



"Here's our whole family!" says Dusty Araújo, left, of Jason Andersen and their kids, Daniel and Gabriela.

# Gay Parents

## Another Kind of Family

by Melinda Blau

**With more gay people choosing to have and to raise children, your child needs to expect and accept all sorts of families. Here's what you can say and do to help.**

**L**ike all big sisters, Kati Fisher-Davenport, 6, is sometimes annoyed by her 3-year-old brother. "Fritz just gets on my nerves," she laments with mock-adult indignation. But she's also fiercely protective and proud of him. Every Saturday morning, she creeps into Fritz's room, nudges him out of dreamland, and then the two entertain themselves for an hour or so until their parents wake up.

Only one detail sets these happy kids apart from their neighbors in

Montclair, New Jersey: Kati and Fritz have not one, but two dads—Tim Fisher, 37, executive director of the Washington, DC-based Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International, and his partner of 19 years, Scott Davenport, 38, who is vice-president of human resources for a management consultant firm. Born of different surrogate mothers, both children were nestled in their daddies' arms by the time they were 1 hour old.

If you or your children haven't yet met up with a family like Kati's, you're likely to. Some 8 to 10 million Ameri-

can children are parented by an estimated 4 million gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, according to a report for the American Bar Association by the Bureau of National Affairs in Washington, DC. The vast majority of these children were born to parents in heterosexual marriages who later moved on to same-gender partnerships. But a growing number of children are also being born to homosexual or bisexual couples who use donor insemination, adoption, or surrogacy to start their own families.

Gay parents (a term used here to include gays, lesbians, and bisexuals) are becoming more visible all the time. Three prime-time TV show

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plots—for *Friends*, *Courthouse*, and *Sisters*—all recently involved lesbian parents. And resources for such families now include six summer camps and 265 support groups, “and that doesn’t even include playgroups,” adds Fisher.

Gay parents say they are trying hard to raise public consciousness about their families, to good effect. Second-parent adoptions, which enable nonmarried partners to adopt a partner’s child, have occurred in 19 states. And some companies—Disney among them—already allow gay partners to share employee benefits.

### Will the Kids Be Gay?

Not all gay parents feel accepted. Fisher says he gets calls every day from parents who want to know how to field nasty comments, hate mail, legal barriers, and rejection from extended family members. “Creating one of these families takes extra work, extra energy, and a great deal of courage,” says April Martin, Ph.D., a New York City-based clinical psychologist and author of *The Lesbian and Gay Parenting Handbook*.

In a world that often prizes conformity, gay parents must face others’ skepticism about how their offspring will fare emotionally. Will these children grow up feeling painfully out of step? Isolated from their peers?

So far, the answers from research have been reassuring. Over 30 psychological studies confirm that in their intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social development, children of gay and lesbian parents are developing normally. After reviewing this research as well as conducting her own, Charlotte J. Patterson, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, says she suspects that the quality of parent-child relationships and of the time spent together are far more important predictors of the children’s well-being than are the number of parents in the home or their sexual orientation.

What’s more, studies consistently indicate that children of gay parents exhibit the same range of gender-oriented behavior as other kids—their girls’ being just as likely to play with dolls; and their boys, with trucks!

Fisher says he and Davenport handle discussions of sexuality like any parents should—without trying to sway their kids in any direction. “Naturally, we try to reaffirm what the kids see at home,” he says. They read books to their children that present a positive view of gay parents and that open up discussion about different kinds of families. “But we’re very matter-of-fact about it,” he adds. “We want our kids to be happy, whatever they’re going to be.”

Still, many wonder: Will children of gay parents be gay themselves? In fact, as adults, they are no more likely to be gay than their peers are, according to experts at the Washington, DC-based American Psychological Association who reviewed a long line of research on this subject.

The most recent research by psychologists Susan Golombok, Ph.D., and Fiona Tasker, Ph.D., of City University in London, compared 39 children of 27 lesbian mothers with a control group of children of single heterosexual mothers. Again, the researchers found “no significant difference” between the two groups in the proportion of children who reported having same-sex attractions.

“These families have the same range of garden variety difficulties and strengths as other families,” says Dr. Patterson.

Before deciding to become parents, gay couples have to ask themselves the same essential questions that heterosexual couples do: Can they afford a family, and are they willing to make the personal sacrifices that being a parent involves? Those who make the transition from childlessness to parenthood experience the same kinds of life changes as well: “The center of your universe shifts and becomes focused on this little person,” says Karen Bellavance-Grace, 31, a store manager in Northampton, Massachusetts, who is in the process of adopting Michael, now 4, with her partner of five years. “Beth and I tell couples who are con-

sidering it, ‘See all the movies you want to see now because you’re not going to do that again for a long time!’”

Gay parents interviewed for this article say they try to be good neighbors and community activists, too. They join the PTA, take part in neighborhood gatherings. “We do all the things other parents do,” Fisher notes, “arranging playdates, buying sand pails. The similarities are vast; the differences, small.”

## What to Say If Your Child Asks...

### Why does Seth have two daddies?

“Some kids have a mom and a dad. Some have just a dad or just a mom. And some live with a grandma and a mom. Seth lives with two daddies.”

### Where’s Samantha’s daddy?

With children under 5, it’s usually sufficient to say, “Samantha doesn’t have a daddy living at home—she has two mommies.”

