

Creating Inclusive Early Learning Environments for LGBTQ2+ Families

By Shelley Secrett, RECE

During our Monday morning circle in a preschool classroom, an eager four year old girl, named Ahmie, put up her hand to share what she had done on the weekend. “I went to tri-Pride! [Waterloo Region’s LGBTQ2+ Pride Festival] It was fun!” I asked her what she saw at the festival. “I saw drag queens. I like them the best!” I smiled and asked Ahmie to tell us more. “They are beautiful and look like princesses.” You could see adoration of these performers in this young child’s eyes and sense the joy this festival experience had brought her. Ahmie’s contribution at circle opened the door to many interesting discussions and teachable moments in our preschool classroom about love, family diversity and gender roles. In general, I think RECEs and early learning professionals already have their hearts in the right place when it comes to celebrating diversity of all kinds, and this positive intention is reflected in the growing interest in having professional conversations and training sessions about how to be more inclusive of LGBTQ2+ families. This is an

important and timely conversation, because LGBTQ2+ families are actually the fastest growing type of family structure in Canada (ETFO, 2014). However, important conversations can sometimes be challenging.

I have heard some educators express that they are not sure what words

to use when discussing LGBTQ2+ issues and they are sometimes worried about offending families by saying or doing the wrong thing. As an openly gay educator and a mother, I would reassure them by suggesting that doing something is so much better than doing nothing. When we keep quiet on this aspect of diversity,

it keeps rainbow families and children invisible. They need reassurance that it is safe to share about



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Listen to Shelley’s interview on the HiMama Preschool Podcast <https://www.himama.com/inclusive-preschool-environments-LGBTQ2+-families>

What does LGBTQ2+ mean?

LGBTQ2+ refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning and 2-Spirit-ed. The + refers to people who identify as Intersex, Asexual or an Ally.

Other common terms used to describe people in these communities who do not identify as heterosexual are the Queer Community or Rainbow Community. It is important to be respectful and use the terms that people prefer when identifying a person as part of this community. (ETFO, 2014)

their family, that they will be free from discrimination and that their children will see their family represented in the environment and the curriculum within the centre. Now is the time to start planting the seeds of acceptance in young children by embracing teachable moments and genuinely celebrating the many forms of love and family in the world today. In a society that surrounds children with negative stereotypes of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals and families, there are significant steps educators can take to be explicitly inclusive. Research states that students perform better academically and socially when they see themselves reflected in the school environment and curriculum (ETFO, 2008). Our lived experience as a rainbow family confirms this research. When our son was in grade 5, we were curious about his elementary school's commitment to family diversity and we sent him to school with a mission. We asked him to go to the librarian and ask if there were any books in the library about a family like his. He explained to her that he has two moms so any book about LGBTQ2+ families is what he was looking for. Our son said the librarian looked "shocked" but then set out to see what she could find. It turns out that in the entire library, there was one book that depicted a LGBTQ2+ family and it wasn't easy for students to find. It made our son feel like it was a "bad thing" that kids shouldn't know about. As early learning professionals, we have the responsibility to create visibility now during the child care years. Children, youth and families are depending on us.

I am fortunate to be working in a child care center that genuinely allows me to be who I am. It intentionally works to embrace and celebrate all kinds of diversity. By using family diversity children's books in creative ways, acknowledging some key calendar events for the rainbow community, challenging stereotypes and just by being myself, I bring LGBTQ2+ awareness and visibility into my classroom and inspire it throughout the centre. Several years ago in a preschool classroom, I read a family diversity book, called "All Families Are Special" by Norma Simon. Many different types of families are portrayed. One page showed a Mommy, a Mama and

their two children giving their pet dog a bath. Just as I was beginning to wonder if any of the children would comment about the two mommies, one little girl put up her hand and said, "That puppy is SO cute!" I remember feeling relieved, pleasantly surprised and laughing at my own nervousness. Back then, I was the only RECE I knew who was reading books that specifically included portrayals of LGBTQ2+ families. Even though I was an openly gay RECE, I wasn't sure of the comfort level of my coworkers on this issue, because LGBTQ2+ families were rarely recognized in my centre.

Over the years, my passion for creating welcoming and inclusive child care environments for LGBTQ2+ families has continued to grow. I now travel throughout Ontario presenting a workshop called, "Rainbow Families: Visibility in the Early Years." Through speaking with fellow ECEs across the province, I have learned that many are worried about how parents will react to words like lesbian or gay being used in preschool classrooms and I've been asked more than once if a letter should be sent home in advance. These concerns from educators indicate that more training is necessary for staff to realize that lesbian and gay are not "bad words." They are accurate descriptions of people's identities. The more children hear those words as they relate to people's identities and who they love, they will become more normalized and accepted for both the children and the parents. Talking about family diversity in a preschool classroom is about acknowledging love and the different family structures that exist. In the event that parents express concern about any books or language of diversity being used in the classroom, educators can let them know their centre embraces all forms of diversity including those who identify within the LGBTQ2+ community and that they follow the Canadian Charter of Human Rights. It is usually helpful to find out exactly what the fear or concern is. Educators can refer the concerned parent to the supervisor of the program for further information.

