

EARLY YEARS SUPPORT GUIDE



Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins

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Introduction

Rainbow Families Early Years Support Guide is the second collaboration between Rainbow Families and writer, Jacqui Tomlins. The guide was developed in response to ongoing requests for information from parents and caregivers and is part of Rainbow Families' commitment to providing quality resources for and about our families. This guide is specifically for expecting parents and parents with babies and preschoolers.

Rainbow families are much like any other family: we all have to adjust to the changes children bring to our lives; we all want our kids to grow up secure, healthy and happy; we all have good parenting days and bad. And we all have to deal with nits and homework and fights over screen time.

But there are some things that are unique to rainbow families; small day-to-day challenges and bigger questions and concerns. *Rainbow Families Early Years Support Guide* aims to address those differences. The ideas, suggestions and advice contained in the guide represent the collective wisdom of dozens of parents who have grappled with these challenges and come up with some great solutions.

We hope the guide will also be of value to early learning educators, teachers, counsellors and other school staff who work with rainbow families. We hope it will provide them with insight and understanding and give them the knowledge and confidence to provide informed support to our families.

We are enormously proud to present the *Rainbow Families Early Years Support Guide*.

About us

Rainbow Families

Rainbow Families is a 100% volunteer organisation that provides support to children and families within the NSW LGBTIQ community. We run playgroups, parent education sessions, discussion forums, movie nights, picnics and a whole range of other social activities. Our events are designed to bring together lesbian mums, gay dads, trans parents, adoptive parents, foster parents and all types of rainbow families to connect, learn, support, make friends and help build resilient families.

Rainbow Families also works to address discrimination and other social disadvantage faced by LGBTIQ families and to promote the affirmation and celebration of rainbow families. We do this by working with LGBTIQ parents, their children, government, businesses, schools, the broader community, and other not for profit organisations.

Rainbow Families is led by a committee of passionate LGBTIQ community members and supported by parent volunteers located all over NSW. Together, we are focused on making Australia a better place for all LGBTIQ families.

Head to **rainbowfamilies.com.au** to learn more, and subscribe to our newsletter to stay informed about events and programs that support our families.

Jacqui Tomlins

Jacqui Tomlins is a writer, trainer and educator with more than 25 years' experience working in the LGBTI field and was one of the founding members of the Rainbow Families Council (now Rainbow Families Victoria). She is an outspoken advocate for the community and has represented rainbow families in the media many times.

Jacqui has written on a broad range of topics for both LGBTI and mainstream press, and most recently researched and wrote *Outspoken Families, A Resource Kit for Rainbow Families*. Currently, she runs workshops for educators and service providers who work with rainbow families and the LGBTI community. She is a member of the Victorian Ministerial Taskforce's Health and Human Services Working Group.

Jacqui lives in Melbourne with her partner of 25 years, Sarah, and their three children.

jacquitomlins.com

Acknowledgements

Rainbow Families would like to acknowledge and thank Jacqui Tomlins for her work researching and writing the *Rainbow Families Early Years Support Guide* and Naomi Murphy and Carlie Jennings for their work editing and designing the guide.

We would also like to thank Janet Broady, Dr Bronwyn Devine, Rodney Chiang-Cruise, and all the rainbow parents who contributed their lived stories to the guide, along with the current and past Rainbow Families Committee for their passion, dedication and amazing work in supporting, connecting and empowering LGBTIQ families.

Jacqui Tomlins would like to acknowledge the 114 supporters who donated to the crowd-funding campaign for the original *Outspoken Families: A Resource Kit for Rainbow Families* on which the *Rainbow Families Early Years Support Guide* is based; Rainbow Families Victoria (formerly Rainbow Families Council), and the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority who both supported the original project. Thank you to the 50+ parents who shared their experiences for the benefit of other families, and to the researchers and community advocates who provided additional material.

Special thanks to Scott Brunelle, and the team from Rainbow Families. It's been a pleasure to collaborate with you on this resource.



What we love about our families

The rewards of raising a rainbow family are enormous – from the unexpected delight of discovering you can become a parent to finding new ways of nurturing and raising a family.

Many parents enjoy the fact that they can create their own ways of doing things, and explore new and different approaches to parenting that are not influenced by traditional gender roles.

For lots of parents being different is something to be celebrated and enjoyed. They recognise that diversity is good for their kids and good for society and that they are contributing to the broader community's understanding and

of, and respect for, different family structures and LGBTI people generally.

There is a sense that children raised in rainbow families are more open and accepting of difference and that they are very resilient. There is enormous joy and pride for parents in raising happy, healthy, thriving kids in the face of social judgement and criticism.

Parents say ...

The biggest rewards

I knew I was gay from when I was about 12 and I thought I'd never be able to have a family. I always wanted to have children. I think being gay and being able to have children is just the best of both worlds, really: I am able to have a family, but I can still be who I am. **Peter**

I think there's a huge pride in having such gorgeous kids and living and enjoying our life without any constraints. It's a very different situation than a lot of people live with, I think. It's positive being a rainbow family anywhere and I can't think of any negatives. **Claire**

There's been enormous joy about raising a family together. The huge support we've had has been one of the delights for us, sometimes from unexpected quarters. Being a parent is the thing that binds you to other parents and the fact that you are two women is really secondary – in our experience, anyway. **Julie**

We've had so much positive feedback about the kids – how well and how happy they are. They look healthy and they're really happy kids. We don't really know because we've never raised kids before, but that's the feedback we get. **Anthony**

The positives generally come from the community, particularly family and friends. There's a lot of acceptance. It is lovely to have a baby and will be lovely to have three more. The first year was a big learning curve, but it's a whole new area where my partner and I have had to work together. We just both love being mums. **Michelle**

I get to have the family I gave up on when I came out. So, having a family – just being together and living the dream I gave up on because I thought I couldn't have it. **Ellysa**

The kids are all different. They've got their own personalities, their own strengths and differences. They are their own person and they are growing up to be positive in their own individual way. And it's not like it's any different because they've got same-sex parents. It's a positive experience and they are becoming the individuals they were meant to be. **Anthony**

I think with the triplets we're going to have a tribe of children. I guess I'm comforted by a few research studies floating around that say kids with two mums do very well. That's pretty exciting. Having been through this year, too, it makes sense to me. David is so happy. If anything, becoming a family with children has really enriched our lives. **Michelle**

Openness and diversity

Far and away the best thing is what it gives Frances in terms of the range of experiences there are in the world. She is different in lots of ways – she's got bright red hair and very thick glasses, so she has a number of things that set her apart from the average kid, but being in a rainbow family is something she is inherently very proud of. It's a really big part of her identity and she feels genuine pride. **Trudy**

There is a certain openness and a necessity to talk to children very differently from the outset about life – how they came to be and who they are – and I think that's actually a real positive. **Pia**

The best thing is the difference. I love diversity and I love that we can add a bit of diversity to the school community and expose other people to it and hopefully produce a better generation that is more open to other sorts of family structures. It can be exhausting, but it is also rewarding when people say: 'Oh, you're the first rainbow family I've met.' **Patricia**

The best part for me is introducing my child to a world that's full of diversity.

Alison

I guess it's nice to be something really different and new, particularly for this area. I think that's what we are. As far as we know, we are the first rainbow family with two gay dads and it is nice when people are interested in a positive way. I think it helps everybody. It does help the community overall, although there might be some resistance and some fear. I think eventually it does change the community and I can't see how that's not a positive impact. **Anthony**

One of the best things is raising a resilient child from early on, because you are aware that they are going to have to cope with difference. I think our kids will be more resilient and I think some of the research shows that they are, because we've put such effort into preparing for all of that and being involved and addressing issues. **Mandy**

Other rewards

I think the kids do a lot more thinking about what family means and what their family means to them. We've got quite a large donor family and we know lots of the siblings. Having that broadening our concept of family, and who is important to us, is an advantage. **Nicola**

I think it really probably comes down to having two nurturers, and we've got a very equal balance in terms of the different things we do, but we're both very engaged with our kids. **Jenny**

I've made some amazing friends out here in a suburb that's not where I grew up. I found my people here and I think part of that is because of how open I am. And I think part of why I am so open is because I want to rule out all the people who don't want to be my friend because I'm queer. My mum's a lesbian and I learnt to do that in high school. I remember saying that to her when I was sixteen, 'I just tell everyone, because if they've got a problem with it, then I know that I'm not wasting any more time.' **Bec**

We both love being mums and we've got a lovely little boy. Not to be smug, but I think, if anything, it feels like we are at an advantage maybe because we are two women. We are very in sync. We really support each other and you can see the results of all our hard work: we've just got such a happy little boy. You walk in the room and his eyes light up. **Michelle**

I think, in some respects at least, we are much more of a partnership than I've seen with heterosexual couples – although it might be a twin/multiple thing as well, because multiple dads are either a hundred per cent or not at all. **Ruth**

The best thing is that we've just got a wonderful relationship. I think we're very compatible and I think life is great. We often have a little joke with Chris because he dates girls and he will actually come to us for advice. There's a standard line in our household, 'There's got to be some benefits to having two lesbian parents – like, we know how to pick up chicks!' **Jenny**

We had a boys' family and we'd do boy stuff, especially when he was a teenager. We were all on our bikes or we were out barbecuing. We'd go hiking and we would build stuff. It was just a bunch of blokes hanging out. I'm not particularly blokey, but it was nice. It was really easy and quite supportive because we were all on the same page. **Mark**



INTERVIEW

The challenges and rewards of being a gay dad

Rodney Chiang-Cruise
Co-Moderator, Gay Dads Australia

Gay men are taking an increasingly active role in parenting through fostering, co-parenting and surrogacy. In recent years, the increased prevalence of out gay dads has helped raise awareness and drive a positive shift in community attitudes. Rodney Chiang-Cruise talks about the challenges and rewards of being a gay dad – and highlights some of the specific issues they face.

How different is it being a gay dad?

Being a dad – irrespective of how you identify your gender or sexuality – involves all the same hopes and fears, and all the joy and excitement, too.

So much of what we do every day is just parenting and the fact that you're gay or trans or straight is irrelevant. That said, there are some unique challenges for gay dads, but most of the time they can be overcome with some care and a positive attitude.

Many rainbow families find the people in their immediate community – teachers, neighbours, coaches – are really supportive, and that most of the negative stuff they hear comes from the TV. The people who oppose us have a big platform and a loud voice, but it's important to remember that they are actually a minority and that most people are either supportive of our families or just don't care. Lots of people are on our side. In general, being a gay dad is awesome and the positives outweigh the negatives a million to one.

Tell me about the positives

Lots of men give up the idea of parenting when they come out and, historically, that was right; before this generation it was almost impossible to be a gay dad, unless you had a child from a former heterosexual relationship. It's still not easy, but gay men can foster and adopt, they can co-parent, they can use domestic, altruistic surrogacy, or – if they can afford it – international surrogacy. I think lots of gay men actually enjoy the fact that they are breaking the mould, that they are broadening the idea of what it means to be a gay man. And our mums certainly love it! They crossed off grandchildren when we came out and now here we are asking if they can babysit! Then there are just all the highs you get with having kids: watching them compete in the

swimming carnival or discovering they have a talent for music. And the little things, too; I loved the fact that both of us got to feed our son when he was baby.

And what's the best way to deal with the negative stuff?

I strongly believe that as parents we must always be strong, confident, out and proud. This is really important. Our children take their lead from us and if we celebrate and affirm our families and are outwardly and obviously proud, our kids will be, too. And the opposite is true; if we are hesitant, doubtful, or closeted, our kids will pick up on that and will wonder what is wrong with their family. We need to show our kids that they have awesome, wonderful families and that, like their parents, they can be completely proud of their family.

We are part of the first generation of gay men who are creating our own families, and I think that automatically makes us advocates, whether we like it or not. It's probably another generation at least before gay dads are more commonplace, which means we all have to take the lead on this. And that's for our own children, the children of other LGBTI families and all the families that come after us.

What are some of those specific issues?

None of these issues are especially huge in themselves, but they can be annoying or insulting, or worse – and they can reinforce an idea that we're not meant to be parents, that there is something wrong with us as parents. I think it's important to be mindful of this stuff, but not stress about it too much or go looking for it. But having a heads-up – knowing what's out there – can be helpful.

Health professionals

One of the common problems gay dads have is finding health professionals who are supportive and inclusive. It's like a doctor will go looking for the mother and when you explain your child has two dads they react badly and that's frustrating and insulting. It can be helpful to ask around your social circle for a referral to someone who's known to be supportive, but that's not always possible. If you do have a bad experience, and you have a choice, go somewhere else. But don't forget to tell them why; change only happens when people are aware of the problem.

'Bio' and 'Non-bio' dads

While adults often stress about bio and non-bio parents, kids

don't. Focusing too much on who's bio and who's not can be really counter-productive and if you get bogged down in this I think it's really helpful to go back to the child's perspective. For them, you are both parents, you are both raising them and they love you both as a dad. For many years, they won't even know or understand about the biology, and when they do, they won't really care. I know non-bio dads are sometimes anxious about this at the start, but once you get into full-time parenting, you don't have time to worry about it! I think it goes away on its own.

