



# Tips for Making Classrooms Safer for Students with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Parents

Developed by the Youth Leadership and Action Program of COLAGE  
(Children Of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere)  
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## Introduction

*Towards the end of the school year one of my friends passed me a note saying that she had a secret to share. In pink pen she wrote "my mom is a lesbian". Upon reading this I sprung out of my chair and yelled, ME TOO!" We ran around the desks to hug each other. It amazes me to this day that in the halls of a public middle school having gay parents is so taboo that even friends hide the truth about their families.*

*18 year old daughter of a lesbian mom and gay dads*

*In middle school when I made my family tree, my teacher told me it couldn't have two women. I was told it could either have one of my moms' sides, or I could "make up a father." The teacher chose to pass on ignorance and intolerance, instead of using the opportunity to teach my classmates about diversity.*

*14 year old daughter of a lesbian mom*

*I wrote a report for school about my friend Stefan who has a lesbian mom and a gay dad. While presenting my report to the class I mentioned his parents' sexuality and everyone went into an uproar. I slunk ashamedly back to my seat without finishing my report.*

*16 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

In the United States alone, there are millions of people with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT) parent(s). While research shows that there are no significant developmental differences or negative affects on children of LGBT parents, these youth do report facing significantly more prejudice and discrimination because societal homophobia and transphobia. Youth report that schools are a key place where they face intolerance- from peers, teachers, school administration, and school systems that are affected by the homophobia in our society. According to a 2001 study, students who have LGBT parents experience harassment at the same rate as students who themselves are gay.

This guide attempts to introduce teachers to the topic of safety and respect for youth with LGBT parents in schools. Developed by a group of youth with LGBT parents in the San Francisco Bay Area, we hope you can use this guide to take steps in making your classrooms and schools more affirming and safe for students from LGBT families, as well as all students affected by homophobia and oppression.

## **Why is it Important for Teachers to Address this Issue?**

*When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I was absent one day and my teacher decided to out me to the class. I came to school the next day and was horrified. I was teased for the next 4 years until I moved to a different district.*

*15 year old daughter of a lesbian mom*

*My baseball team goes to Reno every summer for a tournament. Some of my teammates fit the jock stereotype of not being very open-minded so I was a little nervous when my dad and his partner told me they were coming to watch the game. As it turned out, nothing happened- in fact one kid told me it was "kinda cool" that my dad brought his partner. But in my school there was the kind of environment that made me scared that people would find out about my family and then tease me.*

*18 year old son of gay dads and a lesbian mom.*

\* Teachers set the tone for classrooms. They have the power to foster an atmosphere where the students understand that they must respect one another despite differences. They also have the power to set a strong example against hate. For this reason if teachers take the first step in making classrooms safer for students with LGBT parents, other students, and the school as a whole will follow.

\*Many states have legislation that defines homophobic harassment in schools to be a hate crime. For example, AB-537 makes it illegal for students, teachers, or staff in California schools to be harassed verbally, physically, or emotionally due to reasons of actual or perceived sexual orientation. School districts who have violated this law have been required to pay million dollar settlements to victims of homophobia harassment. AB 537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, changed California's Education Code by adding actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity to the existing nondiscrimination policy. The state defines "gender" as "a person's actual sex or perceived sex and includes a person's perceived identity, appearance or behavior, whether or not that identity, appearance, or behavior is different from that traditionally associated with a person's sex at birth." The nondiscrimination policy also prohibits harassment and discrimination on the basis of sex, ethnic group identification, race, ancestry, national origin, religion, color, or mental or physical disability. One resource for learning about legislation in your state is the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network at <http://www.glsen.org/>.

\* In order to effectively learn, kids need to feel safe in their classroom environments. Being teased or harassed, living in fear, or feeling invisible because of ones family does not contribute to a child's ability to learn and blossom in the classroom. Despite your beliefs on sexual orientation and gender, it is the role of a teacher to ensure the equal safety of each student and to equally protect each student so that they may learn.

