

*Research suggests that the children of gay and lesbian parents have similar psychological adjustment to children growing up in more traditional family structures. Nevertheless, these children may face some particular challenges. VIVIEN RAY AND ROBIN GREGORY explore the school experiences of a small sample of children of gay and lesbian parents. They identify some common difficulties these children confront, and suggest some possible approaches to overcoming them.*



# School experiences of the lesbian and gay

**W**ith the increasing diversity of family structures, families headed by lesbian and gay parents are becoming more common and more visible. Reliable Australian statistics are difficult to obtain. However, two surveys have been conducted in New South Wales assessing the number of lesbians both with children and planning children. In 1995, of 732 lesbians surveyed, 20 per cent had children and about 15 per cent wanted children within the next five years (LOTL 1996). In 1999, 22 per cent of the 386 lesbians surveyed had children, and about 20 per cent wanted children (LOTL 2000). Thus it appears that there is an increasing desire for children in the lesbian community. (Unfortunately, no figures are available for the numbers of gay men with children.)

The great majority of lesbian mothers and gay fathers conceived their children in a heterosexual relationship. However, recently the percentage of children being conceived using donor insemination has increased dramatically (Gartrell et al. 1996). Where lesbian women have conceived with the assistance of a donor, that donor may be anonymous to the woman and the child, or he may take on a full-time father role, or anything in between. Where gay men are rearing children, the men

have mostly come from a relationship or marriage to the child's mother. In a very small percentage of cases, gay men are fostering children or a surrogacy arrangement exists, and in other instances they are sharing the raising of a child for whom they were the donor.

There is not a great deal of research regarding children who have lesbian mothers or gay fathers. In the United Kingdom, Golombok and Tasker (1997) surveyed 39 children from lesbian single-mother families and the same number from heterosexual single-mother families. After extensive psychological, intelligence, social and personality testing, it was found that no significant difference existed between the psychosocial status of the children of lesbian mothers and those of heterosexual mothers.

American research by Patterson, Chan and Raboy (1998) compared the psychological adjustment of children from 55 lesbian-headed families and 25 families headed by heterosexual parents. All children were conceived by donor insemination. The results showed no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents. Thus, "the idea that only heterosexual parents can raise healthy children is certainly not supported by the present findings" (Chan and Raboy: 454). Other research also supports



# children of parents

this conclusion (Kirkpatrick 1981; Hotvedt and Mandel 1982; Puryear 1983; Greenet et al. 1986).

Recent Australian research on same-sex attracted adolescents (Hillier et al. 1998) informs us that over half of these young people have been the victims of verbal or physical abuse because of their sexuality, with 70 per cent of this abuse taking place at school. The study found that information about gay and lesbian relationships was extremely difficult to access, with only 15 per cent of the 750 respondents in the study receiving information on gay and lesbian relationships from school. The study found that same-sex attracted young people either live life "in a shadowy world of silence and denial in which 'passing as normal' requires a constant monitoring of every word and deed . . . or . . . risking rejection and the potentially negative reactions of friends, family and the community" (p.8).

## *The study*

The impetus for the research is the lack of information about the experiences of children who have gay or lesbian parents. Given the findings of Hillier et al. (1998) regarding the homophobic abuse suffered by children who are themselves gay, lesbian or bisexual, we wished to

determine whether children who had gay or lesbian parents had similar experiences at school. Some researchers have suggested the beneficial role that support groups for children of gays and lesbians might have in dealing with issues that are specific to this group (Lewis 1980; O'Connell 1993; Paul 1986). The study thus included focus/support groups as part of the methodology.

The central purpose of the research was to investigate: (a) whether children in primary and secondary schools felt discriminated against because of their parents' sexuality; (b) incidents experienced by the children of lesbian and gay parents; and (c) strategies used by the children, their parents and the school to deal with incidents that had arisen.

Two questionnaires were compiled. The first was aimed at *lesbian and gay parents and those planning parenthood*. The questionnaire was a mixture of open and closed questions and covered topics such as concerns the respondents had for their children, steps they had taken to prevent problems from arising, issues experienced by their children at school, and what their children did when issues arose.

