

# SCHOOL SUPPORT GUIDE



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# Contents

Introduction	iii
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## Topics

Starting kinder or day care	1
Rainbow families and primary school	9
Mother's Day and Father's Day	17
Teasing, name-calling and bullying	23
Older kids and adolescents	29

## Case Studies

Hamish and Fiona: A response to teasing	35
Corin: 12 years of wisdom	39

## Research

Child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: The evidence from Australia	43
About us	47
Acknowledgements	48

# Introduction

*Rainbow Families School Support Guide* is the result of collaboration between Rainbow Families and writer, Jacqui Tomlins. The guide was developed in response to ongoing requests for information from parents and caregivers and is part of Rainbow Families' commitment to providing quality resources for and about our families.

Rainbow families are much like any other family: we all have to adjust to the changes children bring to our lives; we all want our kids to grow up secure, healthy and happy; we all have good parenting days and bad. And we all have to deal with nits and homework and fights over screen time.

But there are some things that are unique to rainbow families; small day-to-day challenges and bigger questions and concerns. *Rainbow Families School Support Guide* aims to address those differences. The ideas, suggestions and advice contained in the guide represent the collective wisdom of dozens of parents who have grappled with these challenges and come up with some great solutions.

We hope the guide will also be of value to early learning educators, teachers, counsellors and other school staff who work with rainbow families. We hope it will provide them with insight and understanding and give them the knowledge and confidence to provide informed support to our families.

This is the first collaboration between Jacqui Tomlins and Rainbow Families, but we hope it won't be our last. We are enormously proud to present the *Rainbow Families School Support Guide*.



# Starting kinder or day care

Kindergartens and childcare centres can vary significantly, with different programs, philosophies and management styles. You may have a number in your area from which to choose, or you may only have one within travelling distance. Some will have experience working with rainbow families, but many may not and yours may be the first rainbow family to attend.

How a centre supports you as a rainbow family is important, but will likely not be your only consideration. A range of other factors may come into play including: the approach to learning, the age or experience of staff, buildings and outside space, location, diversity of children attending, involvement of parents, cost and whether the centre feels like a 'good fit' for your child.

## **Choosing a kinder or childcare centre**

Unless you know exactly where you want to send your child, it makes sense to visit a number of centres before choosing. You can often get a sense of how diverse and welcoming the centre is from posters, notices, artwork and books.

Taking a tour of the centre during daytime hours, talking to staff and observing the children can give you a real sense of whether it's what you are looking for. Ask the coordinator if they have had same-sex families attending the centre; their response will give you a sense of whether the centre is going to be supportive of your family.

Once you've chosen a kinder or centre, you can help foster positive relationships and a supportive environment for your child by:

- attending centre functions, volunteering to help, or being involved with the management committee
- providing your child with some age-appropriate responses to questions they may be asked
- providing information and being willing to educate staff about rainbow families.

Being open and willing to engage in up-front discussions will enable you to manage any issues as they arise.

## Parents say ...

### Choosing a kinder or childcare centre

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The first thing is about his needs, what kind of kid he seems to be and therefore what kind of learning environment we want for him. Then I guess a question about their attitude: Do they have other same-sex families and if not, how would they handle that? **Pia**

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My approach has always been to be very out, very early. I spent a year working in an early childhood centre and I knew what was important to me. I chose the one that felt the best, that felt right to me, and I spent a lot of time there. **Bec**

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When we looked at kinders, I thought inner city was going to be friendlier and, in fact, it was; ten years ago things were a bit different. **Trudy**

We went to all the kinder open days we could get to in our area, plus a few others. We visited while the classes were in session and talked to the kids and the teachers. I was more concerned about how they handled the students' welfare than how they handled the gay and lesbian thing in particular. I thought we'd cross that bridge when we came to it. When we found a quality kinder teacher the other stuff followed naturally. **Ruth**

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We only approached one day care place. We've got a friend who works at this one and we had heard positive reviews about it. We had a look at it and it really exceeded our expectations. I couldn't have imagined a day care centre that would be so well set up and such a positive environment. **Anthony**

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We chose the kinder because it was down the road from my work. We both had a look around and we had a conversation about the fact that we were a same-sex family. The director was very honest and said that they hadn't dealt with a same-sex family before, but that they were open to working with us to make sure our needs were met. **Nicola**

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There was one kinder where we both found the teacher really cold and standoffish and I wondered whether that was the whole lesbian thing. I think probably our anti-gaydar was working subliminally. **Ruth**

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I think we chose our first kinder because the teacher was a man, which was quite unusual. I felt it would be a bit different. I was still in that stage of making sure everybody knew that my partner was female and I think being up-front like that meant it was never a big deal. **Bridget**

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We didn't specifically quiz them about how they would handle the whole gay and lesbian thing, but finding out about their policies generally was enough to give us a good understanding of whether they were likely to be flexible, inclusive, diverse and welcoming. **Ruth**

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I got in touch with a few families I knew; it's good to talk to them because they've got older kids so I've been able to ask them about kinder and school. **Pia**

We made an assessment based on an initial conversation; you just get a feel for a place. They were very inclusive of Carol, but there was also a range of other considerations about the quality of care, how we connected with them, and did Frances seem to like it. I thought the way they were with us as a rainbow family was important, but one of a range of things. **Trudy**

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I think a good kinder is mainly about the programs. I'm a teacher myself and so really value the education experience our kinder offers. **Ruth**

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The kinder staff were just good people and they seemed nice. They had a beautiful outdoor area and all the stuff that is probably important to most parents, so I didn't overly pursue whether they were okay with same-sex couples or not. I just sort of assumed they'd be okay, but we were always very straight up about it. **Bec**

## Staff and parents

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There were occasionally problems with other kids at kinder who were clearly repeating something they had been told by their parents. One child said, 'A child having two mummies makes God cry'. Luckily, that wasn't said to our children, it was said to one of the staff members who said, 'No, no – keep that to yourself'. **Patricia**

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Pretty early on one of the parents offered to help. She said, 'I'll give you my number and just ring me any time'. She has twin boys, too. **Anthony**

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She went to kinder locally [in a small regional area] where she had attended occasional care, so she was well known and they were absolutely fine. Not particularly aware, but because we had a personal and ongoing relationship, whenever stuff came up there was always a phone call. **Katrina**

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If the staff read her a book they will change mummy and daddy to mummy and mama. **Eli**

All kids at this age, including mine, are absolutely sure they're right. What they have been told is the truth because they believe everything their parents say and if you've been told you need a mum and a dad to make a baby then you believe that. It's not that the kid is coming from a bad place, they're just certain about their own reality and their parent hasn't introduced any possibility of there being multiple realities. **Claire**

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He went to day care in the city and he has just finished kinder there. They have mostly been really good, but there have been a few hiccups. They asked questions and they were really receptive to things that we asked them to do and not do. **Nicola**

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A couple of people probably thought we were interesting and that they might like to get to know us because we were different – because we were a lesbian couple – and then they found out we were just as normal as everyone else. **Ruth**