Co-parenting dads

Co-parenting can be a great way for gay men to be dads and there are many successful co-parenting families out there. The guy gets to build a relationship with a single woman/lesbian couple and be involved in a child's life, and the child has more people to love and take care of them. Co-parenting is complex, though, and involves way more than donating sperm and agreeing to how often you'll see each other. I always say take a long time to work it all out and get some professional help from specialist counsellors and lawyers. It's a lifelong relationship between all the parties, and that relationship needs to be healthy and respectful and have the capacity to deal with change and potential conflict in a constructive way.

Where's mum?

Gay dads often hear the comment, 'Oh, you're giving mum the day off!', or something similar. You are going to encounter assumptions about family structure and gender roles all the time and it's annoying. I believe the best way to respond to these situations is with complete honesty: 'Our daughter has two dads'. 'Our son doesn't have a mother'. Honesty is disarming and most people feel slightly embarrassed to have made assumptions. It's a teaching moment; it's polite, it's respectful, and everyone wins. And it's especially important if your child is with you and old enough to understand. If you lie about or obfuscate your family structure or relationship with your partner, your kids will pick up on it. Never be ashamed or embarrassed. Again, you need to be proud and your child needs to see you being proud.

Invasive questions

One of the really common things is inappropriate or invasive questions. Surrogacy dads are often asked, 'Who is the father?' And when they say, 'We both are', they get, 'No, I mean, who's the *real* father?' It's not uncommon for this question to come from relatives, but friends, colleagues – even total strangers often ask it, too.

People think they have a right to know so they can identify the 'real father', but they don't. I think it's important to resist the temptation to give them this information, or to lie or to get angry. I find the best response is to tell them politely that you are *both* the fathers. I generally find that at this point they realise they're out of line and stop.

I feel very strongly that this information belongs to your child. When your child is old enough to know and understand, you can tell them. As parents, we have a duty of care to ensure they are the first to know. What they do with that information – who they tell – is then up to them. It's their story and you have to let them run with it; you can't control it. That makes some people nervous, but they don't need to be. I think kids have a strong sense of privacy and know when it's appropriate to talk about these things.

Parenting girls

There are lots of assumptions about gay men parenting girls. *Who will do her hair? Who will explain about periods? What about female role models?* This really is a non-issue. Parenting is not a function of gender; it's a function of willingness and thought and care. Gay men are entirely capable of raising fantastic girls, as lesbians are entirely capable of raising fantastic boys. And sole parents of any gender or

sexuality can also raise fantastic kids. I try to explain – again, politely and calmly – that whatever it is they're worried about won't be a problem. I tell them our child has many positive influences and role models in their life.

Associations with paedophilia

Some people – thankfully very few these days – will try to associate gay men with paedophilia. This is hurtful and horrible and wholly unacceptable. Everyone will respond differently to this, but I think, for the sake of our kids, we need to call it out and challenge it wherever it occurs. If it happens in a work environment there should be procedures to deal with it. More often, though, it comes up on social media and I think it's important to

remind people that this is wrong, insulting and potentially defamatory. Often when this happens you'll find other people will step in on your side and defend you.

And sometimes it's more subtle than this. You might get odd looks and stares from strangers if you are with your kids at a park or at the pool. Mostly, it's just easiest to ignore it and move on, but there may be an opportunity to politely engage with that person. You may be surprised to find that they are genuinely interested in how you created your family and judgement recedes quickly.

Thank you, Rodney.

For more information check out Gay Dads Australia:

gaydadsaustralia.com



INTERVIEW

Antenatal classes for everyone!

Janet Broady
Educator and midwife

Mainstream antenatal classes can present some challenges for prospective LGBT parents. Janet Broady ran the first antenatal class in Australia designed specifically for prospective LGBT parents. Janet outlines the content of the class, identifies some key points of difference, and looks to how LGBT classes can develop in the future.

Who attended the class?

The class was attended by seven lesbian couples, three gay male couples and a supportive grandparent. The mixed group worked well. We covered all the essentials, including: pre-labour and labour, relaxation techniques, birth,

care of the newborn, breastfeeding and recovery. It was a lot to get through in a day, but we were able to include everything. Having said that, all the participants wanted more time spent on something! I was able to provide follow-up information and have kept in touch with participants.

What's different for LGBT prospective parents?

Mainstream classes can be hard for lesbian couples and singles, gay dads and trans people. An LGBT class provides a safe and inclusive environment, which means the participants are able to relax, chat, and share their experiences much more easily. They are comfortable to ask questions about things like co-feeding and donor milk. These are the kinds of specific things that we talk about for both lesbians and gay dads that wouldn't be covered in a mainstream class.

Non-birth mums

I think mainstream classes can be especially hard for the non-birth mum because so many of the activities are divided up along gender lines. So, a lesbian mum has to decide whether to stay with her partner and the other women, or go off with the dads. An LGBT class overcomes this problem and means the non-birth partner can participate fully in all aspects of the class without feeling like she's the 'odd one out'. That's a key advantage of these classes. Inclusive language is especially important as well.

Co-breast/chestfeeding

It's possible for lesbian or trans couples to both lactate and feed. Where both partners have been

pregnant and are lactating at the same time, this is easy. In other cases, the non-birth mum can take medication to initiate lactation and enable breastfeeding. This is certainly possible, but it does require some time and patience. Hospitals should have a framework to support co-feeding and can organise an appointment with a lactation consultant.

Gay dads

Some hospitals accommodate gay dads and will run one-on-one sessions for them, but I don't think this is the norm across Australia. There is a place for classes just for gay dads, focusing on things like bottle feeding, bathing, changing, swaddling and settling. Daddy Boot Camps for expectant fathers are a great idea, too, with information and advice provided by an early childhood nurse.

Child health record

When a baby is born in Australia, the parents are issued with a book that provides details of the baby's birth, and information about immunisation, periodic health assessments and screening. It's a really important document that hooks you into the maternal and child health system and records your child's medical history. Babies born by surrogacy overseas miss out on receiving that. Surrogacy dads can get a book from their early

childhood or maternal and child health centre (see below).

Early childhood/maternal and child health centres

Parents who have a baby using surrogacy – either locally or overseas – may not be hooked into the local health and support services for new parents and their babies. Early childhood centres provide help, information and referral, including: parental mental health and post-natal depression services; nutrition for babies and breastfeeding mums; speech pathology and physiotherapy. They also organise new parents' group and lots of gay dads have attended these and found them helpful. So, new gay dads should contact their local centre and make an appointment to see the nurse.

They may also miss out on receiving the Medicare registration forms that are provided to all new parents in Australia when a baby is born. These forms are available from Centrelink. If a baby is born overseas, they have a foreign birth certificate, but are able to register for Medicare because their parents are Australian.

There are two clinical tests that may not have been carried out if a baby is born overseas. They are the SWISH hearing test and the Newborn Screening Test. Your GP or paediatrician can organise for these to be carried out at your local hospital.

Donor milk

One of the areas we cover in the classes is breastfeeding and I provide some information about the Mothers' Milk Bank (MMB) which provides breastmilk to parents who – for whatever reason – cannot provide their own. MMB transport milk by frozen air freight, which is picked up by the recipient from their nearest airport. MMB have provided milk to a number of gay dads in the past, as well as women who have had a mastectomy, or who have low milk supply.

How have participants responded?

Feedback suggests the participants really enjoyed the day and feel more prepared for birth as a result of having attended the class. These are a couple of comments from the evaluations:

Thank you for doing this. It's really great to do birthing classes with people with similar families and to acknowledge same-sex partners.

Congratulations on running this class – much needed in the community. Thank you Rainbow Families.

Basically, they wanted more of everything! Suggestions for inclusion:

- group work and more time to chat
- more advice on how to care for a newborn

- a range of different speakers
- a take-home folder with information on topics covered, where to get further advice and help and links to further reading
- videos and information on breastfeeding, bottle feeding and labour and birth positions
- information on:
 - pre-labour and when to go to hospital
 - caesarean section
 - relaxation techniques
 - international surrogacy.

What are your plans for future classes?

I would love to run some separate classes for surrogacy dads and to focus on feeding – including a discussion about formula and a demonstration of formula preparation – caring for a newborn, and some early-parenting advice.

Lots of people are interested in relaxation techniques and I'd also like to look into how we could support trans parents. The participants were keen to set up a Facebook group that I could moderate so they can all keep in touch.

We need information and brochures that focus specifically on the needs of rainbow families. There really isn't

much available at the moment. When I was developing the course material I couldn't find any good quality educational videos that featured LGBT prospective parents. I'm now hoping to work with a filmmaker to develop some film clips for rainbow families. We're currently looking into how we can partner with an educational film production company to produce a series of videos.

Where can people get more information?

These are great sites.

Raising Children

raisingchildren.net.au

Australian Breastfeeding Association

breastfeeding.asn.au

Mothers' Milk Bank

mothersmilkbank.com.au

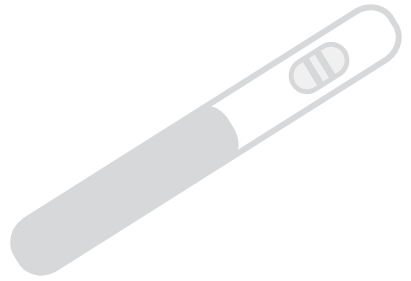
Lactation Consultants of Australia and New Zealand

lcanz.org

Sydney LGBT antenatal classes will be advertised on the Rainbow Families website: rainbowfamilies.com.au

Check My Midwives for Melbourne classes: mymidwives.com.au

Love ya work, Janet! Thank you.



Mainstream antenatal classes

Probably the biggest issue for lesbians in pregnancy is ensuring that they get quality, non-judgemental care and treatment from health care providers. Many lesbians have entirely positive experiences of pregnancy with health care workers who are supportive, include both partners equally and, in some cases, celebrate their patients' relationship and family.

The public health system involves contact with a larger number of health professionals, which inevitably involves having to come out and explain personal circumstances more often. This can sometimes be awkward or frustrating. It also means that when you see a supportive doctor or nurse for one appointment, there is no guarantee of seeing them again for your next appointment.

In the private system you only have to deal with one obstetrician who will be familiar with your personal circumstances, though you will likely still encounter a number of nurses and midwives when you come to give birth.

Some lesbians choose to engage an independent midwife to assist them throughout their pregnancy and manage the birth. There are, however, a range of factors to consider before choosing this option.

Choosing an obstetrician or independent midwife

One of the key things lesbians look for is an obstetrician or midwife who acknowledges and includes the non-pregnant partner or co-parents, and who doesn't ask intrusive questions. Bear in mind that health providers will often ask questions that can seem inappropriate, but may also reflect a genuine desire to learn more about your family.

Doing some initial research and asking people in your social networks for a recommendation for a lesbian-friendly obstetrician or midwife can be very useful. A trusted local General Practitioner may also be able to make an appropriate referral.

Having a support network of friends and family can be very helpful, especially in the final stages of pregnancy and when giving birth. However supportive everyone is, though, you may sometimes still feel a little awkward or uncomfortable because your family is different to other families and you don't fit neatly into the system.

Antenatal classes

Antenatal classes present some challenges for single lesbians and lesbian couples. Because classes are designed around the different

roles ascribed to men and women – and activities are often run in gender groups – a female partner can find herself in a kind of limbo, wondering: *Do I go with the men or the women?* Some partners choose to go with the men and some with the women, depending on the subject being discussed and on their own level of comfort.

It's not uncommon for the non-pregnant partner to feel excluded or just not sure of their role in the class. Experiences can range from mildly awkward to very uncomfortable, though couples often find ways of managing these potentially difficult situations. Some people try to make light of the situation or use humour to manage an awkward moment.

Antenatal classes can be difficult because of their gender focus and can require some thought and preparation beforehand to ensure the experience is as positive as it can be. Talking to the person running the class before it starts can be a useful way to break the ice and explore options. It may also be helpful to introduce yourselves to your group at the beginning to ensure the non-pregnant partner isn't mistaken for a friend or relative.

Often your experience might just depend on the individual midwife running the class and how she deals with the situation.

Parents say ...

