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In A Family Way: School Daze

I had an experience on a local (Albany NY) parenting listserve: the list owner refused to let me post an announcement about an LGBT Parenting Conference because, she wrote, she's a Christian. I decided to go public with this information by writing about it in my nationally syndicated column as well as sending the email I received from her to many of the list members for whom I had email addresses. Wow, talk about a small action creating large waves.

When I woke up the following morning, I had numerous emails in my mailbox, all of them supportive. A few people were appalled, a number decided to leave the parenting list in disgust, two people came out to me as bisexual, and two more shared that they had close relatives who were gay.

The most surprising disclosure, though, was from the listowner herself who told me that the reason she has such strong feelings about the issue of gay parenting is that her mother is gay! In my line of work, not much trips me up, but this confession moved me from shock to a long guffaw and finally to a place of emotional reflection and something akin to compassion. I, of course, invited her to attend the LGBT Parenting Conference.

You've all heard the joke that to lower anxiety about public speaking, you should envision the audience to be naked. It levels the playing field, since most of us feel a bit naked when standing in front of an audience. I suspect part of the resistance we experience when doing LGBT education, particularly in school systems, is that we are up against very personal issues about people's own families. To talk about starting a gay/straight alliance in a high school, to talk about including gay parents as a viable family form in elementary school classrooms, is to face parents and teachers whose own closets are full of skeletons: the brother who died of AIDS that no one talks about; the petting they

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remember in high school with a same-sex peer; the rumor an aunt shared about their father's gay relationship (I've heard that story four times in the past decade); their fears that their son's love of art and beauty may indicate *something* about his future sexuality. Our naked insistence on our humanity and our willingness to simply be queer families out and proud may make others feel exposed, unable to hide their own unresolved queer life experiences.

Talking about gay families and gay people is not something "over there," but something that every family has a personal and unique relationship to, a unique queer *relation* in the family. Since most people have not really examined these issues about homosexuality in their own families, neighborhoods, and social circles, those of us who dare to keep talking about it, up front and center, are opening up a proverbial can of worms that our listeners can barely emotionally handle. Educating people about queer families is not just a scholarly task, not just facts and figures. It takes skill and sensitivity to work with people's, dare I say, *latent* psychological experiences, what Carl Jung called the shadow self. It's something like this: behind every Kinsey 6 heterosexual is lurking a queer memory or experience reinforcing the bolt on the closet door.

In order to educate parents, teachers, and administrators in schools, we need to start with very simple basics. Like the listowner, who heard "LGBT Parenting Conference," and thought I said, "Bacchanalian

sex orgy," many people are still frightened by our words, our existence, and a simple smile across the room when homosexuality is rumored to be involved. We need to remind them that we are not talking about sex or even sexuality (we can get to that later). We are talking about families, and the diverse makeup of all of our families. We are talking about their cousins and aunts; about their nephew and his partner. We are talking (who knew?) about *their* parents.

So in deciding to take a stand against homophobia and exclusionary policies, something else has been revealed, and what a surprise to find yet another face of the gay community, of the gay parenting community. Underneath what appeared to be hostility and religiosity is a woman ashamed of her own lesbian mother, teaching her children that their grandmother is a sinner.

The damage done to our families from years of homophobia and internalized shame is hard to undo, but if we make our school systems safe for gay-parented families, maybe one day her children will come home from school and talk about their friends, who have two moms, and slowly, slowly, the tide will turn. I do believe that both the Jewish and Christian scriptures teach us that it is a child that shall lead us. The lessons our children are taught in school about the diversity and acceptance of all family forms, will be brought home to their parents, hopefully making the world safer not only for gay youth, not only for kids being raised by LGBT parents, but also for the parents living in shame about the gay-parented families that reared them. ▼

Arlene Istar Lev is a family therapist, activist, and educator. She and her partner are parents to two handsome sons, Shaiyah and Eliezer. Find her on the web at www.choicesconsulting.com and www.proudparenting.com (search: Dear Ari).