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Lucy, my daughter, has a kinder that she goes to now and we've been educating the kinder teachers all year. **Alison**

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There is one worker who's been a bit prickly about what time we bring the children and little things. I feel really uncomfortable about stuff like that and I don't know how to handle it. I'm not really sure if that's just the way she is, or whether she's a little bit directive to us because it's us. Apart from that, everyone else has been really friendly and flexible and accommodating. **Anthony**

## Thoughts and suggestions

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When possible, both of us try to do pick-up and drop off. It's very affirming for your kids if you're both showing up; it means your child has got a strong sense of your family being involved. **Alison**

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I think if you are confident and positive about it all you just don't give people the space to criticise or be negative and I find that works quite well. **Patricia**



Other families have been fine; we haven't had any problems at all with friends coming over, or the kids going to their houses. We're pretty open around the school and the kinder. At events, we're both there and involved so we're not hiding it and we haven't met any resistance at all. **Nicola**

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We try to join things and not let our fear of not being accepted stop us. You've got to try to overcome anxiety about those things in order to go along to social nights or whatever. The best approach for us has been thinking, 'Too bad, we're part of this community, we're going along'. We're not going to let those fears stop us because we can't communicate that message to our kids. That's not easy and I'm not the most super confident person in the world. **Mandy**

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At pre-prep, the manager of that section was very inclusive and said, 'Tell me what books you want and we'll go and buy them'. So they've got lots of books that they just toss in with the others and the kids can pick up a book about mum and dad or mum and mum. **Jenny**

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We had a few more issues at kinder with our son. He is a little bit gender creative; his favourite colour is pink and he likes to wear dresses. Once they got to know him – he's a beautiful, lovely little guy – they just accepted him for who he is, but some of the other kids made comments. The staff responded to our requests to address that and they talked to the kids about diversity and about how everyone is different and about celebrating uniqueness; they had Diversity Day and they called it Rainbow Day. Each year it has taken a bit of work and some conversations, but they've got there and it is a really safe place for him now. **Nicola**

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There was a good preliminary orientation period the year before she started. They hosted a couple of family barbecues which was fantastic so we basically got to come out and all the parents got to know each other. And the kids didn't have to feel like they were coming out as well. **Alison**

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We gave them the *Love Makes a Family* posters and they put them up. **Nicola**

When they were in kindergarten we equipped the kids with things to say like, 'I've got two mums and that's okay', but the other kids kept coming back and saying, 'But you have to have a dad. Why haven't you got a dad?' So they actually killed off their 'dad', but unfortunately they used different stories; in one he died in a skiing accident, in the other it was something else. **Claire**





# Rainbow families and primary school

There are many factors rainbow families consider when choosing a primary school. These include: whether the school is local, or in an area thought to be open-minded and rainbow family-friendly; whether it has good policy and practice in relation to bullying; the diversity of the children attending the school; the philosophy of the school and its education programs; whether the school has lesbian, gay or bisexual staff; and whether it meets the educational and personal needs of their child.

In addition, parents will want to know how supportive the school is likely to be of their family and whether staff will be inclusive, respectful and sensitive to their family's particular needs. How the school will deal with any teasing, name-calling or bullying in relation to their family is

of concern to many parents. You may want to seek clarification of the school's approach to these issues before you enrol your child.

There are many ways parents can engage with their child's school to ensure it is a positive and safe environment for their family.

## Choosing a school

Talking to people in your own rainbow family or local networks who have older children can be a good place to start when choosing a school.

You can get a feel for how inclusive a school is from a visit, tour or parent information night, where you can ask a general question about the school's experience of working with same-sex families.

It may be helpful to meet with the principal or vice principal to discuss your concerns and assess their level of support. You can also ask about the school's approach to bullying and ask to see their policy.

## Supporting your child

You can support your child by talking to them before they start school about how they will deal with questions about their family.

Once enrolled, it can be helpful for you to be involved with your school in different capacities, including:

- attending working bees, barbecues or social functions
- volunteering to help in the classroom
- helping with excursions or sporting events
- joining a school committee
- becoming a member of school council
- volunteering with the Parent Teacher Association.

Talking openly and directly to staff about any issue that arises, as soon as it arises, can be useful. You can also suggest books, posters, websites or other resources the school could refer to or buy to help improve understanding in the school community.

# Parents say ...

## Choosing a school

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We chose the school because of their capacity to support kids who come from a really interesting and challenging range of backgrounds. The town has a very significant proportion of highly disadvantaged kids, so they've got some very good strategies in place around inclusiveness, which we really liked. **Katrina**

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I looked at the three closest schools and I wrote one off immediately. Then I chatted to people at the other two and I asked them, 'Have you got any other same-sex-parented families here?' One principal showing me around said, 'No, but of course there's no issue'. He was lovely and I believed him. **Bec**

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Our approach to parenting has very much been that we want our kids to know what the general mainstream world is like and we want them to be able to cope with that. We wanted them get to know that world of heterosexual parents and fairly conservative views, so we just chose our local school. **Mandy**

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A lot of people advised us to send our son somewhere close to home because he would make friends with people in the neighbourhood, so we sent him to the local state school. We certainly discussed our family situation with the principal and the teacher and we talked about how they would handle that and any bullying. We made sure – as a deliberate strategy – that we were very visible in the school and that we were very active. **Jenny**

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I think we just assumed the school would be okay because of the area. **Bridget**

We chose a school in a place where we thought we would naturally meet other rainbow families, but that didn't really happen. But I think [closer to the city] you do just find a more open-minded community, or at least you are not the first lesbian couple they've met, which is how it always was when we were in the outer suburbs. **Bridget**

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At one of the schools – a public school – the principal wore a prominent crucifix, so I wondered whether that meant anything in terms of being homophobic. I'm just not religious and I don't want any Christianity involved in my kids' education, so that turned me off that school straight away. **Claire**

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I've never seen their policy, to be honest, but you walk into the school and you can just see it: it's all over the walls. It's the photographs, it's how the staff interact with the kids, it's the number of integration aides they have, it's the way they run their assemblies. They are very broadly aware of the needs of every child and how they need to be accommodating those. **Katrina**

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The first thing I think of is more the kind of personality he has and then what does that mean in terms of the kind of environment. So: *Does he need this, that or the other?* But obviously, if the school is not comfortable with him having two mums, he's not going to get support if he gets bullied or if kids make disparaging comments. We need to have him in an environment where they will respond seriously to those sorts of things. **Pia**

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We weren't too impressed with the first school we saw. Their approach seemed to be a bit of don't ask, don't tell. It was sort of, *We treat everyone the same, so we ignore any difference*, which I don't think is a very useful approach. **Patricia**

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I walked around with the acting principal and one of the lead teachers and when I asked her about same-sex families she said, 'As far as I know, we don't have any same-sex-parented families, but I can tell you there's at least one gay teacher'. It was hilarious; I thought that was pretty cute. **Bec**

We didn't ask a lot of questions about same-sex families or anything like that. There weren't any stupid questions like, 'Which one's the mother?' The principal just straight away picked up what was going on and who we were and was absolutely comfortable with that. **Patricia**

