

(A1 &B1) From family diversity to strategies to end homophobia

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Far from being a marginal occurrence, the growing number of rainbow families is the result of many interdependent factors, such as:

- The growing diversity of family types since the 1960s (single-parent families, multicultural or multiethnic families, stepfamilies, etc.).
- The growing number of LGBT parents who affirm their sexual orientation.
- The passage of laws in some jurisdictions that recognize and grant the same rights and responsibilities to all families, including those with same-sex parents.
- The capacity of LGBT couples and individuals to adopt children in certain jurisdictions.
- The increased accessibility of new reproductive technologies.
- The growing number of LGBT people who want to and are able to start families in a society that is more and more accepting of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Despite this, some individuals working in schools believe they have never met a family with LGBT parents. Some may even ignore the fact that this type of family exists. Invisibility and silence are the most common obstacles faced by members of a rainbow family.

Rainbow families' invisibility leads them to be ignored and misunderstood. They are neither present in social representations of families nor in the overall image of family diversity. They are generally ignored by public services and institutions such as prenatal courses, day-care centres (nurseries), home-based day cares, social and health services and especially in schools. These families are often forgotten and practices need to be put in place to meet their needs. Doing so can have a significant impact on the children in these families.

The silence surrounding families with LGBT parents is just as harmful. Children learn a great deal from what is not said. If children notice that differences between people are hidden, these differences become mysterious and threatening. When a topic is not covered in class, it seems like a suspicious and shameful secret.

Schools that ignore the realities of LGBT parents and future parents send a message of rejection and negative judgment. Omission reinforces prejudice. People who work in schools, health and social services and community organizations are not always aware that the children they work with are part of rainbow families. This may be because the children and parents don't know if the class or the institution is a safe space to share this type of information. Many LGBT people do not feel comfortable being "out" in the dominant culture. Although a lot of children have a relative, uncle, aunt, cousin or family friend who is an LGBT person, they might be hesitant to talk about this at school. While rainbow families are often silent and invisible, at school, insults such as "you're so gay," "fag," "dyke," "lezzy"

and “homo” are heard loud and clear, making hallways and classrooms hostile towards homosexuality.

Young people living in rainbow families report being faced with prejudice and discrimination due to society’s homophobia, heteronormativity and transphobia regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity. Despite some legal and social gains, rainbow families face many difficulties linked to invisibility, lack of understanding and prejudice. Studies show that LGBT people who want to start a family, as well as LGBT parents and especially their children, can be victims of prejudice and discrimination. Like LGBT people in general, children and parents of rainbow families feel the stress of homophobia and transphobia and the pressure can have repercussions on their health and well-being.

Homophobia and transphobia in schools is harmful to all students, not just those with LGBT parents. It also impacts children, who, one day, will be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered; those with another family member who is LGBT and those perceived as being LGBT because they don’t conform to gender stereotypes. All children are affected when the school culture routinely marginalizes students because of their perceived or true sexual orientation, or that of their parents.

Homophobic and transphobic attitudes can form during the very first years of primary school when children use words like “gay” and “lesbian” abusively or as generic insults. Remarks that question the masculinity or femininity of certain individuals or that make direct reference to sexuality are heard often and are harmful. Schools, especially primary schools, provide ideal opportunities to change homophobic and transphobic attitudes because they contribute largely to the development of young children’s values and attitudes. Later on, homophobic and transphobic attitudes and values can be deeply rooted and difficult to change.

Although specialists and support staff in schools can have personal beliefs that are incompatible with the idea of rainbow families, those working in public institutions have the legal responsibility to provide an inclusive and welcoming environment to all children and families; an environment in which they can succeed and develop.

LGBT parents, like other parents, want to establish partnerships with schools and community organizations to offer support for the academic, social and emotional development of their children. Educators and rainbow families can learn to work together. At the same time, educators and other professionals need to better understand the realities of rainbow families and research on these families in order to work as a team with them and support their children.

Despite constantly shrinking financial resources, schools are serving thousands of children and families. The majority of schools and services want to accommodate children and families as best as possible, but the needs of rainbow families are not their only concern. However, providing an inclusive environment for children and parents in rainbow families is

neither difficult nor expensive. The tools suggested throughout the conference and in various workshops and plenary sessions will help people working within these institutions to overcome their hesitations and fears related to the inclusion of these families in their practice.