Questionnaires were placed in gay and lesbian magazines, posted on a gay and lesbian website, and made available at lesbian and gay seminars and conferences

in Melbourne and Sydney. In total, 117 questionnaires were returned from Victoria, Tasmania, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Queensland. Sixty per cent of respondents were gay and lesbian parents, and 40 per cent were prospective parents. Lesbians comprised almost 90 per cent of respondents.

The second questionnaire was aimed at *children with gay fathers or lesbian mothers*. Forty-eight children from New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria took part in the study. One-third were interviewed individually. Focus/support groups were held for the remaining two-thirds.

The children ranged in ages from five to eighteen years. In addition, there were two young adults who reflected on their recently completed secondary school experiences. Of the 48 participants, over half (58 per cent) were in primary school at the time of the

Lesbians and gay men who already had children wrote about the incidents experienced by their children. According to parents, the biggest issue for children in both primary and secondary school was the feeling of isolation or being different. More than one-third (36 per cent) of lesbian and gay parents of primary school children and more than two-thirds (67 per cent) of parents with children in secondary school described their children as having felt isolated or different.

Lack of an inclusive curriculum ranked second. Almost one-third (32 per cent) of gay and lesbian parents with children in primary school and over one-third (39 per cent) of parents with children in secondary school described the omission of issues concerning gays and lesbians from school curricula as something their children had experienced.

Although the main fear of respondents was that their children or future children would be bullied or teased,



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interviews, over one-third (38 per cent) were secondary school students, and 4 per cent were post-secondary school. Most children lived in Victoria (67 per cent) or New South Wales (29 per cent), with 4 per cent living in the Australian Capital Territory. Females made up just over half (56 per cent) of the participants. By far the majority of children had lesbian mothers (81 per cent, or 39 children), with 13 per cent (six children) having gay fathers, and 6 per cent (three children) having both a lesbian mother and a gay father.

### ***Parent questionnaire***

Parents and parents-to-be were concerned about future problems their children might face as a result of negative attitudes towards the sexuality of their parents. The most common concern for all respondents was that their children would be teased or bullied (73 per cent). This was followed by a concern that discussion about lesbian and gay families would not be included in the school and pre-school curriculum (62 per cent). The third major concern was that children would have to answer difficult questions (56 per cent).

actual exposure to bullying and teasing was rated third in the issues experienced by the children. Eighteen per cent of parents of primary school students and 28 per cent of the parents who had children in secondary school reported that their children had experienced teasing or bullying. Notably, 17 per cent of parents of secondary school students claimed that their children had experienced discrimination by a teacher.

It is important to emphasise that 41 per cent of respondents with children in primary school did not describe any negative issues as having arisen. On the other hand, only 17 per cent of parents with children in secondary school, did not describe any such negative issues due to their parents' sexuality.

### ***Children's interviews and focus groups***

#### ***Questions and disclosure in primary school***

Children in primary school reported that they were asked many questions about their family background. Children in Prep, Grade 1 and Grade 2 (five to eight year olds) were happy to answer these questions

although the terminology used by children with gay and lesbian parents and the concepts of family seemed difficult for their peers to understand. Many of the children who were born into a lesbian relationship referred to both women as “mum” or “mummy”. This was often not understood by the children’s peers and, consequently, constant and at times difficult questions were asked. The answers were received with a variety of responses ranging from surprise and curiosity, “*How were you born then?*”, to disbelief, “*One must be an aunt.*” A small minority of children in Prep to Grade 2 experienced frustration: “*People ask annoying questions.*” In one single case, a girl in Grade 2 had decided to tell only her best friends about her mothers’ lesbianism.