Obstetricians

We did some research about obstetricians. The first one I went to was a woman and that was partly why I picked her. She seemed to be good at listening and being encouraging, but also provided a lot of information and she gave us choices, which was really good. **Ruth**

For my pregnancy and birth I had a universally good experience. You do wonder if people are going to be accepting, but a number actively said, 'It's wonderful what you are doing'. **Mandy**

I did a bit of research because I knew I was going into it on my own and I decided straight up that I would get myself an obstetrician who I trusted and so I went private. Instead of dealing with a hundred different obstetric nurses and doctors who I had to come out to over and over again, I thought it best if I just found myself someone who knew my whole story and was supportive of what I was doing. I didn't have to explain to someone over and over that I didn't have a partner and, if I did, it wouldn't have been a man. **Anna**

I think we were the first gay couple to go through with our obstetrician and it wasn't a major issue. We were treated pretty well and he welcomed Elaine into the consults the same as anyone else. It was a very positive experience. **Jayne**

Our obstetrician was perfectly fine with the same-sex couple thing; he was really comfortable with it. With some other people it was hard to tell, but you never know whether that's just the person's nature. **Ruth**

Non-pregnant partner

Everybody was completely fine about the fact that there was another woman. We didn't have any trouble with any of the sonographers or anything and we went to a lot of appointments together. **Ruth**

Apart from one doctor, they were all, 'Yep, so you're partners' and that was fine. You got the impression that we were by no means the first they had encountered. **Paula**

The main thing was including Jo and talking to her like she had something to do with it. I think there's probably been a lot of exclusion, but at the same time when people are more comfortable, they just seem to include her in the conversation. **Pia**

A couple of times we had experiences with doctors who just didn't cope and ignored my partner completely, or were just unable – or unwilling – to take it in and that was very difficult. **Bec**

Antenatal classes

The antenatal classes were through the hospital and I was the only single woman there, let alone lesbian. The woman I had was very warm – a sort of hippy type – and she was really lovely. **Anna**

Everyone was in quite late pregnancy and the woman running the class said, 'Now every woman in this room right now is lactating', and everybody looked at Jo and laughed, including Jo, and it was fine. It was all in good humour and she just kept going. **Pia**

We did go to a few antenatal classes and we were the only same-sex couple. The midwives barely blinked – they were great. **Bethia**

In the antenatal classes they didn't quite know how to manage my partner. She wasn't a dad and she wasn't pregnant, so they struggled a little with that. But mostly they were well-intentioned and asked questions about how we wanted it to be handled. **Natasha**

If there was a sort of a rainbow family network of expectant mothers who could form an antenatal class together, that would be amazing. It would be amazing to have that in place and not feel like you are doing it so very alone. **Anna**

We did this antenatal breastfeeding class and we were the only same-sex couple there. The woman who was running the class was not old – probably thirty-something – and she was pregnant herself, but it was like she just could not deal with Jo being there. **Pia**

They asked a few questions about the father, but I didn't feel that that was discriminatory or intrusive; it was more that they wanted to educate themselves as health professionals. Sometimes they ask out of genuine interest and it's helpful for them in learning about same-sex families. **Mandy**

Separating mums and dads

The antenatal classes were a big issue because it was: *Do you go with the fathers or do you go with the mothers?* I went with the mothers. I felt really uncomfortable going with a group of men who were talking in slightly derogatory terms about their wives. I remember having a debate with other same-sex couples and some went with the fathers and some went with the mothers. **Mandy**

Going through the process of getting pregnant and having babies together is like a whole other wave of coming out. It reinforces that this is never going to end, this coming out stuff. **Michelle**

There were those awkward moments all the way through pregnancy – and I imagine it'll be the same right through school – where you're fitting your family's structure into the norm. **Mandy**

We started antenatal class at the local hospital and it was a bit of a shocker. When we got divided off into mummies and daddies we decided this wasn't really going to cut it and we did antenatal classes privately in Melbourne. **Kaye**

It was a bit awkward when they separated into men and women because they didn't know what to do with us. As it happened, there was another lesbian in our group, but she was co-parenting with a gay man, so they just passed as a hetero couple. But I knew, and that was kind of nice. **Bec**

The antenatal classes were fine. We were the only same-sex couple and I'd say we didn't have any problems. I remember one class with the dads on one side of the room brainstorming something and the mums on the other and I was with the dads. If anything, I would say I probably knew more than most of the expecting dads. **Michelle**

It was funny because they would say, 'Men over here and the women over there', to talk about different things and my partner would go with the men and was pretty comfortable. She's pretty relaxed, so I think she handled that reasonably well, although it was certainly strange for everyone. She just made a joke out of it and it wasn't really a big deal. **Jayne**

Rainbow families in rural and regional areas



Rainbow families are living in small, rural communities and regional centres throughout Australia. For many families, the experience is extremely positive and they find that the people in their community are welcoming and supportive. Some have a local network of other rainbow families; some are the first or only rainbow family in their area.

A key factor in how they are regarded seems to be the extent to which they are involved in the community. Making an active contribution to the civic life of a small town or regional centre is highly valued and there are very positive outcomes for families who are able to do this.

Becoming involved in your local community can help demystify your family and create positive

relationships for you and your children. Being out, open and honest about who you are and the nature of your family can help you to integrate into a community. Rainbow families might explore any of these pathways into a community:

- kinder committees or school councils
- sporting or social clubs
- religious or political groups.

People in rural and regional communities may have less experience of rainbow families than people in inner urban areas and may not be as well-informed. Many rainbow families recognise that this does not necessarily constitute

prejudice or discrimination and are happy to take on an educative role and give people time to adjust. You may be surprised to find welcoming and inclusive medical facilities, community services, kinder staff and teachers in regional communities.

Parents say ...

Experiences

There are no real negatives for us. We've got this old couple next door, so I think if anyone was going to have an issue, they would, but they're just ... I mean, they bring our washing in if it starts to rain. **Ellysa**

My partner got a promotion at the school down here, to second in charge, and for next year he has been promoted to principal. We're in a Western District regional town and we've had no issues. We're known as 'Peter and Hamish with the kids' and no-one has ever blinked an eye – it's amazing. **Peter**

It's hard to work out the difference between people's perceptions of surrogacy, and the number of children we've had (three), and the fact that we're gay parents. There are two or three different things there and it's hard to separate reactions to that from the fact that people might just think gay men shouldn't have children. **Anthony**

We live in a very small town in the north east. There are 1500 people in the broader district and about 600 or so in town. I guess they are all Nationals voters. I wouldn't say that people have a particular view about us one way or the other, really. We are just part of the furniture. **Katrina**

I'd say our experience of being gay dads raising three kids in the country has been mixed. Since we've had kids, we've been quite surprised that a lot of people have drifted off, and some people we never expected to get support from have popped up. It's not always clear why that it is and it could just be because things change when you have three very young kids. **Anthony**

We live in a large country town, which used to be very Anglo-Saxon, but it's slowly become more diverse. Our son is one year old, and I'm expecting triplets, and so far it's all been fine. People are generally quite positive and we've both worked at very supportive workplaces. **Michelle**

We live in a tiny community of about 2500 people, about 150 kilometres from Melbourne, and it's heaven on earth. When we set about trying to find a community that met our needs, one of the important things was that it was a small, rural community that was progressive and rainbow family-friendly. **Trudy**

We live in a semi-rural area which you might call a slightly upper class hills area. So far, the community has been absolutely fantastic. We've only heard one negative comment about Jemima not having a father, which we expected at some point. **Ellysa**

Community

We live in a large, rural, regional city in Queensland. It's got a bit of a reputation for being a redneck town, but we haven't found that particularly. I think it depends where you go and how you conduct yourself. We find it quite welcoming and we haven't had any issues here. **Jenny**

Part of my strategy is that I've got really involved in Cubs. There's a very significant Christian component in this community, and one of the things I've done is to try to get in with those people, so they get to know us as a family. It seems to be working really well – we're not a *thing*, we're an *us*. And we're still new, and you're going to be new for about five or ten years in this community. **Trudy**

Most rural communities are very happy with new people coming in, but what they like – more than in metropolitan communities – is that people get involved. If you get out there and meet people and join in with local community activities, I think you'd generally integrate pretty well. **Jenny**

The measure of worth in the community is the capacity you have to contribute, to create, to keep that community functioning, and we're pretty big community involvers. **Katrina**

People in our community are on a journey, too, and that was actually our strategy: to bring people with us on our journey. **Trudy**

The town operates on the basis of its networks and contributions. There is a lot of civic participation and that is what's valued. It works for the girls for us to be involved in things. **Claire**

We found our community very positive. We've got great neighbours and it's like: *Hello! This is who we are and we're pretty nice people, come and have a coffee with us.* So we make an effort, I guess. **Jenny**

Services and schools

We spoke to the school and were comfortable with the principal's reaction, though he is on a journey, obviously. He wasn't entirely comfortable, but there wasn't anything that raised alarm bells. In terms of the parents, we haven't encountered anything that's been problematic at all. **Claire**

It's not always easy to get in to doctors in the country. We met our GP through the hospital. He came from somewhere in Victoria – Melbourne, I think – so he was quite receptive to the whole idea of these new baby boys and he wanted to be their doctor. He's been pretty supportive and friendly, and every time we go he makes a demonstration of how glad he is to see the boys. **Anthony**

We had an issue with a young male teacher in his first year out who yelled a lot. I raised it with the principal and was told very clearly that the teacher didn't yell and that my children mustn't be used to men's voices! Hilarious. Extraordinary. **Claire**

I guess you can work out fairly quickly which facilities and businesses are friendly. If you go in and you don't have a good experience, you just don't go there again. I remember one of our first experiences at a beach café. There was a big group of men and I sensed the staff weren't sure about how they were going to react to us. The staff looked after us and made sure we felt safe. **Anthony**

I'm interested in making more rainbow connections, but I'm also tapping into the multiple birth community. Locally, the group is lovely, and they are super excited that we have come along and we're having triplets. Certainly, the treatment from the local or public hospital and the maternal health team was great. **Michelle**

There's a really impressive medical clinic. We had assumed we would just use the local one for coughs and colds and we'd keep going back to town for other things, but we haven't. They've got posters up, which the kids have seen, and it's all very inclusive: *Some boys like boys and some girls like girls and some boys like girls and boys*. It's gorgeous. **Claire**

Thoughts and suggestions

I think if you try to put yourself on a pedestal and be separate to the whole community, people don't like that. **Peter**

My advice to people moving to a regional area would be: *Just go and take people at face value*. I think you need to not make it a secret. What people don't know, they make up. So, if you just go out and introduce yourselves, then if people want to have a little gossip and say, 'Ooh, they're gay', you go, 'Yeah', and then it's yesterday's news. **Jenny**

We took posters to Jemima's childcare about the different types of family you can have: single mothers or single fathers or two dads or two mums, and they put them up and asked for more. We're not the only rainbow family in the area, so that helps, too. **Ellysa**

People are people. You're going to find arseholes everywhere. There are arseholes in Melbourne and arseholes in regional centres and you just deal with it. **Jenny**

I think this is quite confronting for people and it's going to take time for them to get their heads around it. **Anthony**

We don't hide. I think some people hide who they are and I think that makes it harder. **Ellysa**

I would tell any other gay couple thinking of moving to this area that it would be fine to come up this way. As long as they were open and didn't make an issue out of being gay or being a gay family. **Peter**

We don't avoid places. We'll go where we need to, but we are discreet. We're sensitive to perceptions in the community, but you can't not be out. **Anthony**

We are fairly well known in the region. We were invited to do a fair bit of publicity and for a while Rachel became the 'go to' girl around any kind of gay issue. Funnily enough, we have now got five or six gay couples in town who also moved here because they saw our media, which is nice. So we created a community in that sense. **Katrina**

There is a group on Facebook, but it doesn't seem to get beyond that. I think it would be good for us to have more same-sex friends with kids. I wouldn't want the kids to think we are the only family with two mums. I'd say it's hard to meet other same-sex families. I know they are out there, but it's not that easy to make it happen. **Michelle**

I think it's critical to be connected with other rainbow families. We can tell the kids as much as we want that we're normal, but if their outside reference points aren't telling them that, then that's a problem. They really feel extremely normal. They don't feel like they are odd. **Claire**

We had more trouble as a couple in the city when we didn't have kids than we do now in a regional area. **Peter**

My experience is that being a mother softens the impact for people that you are queer. I reckon they are able to focus on you as a parent and that's a leveller for their anxieties. I think if you were a queer couple without kids in the country that might be a slightly different experience. **Claire**



Birth, midwives and nurses

The experience of lesbians giving birth in hospitals and birthing units has improved in recent years and for many it has been entirely positive.

Labour, birth and breastfeeding are particularly vulnerable times for any woman and inclusive, non-judgemental and knowledgeable staff can be critical to ensuring a lesbian mother's positive experience.

Male co-parents and gay dads through surrogacy can also be involved with the birth process and may interact with hospital staff. They may sometimes find themselves feeling excluded.

Hospital experiences vary widely – some parents have unexpectedly good experiences in small rural hospitals and less good in large inner urban hospitals. In any hospital stay, you will encounter a number

of different staff and the response of those staff may vary significantly. Just because a hospital has policy or guidelines on working with lesbian mothers, doesn't necessarily mean all individual staff will respond in the way you would like.

Some difficulties may arise with the hand-over of staff from one shift to the next and patients may find themselves having to explain their personal circumstance several times.

Some parents have experienced direct or indirect discrimination and homophobia during their labour and immediately afterwards.

More often, they may encounter staff who are well-intentioned, but who are uninformed, ill-prepared or clumsy in their approach. On the other hand, staff may be very respectful and extremely supportive.

While you can't control everyone's response to your family, there are things you can do to help foster a smooth hospital experience.

Having a detailed birth plan that includes reference to the non-biological mum – and donor or dad where appropriate – can be very helpful. Stating the nature of your

relationship when you are admitted and asking that to be conveyed to each new shift at handover can also be helpful.

Some parents like to take a friend or family member who can advocate on behalf of the couple or single woman and manage these conversations.

It can be useful to ask about private or family rooms, and clarify whether partners can stay over, before you are admitted.

