfortable with overt demonstrations of the relationship, at home and in their parents' homes. As one stepparent noted, "I wish I could be a little bit more open with the relationship in front of my kids, which I have not really ever done. It's a typical family when you walk in the house except you don't see Mom and Dad hugging and kissing, you know. Matter of fact if it's nighttime and we're watching a movie on the VCR, we might be lying together on the couch and as soon as the door opens, we jump." Another parent emphasized how this loss of intimacy feels: "It's kind of like you're so happy inside, and you know, you want to do that little pat on the shoulder or hold her hand and it's something you can't do. So it's really frustrating because I'm thinking to myself, 'I love this person and I love these kids and I want to be able to let all of them know that I love them differently but I love them all.'" Another parent expressed a common fear: "I always wanted to be careful that I wasn't . . . that I wouldn't do something that would be unaccepted

or cause a problem between my kids and other parents or kids in school or something like that . . . and I wanted my kids to have the most, I tried to let my kids have the most normal life that they could with being raised with a gay parent and his lover.”

Despite this, there are benefits with respect to having to confront the prejudice. While external homophobia renders these families less acceptable to others, the internal family structure often creates a sense of openness that is rare in other families. Many of our respondents described their children as being more comfortable in discussing their problems since their parents are better able to empathize with children’s natural fears of being different or unacceptable. Unlike mixed sex families, lesbians and gay parents are in a unique position with respect to creating coping mechanisms for helping their children deal with everyday problems that young people face. A benefit that most respondents also indicated was that they believed their children would grow up naturally ready to accept diversity and to appreciate differences in people. One parent echoed the sentiments of many when he stated, “Nobody wrote a book on how to do this. Or at least, if they did, we didn’t read it. So everything we do is fly by the seat of our pants and by the grace of God, it’s worked out well. I guess if I ever had this experience again, I would probably do it much the same. I would be open with them from the beginning. I would arm them with knowledge. You know, we took away the power of the word ‘faggot’ by telling them what it meant. We took away a lot of power from other people by teaching them. I think they’re going to be so open-minded, and they will have learned to accept people for people.”

### ***CREATING SUCCESSFUL LESBIAN AND GAY STEPFAMILIES***

We believe our findings shed light on a number of issues critical to understanding lesbian and gay stepfamilies. One of the most important results is that in these families children’s needs are primary in the parents’ coming out decisions. The consequence of this primacy is that children are raised in an atmosphere of openness and inclusion. The majority of the children in these households learn strategies for coping with opposition and disapproval; they adopt an attitude of acceptance that may be taught in heterosexual families but is often only verbalized rather than directly experienced. In addition, parents usually adopt a stance of flexi-

bility regarding their level of outness in order to insure that both developmentally and situationally their children could feel secure.

The major disadvantage we found was that the coming out decision sometimes negatively affected the partners' ability to achieve the level of intimacy they desired. In the majority of heterosexual stepfamilies, intimacy is expected and the partners are comfortable expressing their affection and love for each other. In lesbian and gay families where children are "chosen," the parents have made decisions without the influence of the children, regarding not only their openness but their level of intimacy both within and outside of their home.

The research on stepfamilies needs to acknowledge that lesbian and gay stepfamilies represent a unique family form. More research is needed not only on the coming out process for same sex stepfamilies and their children but also on other challenges confronting these families. In this research, we noted that while the coming out process is a complicated and ongoing interference in the lives of these stepfamilies, their resulting strength and ability to cope with these challenges produces a unique type of child-centered family. The lesbian and gay stepfamily also has the advantage of rearing children who, having had the experience of confronting discrimination early in life, will become adults who accept diversity and have the skills to confront and resolve other life challenges they will face.

We need to create an atmosphere in which same sex stepfamilies can be encouraged to come out to their children, their parents, and their ex-spouses. Courts and the legal community must be educated regarding the research on lesbian and gay stepfamilies and policies instituted that insure that one's sexual orientation is not considered a factor in custody decisions. More attention also needs to be focused on ways in which outreach to lesbian and gays—especially those with children—can be accomplished so that their parents, significant others and communities will no longer accept complacency and intolerance as the norm and recognize the many benefits children experience being raised in lesbian and gay families.

## NOTES

1. We refer to heterosexual relationships and marital units as mixed-sex in order to maintain consistency with comparisons to same-sex relationships.

2. Eleven books on lesbian and gay families were published between 1977 and 1987, while there were 34 written from 1987 to 1997.

3. We are not suggesting the lesbians and gays who have children within the context of a homosexual relationship do not have to contend with coming out issues or fear of custody; we only suggest that the problem is exacerbated for lesbian and gay families in which one of the partners had children through a heterosexual union. The coming out process is qualitatively different for lesbian and gay stepfamilies because (1) the biological parent's identity as a parent precedes adoption of a lesbian or gay identity; and (2) the evidence suggests that the lesbian or gay stepfamily frequently loses custody to the heterosexual partner.

4. Nelson interviewed both lesbian "choice" and stepfamilies; all of the women in the artificially inseminated group were out while the reverse was true for the women in stepfamilies.

5. Aldrich (1993) found that in families of lesbians who choose to give birth through artificial insemination, the biological mother's family is most supportive of having children. It would seem that parents are supportive of any choice which will emphasize the "normality" of their children and oppose any identity which will call it into question.

6. An interesting further area for study would be the effect gender has on children's reactions. The research to date is contradictory. Kirkpatrick (1987) found that teenage boys were likely to express anger but this was mostly directed toward the stepparent. Bigner (1996) and Pennington (1987) found same sex children had the most negative reactions; however, O'Connell (1993) reported that boys in lesbian households were more likely to react poorly.

7. Thirteen out of the 17 women who were biological mothers had not considered the possibility of lesbianism prior to their marriage. This suggests that an important topic for research are gender differences among previously married lesbians and gays.

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