The children in Grades 3 and 4 (eight to ten year olds) became more frustrated than the younger children at being asked questions about their families. Jesse described his feelings: “*I explain three times, then that’s enough.*” They also became more selective in answering questions. Of the nine children in these grades, one-third (33 per cent) reported not telling anyone that they had a gay or lesbian parent due to a fear of being teased or bullied. Keeping this information to themselves wasn’t an easy thing for the children to do. The children who had kept “the secret” wished they didn’t need to. As Geoffrey said: “*I haven’t told anyone at school because I’d be teased. It feels hard to keep that secret.*”

Children in Grades 5 and 6 (ten to twelve year olds) tended to give more selective answers to questions asked at school and were also more reluctant to answer. Rosie: “*Sometimes I explain, but sometimes I say, ‘doesn’t matter’.*” A noticeable difference in this older age group was that sometimes children made up answers in order to avoid more questions. These fictitious answers tended to be about the parent’s partner – “*she’s my mum’s friend*” – or the donor where there was one.

Disclosing the sexuality of their parents caused fear to some in this age group too. Almost one-quarter (22 per cent) of children in Grades 5 and 6 had not told anyone about their parents’ sexuality and another 22 per cent had told only one person. The reason for not telling was always the same. Susan said: “*I don’t spread it round cos I don’t know what people are going to say.*” Her fear was substantiated by other children’s negative experiences. Hanna, a girl in Year 8 reflected: “*In Grade 6, when it was spread round the school, I cried a lot and didn’t want to go to school.*”

In summary, 90 per cent of children in Prep to Grade 2 had openly told people at school about their parents’ sexuality. However, in Grades 3 to 6, 39 per cent of children in the study had kept the sexuality of their parents to themselves or had told just one person. In quite a few cases the children kept their “secret” for many years.

The children in the study who attended the focus/support groups expressed the view that they valued knowing other children with gay or lesbian parents and enjoyed being in the groups with other children like themselves. Susan summed it up this way: “*I feel more comfortable with them. I can talk to them about anything and I know they won’t turn round and say, ‘Ooh, I don’t like you any more’.*” They discussed many issues and all were keen to regroup after the research was completed.

### ***Bullying in primary school***

None of the ten children in Prep to Grade 2 had experienced teasing or bullying in relation to their parent’s sexuality although an older girl reflected on a time in Grade 2 when she had been teased. She described being quite upset by this.

Just under half (44 per cent) of the children in Grades 3 to 6 had experienced being bullied. The kind of teasing and bullying that they experienced involved disparaging remarks and taunts such as: “*I don’t like gay people*”. It was also common for the sexuality of the parents to be spoken of as if it belonged to the child. Geoffrey described his situation: “*They say you’re a gaybo and push me round and stuff.*” Fights broke out where some boys were concerned.

Another form of teasing that affected the children was the use of insulting language that denigrated gay men and lesbians. For example, children were called gay if they did something that didn’t please another child or said something “uncool”. Taunts such as “gaybo”, “lesos” and “you’re so gay” were heard by most of the children in this age group, even though they were not necessarily directed at them. The children often felt these disparaging remarks as a criticism of their parents’ sexuality and took it personally.

Teasing and bullying caused the children to feel a range of emotions from annoyance to extreme hurt. The climate of teasing and bullying caused fear in many of the children and their reaction to this hostility or the fear of it being directed at them was often to keep their parents’ sexuality a secret.

### ***Coping with bullying in primary school***

Primary school children dealt in various ways with being bullied. Those in Grades 3 and 4 tended to recruit help by talking to a parent or older sibling, getting other children to help, or telling a teacher. Children in Grades 5 and 6 often explained that their parents were just the same as heterosexual parents. Lucy: “*My mum is just like any other mum but she has a different sexuality.*” A large proportion of children tried to ignore the bullies while a few shouted them down or used self-talk. Frank gave an example of self talk: “*Say it inside your head and to the teaser. Your parents are completely normal.*”

### ***Primary school teacher responses***

Where bullying occurred in the younger grades, the children usually sought teacher intervention. In Grades 5 and 6 they were much less inclined to ask for support. On the occasions when the children asked for teacher assistance, they often felt disappointed and let down by their teacher’s responses.

