



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

A guide created by the Youth Leadership and Action  
Program of COLAGE  
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### Introduction

*I was sitting in my science class across from a new friend towards the end of the year. During the teacher's lecture, my friend 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 Stephan 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, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) parent(s). While research shows that there are no significant developmental differences or negative affects on children of LGBTQ parents, these youth do report facing significantly more prejudice and discrimination because of 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.

This guide attempts to introduce teachers to the topic of safety and respect for youth with LGBTQ parents in schools. Developed by a group of youth with LGBTQ parents in the San Francisco Bay Area, these suggestions are first steps in making your classrooms and schools more affirming and safe for students from LGBTQ 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 3rd 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. 18 year old son of gay dads and a lesbian mom*

*My younger brother was still in high school when our mother came out. For his last two years of school, he was petrified that anyone would find out about our mom. He was worried that his friends and teachers would treat him differently just because our mom was gay. He even asked my mom not to bring her partner to his graduation. All this fear and stress caused his grades to suffer. 27 year old daughter of a lesbian mom and straight dad*

\* 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 LGBTQ parents, other students and the school as a whole will follow.

\* AB 537 makes it illegal for students in California schools to be harassed verbally, physically, or emotionally due to reasons of actual or perceived sexual orientation. 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.

\* 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 one's family will 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 LGBTQ Parents

*When I was a freshman in high school, one of my mothers died. Every day 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*

*When filling out permission slips, emergency waivers, and financial aid forms, my parents have to cross out the heading “father” and write in “mother.” 18 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

*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. 18 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

1. **Always intervene** whenever you hear or see anti-gay language or actions. At the beginning of the year, set classroom rules that include making it clear that racist, homophobic, sexist, etc. comments are not welcome 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. **Do not make assumptions** about any student's background. Create a classroom where each student is able to share freely about their identity and families.

3. **Visually show your support.** On your walls include a poster about diverse families (perhaps the COLAGE poster) or other images that show you are an ally to LGBTQ people and issues.

4. **Challenge heterosexism in your assignments.** Some examples: In language classes asking youth to describe their families, often youth with LGBTQ parents have been reprimanded for using the wrong gender pronouns. However, often the fact that they are using he and he to describe two dads is correct. If you assign family origin or family tree projects, allow youth from alternative 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.

**5. Include Topics about Diversity in your curriculum.** Study different kinds of families and famous LGBTQ people (and when someone you are studying anyway is a LGBTQ person, mention that), have speakers, and 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 reasons to incorporate LGBTQ issues positively into your classroom.

**6. Never out a student with LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ parents.** Youth from alternative families report that people often assume certain traits will apply to all youth with LGBTQ parents. For example, do not expect that a student who has LGBTQ parents will also be gay. Research shows that there is no higher incidence of homosexuality among people raised by LGBTQ parents.

**8. Make your classroom accessible.** Do not rely on forms that ask 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 LGBTQ parents.

**9. Work with your administration** to make sure your school is safe for students with LGBTQ families. Suggest that the faculty at your school does an LGBTQ sensitivity training, or an in-service about LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ content in your curriculum. As a starting point, use the resources at 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 LGBTQ family issues are included and that youth from LGBTQ 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 realize that kids use words without realizing that they are attacking someone. Once she learned what the word meant she stopped calling people "fag." 16 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

*When writing to our Japanese pen pals in Japanese class, we were encouraged to describe our families and our interests. I was told that should not talk about the Gay Straight Alliance club, or my parents. I ended up with a very short letter that did not explain much about me. 18 year old daughter of lesbian moms*

In order to be able to comfortably address issues of LGBTQ families in your classroom, it's important to be familiar with some of the terms and words commonly used in conversations about alternative families.

**Adoption:** An option for LGBTQ 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 allow second-parent adoption. To learn about the gay adoption laws in your state, you can visit

[http://www.hrc.org/laws\\_and\\_elections/state\\_law\\_listing.asp](http://www.hrc.org/laws_and_elections/state_law_listing.asp).

**Biological Sex:** The category (usually male or female) assigned by a doctor at birth, based on what body parts you have and certain other physical characteristics.

**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 parenting responsibilities.

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

**Gay:** Someone who is attracted to people of the same sex. Most commonly used to describe the sexual orientation of men.

**Gender Expression:** The way a person expresses their gender identity through gestures, movement, dress, and grooming.

**Gender Identity:** A person's sense of being male, female, or somewhere in between.

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

**Heterosexism:** An ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. Also, systems and societies that prefer and privilege heterosexuals through public sentiment, laws, judicial systems, and more.

**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 LGBTQ people, people perceived to be LGBTQ, or people related to LGBTQ individuals.