## Tips for Teachers to Make Classrooms Safer for Students with LGBT Parents

*When filling out permission slips, emergency waivers, and financial aid forms my parent said I have to cross out the heading “father” and write in “mother.”*

*18 year old daughter of lesbian moms.*

*When I was a freshman in high school, one of my mothers died. Everyday for two weeks the principal for my school program would pull me out of class to see how I was doing. He acknowledged that she was a parent and not just my mother’s partner. It shows the potential of how big a difference schools can make.*

*18 year old daughter of lesbian moms and a gay step-father*

*In language classes from kindergarten through high school, every time I had a new teacher and we were describing our families, I was told that I was not doing it right because I said I had two mothers instead of a mother and father.*

*17 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

- 1. Always intervene** whenever you hear anti-gay language or actions. At the beginning of the year set classroom rules that include making it clear that racist, homophobic, sexist, and all discriminatory comments are not welcome in your classroom. Whenever you hear something being said, step right in. If possible use it as a “teachable moment” in your classroom. Send a clear message that homophobia will never be tolerated. In addition, try to link homophobia to other types of oppression- teach students that hate in all of its forms is wrong.
- 2. Ask about a student’s background instead of making assumptions.** Create a classroom where each student is able to share freely about their identity and families. Use language that is empowering to youth with LGBT parents. For example, many youth report that when asked about their families that are headed by two same-sex parents, people will ask, “Which one is your *real* mom/dad?” However in alternative families, youth see anyone serving in a parental role as their real parent. Youth who feel comfortable to talk about their families will use the terms that they are comfortable with to describe their parents.
- 3. Visually show your support.** On your walls include a poster about diverse families (perhaps one of the educational posters offered by COLAGE) or other images that show you are an ally to LGBT people and issues. You can also use Safe Zone posters which are commonly used by teachers to make a statement against homophobia.
- 4. Avoid heterosexism in your classroom and assignments.** Some examples: In language classes asking youth to describe their families; often youth with LGBT parents have been reprimanded for using the wrong gender pronouns. However, the fact that they are using he and he to describe two dads is correct, their teachers were making the heterosexist assumption that parents can only be straight. If you assign family origin or family tree projects, allow youth from LGBT families to make their own decisions about how they portray their families whether it is two parents of the same gender, or multiple parents who co-parent them, etc. As much as possible use gender-neutral language in both classroom in informal conversations.
- 5. Include Topics about Diversity in your curriculum:** Study different kinds of families, famous LGBT people (and when someone you are studying anyway is a LGBT person, mention that). Have speakers, use videos, and books to show students that diversity is something to be celebrated. Perhaps use events such as National Coming Out Day, Pride Day, or a Unity Week as a reason to incorporate LGBT issues positively into your classroom through discussions and projects.

6. **Never out a student with LGBT parents.** The only person who should make the decision to share about their family is the student when they feel safe and ready to do so.
7. **Do not make assumptions about youth with LGBT parents.** Youth from alternative families report that people often assume certain traits will apply to all youth with LGBT parents. For example, do not expect that a student who has LGBT parents will also be gay. Research shows that there is no higher incidence of homosexuality among people raised by LGBT parents than by heterosexual parents.
8. **Make your classroom accessible to LGBT families.** Do not rely on forms, permission slips, or other paperwork that asks for signatures from mother and father. Instead use the terms Parent/Guardian. On Back to School night, or during parent teacher conferences expect and welcome LGBT parents.
9. **Work with your administration** to make sure your school is safe for students with LGBT families. Suggest that the faculty at your school does an LGBT sensitivity training, or an in-service about LGBT and diverse families. Discuss protocols for dealing with anti-gay or anti-gay family harassment on school-wide or department levels so that all teachers are equipped to address homophobia.
10. **Educate yourself.** Learn more about LGBT families, and issues. Not only will this allow you to be informed when students raise questions or need resources, but it will help you be better equipped to address incidents of homophobia in your school and to include LGBT content in your curriculum. As a starting point, use the resources in the back of this guide for suggestions of books, movies, websites and more.
11. **Be involved.** If your school has a Gay Straight Alliance or other type of club, attend meetings when possible to show your support. You can also offer to be the faculty advisor for such a club if students are trying to start one in your school. If you are involved in your school's GSA, Rainbow Club, or other diversity club, ensure that LGBT family issues are included and that youth from LGBT families are welcomed as participants.