Make sure the hospital is aware that you expect the non-biological mum or co-parent(s) to be fully involved in all aspects of looking after your baby as soon as s/he is born.

Parents say ...

Hospitals

Staying over at the hospital, they were really good. I think we are fortunate – knowing other women who went through this five or ten years ago – things were more complicated then. **Michelle**

It was funny because they put us in a private room, which we were told we should have no expectations of. It seemed pretty clear to us that they put us in a private room because they didn't want to put us with other families. **Natasha**

I do remember a wonderful experience at the hospital when I went to have our second daughter. I fronted up to the receptionist and said, 'We're a same-sex couple and this is our second child', and the receptionist said 'We have a lot of same-sex couples now and you are very welcome here. We accept everyone'. It was just a lovely thing to say and it made a huge difference to us in feeling comfortable going through that service. **Mandy**

I thought the hospital wasn't keen on the idea of Sally staying over. They never put us in a double room even though we were there for five nights and I had twins. Normally, people with twins would get offered a double room although the babies weren't in with us – they were in the special care nursery – so that may have been a reason. **Ruth**

We had a family room and no dramas. We didn't experience any problems. **Jayne**

In the actual labour and birthing, Jo was asked if she was my sister a number of times. We look nothing alike and it's pretty ridiculous to think we were sisters. It was like they could only place her if she was my sister. **Pia**

We had two friends come in, one to be the door bitch and deal with homophobia, and the other to support Roe and me in labour. Because Ian is the Dad, and he was there when Roe was giving birth, we had a real concern that they were just going to trundle Alex off and give her to him. **Kaye**

I remember getting the contraception lecture when I was leaving hospital. I was a bit out of it and I should have just let it go, but I said, 'I don't need to know', and the woman is saying, 'I have to tell you to use contraception', and I'm saying, 'It doesn't matter, I don't need contraception'. In the end, on my discharge notes, it said: *Patient is choosing not to use contraception*. **Pia**

They didn't have stuff in place and we knew they wouldn't; that's why we had our own friends there to support us. That was at the local hospital about five years ago and it was pretty rough. **Kaye**

Staff

To my knowledge we were the first gay couple going through it in our region, but now there's a heap of us. A friend of mine who is also gay – her mother was our midwife and we felt very comfortable with her. We were in a very big hospital and there were lots of other midwives as well, but she happened to be there for the birth and it was all very good. **Jayne**

We went through a birthing unit at the hospital and had a fantastic experience. The midwives had pretty much seen it all anyway, so a lesbian couple wasn't too out of the block for them. **Bec**

The hospital was very mixed. There were at least ten nurses over the course of the time I was giving birth and they're just on shifts and it's the luck of the draw – some were fantastic and really progressive. I reckon you just always end up with at least one who's going to say some stuff that you don't want to hear at the time when you're giving birth. **Anna**

Because I have two older boys, and we had made plans and had support in place early, we were able to recognise it for what it was: a whole bunch of people who really didn't have any clue what was going on. **Kaye**

The theatre nurse we had was a gay man who lived in a big house in the hills. He lived at one end of the house with his partner and a lesbian couple lived at the other end, with a kids' room in between. **Ellysa**

I got some very middle-of-the-road, white-bread nurses who just couldn't fathom that I was doing this on my own and they either felt sorry for me, or felt sorry for my baby, or both – because I was single and a lesbian and there was no daddy. **Anna**

Non-bio mum

The midwives were a bit unsure as to how to include my partner. We have always parented very equally – right from birth. Even the labour and the birth itself was very much a joint thing, which I think they found a bit unusual. They did adjust and they respected our wishes in relation to all of that, but it was clear it wasn't what they were used to. **Natasha**

All the nurses were just overjoyed that a child was brought into this world who was going to be so loved; they treated me as a parent. **Ellysa**

Frances had a lot of medical issues early on so there were a lot of hospital visits. I also had quite bad postnatal depression. All the stuff in relation to her was handled really well and we were always both considered parents by everybody – doctors and nurses – without exception. **Trudy**

Just to complicate things, Roe, I guess, would probably identify as trans, although that's not public knowledge. She had serious breast surgery when she was eighteen, but I guess that qualifies as a reduction. She was unable to feed Alex and I started breastfeeding in the hospital. It was a little challenging for them. I think it was a lot for them to take on board. **Kaye**

I remember one midwife in particular who came in and wanted to show me how to change a nappy and I'm like: *I couldn't give a f**k right now. I've just had a caesarean. I'm exhausted. Show the other mother.* And she just wouldn't do it. She was just holding our baby and she wouldn't give him to Jo. She might have been like that with a father, but I don't know. **Pia**

They saw me as the patient and they weren't really interested in Sally, even though she was doing half the work in the special care unit. But I don't think we had anyone questioning why she was there. **Ruth**



Educating your community

Many parents recognise the benefits of educating the broader community about rainbow families and are happy to take on this responsibility. In fact, parents often welcome the opportunity to talk about their families with other people. However, parents also draw a distinction between questions they regard as appropriate and helpful and questions that are intrusive or inappropriate.

Sometimes, it's difficult to assess the level of knowledge and understanding of a service, a kinder or a school, and parents can find themselves teaching 'Rainbow Families 101', especially if they are the first rainbow family the organisation has encountered. People might just need a little time to process what they are learning and get used to the idea of a different family formation.

A greater awareness among any staff or parents is almost always seen as a good thing, with positive outcomes for children. Often, that awareness is passed on to others within the organisation, or in the broader community.

Sometimes educating people is about explaining our differences, while sometimes it's about pointing out the similarities. Open and honest conversations with others

can go a long way to making them feel comfortable with your family and making your family comfortable with them.

You don't have to come out every single time someone makes an assumption that isn't correct.

Some days you will just want to let this pass. Once children reach a certain age, however, they will be aware of what you say, and in what circumstance, and you will have to manage that.

Parents say ...

The role of 'educator'

I've got a large family in Melbourne and some of them have said our family has led to some really good conversations with their kids about queer families. **Claire**

We do feel that we have an educative role in the school community and we're happy with that. One mother said to me that when our daughter said she had two mums, she assumed it was her mum and her stepmum. I said, 'No, no, she's actually got two mums', and she was fine about that. I certainly feel like we've got to be out there, visible and educating the whole time. **Patricia**

I don't mind educating people, except when I'm in a clothing boutique and people start asking how I got my twins and was it natural or was it IVF? It's none of their business. We had a one-liner for a few people, which was, 'I had a really low sperm count.' **Ruth**

A lot of the time you are trying to show people that you are not very different; that we are actually fairly boring old people, like they are, who struggle with the same domestic issues that they do. **Mandy**

We have a lady who is our cleaner and nanny. She popped up because she has a daughter who is lesbian who had just come out and she decided working for us was a good way for her to get to know more about gay people. I guess she's building some bridges and coming to understand her daughter. **Anthony**

A lot of the time, what we have trouble with isn't discrimination, it's simply difference. That's how I see it. And people aren't horrible to us, but they do see us as a little bit different and some don't necessarily want to get to know us. But a lot of other people do, so that's fine. **Mandy**

I was out at work, but not with the children – but they were all very young, anyway. If I hadn't been gay myself, I probably would have felt more comfortable advocating for gay people and talking about that stuff in the classroom. **Sally**

I always felt that I had to do the coming out thing quite frequently. As time has gone on, I have learnt that I don't always have to. You don't always have to point out the error if someone uses 'he' for your partner, you can just let it slide sometimes. I think I was quite righteous about that at first – I really wanted to make it known every time. **Bridget**

I wasn't aware of the level of exposure that people had had to gay families, so I was probably a bit blasé to begin with. I expected they would be completely *au fait* with it all. Then I realised that they actually had no tools to handle this situation, and no precedent. I think we might have been groundbreaking at that particular kinder. **Alison**

I think we don't just educate people about the gay community; I think we educate them about gender diversity as well. What people do, who they are, and what they can contribute, is not necessarily based on their gender, even though that's been a perception for a long time. We make people stop and think: if it's not the same for us, it could be different for other people, too. **Ruth**

It's important to educate the staff so they can carry that on in the classroom with the kids and it's not all on our children's shoulders to be educating everyone. I don't mind doing it, but I think it's a bit much to expect children to have to be constantly educating their peers. **Patricia**

It felt like, in the two years since we had had our first daughter, things had really improved. And I do think that that's partly because of the activism of rainbow families and other people speaking out. Things have shifted in the last ten years or so. **Mandy**

It's hard for people to get their heads around – it took me a while to get my head around it. People say, 'Do the kids have contact with their mum?' And it's like: *Well, which mum are you talking about?* You try to explain it: you tell them there's a biological mum and then there's the surrogate mum. You can see people haven't had time to think about it and they're confused. **Anthony**

I think being up-front about it helps our children be okay about it. Our kids haven't ever come across anything negative. In fact, they have had friends who have commented to their parents about how lucky they are, having two mums. **Bridget**

I remember once I took David to swimming lessons and I was talking to a mum who assumed I was breastfeeding. I just thought: *I'm in the middle of a swimming lesson, I can't really be bothered explaining that I'm not the mum that gave birth and my partner is breastfeeding.* I wouldn't ever want the kids to think that this is a secret, but then it's just a mum in a pool, and you don't have to come out every time. **Michelle**

My 11-year-old had a play with a new friend and I dropped her off and sat down for a quick chat. The mother referred to my husband in one of those moments when I didn't bother to correct her. And then I thought: *I have just left Naomi there with that.* She had overheard me let it go and I had left her with the responsibility of coming out. I won't do that again. **Bridget**

Rainbow families put a huge amount of effort into parenting and school communities because we don't want our kids to feel different and we need to feel part of that process. It does require a huge effort on our part as parents. **Mandy**

There are good family posters splashed all over the place. It's fantastic because people are being made aware that there are different sorts of families out there – people who would otherwise only meet heterosexual, nuclear families. **Anna**



INTERVIEW

Marc: The story of a trans dad

Marc and his wife have been together for seventeen years and are raising a daughter together in Sydney. Marc describes his journey to parenthood as a trans man, and shares some of the joys and challenges of being a dad.

Can you tell me about your relationship?

I've been with my partner for 17 years now and we've been legally married for nine. We'd been together for about five years when we decided to get married. Initially, we weren't interested in marriage, but we felt it would offer more protection when we had children.

Can you clarify the issues for trans people and marriage?

Marriage is governed by federal legislation and can only occur between a man and a woman; both people must have birth certificates which confirm their sex. Thanks to a landmark court case, 'Kevin and Jennifer', the right to marry for men and women who have transitioned has been confirmed. However, birth

certificates are issued by the state in which you are born, and each state has different criteria to change your sex on the certificate, so it's complicated.

In my case, I have a male birth certificate, but my certificate is theoretically invalid in other states. In NSW, in order to change your sex on a birth certificate, two doctors must sign statutory declarations stating that you have undergone a sex affirmation procedure. This is defined as a surgical procedure involving the alteration of a person's reproductive organs.

The definition is a bit vague and could mean all sorts of things, including: hormones, chest surgery, a hysterectomy, or sexual reassignment surgery. Because it's so vague, many guys assume a sex affirmation procedure must include a full hysterectomy. A hysterectomy eliminates options for fertility, and can also limit other sexual reassignment surgery options. A hysterectomy is also a very big surgery with big risks.

I was able to change my birth certificate based on undergoing chest surgery and hormones alone. I started hormones when I was 21 and had chest surgery when I was 24 and it was a great relief to stop binding. It took several years to save for the surgery and I needed to be on private health insurance as Medicare would only pay a tiny percentage of the overall cost.

The other issue for trans people is that you can't be married when you seek to change your sex. This is an issue for couples who are already married as it requires them to get divorced. Transition is a very hard time for couples and the forced uncoupling only makes things harder.

How did you go about having kids?

We spent a long time preparing to have children. We established our careers, bought a house, renovated, and travelled around the world. Then, when we were ready, we started looking into what we needed to do to have a child. We knew of another couple in a similar situation who had used a public IVF clinic at a hospital so we started there.

We needed donor sperm, but there were very few anonymous donors available. The rules about mandatory disclosure had just come into effect and donations of sperm had dried up. We were very fortunate to find a known donor and started the long process of screening; we had no idea we had to wait six months for quarantine. We did one cycle of IVF in the public hospital, but that was unsuccessful. Then we were advised to go private, as we needed theatre time and this was unavailable in the public clinic.

How did you find a supportive fertility clinic?

We interviewed a number of clinics and none of them had an issue with my status, so we ended up choosing one based on availability. The only occasional slip-up was when the nurses told me it was time to 'go and do my part', not remembering we were using frozen sperm. They also called me by our donor's name several times, but this was more funny than offensive. We were really fortunate that it worked first time and our daughter was born in 2010.

And how is parenting?

We both wanted to be active parents; my wife was to take the first six months off work and then we thought we would both work part time, but it didn't turn out that way. My wife became sick when our daughter was five months old, and I became the primary carer for both of them, which was really hard as we didn't know whether she would get better. I dropped my hours significantly at work and relied on family and friends for support. What's interesting is that I can't really say I had any issue as a trans parent, but there were certainly issues in relation to being a man and recognised as our daughter's primary carer. People would always look around for her mother or ask if I was 'helping out for the day'. That was very frustrating.