**Lesbian:** A woman who is attracted to other 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 LGBTQ parents, it is referred to as coming out about their family. To out someone means to share this information on their behalf (with or without their consent).

**Queer:** A term used by some LGBT people to describe their identity. Not every LGBT person identifies as queer. It has been and still is used as a derogatory term against LGBT people, but has also been reclaimed as a positive and often political term in recent years. May be used to refer to either sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

**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 are the legal parents of the child.

**Sexual Orientation:** The sex/gender that a person is emotionally and physically attracted to over a period of time.

**Slurs:** Negative words used to describe LGBTQ people. Also can mean simply using a word such as "gay" in a negative context, e.g., "You are SO gay!"

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

**Transgender:** An umbrella term describing anyone whose gender identity or expression differs from their biological sex. Literally means "across gender," and conveys the idea of transcending the boundaries of the gender binary system. This is independent of sexual orientation.

**Transsexual:** A person who medically changes their body to match with their gender identity. This may be done through hormone treatments and/or surgical procedures.

## Resources

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

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

***Both My Moms' Names Are Judy.*** A short film of kids talking about their LGBTQ families and their experiences in school. All ages. 1994, 10 min., \$25. Family Pride Coalition, San Diego.

**COLAGE** is a national movement of children, youth, and adults with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) parents. We build community and work toward social justice through youth empowerment, leadership development, education, and advocacy. Programs include local chapters, the *Just For Us* publication, online chat lists for youth, a pen pal program, scholarship, annual Family Weeks, and more. [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org) 415-861-5437. COLAGE also publishes book, video, and other resource lists, which can be accessed at <http://www.colage.org/resources/index.htm>

***Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is.*** Abigail Garner. An estimated ten million children have parents who are lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender and/or queer. Abigail Garner, whose father came out as gay when she was five, has written a deeply personal and much-needed book about gay parenting from the seldom-heard perspective of grown children raised in these families. Using a rich blend of journalism and memoir, *Families Like Mine* provides honest and invaluable insight for LGBTQ parents, their families and their allies. [www.familieslikemine.com](http://www.familieslikemine.com)

**Family Equality Council** works to ensure equality for LGBTQ families by building community, changing hearts and minds, and advancing social justice for all families. [www.familyequality.org](http://www.familyequality.org)

**Focus on MY Family: A Queerspaw Anthology.** This collection of writing, poetry, art and essays by youth with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer parent(s) is a great tool for sparking dialogue and discussion in schools, youth groups, parent groups and more. <http://www.colage.org/programs/youth/ylap.htm>

**Gay Parents, Straight Schools: Building Communication and Trust.** Virginia Casper and Steven B. Schultz. NY: Teacher's 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. [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

**GSA Network** is a youth leadership organization that connects school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) to each other and community resources. Through peer support, leadership development, and training, GSA Network supports young people in starting, strengthening, and sustaining GSAs and builds the capacity of GSAs to create safe environments in schools for students to support each other and learn about homophobia and other oppressions; educate the school community about homophobia, gender identity, and sexual orientation issues; and fight discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools. Their website is full of resources that will be useful to teachers, school staff, and student activists. 415.552.4229 [www.gsanetwork.org](http://www.gsanetwork.org)

**In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBTQ Parents.** Documentary film. In a time when LGBTQ families are debated and attacked in the media, courts and Congress, from school houses to state houses across the country, five young people give you a chance to walk in their shoes—to hear their own views on marriage, making change, and what it means to be a family. [www.colage.org/inmyshoes](http://www.colage.org/inmyshoes)

**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, GroundSpark. <http://www.groundspark.org/films/elementary/index.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; a gay male couple with two adopted sons; and a clinical psychologist and a therapist who work with gay families and their children. 1991, 16 min. Fanlight Productions, 1-800-937-4113

**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 LGBTQ parents about their experiences—both difficult and triumphant, serious and humorous. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

**PFLAG** (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons and their families and friends through support and advocacy. PFLAG 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)

**Respect All Families Poster Series.** Created by youth with LGBTQ parents, this series of two posters is a perfect tool for spreading a message of acceptance and tolerance in any setting. <http://www.colage.org/ylap/posters.html>

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

**That's a Family!** 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, GroundSpark.

<http://www.groundspark.org/films/thatfamily/index.html>

***That's So Gay: Portraits of Youth with LGBTQ Parents.*** The first-ever art show by and about youth with LGBTQ parents. The project includes a photo-text series featuring 24 youth with LGBTQ parents that is available on CD in addition to a larger art exhibit filled with paintings, collages, comics, photographs and more by youth artists.

<http://www.colage.org/ylap/exhibit.html>

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