

Submission
No 224

INQUIRY INTO ADOPTION BY SAME SEX COUPLES

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For the attention of the Committee of the Inquiry into Adoption by Same-Sex Couples

Please find below my submission to be considered as part of the Inquiry. As a researcher in the fields of family studies and psychology with a considerable publication history in the field of lesbian and gay parenting, I draw your attention to five prevailing myths or stereotypes about lesbian and gay parenting that may be addressed in ways other than empirical evidence. Whilst empirical evidence continues to demonstrate the suitability of lesbians and gay men as parents and the positive outcomes for their children, it is also important that we question the very terms upon which existing stereotypes or myths are made. The information below is an extract from a book published in 2007, of which I was the author; *Becoming Parent: Lesbians, Gay Men and Family*. The book is based upon empirical research and practice wisdom and specifically focuses upon the Australian context. I believe that the refutation of stereotypes and myths such as these is central to legislation that is appropriately located in relationship to existing empirical knowledge about lesbian and gay parents.

Sincerely,
Dr. Damien W. Riggs

Myth #1: Lesbian and gay parents cannot provide suitable gender role models for their children. For example, a boy raised in a lesbian headed household is at risk for growing up 'feminine', as he is parented solely by women, rather than by a heterosexual mother and father.

This type of argument reinforces a number of norms about gender within Western cultures. Gender norms typically associate masculinity with men, and femininity with women, and disparage qualities associated with the latter (e.g., emotionality, subjective decisions, fragility) whilst privileging those qualities associated with the former (e.g., rationality, objectivity, strength). Credible research has long refuted these gendered assumptions, not by simply privileging 'feminine' over 'masculine' qualities, but by questioning the association of particular behaviours with particular bodies, and the privilege accorded to the values traditionally attributed to men.

Another way of examining this argument against lesbian and gay parents is to question how gender norms negatively impact upon all children. This is a particularly salient question when we consider that most lesbians or gay men grow up in heterosexual, rather than lesbian or gay, headed households. How have such heterosexual headed households at times been oppressive for children who do not display gender normative behaviours? How may lesbian or gay headed households potentially challenge gender norms or provide a space for children to develop their own relations to, or critiques of, gender norms? In this sense, lesbian- or gay- headed households may be an importance place where children of a range of gender identities can develop a positive sense of self.

Myth #2: Being lesbian or gay is inherently deviant, disordered and unhealthy. Lesbian or gay parents will corrupt children, abuse them, and subject them to many forms of mistreatment, as a result of their own 'pathology'.

Since 1975 it has been recognised that non-heterosexuality is part of a spectrum of diverse sexualities, all of which are healthy and positive. Like all people, some lesbians and gay men may suffer from mental health issues, or may hold particular beliefs about parenting that differ from those held by the majority of parents. If we are to recognise that the behaviours exhibited by lesbian and gay parents typically fall within a spectrum within which heterosexual parents also typically fall, then we can see that claims of pathology or damage are no more accurate to make about the majority of lesbian and gay parents than they are to make about the majority of heterosexual parents.

Unfortunately, however, research has shown that accusations about the supposed pathology of lesbian and gay parents are not simply countered with assertions of non-pathology. In other words, whilst it is possible to counter anti-gay statements with proof of the fitness of lesbians and gay men to parent (as has been established in a now considerable body of empirical research), this 'proof' is not always sufficient to convince those who are sceptical of, or explicitly in opposition to, lesbian or gay parents. This is because examples such as those provided in regard to the first stereotype in relation to lesbian or gay parents (that of gender role models) are viewed by some as evidence of the inability of lesbian and gay parents to enforce normative gender roles. In response to this, it is important to consider how

the enforcement of normative gender roles by any parents may be considered an abuse of the rights of children to choose their own gender expression.

Myth #3: Lesbian and gay parents are 'radicals' or 'militants' who try to recruit people, or who teach their children to be lesbian or gay. Lesbian and gay parents thus interfere with the 'normal development' of children.

This type of argument against lesbian and gay parents is one that encourages lesbians and gay men to decry any involvement in politics or advocacy. This can result in a denial of some of the very concrete reasons for why advocacy or 'radicalism' may be necessary. For example, and as research on domestic violence has long demonstrated, a significant proportion of women continue to suffer abuse in the context of heterosexual relationships. For some women, this may result in the choice of lesbianism as a viable alternative to remaining in heterosexual relationships. For other women who have always identified as lesbian, being critical of the dominance of men in society more broadly may be an important aspect of their commitment to egalitarian principles within the workplace and household. In this sense, teaching children about social and interpersonal injustices does not represent radical or militant views on the part of lesbian parents per se, but rather provides children (as age-appropriate) information about the world and aspects of it that would benefit from change.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that children, like all people, will have their own viewpoints. Children raised in lesbian or gay-headed households may, on the basis of their parents possible engagement with social movements, be more aware of their right to dissent from negative circumstances. This should be seen not as the 'militant' actions of lesbian or gay parents, but rather as the active choices of children to challenge injustices in their own lives.

Myth #4: Children of lesbian or gay parents will be unnecessarily subjected to discrimination on the basis of their parents' sexuality.

This type of argument is a powerful one, as it does not explicitly talk about lesbian or gay parents in terms of pathology, but rather talks about the consequences of being raised by a lesbian or gay parent. In this way it professes concern for children raised in lesbian or gay headed households, without having to actually say that lesbians or gay men are inherently bad.

There are of course no straightforward answers to the 'problem' of potential discrimination if our desire is to avoid discrimination entirely, or to discount it as an accusation against lesbian and gay parents. What we can do, however, is challenge the terms of the argument. In other words, we can look at why it is that sexuality is depicted as an issue *in particular ways* in regards to parenting (i.e., that lesbian or gay parents are 'at fault' for 'causing' discrimination), how it is that children learn to discriminate in general, and why it is that lesbian or gay parents are seen to blame for discrimination, rather than the society within which we live. One answer to these questions is to consider how discrimination against children in lesbian or gay families reflects wider social beliefs around parenting and families, and how this places undue pressure on lesbian and gay parents and their families.

Myth #5: Lesbians and gay men lead transient lives with multiple sexual partners and show a lack of regard for long-term monogamous relationships. As such, they are unable to provide children with stability or safety in a family environment.

This final argument against lesbians and gay men who parent can be challenged in two distinct ways. First, we can make reference to the extensive literature on lesbian families (in particular), which shows that children raised in such families actually experience many positive outcomes that arise precisely from the specific forms of family created by lesbians that are indeed very stable and nurturing.

The second response to accusations of instability focuses on the terms employed in the accusation itself: the presumption is that having more than one partner over the life course is inherently detrimental to children. This denies the ways in which children are often very robust in their responses to change, and denies the positive benefits that children may gain from interacting with the many differing adults who come in and out of all children's lives. Rather than focusing on presumptions about what *could* impact upon children negatively (for which the list is endless), it is more appropriate to focus on the things that *do* support children, namely caring relationships that respect children's right to knowledge as active participants in the families they are a part of.