## Definitions

*In sixth grade, I was shocked when I heard "fag" being used in a derogatory manner- by a girl whose mom is a lesbian! It disappointed me, but also made me realized that kids use words without knowing that they are attacking someone. Once she learned what the word meant she stopped calling people "fag."*

*16 year old daughter of lesbian moms.*

In order to be able to comfortably address issues of LGBT families in your classroom, it's important to be familiar with some of the terms and words commonly used in conversations about LGBT families. This list is just a start to facilitate initial conversations about students with LGBT parents.

**Adoption-** An option for LGBT parents considering parenthood. Laws concerning gay adoption vary from state to state. There are some states where there is an outright ban on gay adoption. Other states have fairly liberal laws allowing two parents of the same sex to adopt a child (second-parent adoption) To learn about the gay adoption laws in your state, you can visit the Family Net of the Human Rights Commission (<http://www.hrc.org/>) for a listing of adoption laws in each of the 50 states.

**Bisexual-** People whose attraction to others is fluid between same-sex and opposite sex partners.

**Co-parenting** When two or more adults, usually not involved in a romantic relationship, share the parenting responsibilities of a child(ren).

**Donor Insemination** (sometimes referred to as alternative insemination) Conception using a sperm donation (sometimes anonymous, sometimes known).

**Gay** – Someone who is primarily attracted to people of their same sex, most commonly used to describe men.

**GSA-** Gay Straight Alliance- School-based clubs which bring together LGBT and straight ally youth for social, educational, advocacy, or other types of activities. Some schools use different names for clubs of this sort.

**Heterosexism:** A preference by both people and/or institutions for heterosexual people over others. Also can be the presumption of heterosexuality.

**Homophobia:** Irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals. Like all prejudices it is based on a set of myths and stereotypes. Because it is so rarely challenged structurally, it is destructive both in terms of societal and legal limitations and in terms of violence against LGBT people, people perceived to be LGBT, or people related to LGBT individuals.

**Lesbian-** Women who are primarily attracted to women

**Out** (as a verb) The act of telling people about a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. In the case of students with LGBT parents, its referred to as coming out about their family. To out someone means to share this information on their behalf (with our without their consent).

**Second Parent Adoption-** When one parent is the biological parent of a child, some states allow the second parent to do a second parent adoption through which both parents become the legal parents of the child.

**Sexual orientation-** the sex(es) you are attracted to

**Slurs-** Negative words used to berate LGBT people. Also can mean simply using a word such as gay but in a negative context (eg. You are SO gay!) Slurs also refer to any words used in a discriminatory manner and can be racists, sexist, etc.

**Straight-** Someone who is attracted to people of the opposite sex.

**Transgender-** an umbrella term often used to describe everyone who does not conform to the social roles that their biological sex is supposed to play. This is independent of sexual orientation.

**Transsexual-** One who feels that their biological sex does not match their psychological gender. Usually a transsexual is living as their preferred sex, and will, or has had operations to change some of the physical aspects of their sex. Transsexuals can be straight, gay, or bi.

**Transvestite-** One who wears the clothes of the other sex for fun or for sexual reasons. Transvestites do not want to be that sex. They are usually straight men. A less clinical term used by many transvestites is Cross Dresser.

## Resources

The following are some suggested organizations, books, and videos that can assist your efforts to make classrooms safer for students with LGBT parents. In no means is it meant to be an exhaustive list of the vast resources available on LGBT people, communities and information.

**Breaking the Classroom Silence: A Curriculum about Lesbian and Gay Human Rights.** Donahue and Satterwaite, Amnesty International, 1994.

**Breaking the Silence: Lesbian and Gay Parents and the Schools.** V. Caspar. *Teachers College Record* 94 (1992): 109-37.

