

Book Review: *Families Like Mine* by Abigail Garner

Claudia Stallman here. I am Director of the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project in Binghamton, NY. We are funded by a grant from the New York State Health Department to provide educational programs, support groups, and information and referrals to LGBT parents and parents-to-be. We sponsor Pride and Joy Families groups in Binghamton, Elmira/Corning, Syracuse and Rochester, NY. The groups offer a sense of community to parents, their kids (of all ages) and prospective parents. New folks are always welcome.

I am reading a wonderful book called Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is. It's a first book by Abigail Garner, the adult daughter of a gay man, who has been writing and lecturing on this topic for years. In fact, my partner and I attended a workshop she gave at Family Week in Provincetown, MA several years ago. Even then I was struck by her candor; Garner takes the "tell it like it is" subtitle seriously. Frankly, some of the material in her book is hard to hear as a gay parent (for example, that our kids may be shielding us from hurtful homophobic comments they hear at school). I am convinced, however, that it is important for we parents to listen to these voices.

Families Like Mine presents a thorough discussion of the subject of growing up with LGBT parents. And thankfully, it is not an anthology of first person accounts. Garner has done the hard work for us of listening to and weaving together the voices of adult children. She uses their stories, their quotes and her own life experiences to analyze and make clear the issues she wants to bring forward. Some of these topics include children of LGBT parents in school, growing up under public scrutiny, coming out about their families, surviving divorces and same-sex relationship break-ups, growing up straight in queer culture, "second generation," when kids with LGBT parents come out themselves, and the impact of HIV/AIDS on children of gay parents.

I was impressed with the range of topics covered (Garner may have thought of just about everything). She treats each one with sensitivity and thoughtfulness, demystifying and ultimately taking the "sting" out of some of the tougher subjects. Her advice, sensibly enough, is usually to "TALK ABOUT IT!"

Garner points out that language is often a barrier to children talking about their families. For example, there are no descriptors for a child's relationship to people such as their father's partner's child ("step-brother"?). To her credit, she does a terrific job of choosing and defining her terms. "Queer spawn" and "homo-hostile" are just two of the new words I learned and plan to keep using.

Some readers may have attended the screenings in upstate New York in May 2004 of the documentary film *Our House*, which also gives kids with gay and lesbian parents the chance to speak about their families. Filmmaker Meema Spadola grew up in rural Maine with her lesbian mom. She and Abigail Garner are contemporaries who share the same premise: that children of LGBT parents have a unique and valid perspective, and "an absolute need" for a sense of community. To conclude, I hope you will read the book, see the film, and, if you live in upstate New York, come out to a Pride and Joy Families event!