Before talking to older children, you might first ask Samantha’s mothers how they explain it. If they used artificial insemination, for example, you could say, “A nice man gave one of Samantha’s mommies his sperm so that she could have a baby.” Or if Samantha was born of a heterosexual marriage and her father lives elsewhere, say, “Samantha’s father lives in another place, and now her two moms take care of her.”

### Why are Seth’s dads gay?

Emphasize love in your answer: “When two people love each other very much, they often want to have a family and share that love with children. A man and a woman can love each other, and two men can love each other, as can two women. When two men love each other the way Seth’s dads do, we say they’re gay. When two women love each other the way Samantha’s moms do, they’re called lesbians.”

### Is Samantha a lesbian? Is Seth gay?

No, their parents are. When they grow up, they can love whomever they want.

### For more information about gay parents and their children:

Write to the Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International, P.O. Box 50360, Washington, DC 20091; or call (202) 583-8029.

Gay parents often choose to live in urban areas or college towns, which have traditions of diversity and tolerance. In Northampton, for example, Lydia Rackenberg, 37, a clinical social worker, and Laurie Loisel, 35, a reporter, take their children, Simon, 3 (Lydia’s biological child), and Sydney, 2 (Laurie’s biological child), to monthly potluck dinners with other gay and lesbian families (the children are bio-

logically half-siblings since they share the same sperm donor). Four of the 12 kids in Simon's preschool class have lesbian moms, and his two mothers say they're happy that he and his sister are growing up feeling so much a part of their community.

However, even in tolerant communities, gay and lesbian parents have to be active advocates for their children with daycare directors, principals, and teachers, Dr. Martin notes. And every new situation is a potential face-off with the straight world. With children to support, gay parents may be even more concerned than other gays about "coming out" at work and facing the consequences—from a boss's discomfort to being fired. "It's a tough balancing act because you have to put food on the table," Fisher says.

Dusty Araújo, 46, of San Francisco, remembers that his moment of truth

anly surprised by others' spontaneous reactions to their kind of family. For example, when Kathy and Maura O'Brien took Sara, then 10 weeks old, to daycare, Kathy recalls, "We asked the director, 'Do you think you'll have a problem having a lesbian couple as parents?' and she came back with, 'Do you think you'll have a problem with straight daycare providers?'"

Prejudice and fear often give way to understanding when neighbors get to know gay parents as loving moms and dads. "We become flesh and blood to them, not a theoretical menace," says Bellavance-Grace.

If your child has a playmate or schoolmate whose parents are gay, she may begin to ask you questions

about it around the age of 3 or 4 (see "If Your Child Asks..." page 83). "Kids have questions about anything that's not considered the norm," explains Joan Kinlan, M.D., a Washington, DC-based child and adolescent psychiatrist. But young children are also very accepting, she notes, so you should be optimistic about your talks together. And after getting to know one of these families, you may even find that they have some

strengths to share with you.

In a study by Dr. Patterson of lesbian-headed families in the San Francisco Bay area, the children of lesbians did indeed report greater symptoms of stress overall than the children of heterosexual parents did. But children of gay parents also evidenced a greater sense of well-being. Dr. Patterson says she is reluctant to draw conclusions from only one study, but she suspects that there are two underlying reasons for the results. First, children raised by women tend to feel very comfortable express-

## The quality of parent-child relationships and of the time spent together are far more important predictors of well-adjusted kids than their parents' sexual orientation.

ing their feelings, both positive and negative. And the second reason is that these children are like anyone who's handled a difficult job well—they feel good about themselves as a result.

Gay parents also are good at allocating household tasks and childcare responsibilities based on a partner's skills or interests rather than along gender lines. And typically, both parents are equal partners in parenting, which bodes well for their kids.

Equal parenting is good for *any* family, says Philip Cowan, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley and co-author with his wife, psychologist Carolyn Cowan, Ph.D., of *When Partners Become Parents*. For years, the Cowans studied how couples divide childrearing duties in preparation for writing their book. Children of equal partners even do better in school, the Cowans found.

Gay parents also develop solid support systems that other families would do well to emulate. Within their own families, they help their children to take pride in their family identity and to feel comfortable about their own uniqueness. And outside their families, they form large, extended networks that include men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, and people of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Their kids are therefore likelier to accept a wide range of behaviors and lifestyles. "I think that's good for my son *and* for his playmates," one mom says. "Hopefully, all these kids will grow up to be more accepting adults someday."

Gay parents may have more battles to fight than other parents, but they have their small victories to celebrate, too. "Kids ask us, 'Are you *both* his mommy?'" says Bellavance-Grace. "We say yes—and that's that!" she concludes with a smile. ■

Contributing editor Melinda Blau writes on new family trends. She lives in Massachusetts and is the mother of two.



"She's our whole world," says Kathy O'Brien, left, of 1-year-old Sara. At right is Sara's other mom, Maura O'Brien.

came when a supermarket cashier inquired, "Oh, so your wife left you with the two kids?" Araújo, a former interior designer who is now a full-time dad, and his partner of 11 years, Jason Andersen, 37, an elementary school teacher, adopted Daniel, now 6, at 5 months, and Gabriela, now 5, at 9 months. "I could have said nothing, but looking at the kids, I knew I had to be honest," Araújo recalls. "So I said, 'No, I'm not married—my children have two dads.' From that point on," he continues, "it was easy."

Sometimes, gay parents are pleas-