Did you use any playgroups or day care?

I started going to a rainbow playgroup when my daughter was about six months old. This was a lifesaver. There weren't many other dads, but there was full acceptance that I was the primary carer and a real parent. Other parents there had kids of a similar age and we would often talk during the week about developmental stages, parenting tips and exhaustion! The kids are all at school now, but we keep in very regular contact with the group. It means that the kids have a whole social network outside of school, and the parents are all friends. For the kids, having queer parents and a donor doesn't seem to be a big deal. There are so many of them that it's just not that interesting.

My child has attended a few day care centres and we only really came out to the last one. We were taking my daughter to Mardi Gras, and we thought she would probably talk about it at day care, so we decided to tell them about our family. We asked for a meeting with the director and teachers and they took it pretty seriously. We told them I was transgender, that our child was created using donor sperm and that we were taking her to Mardi Gras and that she'd probably be talking about it.

They listened very carefully and when we'd finished they asked if there was anything else and we said, no, and that was it. They thought we were

going to make a complaint about something and they were hugely relieved. The whole trans family thing just wasn't a big deal at all for them.

Did you find a supportive school?

When we were selecting a school for our daughter, we first asked if they had any same-sex families to see how open they were to diversity. When we met with the principal and teachers formally, we told them I was transgender, that we were very open with our child, and that we knew it would come up at some stage during her school life. And we asked them if they had any issues with this. They said no, they didn't, and moved onto the next topic.

I actually asked them if we could go back to what I had just said as I wanted to make sure they knew what I was talking about. They said yes, they understood, and again moved on. I insisted we discuss it, and then they told us there was another trans family at the school and it was not an issue at all. We chose that school and it hasn't been an issue. Some of the other parents know and it really isn't a big deal.

Did you think about a second child?

After about a year of illness, my wife started to get better and we were

both keen to have another child. We did more rounds of IVF, but then my wife had a very bad miscarriage. After that, we were told there would be very little chance of success, so we stopped IVF and reassessed.

I thought I could potentially donate eggs that could be fertilised with donor sperm and transferred to my wife. I had no interest in being pregnant myself. I did a lot of international research to determine if donating eggs after transitioning would pose any risks to the baby. The information indicated that, while carrying the foetus may pose a risk, there was no increase in the risk associated with egg donation.

I found an IVF specialist who was helping a few other guys donate eggs and I spoke with her. She agreed to work with my local IVF doctor and they ran some tests to determine the viability of going ahead with this. I would have needed to stop testosterone until I started menstruating, and then we would both start IVF drugs. We didn't come to this decision lightly, knowing it would be very mentally and physically difficult. We had very supportive doctors who worked through different potential issues and how we could deal with them. But, in the end, the tests showed I was not a good candidate, so we accepted that we are a small but perfectly-formed family of three. Throughout this whole process, the medical staff were really supportive.

What advice would you give to other trans people who might want to start a family?

Personally, I have never had an issue with not being genetically related to my child. Anyone who has spent time with my family can see there is a connection between us that does not rely on genetics. I understand for some people this may be more of an issue. If you did want a genetically-related child, there are different options, depending on where you are in your transition, but it can be a difficult and expensive process post transition. If you are donating eggs for a surrogate to carry, you will both need to go through IVF. You really

need to think about whether it's for you, and make sure you have good support. If you're sure, then I'd say find a supportive fertility specialist and get started.

What's the best thing about this journey?

Parenthood and the journey to it has been a huge part of my life and my child brings endless joy. I have been very fortunate to have such supportive family and friends who, together with supportive medical staff, have all made it possible. Being part of the rainbow family community has helped my child to normalise her origins and allows her to celebrate the uniqueness of her family.



Maternal and child health nurses and new parents' groups

New parents are referred to a maternal and child health centre in their local area. The maternal and child health nurse (MCHN) will provide ongoing care and support for the family, including regular health check-ups.

The MCHN will generally ask if parents would like to be part of a mothers' or new parents' group. New parents' groups can provide a supportive space for parents to share their experiences, ask questions and learn about the early days of parenting.

In some cases both mothers or fathers choose to attend the group, in others the primary carer, regardless of biological relationship, might attend. Early group sessions tend to cover the experience of birth, hormones and physical changes to the body, and breastfeeding.

The groups are facilitated by the MCHN for a set period of weeks, but parents often decide to meet independently once the group has finished. Some lesbian mums and gay dads form lasting friendships; some find they don't really connect with the other group members at all.

Being clear with your MCHN about your family structure at your first appointment can be helpful. It can also be useful to discuss any concerns you may have about participating in a new parents' group with the MCHN before the group meets for the first time. It might then

be worth going to the first few sessions to see how inclusive the group is and how comfortable you feel.

Lesbian mums and gay dads may find themselves on the receiving end of curiosity and questions. Some questions may be appropriate and asked in the spirit of understanding your family. Some may be intrusive.

Lesbian mums may have reservations about new parents'

groups, but the groups can be welcoming and supportive and a valuable source of information.

Gay dads may find it hard to find a group in which they feel comfortable, but some certainly do.

In some cases, it may work better for you to connect with other new parents in the LGBTI community.

“Parents say ...

Maternal and child health nurses

When we had Nina in 2002, we lived in a new estate where there was nothing, and we did feel like trailblazers out there. I was really anxious, but I struck it lucky with a really great maternal health nurse. **Bethia**

Our maternal child health nurse was just absolutely glorious – a wonderful woman. We just really lucked out there. **Bec**

Our maternal child health nurse was great and was very inclusive and on board with Jo. She always acknowledged Jo and included her. I think that was just her own personal approach, because I don't think all the nurses that she worked with had the same kind of attitude. **Pia**

Certainly, the treatment from the hospital and the maternal and child health nurse was great; everyone was lovely. **Michelle**

The maternal and child health nurses were a mixed bag, but I would say, on the whole, I find them very staid and old-fashioned in their approach to the business of giving birth and bringing up a newborn. But they were never negative and I never had anyone make any judgement or anything. **Anna**

We attended Tweedle – the sleep school – as well, and Carol was certainly very included in that. Pretty much everything to do with Frances – maternal and child health – was all perfect. **Trudy**

We had a visit at home from a maternal and child health nurse who was perfectly fine. The only problem was that we would have liked them to come more because it was very hard to get out with the twins. **Ruth**

If service providers were a little more aware – if they had a little bit more experience, that would be better. I do remember one woman saying, 'Oh goody. I've been on a course about this', which was cute. She was really positive about it and that's fantastic, if slightly patronising, but that's okay. I'll take that above total ignorance. **Anna**

I think Roe was on the vulnerable register with maternal and child health and they were pretty concerned about her. She was certainly very unwell, but she was well-supported. **Kaye**

I must say that after the first five to six weeks we were an absolute mess because we weren't getting any sleep. This midwife came over and said, 'I'm taking the babies, you two are going out. Go and have coffee. Go!' We went to a local coffee shop and sat there and cried. Then we pulled ourselves together and decided it was going to be okay and it was a huge turning point. **Jayne**

I did get misplaced sympathy from a couple of people about how hard it must be because I was on my own. I think they're just trying to be kind at a time when you're feeling pretty tired and vulnerable. **Anna**

Mothers' and new parents' groups

We requested to be in a mothers' group because normally, for a second child, they wouldn't do that. But it had been nearly nine years and we were in a different area. They were okay with that and the group included both of us. People responded to us really well. There was some curiosity and, when they got to know us, they asked questions but there were no issues whatsoever. **Natasha**

We ummed and ahed about who was going to go along to mothers' group. Lauren went and formed great friendships and everyone was quite comfortable. Basically, all the other mums were jealous because I actually helped around the house and none of their partners did. **Paula**

One very early comment at mother's group was, 'I don't know, but are you guys finding it really hard to get your husband's tea ready by six o'clock?' I just thought: *That's it. I'm done.* As it turned out, she and I never hit it off, but there were two women there whose friendship lasted me through those early years. **Bec**

We asked about parenting groups and I think we were dissuaded by the early childhood nurse. She said: Oh there aren't really any twins groups at the moment. I'm not sure if it was her get out. My hunch is that she just didn't think we would fit into a parenting group. **Andrew**

With my mothers' group, it took me about eight meetings to tell them my partner was female and I was very nervous about it, but they didn't blink. I never quite connected with them the same way as I did with a same-sex playgroup later on, but we were always treated well. **Bethia**

Mothers' group was fantastic and we're still friends with them all. They've all been absolutely wonderful. I think in the hills people are slightly more alternative, which helps. **Ellysa**

My partner went to mothers' group because she had our first child. That was always a bit of an issue because it would be: *Mum's night out* and then: *Dad's night out*, and I didn't go to the *Dad's Night Out*, so that felt a little bit odd. **Mandy**

I'm still in a mothers' group and I was a bit surprised that it was all straight couples and that there wasn't another queer family. They've been pretty good, but I've probably had to educate them a bit. They're all young, in their early 30s, so hopefully that means they are open-minded anyway. **Pia**

Rainbow Families' groups

Yes, there was a mothers' group. I was the birth mother and I was the stay at home mum for a period so I would go to the group. As the kids got older we started to see more rainbow families and we formed a little connection, which was good. **Jayne**

I went along to Rainbow Families Playgroup and that pretty much saved me, because we could talk about all sorts of things and I just felt that I wasn't the weird one. **Bec**

The lesbian parent playgroups were really useful at that time and made a huge difference to us feeling like we were not the odd ones out. That was really positive. You could share your experience with other women and we could all talk about being non-biological parents or other our issues. If they hadn't been there I think it would have been a lot harder. It made us feel like we were understood somewhere by other people who had similar experiences, so it was really useful. **Mandy**

We found support through the Multiple Birth Association and I'm actually their gay and lesbian contact person. They realised it doesn't matter what sex you are, having twins is hard. So we had this common bond, a different shared experience, which gave us a completely different basis for relating to and understanding each other. It's a lot easier to forget about other differences when you've got this massive commonality. **Ruth**

The parent groups we were offered were teenage mums and just weren't really our thing. We hung out with rainbow families in Melbourne and other friends who were having babies. **Kaye**



INTERVIEW

Fertility for trans and gender-diverse people

Dr Bronwyn Devine
Medical Director, Monash IVF Mosman

In recent years, there has been greater social acceptance of gender diversity, but there is still a significant gap in the provision of services for trans and gender-diverse people. Dr Bronwyn Devine explains the medical options for trans and gender-diverse people wanting to have children, and explores some of the personal issues involved in that journey.

Can you tell us about your work with trans and gender-diverse people?

In 2012, I attended the inaugural Australian Transgender, Gender Diverse and Sistergirl conference in Cairns. There were a lot of lectures

on medical and surgical approaches to transitioning, but very little information about starting a family or fertility preservation.

At that time, I was working in Canberra and starting to see a few trans men for general health checks and Pap smears, and I

was approached by an interstate couple looking to extend their family. They had already had one child using donor sperm, conceived with Intrauterine Insemination (IUI), and were hoping to do IVF this time around. It was one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life, caring for the couple and helping them have their second baby. I knew this was an area I wanted to work in, and since then, I have seen a number of gender-diverse couples, single people and teens all looking to have children or discuss fertility preservation.

The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) states that:

Many transgender, transsexual and gender nonconforming people will want to have children. Because feminizing/masculinizing hormone therapy limits fertility ... it is desirable for patients to make decisions concerning fertility before starting hormone therapy or undergoing surgery to remove/alter their reproductive organs. Cases are known of people who received hormone therapy and genital surgery and later regretted their inability to parent genetically related children ... ¹

I now lecture quite extensively to other health professionals in the fertility space on options for gender-diverse people, and I'm passionate about improving access to Assisted Reproductive Treatment services for this group.

Can trans and gender-diverse people still have their own biological children?

Whether you identify as trans, genderfluid or non-binary, you still have the option of having children of your own, if that's what you want. Many trans people will be able to preserve their fertility before undergoing medical and/or surgical procedures to assist their affirmation. There are, however, a number of options available if you didn't have the chance to arrange freezing of eggs or sperm prior to starting puberty blockers, hormones or undergoing surgery.

Having children may raise all sorts of issues for you and it's important to talk through the emotional and psychological aspects of trying to conceive, or of carrying a baby. A well-informed and supportive medical team can make a huge difference in this and it's worth taking the time to seek out health professionals with expertise in this area.

What are the options for trans men?

If you still have a uterus and ovaries

It is possible to produce healthy eggs after you have started testosterone, even if you have been on it for a number of years.

All ovaries run out of eggs eventually (menopause), but taking testosterone doesn't seem to affect this process in any negative way. You have to take a break from the testosterone for a period of time to stimulate the ovaries to produce eggs. When testosterone levels drop, people can sometimes feel anxious, tired or out of sorts, and you may also experience a reduced libido. This can all be quite challenging for some people and you need to talk it through with your specialist.