**Both My Moms' Names Are Judy.** A 10 minute video which presents a racially diverse group of children talking about how the classroom silence about lesbians and gay men affects them, and what they would like to see change. Comes with an extensive resource guide and suggestions for our workshop, "Overcoming Homophobia in the Elementary Classroom. For more info, please contact: Lesbian and Gay Parents Association of San Francisco at LGPASF@aol.com.

**COLAGE** (Children Of Lesbians And Gays Everywhere) engages, connects, and empowers people to make the world a better place for people with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender parents and families. Programs include local chapters, the *Just For Us* publication which is included in membership, online chat lists for youth, pen pal program, scholarship, annual Family Weeks, and more. <http://www.colage.org/> 415-861-5437. COLAGE also publishes book, video, and other resources lists which can be accessed at <http://www.colage.org/resources.html>

**Family Pride Coalition** is a national organization that aims to advance the well-being of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered parents and their families through mutual support, community collaboration, and public understanding. Based in Washington DC, FPC provides programming for LGBT families across the country. 202.331.5015, [familypride.org](http://familypride.org).

**Gay Parents/Straight Schools.** Caspar, V and Schulz. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999.

**GLSEN** (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) is a national organization fighting to end anti-gay bias in K-12 schools. GLSEN combats the harassment and discrimination leveled against students and school personnel. GLSEN believes that the key to ending anti-gay prejudice and hate-motivated violence is education. <http://www.glsen.org/>

**It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues In School** A highly acclaimed film shot in first through eighth grade classrooms across the United States. The film is a window into what really happens when educators address gay issues with their students in age-appropriate ways. 1996, Women's Educational Media. <http://www.womedia.org/our/elem.html>

**Love Makes a Family: Gay Parents in the 90's** Meet a lesbian single mother who shares parenting with the gay father of her son; a lesbian couple who care for one's children by a previous marriage; and a gay male couple with two adopted sons; a clinical psychologist and a therapist who work with gay families and their children. 1991, 16 min. Fanlight Productions, 1-800-937-4113

**Opening Doors: Lesbian and Gay Parents and Schools.** A resource booklet aimed for educators as well as for lesbian and gay parents. Educational Advisory Committee of the Family Pride Coalition. <http://www.familypride.org/>, 1999.

**Our House: A Very Real Documentary about Kids of Gay and Lesbian Parents.** Meema Spadola. A documentary featuring the stories of youth in 5 lesbian and gay families across the country. The diverse experiences of the youth in the film paint a touching and insightful portrait of the lives of youth with lesbian and gay parents. 2000. [www.itvs.org/ourhouse](http://www.itvs.org/ourhouse).

**Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents.** Edited by Noelle Howey and Emily Samuels. A collection of essays and stories written by people with LGBT parents about their experiences- both difficult and triumphant, serious and humorous. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

**PFLAG** (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through: support and advocacy. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays provides opportunity for dialogue about sexual orientation and gender identity, and acts to create a society that is healthy and respectful of human diversity. [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)

**"School Experiences of the Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents."** Ray, V. and Gregory, R. *Family Matters* 59 (Winter 2001): 28-41.

**School's Out: The Impact of Gay and Lesbian Issues on America's Schools.** Dan Woog. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.

**Tackling Gay Issues in School: A Resource Module.** L. Mitchell. GLSEN Connecticut and Planned Parenthood of Connecticut, 1999.

**That's a Family!** Is the first film in the **Respect for All** series, is a highly entertaining half-hour documentary that breaks new ground in helping kids see and understand many of the different shapes that families take today. Designed especially for children in elementary school, **THAT'S A FAMILY!** will stretch your mind and touch your heart, no matter what your age. 2000, Women's Educational Media. <http://www.womedia.org/our/elem.html>

**Welcoming Children from Sexual Minority Families into Our Schools.** Linda and Laura Lamme. A booklet written by a lesbian mom and her daughter that provides a comprehensive look at LGBT families and schools. Phi Delta Kapp Educational Foundation. Bloomington, IN, 2003. [www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org)

This guide was developed by the Youth Leadership and Action Program of COLAGE. YLAP is a group of COLAGE youth members ages 14-20 with LGBT parents in the Bay Area of California. ©2003

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