

Young people with GLBT parents

“If there were no homophobia, I would be lying in bed thinking I probably had one of the best days of my life.” (Jack, Year 8, respondent in survey of school experiences of children of lesbian and gay parents.)

One third bullied...

An Australian study of the school experiences of children of gay or lesbian parents found that 36 per cent were bullied as a result of homophobia. ¹ Bullying ranged from verbal abuse, teasing and joking to physical and sexual violence.

This figure matches the national report on same-sex attracted young people, which stated that an almost identical proportion (35 per cent) of same sex attracted people aged 14 – 21 years were bullied at school, either verbally or physically. ²

Internalised Homophobia

If the children of gay or lesbian parents internalise homophobic attitudes, they may feel shame, as though their family is in some way 'bad' or wrong. Over time, some children come to blame their parents and feel angry towards them, rather than the society that doesn't accept them. Parents who are lesbian or gay may decide to conceal their sexual identity permanently in order to avoid putting their children at risk of being bullied or discriminated against.

Some young people tell lies to their friends and ask their lesbian or gay parent to participate in the lies. For example, they will pretend their mum's partner is an aunt, and when they have a friend sleep over they make up a spare room that they pretend is the aunt's bedroom. Some young people go to great lengths to hide the truth. When they tell lies to their friends, they don't feel a part of the friendship network. Some avoid having friends so that they can avoid questions that would 'out' them.

Secondary school teacher responses

Interviews with children of lesbian and gay parents, in Ray and Gregory's study, found that schools' often had inadequate responses to homophobic language or bullying and that this response by school staff became critical to their wellbeing.

High school students were often reluctant to go to teachers about their experiences, as responses of their teachers to acts of bullying did not inspire trust in the vast majority of secondary students. Interview participants sometimes found their teachers as homophobic as their fellow students.

Reducing the risks of bullying at school

Increasing a school's capacity to support students with gay and lesbian parents will benefit young people and their families.

Due to a lack of gay and lesbian references or role models in school curriculum, books, television programs or songs, young people with gay or lesbian parents encounter

situations that position them as “different”. The importance of having role models cannot be underestimated. Role models give young people someone to look up to, someone who is similar to people in their family. Positive role models show how gays and lesbians contribute to our society, which in turn decreases the need for isolation and secrecy.

Getting together with children in families like theirs, either socially or in a formal group, was felt to be a distinct advantage by many young people in Ray and Gregory’s study. Contacts for social support groups in Victoria, see <http://www.celebratingdiversity.org.au/index.php?page=social-support-groups>

Appreciating difference...

Despite negative experiences of bullying and homophobia, secondary school students who participated in Ray and Gregory’s study also had insights into some of the benefits of being raised by gay or lesbian parents. Many of them felt their upbringing led them to tolerance and an appreciation of difference.

“I’ve been able to grow up with an open mind. And I bring that into the world and create more open minds...I’ve taught my friends about homosexuality. I’ve been a support for gay kids.”⁴

Bibliography

Ray, V. and Gregory, R. 2001, School Experiences of the Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents, Family Matters Journal of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, No.59.

Hillier et al. 1998, School Experiences of the Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents, authored by Vivien Ray and Robin Gregory and published in Family Matters Journal of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, No.59, Winter 2001.