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Marg and I are both in education, which is probably not a good thing in that we were picky about getting the right match for our kids. We have a niece who had been through primary school, so when we came to look, we were really drawn to her school. At the time, the principal was an out lesbian and sixteen years ago that wasn't a particularly common thing. **Julie**

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She went to a local, very rainbow school. The principal is a lesbian and she's very out and there are quite a number of lesbian families. But while the school was very friendly, it was very elitist in some respects. There was a lot of snobbery and it was very competitive and that drowned out a lot of the rainbow family stuff. **Trudy**

## At school

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Annie came home with a book one day, which was *Where's your daddy?* I spoke to the teacher about it being somewhat insensitive. She was almost in tears. She said she didn't think about it and immediately went through all the books and took out any that might have been of that sort of ilk. **Patricia**

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There's always that awkward moment when I'm meeting a new teacher where I don't know if they know about our family. **Bec**

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Where we are now, we're the only same-sex family and it's like they are proud of that and want to celebrate it, rather than hide it. **Patricia**

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At school, people know not to say anything negative. They know they are in an inner-city area and they have to be cool enough to take on same-sex families. **Mandy**



We went to talk to the principal, who was wonderful and responded very well. She actually had a conversation with our daughter about how she's not the only one in the school who has two mums and said if she ever has any problems she can come and talk. **Nicola**

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There are so many different families around these days. The other kids all knew that Tyler had two dads. **Peter**

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When we separated, I found the school really supportive, and that was important. Noah was in Grade 2 and his teacher told me they were having a circle-time conversation and he said something like, 'My mums have broken up', and another kid said, 'Oh, my parents have broken up too,' and they had a little conversation about it. But it was no big deal and no-one blinked. **Bec**

## Thoughts and suggestions

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Having a gay dad was something that was presented very matter-of-factly. He was very comfortable with it. All his friends knew and their parents knew. For him, it has always been out there and there's been no secret. His mother is very comfortable with it and his stepfather; they've all been very supportive. **Mark**

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I think being visible in the school helps a lot. They had a working bee recently and Lara went along. I think pitching in and lending a hand is helpful. I think it makes it easier if everyone can see that she's got two mums and one time I'm there and the next time it's Lara. **Patricia**

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We taught Chris some things to say. If somebody says, 'Are your parents gay?' you just say, 'Yes, they are. Do you have a problem with that?' **Jenny**

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I was on school council and that's my approach. You ingratiate yourself and people's ideas and perceptions about lesbians are altered. I spent a lot of time in the kids' classrooms chatting to their teachers. The principal has always been incredibly supportive. **Bec**

In the very early years I would go in and do reading groups. I did friggin' tuckshop and all the mummy duties and Elizabeth would go and help out on the sports field. She rode a motorbike and wore a leather jacket and it was kind of funny that she was the cool mum. That was a strategy for us – to be visible. Then it's not a secret and nobody can use it against you. **Jenny**

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I was actually more apprehensive about his friends staying over. I would always make a point of actually meeting the parents and making sure they knew I had a partner. I made sure they knew I was gay somehow and just gauged reaction. I never, ever had a negative reaction. **Mark**

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My tendency is to just get really cranky and righteous, but then that puts everyone offside, so if I'm going in there all angry that's not going to work. But at the same time you've got to get your point across. **Pia**

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We're very visible and they are great about it. I took in the posters from the Rainbow Family Council and they've put those up in the school. **Patricia**

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I think we are coming to a place where Amy has an increasing understanding of her family as perhaps not being just like everyone else's. Having said that, at school, family is incredibly diverse, so having two mums and a dad is not that unusual – lots of other people have got two mums and two dads and step families all over the *wah-hoo*. **Katrina**

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They do have some rainbow family books in the library and that's been at my instigation. **Jenny**

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We know more gay families at our current school. We haven't really made any friendships because of that, but I do think my kids are happy to know that there are other gay families there. **Bridget**



# Mother's Day and Father's Day



Mother's Day and Father's Day present some challenges for rainbow families. Almost all schools, childcare centres and kinders have events or activities around these days and they are often important fundraisers. They can be a difficult time for rainbow family kids, and other children who don't have a mother or a father.

Many places – but certainly not all – include *Special Person* in the title of their day to ensure that children are not entirely excluded from the day's activities. A few schools have replaced Mother's Day and Father's Day with *Family Day*, and children are able to invite whomever they like.

Schools and centres vary in how well they handle these days, but many are sensitive to the

concerns of rainbow families and will happily discuss the issue with parents. Many kids with two mums or two dads produce two of whatever card or gift they are making in class. Sometimes, this is at the instigation of the teacher, while sometimes it is at the instigation of the parents.

Prior to Mother's Day or Father's Day, it can be helpful to discuss how you want to manage the

event and come up with an idea or strategy that works for you. Also consider your kids' feelings and how they would prefer to approach the days. If you have concerns, you may want to raise them with your child's teacher or principal before the day.

Some rainbow families make the day about other people in their child's life, including grandparents, older siblings, or friends of the family. Others allocate one day to one parent, and the other day to the other parent, but this doesn't work for everyone.

## Parents say ...

### Experiences

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Our childcare centre and kinder had a really great approach to Mother's Day and Father's Day. They simply had Family Day around those times and anyone could come along. That was a really nice thing. **Mandy**

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Sally got her own set of paintings on Mother's Day and her own set of cards from the girls. That was all at the instigation of the teacher. She told us the girls had been *very busy* – in other words they'd been trying to make a double lot of everything! **Ruth**

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They always included both of us and always had two presents for Mother's Day. That was really good the entire time we were there. **Trudy**

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At the occasional care place, they didn't do very well on Father's Day and Mother's Day. On Father's Day, they asked if we wanted the kids to do a card and we said, 'Yes', but they stuck *Happy Father's Day* all over it. And for Mother's Day, they only did one, and they knew the girls had two mothers. They were late middle-aged women with their ways set in stone – a little bit *old biddy*. **Ruth**

There were no discernible problems until we got to Father's Day and we had to work out what to do. It was great that they actually asked, 'What shall we do on Father's Day?' We decided that one of us would do Father's Day and the other would do Mother's Day and that was easy. **Alison**

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In relation to Mother's Day, the teachers are always great. We are also quite lucky because they do have their dad in their lives and he actually has a male partner as well. At kinder this year, my daughter made two things for them as well. **Bridget**

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The little kids make something for Chris, their big brother. And because there's a 10–11 year age gap with them, it's kind of like he is the man of the household, so to speak. **Jenny**

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They do a *mama's* card and a *mummy's* card, and for Father's Day this year they had *Special Person's Day*. Last year they did *grandpa* cards. We make it about the men in her life. **Eli**

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From grade one, the school has just instinctively made two Mother's Day gifts or cards. That was never at our instigation, always the school's, or maybe it was at the kids' instigation. To be frank, I never asked, but it has just always happened that they came home with two Mother's Day cards. **Jenny**

