

## Gay Parenting Telecourse

### Things to Consider When Working With Gay or Lesbian Parents:

#### **Gay and lesbian parents are always coming out.**

One of the situations a gay parent faces has to do with their own coming out process. A gay man or lesbian who has been out for many years will now have to begin coming out as a gay or lesbian parent. This is a whole new version of coming out which again opens themselves and their family's life up to exposure and vulnerability and quite possibly rejection and scorn from other family members, friends, and acquaintances. Not every gay or lesbian parent has this happy ending for themselves and their child. In reality, your client may have the opposite. Many gays and lesbians have supportive people around them who accept them because they believe their sexuality is not their choice and since they have not actively chosen to be gay, they are accepted into their familial roles as sons, daughters, aunts and uncles. Many churches also accept their gay parishioners because they believe it is through no active choice of their own. However, becoming a parent is very much a choice for a gay or lesbian, and therefore many friends and family members who were once accepting may not be as accepting of this new role of mom or dad for these same individuals. In other words, the belief would be: "It is ok for our friend, co-worker or family member to be gay or lesbian, but it is not ok for that person to bring a child into that homosexual lifestyle." Surprisingly, I have also spoken with many other gays and lesbians who themselves also hold such internalized homophobic beliefs.

Now, a gay man or lesbian is coming out not only in terms of him or herself, he or she will now be coming out on behalf of their role as the parent of their child, a child who has two dads, or two moms, or one gay dad, or a lesbian mom. It is as if your client who is a gay parent must do preemptive coming out as a way of paving the road ahead for their child to be able to be honest about his or her family dynamic without facing many of the questions; You have two moms??? Where is your dad??? Is he dead??? You can't have two moms. You must have a dad somewhere. Which one of your moms is really your mom???

It is important to realize when working with a gay parent that you take into consideration that they are constantly coming out. If you ask a question such as, "Are you out?" he or she is most likely going to answer, "Yes, I have been out for a while, or a long time, or since high school or college." It is here that you as a therapist need to realize that this client who is going around town wearing a wedding band will be viewed by most people as a straight man or woman. It is as if the child whose hand they are holding has given them instant mainstream status, and by mainstream status, I mean heterosexual status. Your client who may have once been viewed as an out gay man or an out lesbian due to their manner or disposition, but now this same person is seen as Zack's mom, or Angela's dad, and it will be from now on that he or she will automatically be seen as a straight married, single or

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divorced person. In other words, your client will be perceived by other straight parents as one of their own. When it is later revealed that your client is not one of their own, he or she may feel exposed and vulnerable to the type of homophobia that often arises out of fears and ignorance.

## **Gay and lesbian parents may be grieving the loss of their previous identity.**

Many gays and lesbians who socialized openly in gay bars are now at PTA (Parent and Teacher Association) meetings. Instead of partying with other gays and lesbians they are at Target searching for a teething gel that just may get the baby to stop crying. Your client, the gay or lesbian parent may be feeling isolated from the accepting gay society that afforded opportunities for open and honest communications. Your client may now be thrust into a mainstream society that they may not be completely comfortable in. You as a therapist will need to help this client to recognize opportunities to be as out as possible in all aspects of their lives while also helping them to create a respite system so that they can once again socialize the way they did before they had a child.

## **Sometimes an issue for a gay or lesbian parent is not so gay.**

Not every dilemma a gay or lesbian parent comes to a therapist to resolve has to do with being gay. It is important to remember that sometimes a parenting issue is simply a parenting issue. No more, no less. When gay parents are at home and they are assuming child care roles and responsibilities, the challenges they face will be similar to the challenges any parent faces. We therapists should not assume that it is in part due to our male client's inability to be maternal or our female client's inability to rough house with her son.

## **Sometimes an issue for gay and lesbian parents isn't specific to parenting.**

Gay or lesbian parents may feel as though they have lost each other somewhere in the process of becoming and functioning as a parent. One specific concern that I have heard from clients who are parents is; "We need more us time." Parents need date nights, time for meals together, or time to simply talk, regroup and catch up from the stresses of their many roles. The issue for these parents is about connecting as a couple. It has to do with the emotional intimacy they share and time together, which is a precious commodity.

## **Recognize your preconceptions of what a "family" looks like.**

If you're an older therapist this may involve the images that you may have been bombarded with from your youth, messages from the prominent adults in your life as you were growing and developing your personhood, the way media portrayed families ( dad off to work, mom keeping up the housework, cooking, supporting dad emotionally, etc. It is important to keep in mind when you are working with your client, that even in gay families, many traditional gender roles are still played out, maybe in the same gender, or perhaps in a different gender.

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In other words for gay male parents, one may be the dad who seems to always know just the perfect outfit for his daughter to wear to a special occasion, while the other dad would have

no clue at all. Maybe, one dad is the one cheering at all of the sporting events for his son while the other dad will take his son's temperature and cuddle him while he is sobbing in the middle of the night after waking with an aching ear. What about the lesbian mom who works 60 hours a week while her co-parent is a room mother at their daughters' school, and also the mom voted most likely to be at every pediatrician appointment.

As a therapist, you should not assume anything about a family headed by same sex parents until you become familiar with that family's dynamic.