If you are having eggs collected, you'll need to have injections which increase your oestrogen. After the eggs are collected, you get an increase in progesterone – the hormone responsible for pre-menstrual tension (PMT) – so you may feel tired, irritable and moody. Two weeks after egg collection, you will likely have a period which can also be very challenging. If you are not intending to carry the baby, you can resume testosterone pretty soon after the egg collection.

Once you have eggs, they can be frozen or used to create an embryo with a male partner's or donor's sperm. That embryo can be carried by a surrogate or female partner.

If you still have your uterus and ovaries and are considering becoming pregnant yourself, this is possible too, either with your partner's or with donor sperm. Testosterone does not act as a contraceptive and a number of trans

men have conceived spontaneously. You would need to come off testosterone prior to conception, and then you could try to conceive naturally, or you could use IUI or IVF using a partner's or donor's sperm. Again, there are important psychological issues you'd need address if you took this path.

If you no longer have a uterus and ovaries

If you have frozen eggs or embryos, you may be able to have a child that is genetically related to you, with the help of either a surrogate or a partner. If your partner has a uterus, is in good health, and happy to go through a pregnancy, they could carry the baby. If not, you would need to find a surrogate to carry the baby for you.

If you didn't freeze eggs or embryos, you would need to look at options for using a donor egg and a donor's or a partner's sperm. If your partner has healthy ovaries, eggs may be obtained from them and fertilised using donor sperm. Your partner or a surrogate could then carry the baby.

What are the options for trans women?

Trans women have the option of freezing sperm or testicular tissue, but this is usually only successful if it's done prior to starting hormones. If you have cryopreserved sperm, you

have the option of creating an embryo with a partner's or donor's egg, using IUI or IVF, and a partner or surrogate may carry the pregnancy.

Sperm cryopreservation is simple and reliable, but some trans women may find it difficult to masturbate to produce a semen sample. Surgical sperm extraction can be an option in this situation, but the quality of the sperm sample may be poor. Some trans women find the concept of stored male gametes an unwelcome reminder of a gender-incongruent past.

If you do not have cryopreserved sperm and you have a partner who has a uterus and is able to carry a pregnancy, you can create an embryo using a donor egg or your partner's egg, and donor sperm, and that embryo can be carried by your partner. Alternatively, if your partner has healthy eggs and wishes to be pregnant, they may have an IUI cycle using donor sperm.

Do you have any general advice for trans and gender-diverse people who may be thinking about having a family?

I think it's really important to have a well-informed and supportive medical team. Yes, there are certainly challenges involved, but there are a number of options, and being trans or gender diverse doesn't mean you have to give up the dream of being a parent. I have many lovely stories of delightful and complex ways pregnancy has been achieved and families created.

Thank you, Dr Devine

1 *WPATH Standards of Care*, version 7 (2012)



Non-biological parents

Most non-biological parents will, at one time or another, think about what it means to parent a child to whom they are not biologically related. For some, being a non-biological parent raises few concerns and those concerns are easily and quickly resolved. For others, the implications are significant and require time to work through.

Sometimes Lesbian mums and gay dads share some of the same concerns, but others are unique to one group or the other. Dealing with these issues and managing them over time can be challenging for some parents. This document provides some thoughts and suggestions that may be helpful.

Bonding, roles and relationships

One of the most common concerns shared by non-biological parents is

whether or not they will bond with their baby. However, most non-biological parents say that once their baby is born, they are surprised by how easily and quickly they bond and how natural it feels.

Many non-biological parents worry about their role in the family and, in particular, their role in relation to the child. This can be challenging for some parents, especially as there are few established social norms for their particular relationship. Parents often overcome this by paying close attention to how much time they

spend with the child, and sharing the practical parenting responsibilities of feeding and caring. In some circumstances, families can arrange for both parents to work part time and to share the primary care role.

For non-biological mums, pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding can sometimes be difficult and they may experience feelings of grief and loss or feel excluded.

What helped?

Most same-sex parents say that biology is not unimportant, but it makes no difference at all to how they love their children. If you do have anxieties, talking them through with your partner – and with other parents – before the baby is born,

and during the first year, is important and can be very helpful.

Acknowledgment and support from family and close friends can also be extremely valuable in helping the non-biological parent feel secure and validated in their role.

Non-biological gay dads may experience anxieties where a surrogate has been involved, or where they are co-parenting. However, many of the anxieties experienced by non-biological parents dissipate over time and parents often look back and realise their early worries have ceased to exist. For example, once their child stops breastfeeding, lesbian mums often say there is no longer any difference between them and they feel more secure in their role and in their relationship with the child.

Parents say ...

Bonding

I think the biggest anxiety about being the non-biological mum is bonding with your child, because every non-biological mum I've spoken to has been anxious about that. And I think what they need to know is that as long as you are the child's mother, that child will bond with you, so take comfort in that and just do what comes naturally and there will be no bonding problems. **Ellysa**

I think for the non-bio dad there is an initial question of: *Will I have the same connection to the child?* But what happens very quickly is that there's a realisation that the child doesn't know who the bio-dad is. The child just knows there are these two adults who are feeding, nurturing and loving it and the non-bio dad essentially forgets he's the non-bio dad – he's just a dad. **Rodney**

You just realise that, as time goes by and you develop that bond, the biology doesn't matter as much. I think that happens very quickly after they're born. I think most of my concerns were before. Once they're born you're in the thick of it looking after them and you develop a bond very quickly. **Vien**

I was the non-bio mum the first time and I did have anxieties; every now and then I'd feel nervous about how it would actually be and how other people would view me. But when he was born I just felt completely bonded to him immediately. I got to hold him and cut the cord and I felt completely connected and very protective! **Cathy**

Over time, my anxieties disappeared. She was equally our daughter and nothing's coming up for me now, so it just became a non-issue, I suppose. **Cate**

Roles

I think Maria has been much more focused on what her role is going to be when the baby is born. She wants to be the one who does most of the bathing and maybe has Saturday mornings with the baby while I sleep ... fine by me! She's focussed on carving out a role which I suspect you need to think through more when you are the non-biological parent. **Joanna**

I think one of the main issues is feeding and with a bio dad and a non-bio dad you're both feeding exactly the same way – not like a lesbian couple where one may be breastfeeding – and I think that helps. **Rodney**

Once the breastfeeding stops, the difference between whether you're a bio or a non-bio mum is gone; you're now on an even playing field. **Cathy**

I would say there can be anxiety around the grief of not being able to do what comes naturally to your body, because you're not the one having the child. You've grown up as a woman and that's always been a part of your identity and someone else is taking on that role that you could have planned for yourself. **Maria**

There was a lot of anxiety in that early time about how to answer questions and whether I was being honest or misleading. That was all about the fact that I was a parent, but not the biological parent and I just had to get used to that role. **Cathy**

There might be some anxiety that you may not have as valid a role and really there is no social construct of that role, so it's very unclear. I've had to get my head around the idea of playing a supportive role during the pregnancy and breastfeeding, which makes the whole family function really well as a unit, and you're an essential part of that. **Maria**

Biology

Parenting is not about genetics and both of us are equally his parents. We are both on the birth certificate so we are at least protected in that sense. **John**

I think biology is definitely an issue and it has to be thought about. Whether your child looks like they're part of your family – like they're your child – is a concern at the beginning, but I must admit, as time has passed I've found it not to be an issue. **Vien**

You don't feel any differently about them – I feel that it's not an issue at all. You know that there is a biological difference, but it doesn't change how you feel about them. **Stephen**

I can't say it's true for everybody, but I've yet to meet anybody who's done surrogacy where the issue of a non-bio dad feeling excluded or sidelined or uncomfortable has actually been an issue. **Rodney**

With our youngest it's quite obvious I'm not the biological parent because she looks so different. People might assume she has an Asian dad, but then they look a little bit puzzled when they see Hannah and Xavier and her. And then they just think, *Oh the quirks of biology, she looks a bit different*. So, I haven't felt as though it's been a big deal, really. **Susan**

It's no different – and I want to use this idea loosely – from an adopted baby, because you trust the love you give that child and we do that naturally because it's our child, not biologically, but it's still our child, and we have to have faith in that. **Ellysa**

That was my concern: whether other people would see me as being a legitimate parent or not and that lasted ... I don't remember, because it just doesn't enter my brain now at all. I reckon it was a good few weeks, maybe even two or three months. **Cathy**

Lots of people, including complete strangers, asked who the biological father was. We didn't tell them. Anthony just said, 'It's not important for anyone to know'. **John**

We don't officially know which of us is the biological parent of either child. When they were conceived, half the eggs were fertilised by me, half were fertilised by Vien. **Stephen**

Thoughts and suggestions

Before they were born we were adamant that we didn't want people to ask who the biological parent was and I know some of our friends are still quite like that. But since they've been born – and we realised it makes no difference to how we feel about these two children – we kind of don't mind. **Stephen**

I'd almost say that the majority of people – especially before the baby is born – would experience a little bit of anxiety about their role, and I think a lot of the anxiety could be overcome by having really good conversations with your partner. **Maria**

I thought, *Right, I'm going to be involved as much as I can. I'll just be right there and I'm the Mama. It will all be 50:50 and I'm going to do everything I possibly can to be just as much a parent.* **Cate**

I remember when he was first born there was a real distinction between people who would say congratulations to Frances and me – to both parents – and that was so validating, and the people who didn't. And I just thought, *Here it is, this is my anxiety: people who don't see me as a parent.* **Cathy**

It's interesting because with some parents they're not both 'mummy' and one of them is known by their first name. Cate and I were 'mummy' and 'mama' from the outset. **Susan**

There were those awkward moments all the way through pregnancy – and I imagine it'll be the same right through school – where you're fitting your family's structure into the norm. **Mandy**

I think getting validation from people in our circle was important. At work, they had a baby shower for me, and all our close friends – not just our lesbian friends – said, 'You guys are having a baby!' And just hearing that rather than, 'Susan's having a baby', was very reassuring. **Cate**

I wish someone had tried to explain things to me more, because everyone just said, 'It's fine, it's not a problem'. I think having a conversation about it really helps. **Ellysa**

I couldn't breastfeed, obviously, but when Susan expressed I said, 'Oh I'll do the feed'. I tried to be there for Hannah as much as I could when I was home and always be the one pushing her, carrying her in the hugabub, or doing whatever I could to have that connection and build that relationship. **Cate**

We had chunks of time home together on maternity leave and we both worked part time, so some of those issues that might come up because one parent assumes a stronger parenting role weren't there. And I think that probably helps to some extent. **Susan**



Talking about how your family was created

Same-sex parents are often asked about how their families are created. Questions may come from your immediate or extended families or from people in the broader community: friends, neighbours, colleagues, health professionals, child-care workers and other parents.

Often these questions arise out of innocent curiosity and are asked in an appropriate and respectful way, making it easy to respond openly and positively. Sometimes you may have to deal with questions that are inappropriate or intrusive and which make you feel uncomfortable or judged.

How you handle these questions will depend on a range of factors. This document provides some broad suggestions for dealing with conversations about how you created your family.

Managing questions

People may ask questions that appear judgemental or homophobic, but which might just be clumsy, ignorant or not thought through. It can be helpful to give people the benefit of the doubt sometimes, and perhaps offer some advice for next time.

People are commonly curious about:

- whether you used a known or anonymous donor

- whether you conceived at home or using a clinic
- how you decided which partner would carry your child or provide sperm.

It's helpful to decide what information you are happy to divulge at various stages and to whom: immediate family, close friends and the broader community.

Gay dads may chose not to reveal who is the biological father of their child born through surrogacy and lesbian mums may not wish to share information about who is the biological mother once the baby is born.

Difficult conversations

You don't have to explain or come out to everyone all the time. Some days it might seem too hard or too complicated, or you might just not have the energy or the inclination.

If someone tells you, the non-biological parent, your child looks like you, you can just smile, or say thank you. You don't have to explain

anything more.

Similarly, if someone starts up a conversation with a non-birth parent about pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding, you may choose to correct their assumptions, or you may choose not to, especially if that person is a stranger.

Conversations may change over time as circumstances and personal feelings alter and you may find you become more confident in handling difficult conversations.

Privacy

Talking to people can dispel myths, correct inaccuracies, or just make people feel more at ease with you and your family, which can lead to positive outcomes for your children. However, you may sometimes need to be very direct with people and explain that certain information is private, off-limits or belongs to your child. You may feel that the process of conceiving a child is personal and private and nobody else's business.

Parents say ...

