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Back To School Resources For LGBT Parents

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Bay Windows
Dana Rudoph

Back-to-school time can be fraught with tension for many parents as we realize our children's shoes are too small, they need new knapsacks, and for reasons that surpass understanding, a perfectly working locker padlock somehow isn't cool enough to be acceptable this year.

For LGBT parents, there is an additional concern about how our children's new teachers and classmates will react to knowing our kids have LGBT moms or dads. Do you approach teachers and school administrators beforehand to inform them about your family and detect any potential problems?

My take on this common dilemma? It is a very personal matter. If you think it will help minimize potential problems, by all means do it. If you think it will focus the teachers too much on your family structure and prevent them from viewing your children as whole, unique individuals, then you might opt for a softer approach. One way (if you are partnered) is to have both parents simply show up at orientation or on the first day of school and introduce yourselves as Johnny or Janie's parents. If your kids are older, of course, they might be embarrassed to have their parents anywhere near their classrooms, for reasons having nothing to do with sexual orientation or gender identity. At that point, too, they may wish to have more personal control over what they tell others about their family.

Regardless of the approach you take, it never hurts to be prepared, either to help allies eager to be inclusive or to take action against bias and bullies. Here are some useful resources. (Note that there is an overlap between resources that help children of LGBT parents and those that help LGBT youth. Many of the issues each of these groups face are the same-not to mention that some children of LGBT parents are LGBT themselves.)

HRC's An Introduction to Welcoming Schools guide is aimed at helping elementary school administrators, teachers, parents and guardians address issues of family diversity, gender stereotyping, and bullying. It is perhaps the best single resource, and includes a great bibliography of books on all kinds of families, LGBT and not. http://www.welcomingschools.org [1].

PFLAG's Cultivating Respect program has materials for making schools safer, reducing bullying, and providing comprehensive health education. They also offer a certification program for PFLAG members to enable them to go into schools and to assist with staff training, policy formation, and anti-bullying initiatives. http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1011 [2]. (In Spanish: http://community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=335 [3].)

GLSEN has safe-schools materials for both educators and students, including materials on starting gay-straight alliances. http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/tools/index.html [4].

The Gay-Straight Alliance Network has materials for starting or sustaining a GSA, as well as the guide Beyond the Binary: Making Schools Safe for Transgender Youth, a joint project with the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) and the Transgender Law Center. http://www.gsanetwork.org [5].

The National Center for Lesbian Rights has additional safe-schools information, including Harassment & Discrimination: A Legal Overview, which summarizes federal and state provisions regarding anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination in schools. They also provide sample anti-harassment policies and memos to school boards. http://www.nclrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issue_youth_docsDownlo... [6].

COLAGE has tips for making classrooms safer (http://www.colage.org/resources/safe_classrooms.htm [7]) and on making GSA's inclusive of youth with LGBT parents. http://www.colage.org/resources/gsa.htm [8].

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) has information for teen and student allies. Much is aimed at allies of LGBT youth, but also has value for allies of non-LGBT children of LGBT parents. http://www.glaad.org/Page.aspx?pid=475 [9].

GLAAD's Media Reference Guide may be of use to those preparing communications for their school or extracurricular programs. http://www.glaad.org/referenceguide [10].

The American Library Association's Rainbow List offers LGBT-inclusive children's and young adult books chosen by a committee of librarians for their quality as well as content. They include books featuring children of LGBT parents and LGBT youth themselves (and combinations thereof). http://rainbowlist.wordpress.com [11].

Groundspark, the organization of Academy Award-winning director Debra Chasnoff, has produced diversity education films for various age groups: That's a Family is for elementary students and talks about different family structures; Let's Get Real is about name-calling and bullying in middle schools; It's Elementary (re-released with updates as It's STILL Elementary), is for and about educators discussing gay issues in schools, and Straightlaced is about the

pressure of gender stereotypes on teens of all sexual orientations and gender identities. They offer curriculum guides for all their films, making them easy to incorporate into diversity and anti-bullying programs.

I would, however, urge parents who want to introduce LGBT-inclusive books or films into their children's schools to think carefully about how best to do so. Sometimes, making them part of a broader curriculum initiative on families or diversity may be a more effective way of gaining buy-in from teachers, administrators, and other parents than trying to present them as standalone media. Judge your own school and classroom, though, and the degree to which they have used such materials before.

The most important thing that LGBT parents can do to prepare the way for our children at school, however, is to build a support network. Make connections not only with other LGBT parents (if there are any) but also with parents of other non-traditional families and others whom you think will be supportive. Volunteer if you can; show up at school functions when at all possible. Sometimes, becoming known as the family that brings the awesome double-chocolate brownies to the PTA meetings can do more to convince people that you are all right than any reading of And Tango Makes Three.

Have a great year. May our children learn and grow.

http://www.baywindows.com/index.php?ch=columnists&sc=mombian... [12]

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GSA Network 1550 Bryant St., Suite 600, San Francisco, CA 94103 | 415-552-4229 | info@gsanetwork.org
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