

Tips for Teachers to Make Classrooms Safer for Students with LGBT Parents

From the COLAGE website www.colage.org

“When filling out permission slips, emergency waivers, and financial aid forms my parents and I have to cross out the heading “father” and write in “mother.” “

-18 year old daughter of lesbian moms.

“When I was a freshman in high school, one of my mothers died. Everyday for two weeks the principal for my school program would pull me out of class to see how I was doing. He acknowledged that she was a parent and not just my mother’s partner. It shows the potential of how big a difference schools can make..”

-18 year old daughter of lesbian moms and a gay step-father

“In language classes from kindergarten through high school, every time I had a new teacher and we were describing our families, I was told that I was not doing it right because I said I had two mothers instead of a mother and father.”

-17 year old daughter of lesbian moms

1. **Always intervene** whenever you hear anti-gay language or actions. At the beginning of the year set classroom rules that include making it clear that racist, homophobic, sexist, and all discriminatory comments are not welcome in your classroom. Whenever you hear something being said, step right in. If possible use it as a “teachable moment” in your classroom. Send a clear message that homophobia will never be tolerated. In addition, try to link homophobia to other types of oppression- teach students that hate in all of its forms is wrong.

2. **Ask about a student’s background instead of making assumptions.** Create a classroom where each student is able to share freely about their identity and families. Use language that is empowering to youth with LGBT parents. For example, many youth report that when asked about their families that are headed by two same-sex parents, people will ask, “Which one is your *real* mom/dad?” However in alternative families, youth see anyone serving in a parental role as their real parent. Youth who feel comfortable to talk about their families will use the terms that they are comfortable with to describe their parents.

3. **Visually show your support.** On your walls include a poster about diverse families (perhaps one of the educational posters offered by COLAGE) or other images that show you are an ally to LGBT people and issues. You can also use Safe Zone posters which are commonly used by teachers to make a statement against homophobia.

4. **Avoid heterosexism in your classroom and assignments.** Some examples: In language classes asking youth to describe their families; often youth with LGBT parents have been reprimanded for using the wrong gender pronouns. However, the fact that they are using he and he to describe two dads is correct, their teachers were making the

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4. heterosexist assumption that parents can only be straight. If you assign family origin or family tree projects, allow youth from LGBT families to make their own decisions about how they portray their families whether it is two parents of the same gender, or multiple parents who co-parent them, etc. As much as possible use gender-neutral language in both classroom in informal conversations.

5. **Include Topics about Diversity in your curriculum:** Study different kinds of families, famous LGBT people (and when someone you are studying anyway is a LGBT person, mention that). Have speakers, use videos, and books to show students that diversity is something to be celebrated. Perhaps use events such as National Coming Out Day, Pride Day, or a Unity Week as a reason to incorporate LGBT issues positively into your classroom through discussions and projects.

6. **Never out a student with LGBT parents.** The only person who should make the decision to share about their family is the student when they feel safe and ready to do so.

7. **Do not make assumptions about youth with LGBT parents.** Youth from alternative families report that people often assume certain traits will apply to all youth with LGBT parents. For example, do not expect that a student who has LGBT parents will also be gay. Research shows that there is no higher incidence of homosexuality among people raised by LGBT parents than by heterosexual parents.

8. **Make your classroom accessible to LGBT families.** Do not rely on forms, permission slips, or other paperwork that asks for signatures from mother and father. Instead use the terms Parent/Guardian. On Back to School night, or during parent teacher conferences expect and welcome LGBT parents.

9. **Work with your administration** to make sure your school is safe for students with LGBT families. Suggest that the faculty at your school does an LGBT sensitivity training, or an in-service about LGBT and diverse families. Discuss protocols for dealing with anti-gay or anti-gay family harassment on school-wide or department levels so that all teachers are equipped to address homophobia.

10. **Educate yourself.** Learn more about LGBT families, and issues. Not only will this allow you to be informed when students raise questions or need resources, but it will help you be better equipped to address incidents of homophobia in your school and to include LGBT content in your curriculum. As a starting point, use the resources in the back of this guide for suggestions of books, movies, websites and more.

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11. **Be involved.** If your school has a Gay Straight Alliance or other type of club, attend meetings when possible to show your support. You can also offer to be the faculty advisor for such a club if students are trying to start one in your school. If you are involved in your school's GSA, Rainbow Club, or other diversity club, ensure that LGBT family issues are included and that youth from LGBT families are welcomed as participants.