Sometimes, in my workshop, ECEs share that they don't have any LGBTQ2+ people in their centre, so they don't feel

it's necessary to create visibility until they do (and then they would be happy to welcome these families). I always respond by challenging them to consider that they very likely already have people who identify in the LGBTQ2+ community within their centre. Here are a few examples: one parent in a seemingly heterosexual marriage may identify as bisexual; a staff may identify as a lesbian but may be passing as straight at work for fear of discrimination; a parent may identify as transgender without your knowledge because they have transitioned and are living and passing as the sex they identify with; a heterosexual couple may be divorcing because a father realized later in life that he is gay and can no longer be in the marriage; or a child in your program may challenge gender norms. For complex reasons, some LGBTQ2+ parents may choose not to come out, and ECE teachers may not even realize they are working with LGBTQ2+ families (Klinger-Lesser, Burt & Gelnaw, 2005). The fear of coming out is tied to the history of homophobia and transphobia throughout time. When your centre explicitly demonstrates inclusivity throughout the centre, in the environment, in the curriculum and throughout the organization's forms, mission or values' statement, it sends a clear message to those approaching your organization for employment or services, that this is a safe space for their family. I can't stress enough that being prepared and always having that visibility present can make a difference for so many!

In June 2017, the Waterloo Region District School Board made a decision to hang a rainbow flag in every single elementary school in our region to show their support of LGBTQ2+ students and families during the month of Pride. This was quite leading edge and such a positive step forward. Inspired by this, I decided to hang a five foot rainbow flag from the hallway ceiling in our child care centre with the intention of leaving it there for the month of June. I was pleasantly surprised to hear some positive feedback from parents. One father approached me early one morning and thanked me for hanging the flag. He asked his 5 year old son what he knows about the rainbow flag. This child didn't miss a heartbeat and answered, "Shelley

told us it's about loving who you want to love and be proud of who you are." In the same week I heard a news story about principals from several schools across the region receiving calls from disapproving neighbours and from upset parents within the school community. On June 30th, Pride flags were shredded and graffiti was sprayed on flag poles at several area schools. Similar graffiti was also sprayed in the entrance to the school board's head office, leading investigators believe the attacks were targeted rather than simply random acts of property damage or mischief. I was very upset to hear this news and decided to inspire people on social media to phone elementary school principals, giving them a pat on the back for flying the rainbow flag despite the controversy they were facing. Principals were so surprised, relieved and delighted to start their day with these positive phone calls. Each principal I randomly phoned had experienced at least one complaint about the flag. I am mentioning this current news to show that although society has made incredible progress, we have so much more work to do.

As educators, YOU can make a difference! One small action of creating visibility can make children and their families feel welcomed, celebrated and valued. This feeling of acceptance and belonging is so important and reassuring, especially in a world where their experiences may not always be so positive. The experience of being welcome or unwelcome, visible or invisible begins in early childhood. In July, an email was sent to the director of my child care centre with positive feedback about us hanging the rainbow flag. *"This message of inclusivity made a big impression on our family, and I'm grateful that Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care supported our LGBTQ2+ community members in this manner. I hope it becomes an annual tradition. Thank you very much."* This feedback made me, as an openly gay educator who tends to take the lead on LGBTQ2+ topics in our centre, feel supported and gave my director a strong message that having this visibility is vital.

Like many topics, an easy way to get started is to ensure children's books that include LGBTQ2+ families, are on the bookshelves all year long, and that

these books are read by educators on a regular basis during story or circle time. To extend the learning, I encourage educators to be creative by planning a game, discussion, parent engagement activity or an art opportunity that relates to the book and topic. Just reading a book is a basic start but we can do so much more. "Best, Best Colours" by Eric Hoffman, is one of my favourite family diversity books because it depicts a family getting ready for the pride parade in such a natural, authentic way. This touching story takes us through a day in Nate's life where his experiences remind him of different colours of the rainbow such as sunflowers, moonbeams and gold for yellow. When he goes to sleep, he has a bad dream in which all the colours are fighting to be his favourite. He wakes up and is upset because he can't choose his best, best colour. When he goes downstairs, he finds his Mom and Mama holding a beautiful rainbow flag they had handcrafted from fabric for the Pride parade celebration. Nate gets excited and decides that all the colours are his best, best colours and he goes outside to show his Pride flag to his best, best friends.