Talking to families and friends

I explained it to my parents like I explained it to everybody else; just very straight-up and honest and answered their questions. **Maryann**

It's a real journey when you start wanting to have a child so we decided to tell our immediate family. We are both very close to our aunts and uncles so we told them as well – and some very close friends. We were not going to tell the world, but we knew we would need that support, especially if we did get pregnant and something happened. **Ellysa**

My immediate family knew we were embarking on surrogacy so we had a full and frank discussion with them. The only thing we held back was the identity of the egg donor, because we didn't want them to guess at biology. It's kind of obvious now – we've got two boys – but at the time we thought it was important and I suppose because my family is from Vietnam, blood is important to them. **Vien**

We kept IVF very close to our hearts, along the same lines as straight people. They don't talk about their sex lives and whether they're trying to have a baby so we didn't want to do that either. **Helga**

With both Jeff and I – and I think this is fairly common – our mothers asked who was going to be the bio-dad and it was quite apparent they wanted to know because there was a sense of ownership over the grandchild. And I understand the reason they asked. Our response was always the same: the child has two fathers, the biology is not important and if you are going to be the grandmother of this child you'll love the child regardless of the biology. **Rodney**

I'm delicately balancing the situation with my family and I think I need to give them the space to talk to me about things, but I have also set up some limits as to what I will accept in conversations. **Maria**

When I told my mum she said, 'Oh I don't know how we're going to love this child,' and I said, 'Get lost mum, I'm adopted! I'm not even related to you'. And she said, 'Ah yes, I suppose so'. She hadn't even really thought about that ... and Hannah was her first grandchild and she was all over her from the minute she was born. **Kate**

Probably the most difficult conversation would have been with my grandmother who was of a much older generation, obviously, and less open in terms of perceptions of what acceptable relationships are, or acceptable families. I think she required time to absorb the information and really come to terms with it. **Jacki**

I think with your own family it's challenging to confront their ideas of norms about families – they want to know if they are really aunties, if they are really grandparents. I would reassure them that they are. **Maria**

Talking to others

I spoke to one mum at school and explained how we talk about our family. I sent her the Rainbow Families Council link so that she could look on there at some of the resources. She wrote back to me and said, 'Thanks, that was really helpful'. **Cathy**

I do get a bit of curiosity and, I must admit, most of the time where it's a casual encounter I generally ignore it or don't go into detail. Part of it is convenience – taking the path of least resistance – because it's not straightforward; it's not a one-liner to explain the whole thing. **Vien**

I'm a community worker. I work for a small faith community and a lot of assumptions have been made and I've just clarified them. **Maryann**

You get the question about who is the bio-dad and most of the time you say, 'Ethan has two fathers and we don't talk to people about his biology because that's Ethan's information'. We're probably a little bit more concise than with family, and probably sometimes we're a little bit more blunt! **Rodney**

It's a bit different if you see two mums together – people assume so much more – whereas I'm dealing with it more as a single parent and people assume that I'm straight. But I think people are generally sensitive so if you say up-front, 'She's an IVF baby,' they tend not to want any more information. **Helga**

I work in the call centre industry and there's a large gay population so I probably had an easier experience than some. We believe in educating people; we think it's best to be up-front and educate them about your journey so if they come across anyone else in the same situation they can help. **Ellysa**

I'm in the corporate world and you talk to your clients about what you do at the weekend. I say, 'I've got a son,' and I'll pause and 90% of the time I go on and say, 'It's kind of unusual circumstances – I've got a son with two mums'. I let them join the dots. To be honest, it's a delightful icebreaker; it takes the conversation to a deeper level in a lot of ways. **Brad**

From day one be out, proactively out in a simple way. Answer people's questions honestly, but if they ask you something ridiculous or you don't want to answer their questions you just say, 'I'm not going to answer that,' or ask them the same question back. **John**

I suppose what really comes out is that people are fascinated with how you have a baby. With my mother's group they really wanted to know how IUI works, how IVF works. So I suppose it's being comfortable enough in yourself to be open with people. You just decide what you're going to say. We're really open with our story. **Karly**

The first piece of information to divulge is that the child has two mothers and the nature of that relationship. So, I guess, make it clear that there is no father in the picture. I don't think I really had any in-depth discussions with anyone about donors. **Jacki**

Thoughts and suggestions

I'm really happy if people want to ask questions. I'm not offended because I'd rather just educate people and show them that it is a thought-out process and why I am confident that it's going to be okay. **Pia**

I think the more open we are, the more people understand and the less they fear. The less fear they have, the less hate they have. **Ellysa**

People at work asked me and I got a bit annoyed, because I thought: I didn't ask you how you conceived your children. But then I think: well I wouldn't ask you, but maybe it's about education – and then you have the conversation. I wouldn't necessarily tell everybody that asked; sometimes I don't really want to go there. It just depends on the situation. **Kate**

It is very important for your children – once they are more than one or two years of age – that you are out and answering questions honestly because you don't want them to see you ashamed or embarrassed or uncertain. **John**

I've lived out east for a long time now and I've never experienced any homophobia. I say it how it is, not in a nasty way, just in a straight-out way and I think if you answer people's questions honestly, then there's no reason they shouldn't respect you. **Maryann**

Some people will ask very probing questions and I don't have a problem with that at all. I think the more I can explain to people, the more they understand, the better for everyone, so there are very few things I won't answer. **Stephen**

Other people might say it's not anyone else's business, and I understand that, but I'm all for just giving the facts and having a more open, educational approach. If you just tell them, there is less mystery and they don't wind themselves up so much thinking about it ... it normalises it, I think. **Pia**

I was very up-front and straightforward – we both were – and just said, 'If you have any questions, please feel free to ask.' We preferred to give them the information. We think it's best to be up-front with people so if they come across anyone else on the journey, they can help them. **Ellysa**

I have to admit that in the first year or two questions infuriated us. We felt judged, so our responses were often curt, but as your child gets older you think: okay, I need to have this discussion because I'm trying to prepare the landscape for my child to grow into. **Rodney**

I guess there's a little of the advocate in me. The more people who know about these stories, the better it is for us and for our community. So that they can recognise the people down the road aren't the only ones who are a same-sex couple with kids – there's also that guy they met at work during the week. **Brad**



Telling the kids: What? When? How?

Rainbow families can be created in lots of different ways, including with a sperm or egg donor known to the parents or sourced through a fertility clinic; through traditional or gestational surrogacy (usually overseas); or through previous heterosexual relationships.

Rainbow families might have two dads, two mums, a sole parent, more than two parents or step-parents.

At some stage, all parents will want to talk to their children about how they were created and this can raise some significant questions:

- What's the best time to start this conversation?
- How much information should I provide?
- What exactly should I say?

All children are different and develop at different stages and

parents need to decide what's best for their child. This document provides some broad guidelines and suggestions on how best to begin this conversation with your child.

When and how

Start talking to your child as early as possible – any time between when they are babies and before they start school. It can be helpful to practice talking to them out loud before they are even old enough to understand.

Be open and honest with your child and tell them the truth. Use clear and accurate language that is age-appropriate; most children can understand the idea of sperm and egg at a very young age.

You can tell your child about how they were created without talking about sex; that often comes much later. Some people use imagery of seeds, planting and growth to help explain the process.

Things to consider

Your child is much-wanted and is much-loved and it's important that you are positive about the journey you took to create them so they can also be positive. Be guided by your child and the questions they ask – they will generally let you know how much information they want.

It's important to acknowledge and be respectful of everyone involved in creating your child, including former

partners, a sperm or egg donor and/or a surrogate.

Try not to let anyone make you feel embarrassed or shameful about how you created your family.

What can help

Conversations often happen in stages over time; you don't have to cover everything in the first discussion. To assist you with these conversations you might consider:

- talking to other parents whose family formation or experience is similar to yours
- creating a book or journal that explains the journey you took to create your child and include names and photographs of all the people involved
- using published books and other resources that explain how families like yours are created.

Parents say ...

Starting the conversation

It just started naturally coming into conversation when he was about three years old. We just told him, 'You've got two dads,' and then we would expand on that naturally as it came up. **John**

Our first discussions with Ethan occurred when he was about three years old. We just basically told him about Kelly, our surrogate, and how she's important to our family and that she is part of our family and that he grew inside her. **Rodney**

My daughter knows that you have an egg and a sperm and the doctor puts them together in a dish and then puts an egg back into mummy – and she's four. I guess it's more the terminology and the process I want to get right before I say, 'A very generous man deposited sperm and that's how you came about'. That will come when she's a bit older and able to grasp that concept better. **Helga**

We've talked about it very openly and very honestly right from when they were babies. The first time we actually sat down with them in any kind of formalised way was probably when Harry was about three. The initial conversation was about how our family came to be – how you need an egg and a sperm – and because he had two mums, we needed to use a donor. **Cathy**

Jenny's two and we've had lots of conversations already. Up here in the hills heterosexual families are everywhere and there aren't so many other types of families. We told her a special person donated his sperm so that we could create her and that she is part of our family and that we love her. From day dot we have basically been telling her about how she was conceived. **Karla**

I think we've just always talked about it. It was really important to me, because I'm adopted, and I asked my mum, 'When did you tell me?' And she said, 'When you were old enough to ask me,' which, I think, was when I was about four. I can't even remember exactly when we told our kids. They have just always known. **Kate**

I would say it's never too early to do it and in my experience kids just stop listening and walk away when they're getting more information than they need. They just kind of tune out and they tell you by their behaviour. When Xavier had had enough, he just changed the topic. **Susan**

I think I want him to know before he remembers knowing, if that makes sense. So I want to keep the conversation going, particularly given that a baby is coming and there is an opportunity for that. **Joanna**

How to tell

I think you need to be honest from the very get-go, so as soon as they start asking questions, tell them the truth. Say, 'Mum and mum or dad and dad ...' – or whatever the family make-up is – '... really, really wanted a baby and this was the way we could do it'. **Maryann**

When you feel they are starting to learn about different things, you read a storybook about our type of family, or catch up with some friends with a similar family situation. **John**

We explained that some people have a mum and a dad and that the dad is the source of the sperm, but in our case we had a donor who was the source of the sperm, and then a nice doctor assisted with the process to create them. **Jacki**

The important thing for us is to own the experience and always be proud of it, because we just know if we don't show pride in what we did, he won't have pride in where he came from. We have to reflect what we want him to take away from the whole process. **Rodney**

I think it comes down to how relaxed or how anxious you are about describing it and I know that with my daughter – I'm actually in a wheelchair and none of her friends' parents are – and I've said to her, 'You know, everybody is different and mummy is different'. So she knows being different isn't a bad thing. **Helga**

I think it's important to be transparent, straightforward and age-appropriate. **Brad**

I think that kids drive this conversation by their questions, but you also don't want to give them too much information, so I think you need to be guided by them. **Maria**

He's not that interested in the mechanics yet; he's interested in football. So what we've been doing is introducing the concept of the people involved and how they relate to us and how we describe them as part of our extended family. **Rodney**

I'd say, take a chill pill, because we work it up to be such a big drama in our heads whereas, in their little minds, it's not such a drama if they feel safe and secure with who they are and their environment. I just told Stella from the very beginning, so it wasn't going to be this big earth-shattering discussion that came out of the blue. It was just a part of everyday conversation in a very informal way. **Helga**

Recently, a friend was asking how they should respond when their child said, 'If Brad likes boys how did Jake come about?' And another friend chipped in, 'You just say, "The doctor helped"'. I thought, well that's not a bad answer at this point in time. Later on, you can go into more detail. **Brad**

At the moment we just say, 'A very nice man donated something, a part of him that we needed to make you'. When she's older, we will say, 'A very nice man donated his sperm and this is what we know about him'. **Ellysa**

Books and resources

I have been making a book for him since before he was born. We've got everything in there from the donor profile, the photos of our first appointment, his birth, his naming day ceremony and his first birthday party. He always wants to look at the pictures and if I go too quickly he wants to turn back. **Pia**

For me, using books was really helpful in explaining her situation. She knows she's got two mummies and other people have something else and if she ever seems confused about it, then we read her one of the books and it definitely helps. **Ellysa**

We managed to find a book that talked about how two mums get a donor and it was exactly our story. So we started using that book and he really loved it, and from there, questions came up. **Cathy**

We created an electronic photo book of all the people involved in the journey – the surrogate and the egg donor. It shows who those people are, with names and dates. It's been really useful, especially because young kids respond to the visual, so it's easy to pull up a photo of our surrogate and her family and talk about how her family was created and how they helped us create ours. **Rodney**

Thoughts and suggestions

We have always tried to be as ethical and considered as we can. I would say, for anything to do with children, honesty is important. If I give my son facts, simple facts, he will ask when he wants more information and then I will answer those questions. Try to be honest, factual, keep it simple but respond when they ask questions. Don't try to sweep it under the carpet and don't say, 'I'll tell you later'. **Pia**

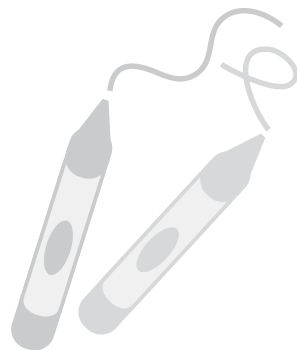
It's more than just telling him a story about how he came into existence. It's teaching him about tolerance and acceptance of other people's families as well, because he does know that other people have two mums or a mum and a dad. So, it's really about getting that context: that there's a variety of families and his is just one of them. **Rodney**

It's outing yourself in public appropriately, without any shame or embarrassment, that's really important, I think, so you are setting the tone. **John**

We'd spoken to lots of friends and we'd had lots of discussions with people we knew who had older children. **Cathy**

Over the years, we've introduced more information about how Daddy Rodney and Daddy Jeff wanted to have a family, but we couldn't have a baby by ourselves, because only women can carry babies. So we had to find a woman who would carry a baby for us, and we met Auntie Kelly, and she was a really wonderful person and she helped us. **Rodney**

I don't have any concerns about having that discussion with Jake, only because I anticipate taking a very factual approach. **Brad**



Starting kinder or day care

Kindergartens and childcare centres can vary significantly, with different programs, philosophies and management styles. You may have a number in your area from which to choose, or you may only have one within travelling distance. Some will have experience working with rainbow families, but many may not and yours may be the first rainbow family to attend.