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For Mother's Day, we didn't say anything, but Annie did some paintings in art and she did two. I do think that, luckily, she's a strong and forceful personality. She needed to educate everyone and say, 'I've got two mums', at least when she first started there. And that seems to have gone okay. **Patricia**

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They would ask how many Mother's Day or Father's Day presents we wanted and that was it. We're probably the first and last rainbow family they're going to see for quite some time. **Katrina**

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We decided that Mother's Day would be my day and that we would celebrate my partner's day on Father's Day. That works, and the school has been really responsive to that. **Nicola**

# Concerns and challenges

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Our kids mostly handle it okay. But there are other kids who don't have parents – or might have a single parent, or a mother who's died – who really are struggling with some of these situations and just have to put up with these days. I think that's a real shame. **Mandy**

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I went to the principal and said, 'Look, this is the one day of the year when our kids can feel left out'. I explained that at other schools they call it *Father's and Special Person's* or *Special Friend's Day*, and that seems to be a much more inclusive approach. The kids can bring along grandparents or whoever they want. She was embarrassed that we had to raise this with her. She said, 'My father died when I was very young and I always hated Father's Day. I can't believe this needed to be brought to my attention'. And when the newsletter came out the next week, the headline was *Father and Special Friend's Day* – a great success. **Patricia**

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It's a tricky one, because a lot of the mothers volunteer to make the Mother's Day and Father's Day craft, and they put in a lot of hard work. You don't want to say, 'Let's just wipe it all out and not have it'. It's about finding a compromise that the community will accept. My preference would be a universal approach, where the child can choose whichever family member they want to, and it's just a family day. **Mandy**

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Mother's Day and Father's Day just irritate me, but we talk to the kids about it. Now that they're older, we just don't do it and we say, 'Don't worry about it'. We've got a relationship with their donor dad, so if they want to give something to him, that's great. If they want to do it for a grandparent, that's fine too. I just want them to put the apostrophe in the right place! **Bec**

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We realised that a lot of school activities were structured around Mother's Day and Father's Day, and the issue for us was not only about our own family, but what happened in other families that didn't have a mother or a father. There was a kid in our daughter's class whose mum had died a couple of years ago and some of the kids were quite upset for that child on Mother's Day. **Mandy**

We went with what the girls wanted to do. For a few years, they allocated Mother's Day to me and Father's Day to my partner. Last year my partner decided that she was a bit sick of that and that she really didn't want to do that anymore. They had a stall at school and my daughter bought a mug that said: *World's Best Dad*. The great irony, of course, was that the *World's Best Dad* is a mum. That was quite hilarious. **Claire**

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Chris's dad passed away when he was eight. Prior to that we did Father's Day. Afterwards, we thought, *What do we do now?* Basically, Father's Day became about Granddad, so he would make something for Granddad and on Mother's Day he would make something for us. **Jenny**

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The kinder is changing the way their forms are written and putting *Special Person*. It used to be *Bring your dad to kinder day* and now it's *Bring a Special Person*. There is an acknowledgement that there are plenty of single parents out there and different family makeups. So I consider that great progress. **Alison**

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In relation to things like Mother's Day and Father's Day, they followed our lead. There was an incident around language on forms, and they also had a roster displayed of which kids were attending on which day. It had a Mother column and a Father column. So, it had me as the mother and Laura just wasn't anywhere. Our son wasn't the only one who just had one parent listed and we suggested that wasn't particularly appropriate. **Nicola**

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We went with allocating the days, but now we actually don't like what that says about our family – we don't think it reflects our family. So, we will need to support them come next September in how they talk about that. They will work out the default position, but we're not going to have a default father. We don't want to do that. **Claire**





# Teasing, name-calling and bullying



Parents of rainbow families worry a lot about whether their children will be subject to teasing and bullying because of their family structure. Most schools have a policy on bullying, and procedures in place to deal with incidents as they arise. Schools vary in how effective they are in dealing with this problem.

Many rainbow families report that their initial fears are unfounded and that their children experience no more or less teasing or bullying than other kids. Where teasing occurs, it is just as likely to be about the things kids have always teased each other about: weight, height, hair colour, glasses, cultural background, interests or ability.

*That's so gay* as a general insult or term of criticism still seems to be fairly common, starting in the

higher grades of primary school and becoming more entrenched in high school. Some teachers challenge this language telling students it is offensive and explaining why. Many, however, do not.

Sometimes your child having a sense of humour, or not taking things too seriously, can contain a problem or reduce its impact. Giving your child strategies and language to deal with any potential teasing

or bullying can also help them negotiate difficult situations.

If you are worried about how bullying is handled, you can ask to see the school's policy (often it's on their website), or arrange to see the principal to discuss your concerns. Keeping the channels of communication open with your child's classroom teacher and talking to them about your family structure can be helpful.

Discussing the issue with your children and asking them how they would like you to handle it – especially as they get older – can be a good idea. It may be that your child has the skills and resilience to cope with minor incidents on their own and you may only need to get involved if the behaviour becomes harmful or persistent.

## Parents say ...

### Experiences

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We've had no problems with bullying. As an educator, I think it is unfortunately one of the biggest fears of parents generally. And unnecessarily so, really. I think that all the early years of parenting we do (and gay parenting is good parenting in my view), helping kids to have good self-esteem, have a bit of a sense of humour, not take themselves too seriously, and become quite resilient – hopefully does make them into pretty resilient kids. **Julie**

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I never got any sign that there were any conversations going on in the schoolyard that were uncomfortable or difficult, or any teasing or anything like that. I certainly appreciate that we have had quite a fortunate journey on this and that was part of the reason I wanted to speak to you. It's not always difficult. **Mark**

You get all this media about cyberbullying and we talk about that stuff a lot. If they are telling me the truth, it has never been something that they've experienced to any degree that has caused them concern. **Julie**

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Most of the kids at school know that Frances has two mums and there have been a couple of tiny incidents, but really it could have been about her red hair or her glasses. And certainly, the school administration is very supportive. **Trudy**

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We went to a parents' orientation evening and I got a really bad vibe. I asked about their approach to bullying and their response was that they think it's a term that is bandied around too much and often it's about teaching the child who has been bullied some resilience. I just didn't like that approach at all. **Patricia**

## Strategies

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I actually raised the issue of a diversity or inclusion policy with the junior school principal a while ago. They've got a strong anti-bullying culture and policy and he said he thought it was inclusive enough. He didn't really see that we needed a separate policy, because it was included in the anti-discrimination policy. I do understand that to some degree. They are aware of the issues and sensitive to them. **Jenny**

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They did have an anti-bullying policy and, by the time he got to trade school, they had all the LGBT support and counselling and awareness. It was a good school. **Mark**

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We chose the school because of their capacity to support kids who come from a really interesting and challenging range of backgrounds. The town has got a very significant proportion of highly-disadvantaged kids and the school she goes to is now has some very good strategies in place around inclusivity, which we really liked. It's working really well. **Katrina**

She's occasionally got, 'You must be a lesbian because your mums are'. Her response to that has been, 'No, I'm not'. She came home and talked to me about it and I said another possibility would be, 'Maybe?' She said she tried that and the reaction was hilarious so she's going to do that again. **Nicola**

