

Best Practices: Seven Areas of Intervention in the School Community to better meet the needs of LGBT families

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Over recent years, more and more rainbow families have begun to affirm their identities at their children's school. Many factors have played a role in this evolution: the greater social tolerance of family and gender diversity, the greater visibility of LGBT parents, and the improved access to parenthood for LGBT couples and individuals. The school community must recognize that these families exist and that their children have the same rights as families with heterosexual and cis-gendered parents. It is also important to be aware that these families have specific needs. The goal of this presentation was to offer administrators, school personnel and parents, as well as all professionals working in schools, suggestions and action plans to help better meet the needs of parents and children from rainbow families in their institutions.

It is important to remember that even a small action can have a big impact. Before anything else, the school's personnel must recognize that LGBT parents are just as competent as other parents, and that they too take the education and well-being of their children to heart. The school must make efforts to communicate this reality to its employees. A fruitful partnership between school and family plays a critical role in children's academic success and the professional success of employees. There are a number of obstacles to overcome in building a positive relationship between the school and rainbow families: homophobia, transphobia, certain personal or religious beliefs, a heteronormative vision of family, a lack of knowledge, etc. Administration and school personnel must work to correct these problems. A whole-school approach is necessary to promote the inclusion of all families. All school community members must work together, from administrators and teachers to social workers, schoolyard supervisors, parents and students.

Policies and the Role of the Administration

A school's administration must ensure a school environment that values and respects diversity. To do so, the administration must publish and promote an official policy of acceptance and inclusion that calls for the respect of all types of non-traditional families. In the same vein, an anti-violence policy that specifies, among other things, that homophobia and transphobia are not tolerated, is an important starting point. This sets the tone, both for families and school personnel. It is important that all families feel accepted, and the promotion of the school's inclusive philosophy will reassure LGBT parents and encourage their participation in school life. For teachers, this guarantees the support of administration in their proactive initiatives on topics such as rainbow families. An antidiscrimination

philosophy also helps to set up a healthy climate in the school community, allowing people to speak freely, to share their fears and to reach a better mutual understanding.

Sensitization of Personnel

School personnel must have access to a training program that introduces them to the specific issues of LGBT-headed families. By learning more about the concerns faced by homosexual parents, they will be better prepared to discuss the topic with other parents, students and colleagues. For future teachers, it is important to include discussions of diversity—particularly non-traditional family structures— in their academic training, which unfortunately was not the case in the past.

Educational Material

Like all students, children from rainbow families need to see their family reality reflected in the class curriculum and in their environment. Schools should have books and other educational material that reflects family diversity. These books should be readily available in the library and in all classrooms, even those not normally frequented by children with LGBT parents. Parents from various family types could be asked to recommend books or videos for the school.

Inclusive Language

In the school environment, heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic language can have a negative impact on all children and their families. Children use the expression “That’s so gay” as an insult, or worse, they use other terms like “fag,” “dyke,” “lezzy” and “queer” because they have learned to what extent these words can destroy someone’s self-esteem.

Schools send letters home which make reference to the child’s mother and father, unintentionally excluding all other family configurations in the school community. School personnel have the responsibility of using language that includes all types of families and people, to show children how to use vocabulary appropriately and to intervene when words are used hurtfully. Word choice is important when speaking to children (or adults) on the topic of rainbow families. If teachers are hesitant to call things by their names, perhaps using euphemisms to designate “homosexuality,” “gays” or “lesbians,” the students are likely to internalize this same sense of embarrassment when they talk about these subjects. Those in contact with students must be comfortable using appropriate language.

Classroom Activities and Actions

Administrators in our school system can also take the initiative of introducing the question of rainbow families into the educational program. School personnel must demonstrate open-mindedness. This means adding issues related to rainbow families to the curriculum and making appropriate pedagogical material available, such as textbooks or other publications, that shows the life of children with LGBT parents. This could also mean introducing students to loving, same-sex relationships. The objective is to raise awareness among students about

the diversity of family constellations to help them discover realities that are different than their own. Integrating the theme of LGBT-headed families into the educational program right from kindergarten will bring the values of openness and respect for differences to the forefront.

Children of LGBT parents need to see their lives reflected in what they see in class. For example, they benefit from being able to recognize their family situation in the books they read; this helps normalize their experiences. It is also important for teachers to lend an active ear to these students, should they feel compelled to talk about their family life.

Children's Role

Children should learn about the importance of respect and open-mindedness from a very young age. Children can participate in many aspects of their school's plan to fight discrimination and bullying and to create an inclusive environment. This promotes not only their engagement, but can also help strengthen their understanding of how widespread homophobia and gender-based harassment has become and its impact on people.

Parental Involvement

Studies show that the more involved parents are in their children's education, the more successful their children are at school and beyond. Schools should encourage LGBT parents to participate in all aspects of their children's education. To do so, an inclusive school climate must already be established so that LGBT parents feel welcomed and accepted. It is not, however, always easy to identify all the parents who are part of a rainbow family. There are a wide variety of rainbow family types. To work with these families, traditional conceptions of families based on biology need to be cast aside in favour of a more functional definition of a parent (for example, an adult who takes on the responsibility of raising a child). Identifying all people who take on a parental role is an element that promotes the creation of effective home-school relationships. The openness of LGBT parents is also essential to establishing an effective home-school connection. Unfortunately, many parents are hesitant about revealing their sexuality (due to a desire for privacy, fear, concerns about custody, etc.). The school must work to support parents who do wish to affirm their sexuality within the school community and to respect those who are not ready to do so. Besides establishing a school climate that promotes diversity and tolerance, administration can take certain actions that demonstrate their willingness to put LGBT parents at ease. For example, registration forms can be modified so that the spaces previously reserved for the father's name and the