

Helping Your Kids Handle Homophobia.....With Love Prevailing

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*Published in Mommy Queerest Online Magazine,
Toronto, Ontario, Summer, 2003, pages 18/19*

Go back twenty years and picture Diana and me in our kitchen for a minute. We both love to cook, love to share, often joke about ooey-goey stuff or spontaneously sing and harmonize on crazy little bits that come to mind while we're rhythmically chopping and slicing. "Oh, mmmMMM, taste *this*," one of us says, and sticks a finger covered in yummy sauce towards the other's expectant mouth. Recipient's eyes widen in scrumptious response. It's so natural to follow up with a hug, and maybe even kiss those pursed, appreciative lips. Innocently loving appreciation. With two teenagers and two younger ones, nothing more.

Two of the back doors to our house lead into the kitchen, and windows are everywhere including in all the doors. We had just newly combined our families. Alex (16) and Angus (13) carefully explained that although they enjoyed our happy hugs, their friends gave them a rough time if they happened to arrive at the back door or side window at the very moment we were expressing our joy. Of course, we felt like they were puncturing some of our party balloons. But to teens who are struggling to define the balancing point between one kind of kiss and another, who are railing against their creative daydreams, this little scene could possibly toss them into deep dark jungles of speculative horror. Reluctantly, without embarrassing our boys any further

by suggesting we speak with their friends about it, we agreed to avoid hugging while in the kitchen, especially during peak teen-social hours.

However, when two of Alex's friends wrote "Lesbian" along the back side of our dusty old Volvo station wagon and we drove around town oblivious for at least a day, we had to address it more directly. Both Alex and Angus were totally dismayed at their friends' behaviour. They'd seen them in the far corner of the garage the night before, but never suspected what they were up to. In the old days of heterosexual parenting, father had always sent their friends home because he disliked noise of any sort. Since we mums loved kicking up our heels, Alex and Angus revelled in having their friends hang out and didn't want anything to jeopardize that.

We explained it was a problem we needed to address with the two boys responsible, separately from them. First we asked Steve and Jocelyn if they'd done the deed, which they openly admitted. Taking a shaky breath, I continued. "You know we love having you guys over." They nodded, serious. "And we want to feel absolutely free to welcome you into our home, our living room, wherever. But we don't feel comfortable having you advertise our sexuality like you did, especially in a society

like this, that is still quite homophobic.” As Jocelyn was French-Canadian, relatively unique in B.C. then, we said, “You know we don’t run around saying ‘*Oh, there’s a frog!*’ Similarly, don’t do that to us. If you have any questions about homosexuality or about us, ask us. We’ll answer any questions you have. But don’t write that kind of stuff on our car.” Although they never did ask us any questions, the boys remained our friends for years afterwards.

Angus has always been sociable, outgoing and very expressive of his feelings. I arrived on the scene at a time in his youth when he was trying to separate from one mum, and there he was, suddenly saddled with two mums. His shy, quiet, introspective dad didn’t pay a lot of attention to him, didn’t ask him to come out for visits or phone him, so the whole change in family structure might have seemed like an overburdening trap. With counselling, we learned that Angus loved me as a friend, but didn’t want me as a parent: an important step-parenting lesson. Diana had to be the only one to give directions to him. Henceforth, I remained overtly in the role of friend only. Of course, nothing prevented Diana from consulting me privately before parenting him.

Angus’s friends loved congregating here, smelling the home-made bread as they entered our kitchen, wolfing down warm slice after warm slice. They formed a band, with Angus as the drummer, with most practices lifting the roof off our loft. The fact that his mum and I were lovers was obvious, and word ran around Angus’s secondary school. One day, Angus came home from school absolutely furious, having been taunted one too many times for having a lesbian mum. He picked up a piece of PVC pipe and whacked it against the wooden workbench in our garage. As plastic shards flew around the garage, tears streamed down

his face, dribbling on to the workbench. Diana was at work. I watched in total empathy. Finally he said, “Why do you and Mum have to be in love?”