Some teachers had acted by putting the bullies in “time out”, asking them why they did it, or telling them it was a bad thing to do. The children viewed these actions as inadequate because they didn’t stop the teasing and bullying from occurring again. Some children felt the teachers hadn’t taken the matter seriously. Frank reported: “*I got into a fight with boys who teased me. The teachers say, ‘It takes two to fight’.*”

### ***Questions and disclosure in secondary school***

Questions about family constellation reappeared in Year 7, when children entered secondary school. Some

Year 7 students received positive responses: “None of my friends have lesbian mums but they want them.” These responses were, however, atypical for children in the Year 7–10 range. Over one-third (36 per cent) of students at this level (12 to 16 year olds) did not disclose the sexuality of their parents to others. The reasons were much the same as for primary school students. Jack in year 9: “*I wish I had someone to tell. But I can’t. I haven’t got enough guts. I’m scared.*”

At the end of secondary school, more students, including those who had kept their “secret” for many years, felt inclined to tell people. The disclosure rate increased from 64 per cent in Years 7–10 to 86 per cent in Years 11–12. Tristan described why he disclosed this information to some of his peers: “*The kids are more mature.*”

With students in Years 11 and 12 beginning selectively to tell their friends, the questions began over again. This time, however, many of the children enjoyed the questions and felt that the questioning was positive. Maria: “*In Year 11, I told close friends and they were all fine. I was a novelty for my friends. Instead of being negative, people were curious and almost envious of me.*” A small number of questions were antagonistic: “*Is your mum a lesbian because if she is, I’m not going to talk to you any more.*”

Mostly, however, Years 11 and 12 often brought about relief for children of gays and lesbians with fewer homophobic attitudes, more positive interest and, with it, support.

### **Bullying in secondary schools**

Children in secondary school experienced similar rates of teasing and bullying to those in Grades 3 to 6. Of the 11 children in Years 7 to 10, just under half (45 per cent) had been the victims of teasing or bullying that was related to the sexuality of their parents. The number of young people in Years 11 and 12 who were being teased or bullied was 14 per cent. Those who had never been bullied put it down to the area they lived in or the kind of school they attended. According to Chloe: “*I’ve never been teased or bullied in my life . . . My school is an arty school. A lot of people are more accepting.*”

When bullying was experienced in secondary school, it included harsher “put-downs” and more severe physical abuse. Again, the sexuality of the parents was attributed to the child in a hurtful way. Danielle described one of the common incidents she lived with in secondary school: “*I had apple cores and banana peels and rocks thrown at me every time I walked past them. ‘Dyke, dyke dyke’ they’d call at me. I used to get very scared; very frightened.*”

### **Coping with bullying in secondary schools**

The students in secondary school used some of the same methods as the younger children to deal with bullying. These included ignoring and fighting. Some of the boys believed that fighting would help them. Gary: “*Two kids gave me a hard time . . . I hit one of them to make him stop saying stuff like ‘Your mum’s a dyke’. He never did it again.*”

Where the children in primary school tended to talk to parents or siblings about bullying, older children tended not to talk about it. Gerard, in Year 11 said: “*I*

*try to work it out as best I can. If I can’t, I live with it. I wouldn’t ask for help.*”

Secondary school students spent a lot of time avoiding being teased or bullied. Some children went to great trouble to hide their parent’s sexuality such as not inviting friends over or setting up a false room to pretend their parent’s same sex partner slept there. Other children stretched the truth. One girl, who was seeking solace from her friends to the news of her mother’s break up with her partner, described the relationship as that of a woman and man. “*Everyone then consoled me as it was a serious and painful family break up.*”

Another method of self protection used by many of the children was to select carefully those they believed they could trust with the information. For most of the children, this approach avoided negative and hurtful repercussions of others knowing and was a way of offloading the burden of non-disclosure. Chloe: “*I waited till I knew my friends’ reactions before I told them. My further apart friends don’t know. They don’t need to know.*”

The Year 11 and 12 students tended to deal with insulting language by addressing underlying issues. “*They say ‘fag’ and ‘poof’. I say – don’t use that word cos using it as a put-down is a put-down to homosexuals, not just to someone you want to insult.*”

