

## A Different Life: What Do We Tell the Children?

by Patricia J.

"Impressionable" is the word some parents I know used recently to describe their twelve- and fourteen-year old "pre-teenagers." The discussion concerned when and how to explain to them that they have a relative who is lesbian.

"We want to do it right. We're such a private family we don't even talk about politics, not to mention sex lives." These are parents doing their best to be open, to accept what they don't understand, but now it's no longer just an issue for the adults in the family...and questions about the children intensify and spotlight the discomfort of everyone around them.

I can't help but wonder if we're underestimating the young and their awareness, shutting them out with our own "concern" for their welfare. When my niece was eight, she asked me why I wasn't married. I was with her and her best friend at the playground. My stomach felt suddenly hollow and heavy – for a moment – and then I said that I felt you should live with your best friend, the person you loved most, and for me that was a woman. She seemed satisfied with that and we continued swinging.

I rarely see her now because we live in different states, but I'm ready to talk with her more and I hope she might like to talk to me. Not being her parent, I can't know her well enough to be sure of what she's thinking or feeling, but I wonder if any of us really knows the inner world of the children around us.

On a recent PBS special, Polish pre-teens were interviewed about AIDS. "They don't talk to us about it," one articulate young woman said. "They think if they don't tell us we won't find out. We already know about it-- but we need to know what's true."

Twenty years ago it was possible to be thirteen and not hear the words "gay" or "lesbian." That's no longer true. Children grow up in a world where they do hear the words, and much of what they hear is one-sided and homophobic, more fiction than fact. Parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives have a responsibility to help them feel open and unashamed when it comes to asking questions about what they hear. But should they be the ones who have to use "those words" first, since so many adults still avoid using them? Are we underestimating them (and forgetting what

we needed at fourteen) when we avoid the obvious and interpret their continued silence as innocence or ignorance?

I recently asked a group of parents what they would say to their children and when. One mother of girls, ten and six, said her responses have changed when one asks, "Can women marry women?" Now she says "women can love women or men" and "men can love women or men." She also tells them, "They can't really marry but they can love who they want."

That particular child heard the reality, but how many others do? Usually the more comfortable adults are around gays and lesbians, the closer and more positive their relationships with us have been, the clearer their responses to children's questions will be. Another parent expressed uneasiness that her child could possibly be different

from her, and that her child might also have to face a world that is harsh and judgemental toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals.

So what do we tell the children? Hopefully the truth – not our own particular perspective, as if that alone could ever be the whole picture – and we can be open ourselves to learning what that truth is. It won't be the same for everyone, and that, too, is important for them to hear. We can tell them what we know and what we don't know...we can leave open the possibility that they may not only have questions about others, but about themselves as well.

We can help the children begin to see that curiosity about homosexuality brings up questions about love as well as about sexuality. We can do this with them if we can do it with ourselves, and that may be the real question to ask – are we ready?

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