“Oh Angus,” I said, my heart stretching while my tongue stumbled around for the right words. “I’m sorry you’re getting teased at school. That’s just not fair. One day, this won’t happen, even though right now it is. It reminds me of a story your mum told me about your Uncle John. About ten years ago, he thought the fact that your mum grew alfalfa sprouts at home, that she not only made her own yoghurt, but that you all ate it, was just outrageous and he ridiculed her for it. Now he likes eating sprouts and yoghurt himself. So things do and will change. Your mum and I are not going to separate. We’re in love, and we’re committed. But the world will change, just as Uncle John’s opinion of sprouts and yoghurt changed.”

I assumed that because Diana and I hugged, kissed and slept together, the younger kids, who were 5 and 4 at the time we got together, would just know by osmosis that we were living as spouses. However, one day, after Diana and I had been together about a year and a half, I was driving Clio and Josh to an elementary school where I was also substitute-teaching. I told Josh that his friend Beau’s parents had recently separated. “Why?” Josh asked.

“Because Beau’s dad fell in love with another man, so his mum wasn’t Number One any more,” I responded.

There was a moment of silence. Then a little voice piped up from the back seat. “But I thought a man could only fall in love with a woman, and a woman could only fall in love with a man,” he said.

Somewhere along the line, I had learned that when younger children ask questions about sexuality, it's important to keep it simple. When they're ready for more information, they'll ask, as long as parents keep communication lines flowing by listening to feelings, respecting both hearts and minds. So I answered, "No. A man can fall in love with a man, or a woman can fall in love with a woman."

"Oh, I see," came the upbeat, satisfied reply. And this was all the information they needed at that point.

When Clio began Grade 9 at a private school in Victoria, she didn't tell any of her classmates about having two mums at home, nor did she invite anybody home for a long time. When we questioned her about it, we realized she was very shy about revealing her mothers' sexuality, for fear of being judged herself. Perhaps her observations of her older brothers' angst influenced her. We listened supportively as she expounded her fears and gave her the space to take whatever time she needed to push through them.

After about a year, Clio began bringing friends home, and soon realized that her friends loved us without judgment. We are still friends with several of them to this day. During an email chat recently, one of her old friends who is now 25 and doing exchange teaching in Japan, told us we are like "second mums" to her.

Josh was the child who seemed to wear us like a badge. When he was only 6 or 7, he constantly asked questions that got us thinking about gender and language. For example, "Why aren't there snow-women, Mummy? Why do they say only mail-men and not mail-women?"

Josh was more "out" about us than we were. On his first day at a new school in Grade 7, he wore a pink jogging suit. By the end of the first week he danced into the kitchen and said, "Guess what, Diana? I told the whole class that my mums are lesbians!" He told me recently (now age 24), that he did that because he felt it was easier to be the first person to break the news. That way, he could be the person in charge instead of the person on the defensive (if he'd said nothing, he figured that eventually people would find out and later accuse or taunt him about it.) He always found that if he spoke up about it, people gathered around and asked him lots of questions, especially the guys. He said the girls often said "Ooooo, icky," and would at first walk away, but interestingly, his most reliable friends in high school were girls.

We knew by the time Josh was 15 that a pink pin we found at the Vancouver Music Festival one summer week-end would suit him as a present. The words on the pin read "My Mum's A Lesbian", with a little heart drawn underneath. The kids hadn't come with us on that trip, so when we returned with other gifts for them, including music tapes and T-shirts, it was the pin that had Josh grinning so happily. "Wow! Thanks, Mum," he exclaimed, immediately taking off his skateboarding cap, firmly attaching the pin, and promptly securing the cap back on his head. There it stayed for the next three years, even through a visit across the continent to his father's new fundamentalist Christian family where one of his half sisters declared, "Did you know your mother is born of the devil?"

A refrain from homophobic family and others ranted intermittently. It went something like "You lesbians are going to make your children grow up to be homosexuals". With regard to the question

of “influencing someone to be gay”, all we can say is, “Who, given the gay bashing and the stigma and fear that exist both in society at large and in each of us individually, would *choose of their own volition* to ‘become’ homosexual?” One of the professional counsellors with whom we discussed this fear said, “What you two

women are modelling is a relationship based on love. The children are not picking up lessons on how to be homosexuals, but lessons in how to be loving. Looking at our grown children’s relationships and at the love they continue to return to us, we can say with certainty that’s true.