A couple of students in secondary school joined in the teasing. Maria described it: “*If there were two girls who were affectionate to each other, we’d call them lesbians. They were the butt of cruel jokes. I laughed at the jokes and sometimes joked along with them. I hated doing it . . . If I had highlighted how negative it was, the attention would have been on me. I didn’t want to be shunned, or worse, hated. I never did stick up for anyone.*” On occasions, the fear of the consequences of disclosure of their parents’ sexuality and the desire to belong was so great that children resorted to homophobic bullying themselves.

### **Secondary school teacher responses**

A concern that became clear throughout the interviews was that of schools’ often inadequate responses to homophobic language or bullying. For some students in secondary school, the response by school staff became critical to their wellbeing.

High school students were often reluctant to go to teachers about their experiences. Similar to the primary school children, the responses of their teachers to acts of bullying did not inspire trust in the vast majority of secondary students either. Jane had been the victim of much homophobic violence throughout her high school years: “*They punched me. It ended up in a fight and the teachers did nothing . . . For other things they suspend them, but not for this.*”

Some teachers took “turning a blind eye” to extremes such as the situation where Danielle found herself behind the shelter sheds with a group of boys who were “*grinding themselves on me . . . A teacher walked past and didn’t stop it. That was typical.*”

Participants sometimes found their teachers as homophobic as their fellow students. “*The teachers would join the kids in saying ‘you’re so gay’.*” Katie was the only participant in the research who had confronted a teacher about her homophobia: “*My friend was giving another friend a hug. The teacher cracked it.*”

Later in the class I went up to her and said, 'Why did you have a problem with that?' I go, 'If you feel like that then I don't want to be in your class' . . . Then I had a full blown argument with the coordinator. I said point blank, 'Look, my mum's gay and I'm not going to be in a class with a teacher who is homophobic'. I got out of getting into trouble cos I had a good argument."

### What would make a difference?

Many children in primary and secondary school believed that by educating students and teachers and challenging false ideas about people whose sexuality is not heterosexual, people at school would be more understanding and less inclined to bully. Finn (Grade 6) said: "Teachers should talk about different families and start in Prep. They should choose children with

individually expressed a need to be part of a group, or at least meet others in a similar situation.

### "Rainbow" children

Is it all bad for children of lesbian or gay parents? The following is a poem by children in the Grade 3-6 support group, in Victoria.

*We are children of the rainbow  
We like the way we are  
We don't care what you say  
So la di da di da.*

When asked if there were any advantages in being a child who has gay and lesbian parents, the children in all age groups and year levels were definite that there were.

One of the things the children had in common was the feeling of being special. "In some ways I feel special



**One of the things the children had in common was the feeling of being special.  
"In some ways I feel special and proud to be different."**

[drawings of] different families to come out the front and show their pictures to everyone."

Hanna: "Bring in specialists to run a workshop . . . Encourage a kid if they come to a teacher or guidance counsellor. Don't say, it [the teasing] will pass. Say it [a gay and lesbian headed family] is perfectly normal. You can be proud of it or keep it quiet."

Some children suggested that homophobia should be dealt with in the same manner as racism and sexism. Frank (Grade 6): "Our school is so anti-racist. We have a sister Aboriginal school. Kids from our school go there and Aboriginal kids come here. But our school doesn't care about homophobia." Geoffrey also felt that bullying should be dealt with more seriously: "Teachers should be tougher on bullies."

A number of children said that if there was more safety and visibility for gay men and lesbians it would make a difference to them, particularly if teachers felt comfortable expressing their sexuality: "More gay couples should walk hand in hand . . . visibility." "Lesbian and gay teachers being out."

Some children also discussed the benefits of being part of a support group and some who were interviewed

and proud to be different." Some children described the benefits: "Say you have two mums. You could never miss your mum when she goes away cos you've got another one." Meeting new partners of parents was described as a positive occurrence: "I like my mum's partner."