How a centre supports you as a rainbow family is important, but will likely not be your only consideration. A range of other factors may come into play including: the approach to learning, the age or experience of staff, buildings and outside space, location, diversity of children attending, involvement of parents, cost and whether the centre feels like a 'good fit' for your child.

Choosing a kinder or childcare centre

Unless you know exactly where you want to send your child, it makes sense to visit a number of centres before choosing. You can often get a sense of how diverse and welcoming the centre is from posters, notices, artwork and books.

Taking a tour of the centre during daytime hours, talking to staff and observing the children can give you a real sense of whether it's what you are looking for. Ask the coordinator if they have had same-sex families attending the centre; their response will give you a sense of whether the centre is going to be supportive of your family.

Once you've chosen a kinder or centre, you can help foster positive relationships and a supportive environment for your child by:

- attending centre functions, volunteering to help, or being involved with the management committee
- providing your child with some age-appropriate responses to questions they may be asked
- providing information and being willing to educate staff about rainbow families.

Being open and willing to engage in up-front discussions will enable you to manage any issues as they arise.

Parents say ...

Choosing a kinder or childcare centre

The first thing is about his needs, what kind of kid he seems to be and therefore what kind of learning environment we want for him. Then I guess a question about their attitude: Do they have other same-sex families and if not, how would they handle that? **Pia**

My approach has always been to be very out, very early. I spent a year working in an early childhood centre and I knew what was important to me. I chose the one that felt the best, that felt right to me, and I spent a lot of time there. **Bec**

When we looked at kinders, I thought inner city was going to be friendlier and, in fact, it was; ten years ago things were a bit different. **Trudy**

We went to all the kinder open days we could get to in our area, plus a few others. We visited while the classes were in session and talked to the kids and the teachers. I was more concerned about how they handled the students' welfare than how they handled the gay and lesbian thing in particular. I thought we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. When we found a quality kinder teacher the other stuff followed naturally. **Ruth**

We only approached one day care place. We've got a friend who works at this one and we had heard positive reviews about it. We had a look at it and it really exceeded our expectations. I couldn't have imagined a day care centre that would be so well set up and such a positive environment. **Anthony**

We chose the kinder because it was down the road from my work. We both had a look around and we had a conversation about the fact that we were a same-sex family. The director was very honest and said that they hadn't dealt with a same-sex family before, but that they were open to working with us to make sure our needs were met. **Nicola**

There was one kinder where we both found the teacher really cold and standoffish and I wondered whether that was the whole lesbian thing. I think probably our anti-gaydar was working subliminally. **Ruth**

I think we chose our first kinder because the teacher was a man, which was quite unusual. I felt it would be a bit different. I was still in that stage of making sure everybody knew that my partner was female and I think being up-front like that meant it was never a big deal. **Bridget**

We didn't specifically quiz them about how they would handle the whole gay and lesbian thing, but finding out about their policies generally was enough to give us a good understanding of whether they were likely to be flexible, inclusive, diverse and welcoming. **Ruth**

I got in touch with a few families I knew; it's good to talk to them because they've got older kids so I've been able to ask them about kinder and school. **Pia**

We made an assessment based on an initial conversation; you just get a feel for a place. They were very inclusive of Carol, but there was also a range of other considerations about the quality of care, how we connected with them, and did Frances seem to like it. I thought the way they were with us as a rainbow family was important, but one of a range of things. **Trudy**

I think a good kinder is mainly about the programs. I'm a teacher myself and so really value the education experience our kinder offers. **Ruth**

The kinder staff were just good people and they seemed nice. They had a beautiful outdoor area and all the stuff that is probably important to most parents, so I didn't overly pursue whether they were okay with same-sex couples or not. I just sort of assumed they'd be okay, but we were always very straight up about it. **Bec**

Staff and parents

There were occasionally problems with other kids at kinder who were clearly repeating something they had been told by their parents. One child said, 'A child having two mummies makes God cry'. Luckily, that wasn't said to our children, it was said to one of the staff members who said, 'No, no – keep that to yourself'. **Patricia**

Pretty early on one of the parents offered to help. She said, 'I'll give you my number and just ring me any time'. She has twin boys, too. **Anthony**

She went to kinder locally [in a small regional area] where she had attended occasional care, so she was well known and they were absolutely fine. Not particularly aware, but because we had a personal and ongoing relationship, whenever stuff came up there was always a phone call. **Katrina**

He went to day care in the city and he has just finished kinder there. They have mostly been really good, but there have been a few hiccups. They asked questions and they were really receptive to things that we asked them to do and not do. **Nicola**

All kids at this age, including mine, are absolutely sure they're right. What they have been told is the truth because they believe everything their parents say and if you've been told you need a mum and a dad to make a baby then you believe that. It's not that the kid is coming from a bad place, they're just certain about their own reality and their parent hasn't introduced any possibility of there being multiple realities. **Claire**

A couple of people probably thought we were interesting and that they might like to get to know us because we were different – because we were a lesbian couple – and then they found out we were just as normal as everyone else. **Ruth**

If the staff read her a book they will change mummy and daddy to mummy and mama. **Eli**

Lucy, my daughter, has a kinder that she goes to now and we've been educating the kinder teachers all year. **Alison**

There is one worker who's been a bit prickly about what time we bring the children and little things. I feel really uncomfortable about stuff like that and I don't know how to handle it. I'm not really sure if that's just the way she is, or whether she's a little bit directive to us because it's us. Apart from that, everyone else has been really friendly and flexible and accommodating. **Anthony**

Thoughts and suggestions

When possible, both of us try to do pick-up and drop off. It's very affirming for your kids if you're both showing up; it means your child has got a strong sense of your family being involved. **Alison**

I think if you are confident and positive about it all you just don't give people the space to criticise or be negative and I find that works quite well. **Patricia**

We gave them the *Love Makes a Family* posters and they put them up. **Nicola**

Other families have been fine; we haven't had any problems at all with friends coming over, or the kids going to their houses. We're pretty open around the school and the kinder. At events, we're both there and involved so we're not hiding it and we haven't met any resistance at all. **Nicola**

We try to join things and not let our fear of not being accepted stop us. You've got to try to overcome anxiety about those things in order to go along to social nights or whatever. The best approach for us has been thinking, 'Too bad, we're part of this community, we're going along'. We're not going to let those fears stop us because we can't communicate that message to our kids. That's not easy and I'm not the most super confident person in the world. **Mandy**

At pre-prep, the manager of that section was very inclusive and said, 'Tell me what books you want and we'll go and buy them'. So they've got lots of books that they just toss in with the others and the kids can pick up a book about mum and dad or mum and mum. **Jenny**

We had a few more issues at kinder with our son. He is a little bit gender creative; his favourite colour is pink and he likes to wear dresses. Once they got to know him – he's a beautiful, lovely little guy – they just accepted him for who he is, but some of the other kids made comments. The staff responded to our requests to address that and they talked to the kids about diversity and about how everyone is different and about celebrating uniqueness; they had Diversity Day and they called it Rainbow Day. Each year it has taken a bit of work and some conversations, but they've got there and it is a really safe place for him now. **Nicola**

There was a good preliminary orientation period the year before she started. They hosted a couple of family barbecues which was fantastic so we basically got to come out and all the parents got to know each other. And the kids didn't have to feel like they were coming out as well. **Alison**

When they were in kindergarten we equipped the kids with things to say like, 'I've got two mums and that's okay', but the other kids kept coming back and saying, 'But you have to have a dad. Why haven't you got a dad?' So they actually killed off their 'dad', but unfortunately they used different stories; in one he died in a skiing accident, in the other it was something else. **Claire**



A heads up

One of the biggest challenges for rainbow families is that we constantly have to come out and explain who we are, and there can often be a level of anxiety about how people will respond to us when we do.

Just being different from the norm means we regularly have to negotiate things that other families take for granted. Often, we find ourselves having to educate people in our community, including other parents, childcare staff and teachers.

The lack of social understanding and acceptance can be very difficult, especially when children reach an age when they start to understand the implications of this. Negative comments expressed by politicians, religious leaders and social commentators can be very harmful.

Perhaps the biggest fear is that our children will be teased or bullied at school because of their family structure. While this certainly can occur, many parents find their fears of this are unfounded.

For some parents, being isolated or not knowing other rainbow families can be hard. Other parents would like to see greater representation of our families in popular culture and in the media, and a formal recognition of our families through marriage equality.

Parents say ...

The biggest challenges

It's not that bad, it's just that coming out is never going to stop. **Michelle**

The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is probably just always being different to the norm and having to manage that difference on a day to day basis. **Mandy**

I don't find it difficult, to be honest. It's awkward having to come out all the time and I guess it's particularly awkward having to come out post-separation. That makes it a little harder. **Bec**

I think it's probably just that educative role – that you constantly have to explain your family structure to new people when you meet them. Constantly. **Patricia**

We've done quite a bit of travel and we have not always bothered to come out. You feel like you are misleading people a bit and my daughter will say, 'Hang on, what are you saying? What are you letting them think?' I do find that really hard and we have had to explain to her that sometimes it's easier to just let it be. **Bridget**

The constant second-guessing about how much of an issue it will be – and you don't want to get into the whole internalised homophobia, transphobia stuff – but is it really an issue or am I just considering something that doesn't exist? **Trudy**

I think it is challenging assumptions all the time. And not just us, the kids have to do it constantly, too. **Nicola**

One of the most difficult things for us would be going to a large event – like a traditional, country concert – where there were lots of people I was unsure about. Knowing we would be very visible as a gay family and not knowing what the response was going to be. **Anthony**

Protecting our children

Looking ahead, what I worry about for the kids is bullying, but we're not there yet. I have read interviews with people who say it does normalise your family a bit if you are involved, and that is something I would see myself doing – getting involved, trying to make a connection with other parents. **Michelle**

Probably just normalising it for the kids, that's the main thing for me. If your kid was getting bullied – but, touch wood, we haven't had any major issues with that at all – that would be hard. **Jenny**

I think when he was younger it was my own apprehension and guilt. You think: *What is going to happen when he goes to primary school? Who do I need to protect him from – teachers, school kids, parents?* Anticipating all of that was probably the hardest thing. And that was all in my own mind, as it turned out. **Mark**

The worst thing for me is anxiety for my child about discrimination or teasing, I think. **Anna**

Societal views

The thing that annoys me is all these politicians saying that kids of gay couples are going to turn out gay, or that we're not bringing them up correctly. That really pisses me off. They grow up just the same as in any other family. **Peter**

I think for Sally, it's probably that she's in the no man's land of: *You're not in the dad's movie-night crew, and you're not in the mum's movie-night crew, so where are you?* **Ruth**

Our kids have lots of female role models. They experience all of that just the same as any other family and it annoys me when people say that our sort of families don't work properly, because they do. We probably make sure our kids have access to role models more than heterosexual couples do. **Peter**

I think it's that invisibility; you walk down the street and everyone who sees me with the children assumes that I'm straight. People assume – or forget – that my partner is a woman. **Ruth**

At the moment, we ostensibly present as a straight family. Like, I'm pretty butch and Gary's not, and people see us and they go: *Well you're not mainstream, but is that because you're from Melbourne?!* **Trudy**

The worst thing is not being able to be recognised as a family properly. Marriage is not necessarily important, but for us it's about the recognition that we are a family like any other family, and that's pretty important. **Peter**

You're also just battling the media assumption. Every program that the kids watch on ABC KIDS always is mum, dad and kids, so they constantly get this saturation about what families look like. And then you're saying, 'No, families come in all shapes and sizes.' I guess it would be nice if there were some children's programs that were more diverse. **Patricia**

Other challenges

I think there is a big lack of information out there for people wanting to start a family. It's not until you are really determined to have a family that you actually go to the effort of finding out how you can make this happen, and there are still a lot of hurdles to go through. **Sally**

At this stage, watching Jemima play mummy and daddy with her dolls and getting her to understand why there is no daddy. She is so young and kids don't get things at this age. **Ellysa**

You don't have anyone else around who's in the same situation; we're miles away from anyone else. **Ruth**

Being a lesbian primary school teacher, you have to be so careful. I remember one year I had grade ones and a couple of the kids came and stood behind me and started massaging my shoulders and I felt really nervous. **Sally**

I think just being a family in today's society when you are trying to juggle all those balls is tough. Trying to get the work/life balance is probably the biggest thing, which has got nothing to do with the fact that we're two mums. **Julie**

The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is that it's a bit like you're speaking in French and they're listening in Tswana. **Ruth**

I don't find anything difficult about it, but I'm quite old now. **Claire**

Maybe just having to explain or justify things, but I don't think our challenges are very different from other families. When I sit down with my mothers' group and we talk, it's just the same sort of things. **Pia**

