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Tasker, Fiona and Gato, J. (2024) LGBTQ parents, coming out to children. In: Goldberg, A.E. (ed.) The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ Studies, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, U.S.: Sage. ISBN 9781071891421.

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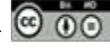
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*Accepted copy (9 January 2023) of the following encyclopaedia entry:
Tasker, F. & Gato, J. (in press). LGBTQ Parents, Coming Out to Children. In
Goldberg, A.E. (Ed). The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ Studies, 2nd Edition*

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LGBTQ PARENTS COMING OUT TO CHILDREN

Affirmation of gender and/or sexual identity is key to psychological well-being and disclosure—that is, the process of coming out—is vital to this. There are different degrees of outness and distinct settings in which outness can be enacted, for example, in public or in the privacy of home. For an LGBTQ parent, coming out to children is complex with implications across the life course for both parent and child and across settings. In this entry we consider the interplay of these issues for different groups of LGBTQ parents making various decisions about coming out to children. We are mindful of the debates concerning the usage of the term ‘coming out’, implying an event not the process of being out. Nevertheless, we use the term ‘coming out’ to reflect the careful management of a stigmatized sexual or gender identity that is revealed by a parent to their offspring, or at least not kept hidden from them.

Post-Heterosexual Relationship Disclosure

During the 1980s and 1990s and wanting custody of their children after divorce highlighted how difficult it was for women who wanted to have their children living with them to be open about the relationship with the woman they loved. Nevertheless, some pioneering studies in the US of lesbian mothers during the late twentieth century highlighted the freedom from fear that a planned disclosure to an ex-partner and children could bring to a parent worried that they would be outed during a courtroom custody battle.

Sociologist and psychotherapist Jean Lynch pointed out that the challenge for post-heterosexual relationship (PHR) lesbian mothers was integrating coming out to their children within their pre-existing identity as a resident parent. Most of Lynch's PHR lesbian mothers were partnered with childfree women who were already out as lesbians. Thus, lesbian stepparents in PHR families re-learned how to be 'out' as a member of a lesbian-led family and included moderating their level of visibility to accommodate the preferences of their partner's children. Very few PHR gay fathers had custody of their children, the situation movingly described in the autobiographical account by Alysia Abbott in *Fairyland – A memoir of my father* (2013). Thus, nursing scientist Fredrick Bozett writing during the 1980s highlighted the plight of fathers struggling to consolidate their gay identity while keeping in touch with their children from a previous heterosexual relationship. Bozett used the term 'integrative social sanctioning' to describe the unifying process whereby gay fathers came out to their children and spoke of their fatherhood when socializing with other gay men.

Recent studies of PHR LG parents have found that many still hesitate to come out to their children and find the process very difficult. Yet those that had come out often found their child responded positively and saw improvement in their relationship with their child over time. Likewise, studies of adult offspring of LGB parents also reflect a generally supportive response to their parent's disclosure, although a range of emotions including happiness for their parent and uncertainty, embarrassment, disappointment, or anger may have been expressed over time.

Societal or cultural mores set the scene for the decisions that parents make in contemplating how or when to come out to their children and the rate of social acceptance of LGBTQ parents is far from uniform. For example, recent studies in countries such as Italy have indicated that a combination of statutory restrictions or cultural and religious prohibitions mean that many lesbian and gay people married because of social expectations

and a desire for parenthood, and then remained closeted for some time before coming out fearing a child's rejection and losing custody. Furthermore, acceptance of LGBTQ parenting varies as function of multiple and intersecting social identities. In the US sociologists such as Katie Acosta, Megan Carroll, and Mignon Moore have highlighted the lack of acceptance that LGBTQ parents of color and interracial families occupying multiple marginalized social statuses face when deciding whether to come out to children, who might then become further isolated because a racial or ethnic group withdraws support. Correspondingly LGBTQ parents who live in rural areas, or who are less connected to LGBTQ parenting groups, appear to be less likely to be out to children or be able to give their children opportunities to meet other children growing up in comparable family types.

Evolving Normative Conversations

In contrast to the more dramatic disclosures of lesbian mothers and gay fathers whose children had grown up in a two-parent heterosexual family before their mother or father fully realized their sexual identity, coming out in planned families led by LG parent/s is more usually an evolving project that is regularly revisited. From findings of studies such as the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study begun in the 1980s, we know that children born through new reproductive technologies become aware of two moms or two dads early on, and like children adopted early in life, hear their origin story in relation to this. Subsequently, usually when children become aware of other children with a mother and a father, LG parents represent the child's own family as special. Parents then begin to educate their child explaining that different gender couples are often socially privileged in society and note ways to manage the stigmatized position of families headed by lesbian mothers or gay fathers.

Declaration or Coming Out as Part of Queer Socialization

Whereas a lesbian woman or a gay man in a same-gender partnership can opt to reveal sexual identity in a straightforward normative way by not hiding evidence of partnership from their

children, a single lesbian or gay parent needs to make a declaration (a more active and educative self-statement) when they come out to a child or to others. Similarly, research in both the US and the UK has highlighted the importance of educative declarations concerning sexual and gender identities made by parents identifying as plurisexual, bisexual, pansexual, omnisexual, or queer. Furthermore, research on transgender parents and bisexual parents has indicated that declarations can be sometimes be delayed and impeded. Impediments include fear and levels of self-uncertainty, coupled with difficulties in finding the best words to explain gender and feelings of sexual attraction to others including to children.