This book touches on the theme of pride and self-respect. It's about feeling confident to be yourself as you are exploring your environment and developing relationships within it. To extend the learning after reading this book, you can ask questions such as, "What does it mean to be proud of something? How does it make you feel? What are you proud of?" For older children you can go on to say, "Nate's Mamas talked about going to gay pride. They are proud of their family. Gay Pride is a big party where people celebrate many ways of loving and that being different is ok. Nate has 2 Mamas and they love each other. They made something special to take to Gay Pride. Who remembers what it is? The Rainbow Flag is a symbol for their love and for Gay Pride, just like the Canadian flag is a symbol for Canada, the country we all live in." Other directions to continue the learning include asking, "When you think of the rainbow, what colours do you think of?" or having the children create their own rainbow flags. When your city's Pride festival is approaching,

LGBTQ2+ and family diversity book recommendations to get you started:



Best, Best Colours, Eric Hoffman

And Tango Makes Three, Justin Richardson

Donovan's Big Day, Leslea Newman

All Families are Special, Norma Simon

It's Okay to be Different, Todd Parr

Who's in a Family?, Robert Skutch

ABC: A Family Alphabet Book, Robbie Combs

Molly's Family, Nancy Garden

My Princess Boy, Cheryl Kilodavis

put up a poster for any family related events. Tell the children about it and if families attend, have the children share about their experiences. These are just a few ideas but I hope they inspire you to be creative with the books you read and to be intentional with colleagues about brainstorming ways to deepen the learning and really plant these seeds of acceptance.

If every educator and early learning program director committed to at least one small action towards LGBTQ2+ inclusion, imagine the meaningful difference it would make for children and their families living in the rainbow community. We might never know the powerful impact that planting these seeds of acceptance, at an early age can have, but I do know it may change

someone's life. I invite you to create a space that is so open and accepting that a child like Ahmie can share about drag queens and know that her story will be heard, honoured and celebrated. Be the one to make that difference.

Here are a few more practical ideas on how to take some steps to being more welcoming and inclusive of LGBTQ2+ families.

- Post a rainbow flag or a Safe Space poster in the classroom, on the main entrance door or in the administration office to indicate that the environment is safe and welcoming for all kinds of people including LGBTQ2+ people. Safe Space posters can be downloaded at www.rainbowhealth.ca
- Be aware of the language you use. For instance, instead of saying, "Take this home to your Mommy and Daddy", you can say, "Take this home to your family." Also, when getting to know new parents in your centre, be careful not to assume heterosexuality. When speaking to one parent, avoid using gender specific language about their significant other unless they have shared the gender of their partner.
- Find out about, and use, the language families use to describe themselves. In a family with two dads, for example, how does their child refer to each parent?
- Use language in the mission statement and parent and staff handbooks that explicitly includes LGBTQ2+ families and staff.
- Provide parent meetings and staff trainings to address issues of diversity including concerns of LGBTQ2+ families.
- Use films, articles and speakers to enhance staff and parent trainings (a list of resources can be found at www.parentservices.org)
- Find ways to create a work environment that allows LGBTQ2+ staff to choose to be safely out to other staff, parents and children in the centre.
- Adapt children's songs and stories to include the diversity of families,

so that different family structures are included on a regular basis in the classroom.

- Use what you hear from children to learn about what they think about families and challenge misinformation or stereotypes. In my preschool classroom, I often have children say to peers that 2 girls or 2 boys cannot get married. Same-sex marriage became legal in Ontario in 2005 and we need to recognize the opportunity to give children accurate and up to date information.

Many early childhood educators love to celebrate calendar events within their program, such as, Groundhog Day, St. Patrick's Day, Grandparents' Day and even National Cheese Pizza Day! There are many LGBTQ2+, anti-bullying and family diversity calendar dates that educators can plan for. Use your creativity to bring awareness of these dates to your early learning environment through a special event like a preschool Pride parade, your own Day of Pink extravaganza, or a special visitor to talk about all kinds of families, etc. The possibilities are endless if you are committed to making a difference. Use these websites for inspiration when planning.

No Name-Calling Week
(November)
www.nonamecallingweek.org

Pink Shirt Day - Anti-Bully Day
(February)
www.pinkshirtday.ca

Day of Pink - Anti-Bullying Specific to Homophobia and Transphobia (April)
www.dayofpink.org

International Family Visibility Day (May)
www.LGBTQ2+pn.ca

Toronto Pride (June)
www.pridetoronto.com

References

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2014). *Welcoming and Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families brochure*. Retrieved from: <http://www.etfo.ca/buildingajustsociety/lgbtq/pages/lgbtfamilies.aspx>

Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2008). *Positive Space/Positive Place pamphlet*. Retrieved from: <http://www.etfo.ca/supportingmembers/resources/pages/shopetfo.aspx>

Klinger-Lesser, L., Burt, T., & Gelnaw, A. (2005). *Making Room in the Circle: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Families in Early Childhood Settings*. Cornell University: Parent Services Project

Additional websites & resources:

LGBTQ2+ Parenting Network - offers training to organizations
www.LGBTQ2+pn.ca

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network - curriculum ideas that can be adapted for preschool age.
www.glysen.org

Building Bridges - Queer Families in Early Childhood Education
<https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/resources/building-bridges-queer-families-in-early-childhood-education/>

OK2BME - KW Counselling - Click on Resources
www.ok2bme.ca

HiMama Preschool Podcast - Interview with Shelley Secrett, RECE
<https://www.himama.com/inclusive-preschool-environments-LGBTQ2+-families>