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Some kids would ask, 'So is your dad gay?' and he would say, 'Yeah', and they would say, 'Okay, right', and that was it. That is the nature of conversation when they are kids; it's quite funny and it's such a non-event. **Mark**

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We chose not to send her to the local school because the school is not across bullying. They don't have good strategies around it and they don't know what to do. They can't articulate what to do with the bully, the onlookers, the families, the broader circle, and we just didn't really feel safe about sending her there. **Katrina**

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They have an anti-bullying policy, not that we've ever talked about it that much. They're more focused on the cyberbullying stuff and are pretty on the ball with that. **Nicola**

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The only thing I would say in terms of this bullying thing with Chris was that it did end up escalating to the point that the principal of the middle school pulled both boys up to have a chat to them. They wouldn't go so far to say that the other boy's behaviour was discriminatory – they said both boys were behaving inappropriately and I guess they were. But some of the stuff this kid was saying was really vile; that we were going to hell and that he felt sorry for Chris growing up in our household. It was nasty and I think the school probably could have handled that a little more firmly. **Jenny**

## ***That's so gay!***

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My daughter says that everyone says, 'That's so gay', all the time and that some of the teachers have said that it's not okay, and some of them don't intervene at all. I wish they would do more about it. There doesn't seem to be much impetus to deal with it. My partner is a high school teacher and she talks about it with her class; it's not hard. **Nicola**

'That's so gay' was sort of standard practice for a little while. I don't know that it is anymore. I don't hear it now. **Mark**

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The kids have never said anything about hearing, 'You're so gay' or 'That's so gay' in the playground. **Julie**

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When he was about nine – that bullish boy age where they start hanging out with the lads – I had a couple of his mates staying over for the weekend. We were in the car and one of them said, 'That's so gay', which Jeremy never used at home. Then the kid said to me, 'You're not gay, you're homosexual'. I said, 'It's not nice', and they said, 'Yeah, yeah, sorry'. They were completely aware of my sexuality and my partner and all the rest of it. **Mark**

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From time to time my son does use the term, 'You're so gay' or 'That's so gay', which I hate and he knows it, but I think that's part of the age and the culture. But, fundamentally, he will stand up for anyone. He has that real sense of justice: *this is right, this is wrong*. **Jenny**

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Our daughter says it is too exhausting to fight all the time in relation to some of the comments. Even though she's an early adolescent, she is very focused on her peer relationships, being popular and not being different. She keeps quiet a bit. She used to pull people up if they said things like, 'That's so gay', or made homophobic slurs, but she doesn't anymore. She lets it go. She doesn't join in. If her friends do, she will pull them up, but not the wider class or in the playground. **Nicola**





# Older kids and adolescents

Parental involvement in school decreases significantly once a young person starts high school and teenagers will likely want to manage things by themselves. In many ways, the capacity of a young person to negotiate being part of a rainbow family will have been established at primary school. Many young people find good strategies and have an easy journey.

In addition to the usual factors parents consider when choosing a high school, rainbow families may also be interested in:

- whether the school has previous experience of working with rainbow families
- the school's policy on bullying, diversity and discrimination
- whether it has a gay/straight or rainbow alliance
- whether there is a secular welfare officer
- the extent to which the principal and staff are welcoming and supportive of diverse families.

Factors that may influence the high school experience of rainbow family teenagers can include:

- the extent to which they are out and open about their family structure



- who they tell and how they talk about their family
- how their friends – and their friends' parents – respond to their family
- discussions about their own sexuality
- their own level of confidence and resilience in dealing with any negative reactions from peers.

Visits to the school, questions to staff and the principal, a detailed look at the school's website and discussions with your own social networks can help in choosing the right school.

Most grade six kids will have their own view about the school they wish to attend and will need to participate in any discussions.

Parents can check out whether any school is part of the Safe Schools Coalition which commits the school to providing a supportive environment for LGBTI students.

It can be helpful – if sometimes difficult – to take a step back and allow teenagers to manage any issues that arise on their own.

Keeping the channels of communication open, letting them know you are there for support and back up, and offering suggestions or advice can be helpful too.

Other young people from rainbow families can provide teenagers with an important outlet and can be a great source of support.

# Parents say ...

## Choosing a school

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In my head, I had already chosen her high school because our local school is really progressive and they have a Gay–Straight Alliance. But when the time came, Ella actually said she wanted to do the test for this nerdy school down the road, so that's where she's going. I did get a heads-up from someone saying there's a person in their welfare team who is awesome and really doing some good stuff, so that was nice to hear. **Bec**

With high school, you've actually got a 12-year-old who is going to tell you very clearly what they want. We wouldn't have chosen a school that we felt was very conservative or had no history with rainbow families, but there was never any issue with any of the schools we looked at. **Debbie**

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When we were looking around, we noticed at several schools the counsellors had posters up about same-sex attracted youth, which indicated to us, at an institutional level, that they were not discriminating. **Debbie**

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He moved schools and that was a very positive experience. Everyone there was aware that I was gay and they met my partner. He was very comfortable there and I think the school itself actually made the difference. He was very happy to talk about it and everyone knew. He had a wide circle of friends and it was a non-event. **Mark**

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We had people within our own social networks who knew about the various different schools and which schools had participated in Pride. We also knew about schools that had education about same-sex attracted youth, and that was all part of our decision. **Debbie**

## At school

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As a parent, it's an interesting transition to high school, because you know so much less about what is going on and you have much less involvement. That's one of the reasons I am on the school council – because I want to know what is happening. **Nicola**

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I guess the best thing we can do to support kids going off to high school is to be open and honest. So, the first thing is that there are no secrets and everyone is comfortable with the situation. It's really useful if kids have a good social network. We would disclose whenever kids came over to our house; we would make sure that either both of us greeted them at the door, or otherwise make it very clear that this was our situation and it wasn't anything to be ashamed of. And the kids were very accepting. **Jenny**

This first couple of years in high school were probably the most difficult. It wasn't a great school experience and that was probably the only time where I got the feeling he wasn't completely open with all his friends. His close friends and the friends he'd known since primary school, yes, but it wasn't just generally known. It wasn't a nice school. **Mark**

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Our philosophy in terms of handling schooling changed as he got to senior school. In primary school, we would speak to the teacher each year and disclose who we were, but as he got to high school it just naturally wasn't an issue and we didn't do that. **Jenny**

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With the primary school, we did ask specific questions, but at the high school we didn't. That was partly because we felt – and this has been borne out – that at high school you've actually got far less to do with the school. It's much more to do with the child; they have to make their own way with the resources that they've got. **Debbie**

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The enrolment forms are really good about the two family thing and parent/parent. They have an additional family form for her other family so she had her dad and his wife on that. The first time we got a letter it was addressed to me and her father at my address. We raised that and they fixed it. **Nicola**

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I think, in terms of high school, you really have to do the groundwork before they get there. When they're at high school, it's much more hands off. You have set the scene in primary school and by the time they get to high school, to a large degree, they are on their own. You're just there to support them if anything happens. **Jenny**

