

My Children Have Three Moms

Personal Reflections on Raising a Highly Visible Family

by Marsha Hiller, MFT

My lesbian identity was central to my life for many years. My friendships, political work, and cultural activities were all focused on my connections in the LGBTQQ community. Then my long-term partner and I, both white women, became the adoptive parents of two children, our African American son and our biracial (African American) daughter. As a parent, everything shifted. I found that some of the issues important to me as a lesbian were also important for my children as adopted people of color: the struggle for identity formation, the need for physical and emotional safety, the challenge of looking "different," and the value of social justice consciousness. I also found that my own lesbian identity took a back seat as I focused on building compelling connections with people who shared other values and experiences.

Starting when our children were very young, we wanted to make sure they were surrounded by a variety of types of families, in order to support the notion that there are many ways to become and be a family: genetically-connected families, adoptive families, LGBTQQ families, straight families, single-parent families, couples with no children, multiracial families. I'm talking here about our closest family and friend circles, as well as our kids' schools, our neighborhood, and our larger community. While we wanted our children to be connected to other families as close to looking like ours as possible, we soon began to realize it was critical for our children to see us in close relationship not just with other lesbian-parented families, but many kinds of families. Diversity of all kinds has been essential in helping them feel comfortable in a variety of settings.

When our kids were in pre-school, there were birthday celebrations and other opportunities when we could plan with them to go into their classes with pictures and stories about how our family came together. We had chosen their pre-school carefully, so there was plenty of support for and familiarity with both transracial adoption and LGBTQQ families, with positive, accepting language in place.

By elementary school, there was more feeling of our family being different and sometimes there were comments about our family being "weird." I made it a point to come to my children's classes if they wanted me to and showed the film "That's a Family," in

which children talk about their varied families. By introducing a film with visuals and language about lots of types of families, including lesbian/gay and adoptive ones, we helped normalize ours for children who hadn't been exposed to much family diversity. I wanted to pave the way for our kids and also model for them being comfortable talking with the kids and teachers in their classes about our family. Being proactive and delivering the message of normalcy and respectful language helped our kids feel emotionally and physically safer.

Being proactive ties into our desire to raise children with a social justice mindset. Especially because we are parenting children of color, we wanted to have ongoing conversations and open dialogue about race, racism, sexism, socio-economic disparities, and of course homophobia. When they were younger the focus was on unfairness—situations my partner and I noticed as well as ones that got their attention. We'd talk about why we thought certain groups of people were treated differently and brainstorm what we could do about it. As they got older, we helped them put these events into historical and institutional contexts. Over time, our conversations have become richer and more complex. Sometimes now we overhear our teens having their own discussions about whether something is sexist, homophobic, or racist. We value these conversations and hope they will continue among us—and for them, with other important people in their lives—for the rest of their lives.

We've come to realize that it's important not to generalize, because every child is a unique individual, and two children may respond to the same experiences very differently. As our children got older, there were times when our son felt uncomfortable being seen at public events with both of us moms, and was hesitant to bring new friends to our home. It was sad and at times painful when only one of us was able to show up at parent conferences, but we knew we needed to respect our child's need for privacy. During high school, the discomfort eased up. We were then able to talk together more openly about what had been going on. We realized this process needed to belong to our child, and was about that child's identity development, not a test of love or attachment or loyalty to us. Our daughter seemed proud to have two moms and never showed any discomfort about our lesbian relationship.

Our two children also had different responses to not having a father in the family. Our daughter focused mostly on longing to meet her birth mother, with little attention given to wondering about her birth father. Our son, starting at age three, had lots of fantasies about his birth father, and would stop at random phone booths to have conversations with this imagined Dad. Later he could express more directly his anger about not having a dad in the family. We were very intentional in including our close male friends in all kinds of holidays, camping trips, and family rituals, including celebrating “men in our lives” day. We were fortunate enough to connect our son with a series of important male mentors, one of whom we have all come to consider part of our family. None of this takes the place of having a dad and we all continue to grieve this loss, each in our own way.

Neither of us parents have ever had an agenda about how our kids would eventually define themselves in terms of their sexual orientations. We have always been more focused on hoping they’ll have close, trusting, healthy intimate relationships. We hope that our parenting choices—embracing diversity, seeking role models outside the family, cultivating social consciousness, respecting our children’s needs, and always being available to speak honestly and openly with them, even about painful subjects—are giving them the foundation they need to build happy, healthy adult lives.

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