### Things to Consider When Working With Gay or Lesbian Clients Planning on Becoming Parents:

#### **The Stability of Their Relationship:**

Work with your clients to foster awareness of their reasoning for wanting to embark on the journey to becoming parents.

A child is not the way to save a faltering relationship.

Agreeing to co-parent when you really don't want to is not the way to keep a partner.

Parenting involves an insurmountable amount of effort which is best distributed between two parents who share similar parenting styles.

#### **The Logistics of It All:**

Turkey baster at home or artificial insemination at a clinic? Adoption or surrogate? How did you find out where to go? Who can help you get started? Gays and lesbians who want to become parents face unique obstacles that straight parents do not have to give a second thought. (Recount experience when the fertility specialist told Stacey and me that we didn't have a fertility problem, we simply needed some sperm). He was correct. My partner had the ovaries; I did not have the testicles. Let me say one name, IVF (In-vitro Fertilization). For a lesbian wanting to become a mom, there are IVF clinics in most states and this is a place that not only can provide sperm, but also can facilitate the process of getting the sperm to the egg. For gay men choosing to become a dad they will need to go in search of the egg. Perhaps a friend can act as a surrogate mother. Another method would be to go through an organization of surrogacy services which could put him in touch with women who are willing to provide the necessary uterus that will be needed for the next nine months. Also, remember when working with a gay or lesbian client embarking on this journey, you should advise them to seek out professionals in both the medical and legal fields of artificial insemination and surrogacy to help guide them in their process. Most couples require the help of knowledgeable professionals and we as therapists can provide guidance by advising

our clients to seek them out. If you can put together a list of organizations that can help your client than you will have given them a stepping off point.

## **Gay and lesbian clients who are parenting often need your help in recognizing:**

- **The Importance of Support for Their Family:**

It is important for all parents, especially gay and lesbian parents to have a network of supportive people in their family's life. It is through family and friends that parents are given assistance and respite care help, answers to questions, reassurances, etc. With gay parents this support often comes more from non-family rather than immediate family members depending on the acceptance from their family. Perhaps more than with other straight families, friends will play an important role in the lives of gay and lesbian parents often taking on surnames such as aunt or uncle. Sadly, many of these friends are not parents themselves. With this said, many questions and reassurances that all parents including gay and lesbian parents need may not be available leaving these parents feeling isolated and without support. A therapist should have some referrals for their clients who are gay parents. Most metropolitan cities have an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered) center that offers social and educational opportunities for these parents. As a therapist you should be knowledgeable of the LGBT resources in your community and provide a listing when appropriate for your gay and lesbian clients. There are also internet groups a gay or lesbian parent can join such as "The Lesbian Moms' Network" out of Ann Arbor, Mi which is comprised of a group of moms sharing resources, information, and advice for over 250 local families in the communities of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, MI. You will want to refer your clients to a local support network since there are usually scheduled seasonal activities and various outings for gay and lesbian parents and their children. These social outlets provide support for parents while allowing an opportunity for their children to meet and interact with children from other families that look like theirs.

- **The need to normalize whenever possible and continually educate their children.**

As a therapist and also a lesbian parent I am a proponent of normalizing the lives of children from gay and lesbian headed families as much as possible, while still celebrating the uniqueness and diversity of their family. My children attend a public elementary school in a very affluent community. They are the only kids there that I am aware of with gay or lesbian parents. I need to be honest in letting my kids know that our family doesn't look like most of their friends' families. I celebrate the differences of all types of families with them and I include them in discussions about having two moms and what that means, and also what it does not mean. As a therapist it is imperative to work with gay and lesbian parents on how to educate their children about homophobia and what that may look like. These parents will need support on how to build strength and foster resilience in their children. They also need support on creating open ended dialogue with their children on all the issues of their diverse

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family. (Give examples of what I say to my kids about what some people say and believe about families with two moms or two dads). We received a nice complement from one of our children's teachers last week when she commented how our child was referring to her Kelli Mom and her Stacey Mom and was asked the question, "How can you have two moms?" My

daughter simply replied; "I just do, and it's great." The teacher congratulated us on having created such an independent free thinker. Working with gay and lesbian parents to help them maintain an open dialogue with their children is key to helping their kids avoid the confusion that can be caused by questions such as the one that was posed to my daughter. It will also allow for issues to be addressed as they present rather than making a bigger deal by waiting or having some dauntingly staged discussion. You can help your clients to be able to make what I like to call preemptive statements such as "Not everyone knows about families like ours." "Not everyone believes that a family should have two moms or two dads." "Some kids only get to see families with a mom and a dad and how sad is that?" "Some kids live with their grandma, or their aunt." "You have two mommies and how cool is that?"

- **Their own internalized homophobia and fear based behavior around both their own children and other children.**

When working with gay and lesbian parents a therapist should be able to recognize and make aware fear based behaviors that his/her client may be exhibiting as a result of the fears that their child may experience discrimination and have to deal with homophobic peers and adults. The parent is the protector of their child, yet there remains the possibility that an attack on their child may be a result of themselves being gay or lesbian. A child of a lesbian or gay man may be bullied as a result of their diverse family, and your client may be dealing with issues of guilt and frustration as a result. Helping the client to become proactive and address their own fears and internalized homophobia will help them to be able to raise a child that is strong in his/her self-esteem and resilient to the comments and opinions of others. An emotionally healthy adult will be able to foster that same emotional well being in their child.