The children were pleased to be part of the gay community. They enjoyed socialising with other gay people at events such as Mardi Gras and Pride March. They also felt that getting together with children in families like theirs, either socially or in a formal group, was a distinct advantage. Getting together was important for "talking about things we don't normally talk about". Rosie summed it up: "Everybody's the same here."

Secondary school students had more insights into some of the benefits of being raised by gay or lesbian parents and many of them felt their upbringing led them to tolerance and an appreciation of difference. "I've been able to grow up with an open mind. And I bring that into the world and create more open minds . . . I've taught my friends about homosexuality. I've been a support for gay kids."

## Conclusion

This study involved a relatively small sample of parents and children, and it is not known if the finding can be generalised to all gay and lesbian headed families. However the results do suggest that further research in the area of homophobic discrimination is warranted. Particularly, comparisons of bullying suffered by children with lesbian and gay parents with children of other marginalised families are suggested.

The finding from overseas research concerning the mental wellbeing of children raised by lesbian mothers and gay fathers, suggests that the sample of children in the current research is likely to have similar overall levels of adjustment as children raised by heterosexual parents. However, the current research finds that children raised by gays and lesbians had been exposed to high levels of bullying, teasing and silencing. The effects of bullying are noted by Carr-Gregg (cited in Jones and Gibson 2000): "I am absolutely convinced bullying is the number one mental health issue in our schools. The apathy around the issue I find nothing short of astonishing."

The young children in the Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents Study highlighted the fact that gays and lesbians were so little spoken of that when a young child told his or her peers about their family structure, the other children asked many questions and often still didn't understand. The lack of understanding about their families was sometimes frustrating.

The experience of being teased or bullied mostly began after Grade 2. Almost half the research participants from Grade 3 through to Year 10 had experienced teasing or bullying in relation to their parent's sexuality whereas in Years 11 and 12 the number fell dramatically.

The study found that one-third of all secondary students had been teased or bullied. This figure matches the national report on same sex attracted young people (Hillier et al. 1998) which reported that an almost identical proportion (35 per cent) of same sex attracted people aged 14–21 years were bullied at school, either verbally or physically.

The kinds of bullying experienced by the children in the current study ranged from verbal abuse, teasing and joking to physical and sexual violence. A large number of children were hearing anti-gay sentiments, often on a daily basis. Many of the respondents described feelings of disempowerment, fear and/or isolation.

The effects of both the bullying and the use of homophobic language were to silence many of the children in the study. One-quarter of children in Grades 3 and above had told no-one at all about their gay or lesbian parents. This figure is similar to that found by Hillier et al. (1998) where one fifth of same sex attracted young people had not disclosed their sexuality to anyone.

Children were inventive in defending themselves against teasing and bullying but because their attempts lacked the necessary power to overcome a school culture of homophobia, they strongly required adult assistance. Teachers' responses to incidents of homophobia varied. In a few cases, children had gone to see a teacher or school welfare coordinator and were pleased with the results, experiencing some relief for a period of time. However, teacher responses were more often described as non-existent or ineffectual. In the more extreme cases, teachers joined in with homophobic

retorts along with their students. Many of the children stated they wouldn't go to a teacher if they were being harassed. It is a concern that many children felt unsafe at school and didn't feel confident in teachers' abilities to deal with the issues.

The similarities between the findings of Hillier's work on same sex attracted youth and the current work, are noteworthy. Children and young people who have gay or lesbian parents, like young people who are same sex attracted themselves, feel a lack of safety in schools. The inability of schools to cope with the problem of homophobia includes a lack of dissemination of information on homosexuality to students and staff, and the existence of a climate of fear, teasing and bullying.

There is a need for these research findings to inform and guide school policy decisions and practises in order that children of lesbians and gay men be better supported and not be subject to discrimination and harassment. The study also points to the need for social/support networks to be established for these children to help counter their feelings of isolation and difference.

*"If there were no homophobia, I would be lying in bed thinking that I probably had one of the best days of my life."* (Jack, Year 8.)

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*Names used in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the children.*