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They had a parent information session about sex education and they talked about how it is really important to talk to your kids about sex and to be open. But then they made the point that there are certain things they will not talk about and will refer back to parents – and they were things like abortion, contraception and same-sex attraction. They were giving mixed messages and they weren't very responsive. Very friendly, very open, but that wasn't done very well. **Nicola**

## Out of school

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He has a really close group of friends, amazingly close. They're all boys – they're all tradies. When Jeremy was living with me, we had two of his mates living with us as well, so there was me, my partner, Jeremy and either one or two of his mates. It was great. It was just a really good household. **Mark**

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She has a good, supportive group of friends – a good, little core group. She talks to them about stuff and they don't give her a hard time about anything. **Nicola**

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He's still very good friends with my partner who I went out with when he was younger. When they see each other, he is comfortable being affectionate with him – he'll give him a hug, a kiss on the cheek or whatever. **Mark**

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I think it's really important to give our kids some tools. They are going to be faced with stuff they don't know how to handle and, like any parent, you want to give them the skills to help. We talk about when people say, 'Are your parents homosexual?' You just say, 'Yes, are yours heterosexual?' It was never a secret. I think if it's a secret it's something that people can use against your kids, but if it's not a secret, then it's really not a drama. **Jenny**

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They both talked about choosing who to tell and that you don't tell people, particularly in high school, until you've built up some sort of trust with them. Noah said that if you do tell them and they don't accept it then obviously they are not very good friends. **Julie**

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We've had conversations about sexuality. Chris is very heterosexual and he has said from very early on that he's got no doubts about that. If he was gay, that would be okay. **Jenny**

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He is very clear about his own sexuality. It hasn't confused him at all. He's comfortable with his mates and they are reasonably affectionate for young men. They seem to be a lot more balanced and just down to earth. All his mates seem quite aware and worldly and they don't have hang-ups. They're not trying to be big, macho men. **Mark**

She's done projects and assignments on marriage equality. She gets really passionate and she talks about why we can't have rights like everybody else. She's very much taken it that it is her fight which is lovely because she is pretty sure she is straight, but she's open. **Nicola**

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My ex-wife was Malaysian/Indian so Jeremy is multi-racial. He went to a very multi-racial school and knew my sister, who is a lesbian. And with gay parents, and lots of heterosexual parents of all different nationalities in his life, trying to illustrate diversity was really easy because he was surrounded by it. **Mark**

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He is quite militant because of his strong sense of justice. He went on this *Insight* program – so, national TV, when he was fifteen. It was huge. He was obviously very clearly identified, and people talked about it, and he is very comfortable with that. I organised a Marriage Equality forum and we had a panel of speakers and one of them was Chris. He said he would like to speak for the children. He's quite comfortable standing up in a forum and talking about what it's like to be a kid growing up in a gay family. He said, 'It's just normal; my parents are pains in the arse sometimes, and they're good sometimes'. **Jenny**

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Georgia said that being in a gay family helps her have more understanding of others, and an acceptance of diversity, which I am sure is true. She said we've taught her to stand up for what she believes in. She talked about going to the Pride March when she was little and said it was really fun and it made her realise that she was part of a big community. **Julie**



## CASE STUDY

# Fiona and Hamish: A response to teasing

Fiona and her partner, Camille, live in an inner-city suburb where their eight-year-old son and daughter, Hamish and Sasha, go to the local state primary school. They are the only same-sex family at the school, but the school has acknowledged them both as mothers and been sensitive to them as a family. A while ago, they came up against a problem that worries many of us. Fiona describes how they, as a family, dealt with the issue.

### **Can you tell me how this all started?**

Hamish started saying he didn't want to go to school. Some of it was just normal separation anxiety, like after a holiday or at the end of the weekend. We spoke to him about it,

and we spoke to his teacher, but he wouldn't tell us why; he just said he was tired.

Then, a couple of weekends later, he and I were lying on the bed reading books and he was telling me a funny story. He's really quite humorous and I said to him, 'You've got a really

good sense of humour. Do your friends at school think you're funny?' And all of a sudden he looked very sad – he was crestfallen – and I thought, *Something's going on and I've got to get to the bottom of it.*

But he just wouldn't tell me. In the end, I said that if it was something about Mama and me that we wouldn't be upset by it, that we'd help him work it out and that he didn't need to protect us. Then he said that some of the girls at school had said that it was weird having two mums and he'd felt really upset about it. He was clearly worried and he didn't know how to respond.

Sasha came along at that point and overheard the conversation, so we brainstormed what they could do or say. Sasha had lots of suggestions, including giving the girls '50 knuckle sandwiches'! We talked about how the knuckle sandwiches perhaps weren't the most appropriate response, but that it was really good to stand up for yourself.

Instead, together, we came up with some phrases: *There are all different types of families; there's nothing weird about ours.*

*I know lots of people who have two mums or two dads, and some people only have one mum or one dad and some people are adopted.*

*There are all different types of families and that's what makes the world go around. You know, everyone's different.*

*People come from different countries. People are different shapes and sizes.*

It was really a conversation about difference and diversity and afterwards Sasha wanted to role-play – we do a lot of role-play in our house. You know, *I'll be the bully and you stand up to me.* Hamish felt better after that; I think he was relieved.

We talked about me going to see the teachers. I told them we had some posters we could take to school and that we could go through the bookshelves and find all the books about families with two mums or two dads and show the teachers.

## **So you arranged to talk to the school?**

Yes. The following week I went off to school armed with my posters and books: *And Tango Makes Three*, a couple of Todd Parr's (*The Family Book* and *Everyone's Different*), and one about a dragon with two mums. I sat down with the two teachers and explained what had happened.

They were really very accepting and wanted to know what they could do. They had already thought about how they could incorporate normalising our family into the curriculum. They asked whether there had been any issues in prep and whether anything had been done previously. I explained that this was the first time

anything had come up, and that we only wanted to respond as and when the need arose, rather than making a big song and dance unnecessarily.

I planned to give them two posters, but I had ten rolled up in a bundle and they asked if they could have them all. They were going to raise the issue at a staff meeting and discuss how they could use the posters with all age groups. They said the posters would be really helpful in explaining diversity on all sorts of levels, including adoption and separated families. And they said they would read the books and think about how to include them unobtrusively at story time.

### **That's a great response.**

It was. So at the end of that discussion, I said that I was happy for them to ask me anything they liked, whether they were curiosity questions or anything they felt they'd like to know that would help their understanding of my family. I said, 'Don't feel like you need to be polite'.

One of them asked how we went about having the kids and who bore them. I explained it all, including the fact they didn't have a dad – they had a donor who was called Andrew, but who we didn't know.

The teacher said that she had come across a few lesbian parents – not just in teaching, but in her personal life – and they all seemed so loving

and thoughtful about their families. She felt their families were so carefully planned and she'd been very impressed.

Then she gave us a whole load of positive feedback about the kids – that they were just the most beautiful, kind and thoughtful children who were very engaging and considerate of other people's feelings. She said they were just the most delightful children she'd had in years. I was really chuffed with all that!