Coming out as plurisexual is difficult when the general assumption is that people have a monosexual identity, that is, attraction to only one gender. Countering bisexual erasure and binegativity—the assumptions that people are monosexual and the stigmatization of people who are not monosexual—often complicate the disclosure process. On the one hand, the task is not easy for a plurisexual parent who has more than one intimate partnership as the social taboo on nonmonogamous relationships makes this difficult to explain to children. On the other hand, a bisexual parent in a monogamous relationship is often deemed to have a heterosexual or a gay or lesbian identity based upon their own gender and that of the person they co-parent with. In one online survey published in 2021, more LGBTQ parents in a same-gender relationship had come out to their children compared to those who parented with a parent of a different-gender and this difference was more noticeable among men than women. In-depth studies of bisexual mothers parenting with cisgender men have indicated that women often find it difficult to keep their bisexual identity in the foreground when the social pressures of parenting young children suppress sexual interest. Furthermore, these cisgender mothers mostly did not feel the need to come out to their children, until the children were older and mothers then embarked upon a new same-gender partnership.

The route to parenthood pursued by most cisgender bisexual parents, or by many binary and nonbinary transgender parents, means that there is no “origin story” via adoption or assisted reproduction to explain to a child. Instead, the disclosure is purely one of sexual and or gender identity disclosure and thus begun via queer socialization processes, i.e. challenging hegemonic heteronormativity in relation to monogamous normative family practices and binary (cis or trans) gender. In the online survey by sociologist Rowan Haus, bisexual parents gave several reasons why they came out to their children: educating their children about diversity to contest bisexual erasure, promoting allyship, and providing support for offspring who may develop an LGBTQ identity. In contrast, logistical reasons for coming out came low down the list of reasons for disclosure. One in-depth study of UK bisexual mothers reported that mothers usually planned their disclosure carefully -- considering the child’s age and level of understanding in deciding either to begin with simplifying concepts or explaining identity labels. Bisexual mothers then challenged heteronormativity and alerted children to the possibility of prejudice. Often a personal disclosure was prefaced by queer socialization practices that kept the topics of gender and sexual identity on the discussion agenda. For example, bisexual mothers raised their child’s awareness of LGBTQ diversity through trips to pride events or by engaging with queer-friendly media and critique.

Research studies have indicated that the age of child is a key contextual factor in how a child is likely to respond to a transgender parent’s disclosure and gender presentation changes. If a child can understand why gender affirmation is important, then they will be better able to appreciate and support their transgender parent. The Australian transgender parents interviewed by psychologist Rosie Charter and colleagues mostly said they realized the difficulties adolescent offspring might face at school when a parent identified as transgender and therefore respectfully set boundaries to give their young person space to

adjust. Regarding younger children, transgender parents said a simple clarification of being previously stuck in the wrong body usually sufficed to explain gender. However, transgender parents with younger children could face other challenges. Despite the young child's easy acceptance of gender transition, a transgender parent might still retain a doubt as to whether a younger child had really understood and might then feel anger or distress at a later developmental point. Furthermore, when a transgender parent was living in stealth (not publicly out) it was not uncommon for them to be outed by a younger child under potentially challenging circumstances that the transgender parent often absorbed with a sense of humor or indulged as the naïve child's prerogative. Transgender parents in the Australian study also felt that in many ways it was easier to disclose to adult offspring than to either adolescents or younger children. Adult offspring tended to adopt a more detached view of the disclosure and better appreciated the unhappiness of a parent trapped in a cisgender identity. Furthermore, older offspring did not feel that their own lives were encroached upon by parental identity as even young adults lived more independently from home and family.

A notable factor contextualizing how transgender parents come out to their child, has been the way in which a child's co-parent's reaction can influence the child's response. In the Australian study by Rosie Charter and colleagues, some co-parents had been aware of the transgender parent's gender questioning for some time beforehand, in which case disclosure to children could often be paced and carefully managed to balance the transgender parent's needs and those of the family who gradually affirmed the parent's gender transition. In this study some of the transgender parents saw their partner and children as their best sources of support and described coming out to a co-parent and their children as a simple progression. Conversely, other participants described how their partner had been completely unaware of the transgender parent's gender questioning. Here the relationship between the transgender parent and their partner had dwindled with the secrecy of their gender predicament and often

deteriorated further upon disclosure. Then, a co-parent's anguish, or even a reaction from another influential extended family member, could form the context for a child's hostile reaction to a transgender parent. If a co-parent was distressed, even adult offspring might sometimes engage in parental alienation tactics -- threatening to cut contact or perhaps withdraw access to grandchildren.

Conclusion

Across different research studies, the desire for authenticity – the freedom to express yourself and partner who you choose – seems to be the key motivating factor for LGBTQ parents when deciding to come out to children. Notwithstanding the gains in self-expression, coming out to a child can be an additional strain on the psychological well-being of an LGBTQ parent who upon seeing their real potential then may have to place their feelings hold while the child adjusts to the news. Disclosing an LGBTQ identity in a way appropriate to the child's developmental age seems to promote a child's acceptance. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the child's response to an LGBTQ parent coming out does not just reside with the LGBTQ parent as the response of other family members to the news can often influence the child's reactions.

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RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS, YOUTH
STEPFAMILY FAMILY FUNCTIONING
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