

GAY AND LESBIAN ADOPTIVE PARENTING

by Michael Colberg

Gay and lesbian adoptive parenting has come of age. Although the debate regarding whether homosexuals should be allowed to adopt continues, the truth is that gay- and lesbian-parented families have, in many ways, become mainstream. Our families are written about, filmed and studied. More and more agencies are training their staff to work with gay and lesbian pre-adoptive couples. Almost all of the major adoption conferences have included this population and have learned from the experiences shared by homosexual parents. We have come a long way.

When my partner and I adopted thirteen years ago, we were hard-pressed to find an agency or attorney who would work with us. We, in effect, had to advocate for ourselves. We were forced to figure out how to adopt from outside the traditional loop. In doing so, we had an opportunity to learn about the essential nature of adoption. I learned that being adopted is not an event, but an ongoing process—just like being gay. By the time that we became parents, we understood the lifetime nature of adoption and how important it was for a child to know and honor who they are in the fullest sense of the term—even having a relationship with their birthparent if possible.

As I learned more about adoption, I began to find important similarities between the experiences of adoptees and those of homosexuals. For one thing, neither adoptees nor homosexuals are typically parented by members of their minority group. Homosexuals typically have heterosexual parents, and adoptees' parents are generally not adoptees themselves. This means that neither gays nor adoptees are socialized into their minority status by their parents. They have to figure it out on their own. This is unusual. Another similarity is that neither group has the same civil rights as those enjoyed by the population at large. When it comes to our populations, those that argue for small government ironically seem to be the most intrusive. The state continues to intrude on our families in a number of inappropriate ways. These similarities made me realize that I could use my coming out experiences to help me gain empathy for my daughter's feelings about being adopted.

To prepare for becoming parents, we needed to learn about how adoption impacts an adoptee and all of his parents throughout their lives. We already knew about being gay. In doing so, we naturally came to a place where our understanding was child-centered. We learned first about being adopted and then about what parenting through adoption required.

We, as it turns out, were fortunate. One of the dangers present in becoming mainstream is that we are now being invited to join a placement system that focuses on "getting" a child and often ignores what it means to be a good adoptive parent. This means that the gay and lesbian community runs the risk of succumbing to society's insistence that we make gay- and lesbian-parented adoption a gay rights issue rather than about the children and their needs. If we were looking at things in a child-centered way, we would realize that homosexuals who have an understanding of how their experience parallels their children's experiences are especially well-suited to mentor their children.

We also have to understand that being homosexual is not equally important for all gay men and lesbians. We need to pay attention to other layers of diversity including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, religion, intelligence, economic situation, emotional maturity of the parents, the family's geographic location, the form of the adoption, the nature of the parent's and of the child's larger community. These layers of diversity will need to be addressed by the gay and lesbian communities in the coming years. We are not a single group, but many groups who may share nothing more than sexual orientation. We should use these differences as a way to collaborate, but, unless they are acknowledged, I fear that they will

cause some parents in our community to feel further marginalized and alone.

We also need to learn how to focus on and address whatever layer of diversity is important in our children's lives at any given point in time. Sometimes being adopted is more important than having same-sex parents or being of a different race than parents and sometimes having same-sex parents is the focus. It is not always easy to distinguish what is going on. My daughter came home a year or so ago saying that she hated having gay parents. I asked her why and she said that she hated having to explain the whole thing all of the time. She also said that, even after she explained that she had two dads, kids would ask her which of us was her real dad. By this time crying and in my lap, she told me that she would have to tell them that neither of us were. Her sadness was, at that moment about being adopted, not about having gay dads. I sat with her and we both felt the sadness of not having a biological connection, and then she got up and went back to her life. This could only happen because I had an awareness of the nature of adoption.

Gay and lesbian adoptive parents need to learn that it is vitally important that they become adoption competent. There is a lot of sadness present both for homosexuals during the coming out process and for adoptees as they grow up. If gay and lesbian parents are not educated about adoption, they may feel that they are doing something wrong when their child becomes appropriately sad and they may have some of their shame issues rekindled. It is only when we understand the true and complex nature of adoption that we can make use of our experience, be with our children as they express their feelings and help them to feel proud of who they are in the world—just like their parents do.