Then, after drop-off a few days later, I peeked through the window and saw her pointing to the poster and having a discussion with all the children sitting on the floor. She told me later that lots of kids put their hands up; a girl who was adopted, a couple of kids from different countries, and some in different family arrangements. Sasha put her hand up and told the class, 'One of my friends who's called Ruben has two dads. We know lots of people with two mums and two dads and they're called rainbow families'.

### **How did the kids react afterwards?**

When Hamish came home that day he was so excited. He had some friends over and he told them all about it – how the posters about rainbow families had been put up in the classrooms and how they'd talked about them and how they'd read the books. And it was all



because he'd said something. He was really proud and impressed that speaking up about it had led to this really helpful course of action.

Afterwards, he was definitely a lot better, and I said to him that he seemed so much happier and he said, 'Yes, it's because they put the posters up'.

The very first time Hamish told me what had happened, I felt like crying. I was so upset and it was very intense. But then, it had such a good ending and Hamish felt so much happier, I felt really good. It was lovely; the teachers were so great. They gave us such positive feedback and they didn't treat us like we were a problem.

I think there is something about the attitude with which you approach

this. We were not confrontational at all and I gave the teachers the chance to ask questions. Also, I explained I didn't want anything said to the girls who had made the comments in the first place; they're just children and they're learning. They need to understand about diversity and they don't need to be pulled up individually, unless it becomes persistent.

So, we didn't go in with a confrontational attitude like, *This is outrageous and it shouldn't be happening and what are you doing about it!?* We went about it in a collaborative way, so they weren't on the defensive with us, and I think that really helped.



## CASE STUDY

# Corin: 12 years of wisdom

Corin was conceived using identity release sperm through a fertility clinic. He has been raised by two mums in a family that has always been very out and open. He goes to the local state school in an inner suburb. He loves reading, Minecraft and Lego and is highly indifferent to all types of sport.

In the following interview, Corin talks about school, friends and bullying. He also offers some advice to other kids being raised in a rainbow family, and provides some pointers for their parents, too.

### **Can you describe your family and school?**

I have two younger sisters and two mums. My school is very multicultural; we have lots of people from all over the world. There are

very nice teachers – they are kind and if you need help you can ask. If you are hurt they have an excellent sick bay. If you have any medical issues you can tell the office and they can make special arrangements.

### **Have you ever been teased at school?**

Yes. In grade four I had really long hair and people said I looked like a girl. Lots of people called me

*Rapunzel* and I just said, 'Look at the people who go surfing!' And that shut them up.

## **What about other kids, do they get teased?**

People do get teased at school. I mean, we don't have a lot of racism or sexism, which is good. It's mainly about ... well, we have lots of footy fans and people say, 'Oh my God, you're so dumb because you barrack for Collingwood'.

## **But what about having two mums?**

One person tried to tease me. I just looked at them straight in the eyes without smiling and said, 'If you have nothing better to do than tease me about having two mums, that is just sad – that is really sad', and they just walked off. I made them see sense because, honestly, kids won't really get teased about having two mums – it's about football, soccer, competitive stuff.

## **What do other kids think?**

Well, my friends think it's great because they like my mums and they're fine with it. People in my class, when they found out, nobody went, 'That's weird'. They all said, 'Oh, hmm, good'. Nobody has teased me. Some of them didn't

even care and I'd rather that. Like, I was happy that some people actually thought it was pretty cool, but I don't really care.

## **What advice would you give to other kids?**

I would suggest to other kids not to tease anybody because they will tease you back. Tell this to your kids – trust me, it will help them. If it turns out that these kids tease people behind their backs, don't become friends with them.

I would try to make good friends. Don't become friends with someone just because you like the same footy team as them, become friends because you actually really like them.

You don't have to share the same interests. Like Jack – he is my best friend – he loves baseball, but I don't. But I've been to watch his team and I'm really supportive of him. I think you should do what you love. So I'm friends with him because, even though we don't share the same interests, we acknowledge that and we learn about each other's interests.

If you are being teased at school, always tell your parents. This is how I dealt with it: if it goes on for a day, tell your parents, but tell them not to tell the teacher. If it goes on for a week, tell your parents to tell the teacher. If it goes on longer than that, keep telling your teacher every time it happens. If it still goes on,

then it can become bullying and that will get the principal involved, so hopefully you can stop it before then.

I knew a situation like that, where someone got teased so much it eventually went to the principal. It wasn't because of gay mums and dads, it was something else, but I'm not going to say. I swore not to tell because it makes the person feel really uncomfortable and they probably don't want it to be public.

## And what advice would you have for parents?

Don't get too involved with the child. I know some kids – and I'm not mentioning any names here – their parents have too much to do with their kid's life and it's just really not good because they are too protective. I honestly think that's a really bad thing because if the parents are too protective, the child gets no opportunity to explore. If they get no opportunity to explore, their lives are not going to be amazing like other people's who do get to explore. And kids need that little freedom; it's really handy for them and it will help them develop social skills.

I would also say to the parents, *Try to talk to the teacher*. That always helps. My parents did that just to make sure there was no teasing going on. If your child comes home looking really sad or looking like something has happened, ask them what's wrong. It can really

help. My parents ask me if I come home looking sad and I tell them if something bad has happened.

## Does it come up in any other context at school, the having two mums thing?

I'm going to explain about *That's so gay*. This is very handy for parents. At school, kids probably will experience a lot of this. They say, 'Oh my God, that's so gay!' And most times people don't know what it means. In prep it never happened, but in grade three I heard it and it's just stupid. They use it to mean bad and that can really hurt someone's feelings.

It's hard. There were kids saying it at school, so I challenged them and said, 'Do you even know what it means?' And they said, 'Of course we do, we're not idiots. It's two people who love each other of the same sex.' And I'm like, 'Yes, so why are you using it in that context? You say "That's so gay", but not in the right context and that's pretty offensive. Actually, no, that is really offensive. It is offensive to every gay mum and dad out there. Saying "That's so gay" is like teasing all gay people. It's super offensive'.

## How did that play out?

I ran off and I told my teacher. She's a really nice person – she helps me whenever I'm stuck. She dealt with

them and said thank you for telling her and that I did the right thing standing up for my parents.

And last year I had a severe case of *That's so gay*. I took a week of it and then told my teacher, because it was really hurting my feelings and I spent a whole lunch time crying. It can make people ... you can really hurt someone's feelings. I honestly think everyone should respect everyone else's family.

## **What did your teacher do?**

She spoke to the kids at circle time and she said it was like saying 'Oh my God, that's so Greek', and I thought that was a great example.

