

GAY PARENTING: "It's just like coming out: people will only start to think of gay men as fathers if they actually see

By Sam Abel-Palmer

If you believe the gay press, gay dads are everywhere. Major-release books, high-profile articles in *The Advocate* — even *The New York Times* is telling us how gay male couples everywhere are acquiring children. Baby joggers are the latest necessary gay accoutrement, like goatees or tank tops. Gay men all over the country are adopting — except, apparently, in Vermont.

My husband Craig and I started the "Dad thing" almost three years ago. We didn't become dads to be fashionable. We've wanted children since the start of our relationship, and as soon as our lives and careers made it feasible, we became foster parents with the intent to adopt. We just finalized the adoption of our oldest son, and we hope to start adoption proceedings for our younger son very soon. Without question, it's the best thing we've done in our lives.

We adore our boys (ages 4 and 18 months), and our experience as gay male parents has been amazingly positive.

The one thing that's disappointed me is the almost total lack of a network of other gay male parents in Vermont. We've had no trouble finding lesbian parents. Almost half the people in our foster parent training class were lesbians. There's a local gay parenting group made up of many terrific lesbian couples. And we've recently become friends with a wonderful lesbian couple with three kids the same age as ours — it's a true blessing to have some gay-friendly adult conversation while the kids amuse each other. But we're always on the lookout for other male couples doing what we're doing, without much luck. Since coming to Burlington, we've met one single gay man who also adopted through foster care, but SRS told us that we were the first gay male couple they had encountered.

As a gay man, of course, I

love to network — it's part of my identity. Being gay means connecting with other gay people. We've all been through that lonely early stage of coming out, when we think we're the only one in the world to feel this way, so when we finally realize that there are other gay people out there, we leap at the chance to form communities. In our pre-children days, Craig and I spent most of our social time with other gay men. We joined support groups and found the informal gathering places where we could link up with other people who shared our experiences.

Parenting makes it a whole lot harder to stay in the gay male loop. Being a parent is wonderful, but it's exhausting, and it eats up the energy that we used to devote to the gay community. This is hardly unique to gay parents — I'm sure all parents of young children go through the same sense of isolation from their former lives. But you can be straight without being part of a "straight community." As a gay man, I miss the connections I used to have to other "people like us."

There are, of course, support groups for gay fathers out there, but they're mainly for guys who had kids in straight marriages, and then came out. I'm not looking for a support group — I don't need to sit around a somber circle, downloading all my problems as a gay father. If I may say so, Craig and I are pretty damn good dads, we love what we do, and we're very comfortable with our parenthood. I'd just love to hang out with some other gay dads, to be part of a network of people whose lives look like ours.

It doesn't help that many of our gay male friends have a hard time understanding why we even want to be parents.

us doing it. Craig and I don't carry around "gay father" signs on our necks, but we have always made a point of going to restaurants, playgrounds, and street festivals as a family. It lets people know that we're proud of our status as dads. And maybe we'll even be able to persuade a few other folks to do what we're doing."

When we talk about our children, most other gay men respond with a mix of confusion and astonishment. Few people actually say, "Why would you want to do something like that?" But the sentiment is there under the wide-eyed looks. And I can certainly see where they're coming from. Being a parent puts a major crimp in the "traditional" gay male lifestyle. It's hard to let yourself go wild on the dance floor when you're thinking about how the babysitter is doing back home. A toddler's nap schedule does not mesh well with the rhythms of a Key West B & B. I think that straight people can connect to us more easily as dads — they don't get our sex lives, but parenting is common ground. But parenting children is far beyond the scope of what gay male culture expects us to be doing. Bringing a child into your home means abandoning many of the activities and attitudes our culture associates with being gay, and that can be a hard bridge to cross.

Sometimes I think that straight parents are more supportive of our parenting than are our gay male friends. At restaurants, we sometimes overhear straight couples at the next table explaining us to their kids: "You see, some children have a mom and a dad, and some have two moms, and some have two dads." We often get smiles and nods of recognition from straight parents on the street: "Oh, those are the gay dads we've been hearing about." The reaction from other children is even better. We've heard these reactions to the comment "Joey has two

dads" at the daycare where Joey, our oldest, goes: "I wish I had two dads too," or "I have a mom and a dad, but I have two dads in my heart," or even better, "Oh yeah, well I have three dads!" Of course, there's plenty of anti-parenting homophobia out there too, like the bumper sticker I saw the other day in Montpelier: "Mom and Dad, not Tom and Brad." But overall, the response from straight parents has been glowing, at least among the people we know.

The gay community has trouble even thinking about men as fathers, even in the world's gayest places. We rent a condo in Provincetown for a week every summer, and Craig's sister, Pam, usually stays with us for a few days. When we all go out together to dinner or to the beach, everyone we meet assumes that Pam is the boys' mother, and that Craig and I are the gay uncles (or, worse, that we're a straight family slumming in P-town).

With Pam along, most people barely notice us, while the occasional comment or compliment about the boys invariably gets directed to Pam. The instant that Pam leaves, we suddenly become visible — very visible. Last year, within an hour of putting Pam on the boat to Boston, people were literally stopping us on the street to tell us how great it was that we had children.

Lesbian couples at Herring Cove Beach did everything but applaud as we walked by, each with a child in one arm and a cooler on the other. It's not that the gay community doesn't support gay male parenting — once they see us as a parenting couple, the enthusiasm is real. But if we're out in public with a woman, people just assume that she's the mom, and we're something else.

The only way to begin to counteract those assumptions is for gay dads to be a lot more visible. It's just like coming out: people will only start to think of gay men as fathers if they actually see us doing it. Craig and I don't carry around "gay father" signs on our necks, but we have always made a point of going to restaurants, playgrounds, and street festivals as a family. It lets people know that we're proud of our status as dads. And maybe we'll even be able to persuade a few other folks to do what we're doing.

Happily, we may be getting some company soon. We've recently met two wonderful guys who just moved to Burlington through the gay-friendly church we attend. They came over for dinner, along with our new lesbian-parent friends and their kids. It was chaos — five screaming children throwing around every toy in the house, while six adults tried to carry on a conversation between wiping noses, mediating fights over who gets Thomas's trains, and trying to get the brood to sit still long enough to eat.

Luckily, the madness didn't scare them off. The next week they called Burlington SRS to inquire about becoming foster parents. In time, I hope there'll be enough of us out there to build a real community — both for ourselves, and for our children.

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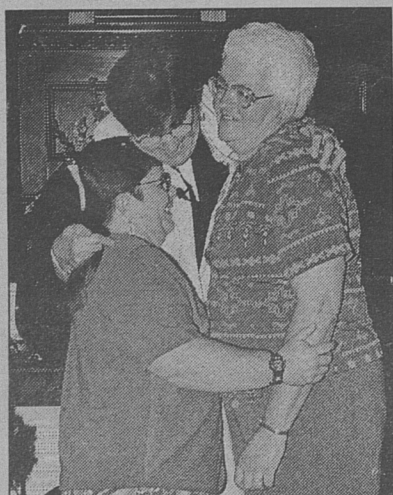
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