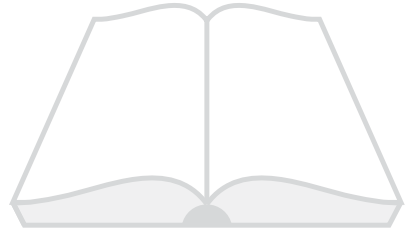
## **Anything else you would like to add?**

Yes, this is for the kids. If someone asks you about how you were born – if you don't have a dad – just say,

'I'm not telling you. That's private'. If they ask for the details, say, 'I'm not revealing the details. Your parents will tell you when you are old enough to understand'. I only tell my closest friends and I trust them because I know they will not go around saying, 'Oh my God, blah blah blah'. I tell them how I was born, but I don't really want to reveal that too often because it's private; it's my secret.

I just want to tell kids about one thing – parents and kids, actually. My mums have some friends and they have the same donor as us, so I have a half-sister and half-brother. We are half-siblings and we're fine with that. We get along really well. It's cool. So kids, if you meet someone and they have the same donor, it's okay.

RESEARCH



# Child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: The evidence from Australia

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## Introduction

When making the decision to start a family, many first-time parents reasonably consider whether they can provide a healthy environment in which to raise children. For same-sex attracted parents, this

question carries added weight in a society where many people promote traditional family values and two biological, married parents as the best way to raise a child. There are often questions around biological verses social parenting and whether this will cause problems. While every family is different, and will

therefore face their own challenges, it is helpful to have scientific, robust information about how children growing up in same-sex families are doing overall in terms of their health and wellbeing.

## The research

The Australian Study of Child Health in Same-Sex Families (ACHESS) provides the most recent Australian data on child health and wellbeing in families where at least one parent identifies as being same-sex attracted. It builds on around three decades of research on children with same-sex parents, but the ACHESS provides the largest set of data to date.

The ACHESS was conducted at the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne and collected information from families across 2012 and 2013. The aim was to capture the complete physical, mental and social wellbeing of Australian children with same-sex attracted parents. In other words, we wanted to find out just how well children in same-sex families are getting on, and how they are impacted by their non-traditional family situation.

## What we did

The study was advertised across a range of community settings, with families volunteering to take part. Special efforts were made

to capture a range of family types so that our sample was as representative as possible. We had families with male parents, female parents and other-gendered parents. We had children born in the current same-sex relationship, in a previous heterosexual relationship and children with single parents. We had children born through sexual intercourse, donor insemination, surrogacy, and children who were fostered and adopted. The families came from all over Australia and the children ranged in age from two months to 18 years.

Two different types of data were collected. We used a survey to gather quantifiable data so we could make statistical comparisons against average scores from the Australia general population. Both parents and adolescent children completed surveys. We also collected interview data so we could make a more interpretive assessment of how children are doing. Entire families took part in family interviews, with children as young as three contributing.

## What we found

Our findings represented 500 children from 315 families. 80 per cent of the children had a female parent or parents, while 18 per cent had a male parent or parents.

Overall, children with same-sex attracted parents scored well

in all aspects of their health and wellbeing, with few differences when compared to average scores for children in the general population. When there were differences, we found that the children with same-sex attracted parents scored better than children in the general population. These results were similar when parents answered the survey and when adolescent children answered the survey. The two areas where children with same-sex parents were doing particularly well were in terms of their overall general health and on measures of how well families get along, and how this impacts on their health.

While children are doing well overall, there are reports of experiences of stigma relating to their same-sex families. When this does occur, there is an association with poorer health outcomes on a number of measures. Clearly, there is a degree of resilience being instilled in children to maintain a good picture overall, but vigilance is required by parents to ensure that societal stigma does not have an adverse impact at an individual level.

From our research, however, what does not seem to be important in how well children are doing is the gender of their parent or parents.

When talking to children in the family interviews, they described their health in rather normal terms. They didn't see their families as being particularly unusual. They

often talked about the benefits of having multiple parent figures, a combination of biological parents and social parents. Friends were often described as being important and even included as part of the family. There were some descriptions of times when people directly or indirectly made negative comments about their families, and while this was upsetting, it rarely had long-term impacts.

## What this means

Children with same-sex attracted parents in Australia are developing well in terms of their health and wellbeing, and this supports previous international research. The way in which same-sex parents construct families, not necessarily sticking to traditional parenting roles, helps families to get along well, which in turn is good for overall health. Families are aware of stigma in society and this is related to child health, but through strong resilience-building there is little overall impact on these children. Resilience-building is key and is developed through resilient individuals, resilient families and resilient communities. Strong supports through rainbow family groups can assist in this resilience-building, as can openness with children about where they have come from and how their family is formed.

Families come in all shapes and sizes, enjoying different successes



and facing different challenges. What the ACHESSE suggests, however, is that parental sexual orientation itself does not negatively impact on child health and wellbeing and may even provide some

benefits. Deciding to have children is always a big step, but same-sex attracted people should enjoy the journey knowing that their children will most likely be just fine.

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## Further reading

[www.achess.org.au](http://www.achess.org.au)

Crouch SR, McNair RP, Waters EB and Power J (2013). What makes a same-sex parented family? *Med J Aust* 199(2): 94-96

Crouch SR, Waters E, McNair R, Power J and Davis E (2012). ACHESSE – The Australian study of child health in same-sex families: background research, design and methodology. *BMC Public Health* 12:646

Crouch SR, McNair R, Waters E and Power J (2014). The health perspectives of Australian adolescents from same-sex parent families: a mixed methods study. *Child: Care, Health and Development* Epub 31 Aug

Crouch S, Waters E, McNair R, Power J and Davis E (2014). Parent-reported measures of child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: a cross-sectional survey. *BMC Public Health* 14:635

# About us

## Rainbow Families

Rainbow Families is a 100% volunteer organisation that provides support to children and families within the NSW LGBTIQ community. We run playgroups, parent education sessions, discussion forums, movie nights, picnics and a whole range of other social activities. Our events are designed to bring together lesbian mums, gay dads, trans parents, adoptive parents, foster parents and all types of rainbow families to connect, learn, support, make friends and help build resilient families.

Rainbow Families also works to address discrimination and other social disadvantage faced by LGBTIQ families and to promote the affirmation and celebration of rainbow families. We do this by working with LGBTIQ parents, their children, government, businesses, schools, the broader community, and other not for profit organisations.

Rainbow Families is led by a committee of passionate LGBTIQ community members and supported by parent volunteers located all over NSW. Together, we are focused on making Australia a better place for all LGBTIQ families.

Head to [www.rainbowfamilies.com.au](http://www.rainbowfamilies.com.au) to learn more, and subscribe to our newsletter to stay informed about events and programs that support our families.

## Jacqui Tomlins

Jacqui Tomlins is a writer, trainer and educator with more than 25 years' experience working in the LGBTIQ field and was one of the founding members of the Rainbow Families Council (now Rainbow Families Victoria). She is an outspoken advocate for the community and has represented rainbow families in the media many times.

Jacqui has written on a broad range of topics for both LGBTIQ and mainstream press, and most recently researched and wrote *Outspoken Families, A Resource Kit for Rainbow Families*. Currently, she runs workshops for educators and service providers who work with rainbow families and the LGBTIQ community. She is a member of the Victorian Ministerial Taskforce's Health and Human Services Working Group.

Jacqui lives in Melbourne with her partner of 25 years, Sarah, and their three children.

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