

The **Struggles, Experiences**  
and **Needs** of Children in  
LGBTQ Families:

**A Focus on Schools**

**By C. Terrill Thompson**

*(With special thanks to Mountain Meadow)*



*C. Terrill Thompson is the former Executive Director for Mountain Meadow, a nonprofit organization that helps youth from unconventional families and their allies succeed in school and daily life.*

It is estimated that between 12 and 15 million children in the United States are being raised by gay and lesbian parents.<sup>1</sup> These children are students in our schools, yet how much do we know about their unique experiences and needs? How much do we know about the needs of youth being raised by bisexual, transgender and queer parents who are not even included in the statistic above?

If we were to base our knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) families on the media's limited representation, we would likely believe that all LGBTQ families are white, middle-class, two parent families who have been together for many years. In actuality, these families are a small percent of the larger LGBTQ family community.

LGBTQ families come in all different shapes and sizes. There are single parent families, two parent families and multiple parent families. LGBTQ parents are biological parents, adoptive parents and foster parents. Many youth who have LGBTQ parents were conceived in heterosexual relationships, while others were conceived through alternative (artificial) insemination and surrogacy. LGBTQ people are also raising nieces, nephews and grandchildren. LGBTQ families live in rural, urban and suburban areas and span the spectrum of racial and economic diversity. In short, LGBTQ families are just as diverse as the rest of the U.S. population.

In this article I outline common experiences of people with LGBTQ parents and guardians, and examine the effects of homophobia and transphobia on their lives. I also provide answers to several commonly asked questions, discuss the diversity of LGBTQ families, offer tips on how to be an ally to this community and provide a glossary of terms.

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## **Experiences of Youth from LGBTQ Families**

The experiences of youth growing up in LGBTQ families are as diverse as the experiences of any identity group. Some youth are vocally proud of their families while others go to great lengths to hide their secret from others. The one unifying factor for all youth from LGBTQ families is the effect of homophobia and transphobia on their lives. Homophobia and transphobia are both blatant and subtle, and affect all youth from LGBTQ families regardless of their individual sexual orientation or gender identity.

Youth from LGBTQ families are faced with the same homophobia and transphobia that LGBTQ people face, but they often experience it at a younger and more vulnerable age. Five-year-olds entering kindergarten discover that everyone besides them, from

classmates to storybook characters, has a mom and a dad. Other youth struggle to understand why both of their parents are not welcome at teacher-parent conferences or family events. For other youth, homophobia and transphobia are more direct and often violent. Fifty one percent of students in LGBTQ families, according to a recent GLSEN study, feel unsafe in school because of personal characteristics.<sup>2</sup> The most common reason given was having LGBTQ parents. A full 40% of students in the study reported that they had been verbally harassed in school and 25% reported feeling that they could not fully participate in school because of their family make up. Some youth are physically threatened by other students on a regular basis at school, while the teachers refuse, or are ill-equipped, to intervene. Even more disturbing is the fact that nearly 40% of students reported that their teachers and other school staff were the perpetrators of homophobic remarks.

The effects of this daily oppression are profound. Some youth from LGBTQ families act out, while others withdraw. The response I see most frequently, especially in younger children, is a painful confusion. I too often hear the question, "Terrill, why do people hate my family?" This question is always accompanied by a very perplexed and confused expression. Without support, youth from LGBTQ families internalize the messages they hear and often believe there is something wrong with them, rather than with the society in which we live. With support, however, youth from LGBTQ families become confident themselves and their families. These children are typically advocates for diversity of all types and many actively work for LGBTQ rights.

### **Understanding the Levels of Oppression**

In order to understand the oppression youth from LGBTQ families face on a daily basis, one must understand the different levels at which these dynamics play out.

*Interpersonal Level:* Oppression experienced at the interpersonal level is often the easiest for people to see and articulate. The most common complaint I hear from youth with LGBTQ parents and guardians is that their friends' parents will not allow them to come over. Heterosexual parents often prohibit their children from playing with youth from LGBTQ families out of fear that exposure to family diversity will turn their children gay. Other parents believe the myth that all LGBTQ people, especially gay men, are child molesters. This irrational fear keeps youth from LGBTQ families isolated from their peers. The homophobia these youth encounter is often internalized, making them hesitant to invite friends over to play. This internalized homophobia further increases their isolation.

*Group Level:* Hateful words and phrases, such as "that's so gay", "faggot" and "dyke," hurt youth from LGBTQ families at a group level. These words are degrading to their parents, themselves and all LGBTQ people. The term "that's so gay" is often seen as

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benign, but is extremely hurtful. In this context something is “gay” when it is bad or not hip. In contrast, phrases such as, “Are we straight?” translate as “Are we okay with each other? Are we good?” Equating “gay” with “bad” and “straight” with “good” reinforces societal inequality on the basis of sexual orientation. Seventy-five percent of students in the GLSEN study mentioned above reported hearing the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” in their schools.

*Cultural Level:* In U.S. culture the ideal family is portrayed to be a mom, dad and two children. Youth from LGBTQ families constantly have to explain their families to people because of our narrow cultural lens of what constitutes a family. In addition, nearly every child in the U.S. dreams of growing up and getting married. Youth who have same-sex parents are constantly forced to defend why their parents are not married, despite the fact that U.S. law will not permit them to do so.

*Institutional Level:* In many states LGBTQ parents have no legal guardianship rights for their non-biological children. Even in states that do allow for second parent adoption, the legal process is not economically accessible to many LGBTQ people. The end result is that many youth from LGBTQ families live in fear of being separated from their parents. If a child is injured, their non-legal parent may be denied access to them in the hospital. Even worse, if their biological or adoptive parent dies, the child has no legal rights protecting them from being separated from their other parent. This fear is heightened for bi-national families.

## Some Frequently Asked Questions

*Will the kids be gay?* This common question stems from our society’s views that homosexuality and transgenderism are abnormal and therefore should be prevented. Allies of the LGBTQ community have conducted numerous studies that “prove” that youth from LGBTQ families are equally likely (and equally unlikely) to be gay as youth from heterosexual families. These studies are well meaning, but stem from societal beliefs that homosexuality and transgenderism should be prevented. This question would not be asked if all sexual orientations and gender identities were equally valued.

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*Do LGBTQ parents want their children to be gay?* Some LGBTQ parents hope their children will come out as LGBTQ themselves so that they can share in that experience; others hope their children will be straight and gender normative so that they won’t have to encounter the same challenges their parents have experienced. At a deeper level, however, LGBTQ parents want the same thing all parents want. They want their children to be happy. Happiness comes from being loved and supported in who you are.

*Is it ethical for LGBTQ people to have children in today’s intolerant society?* This common question is the same one my aunt and uncle heard only 25 years ago when

they wanted to have children as an interracial couple. It is true that youth from LGBTQ families must overcome obstacles that youth from straight families do not have to face, but this does not make having children unethical. If this argument were true, then only white, upper class, straight, married Christians could ethically have children.

*How do children feel about having one or more LGBTQ parents?* The answer to this question depends primarily on the person and their support system. One of the most challenging common situations is a mother and father who divorced as one parent came out as being LGBTQ. It is challenging for a young person to separate the pain from the divorce from their feelings about having an LGBTQ parent. This challenge is more pronounced when their straight parent blames the LGBTQ parent or is openly homophobic or transphobic.

How a child feels about having an LGBTQ parent often changes with age. For example, Mountain Meadow frequently receives calls from distraught parents who are concerned as to why their child is suddenly ashamed of their family when they never had been before. We always ask the age of the child and we nearly always receive the same response – he or she just started middle school. Middle-school students often find their parents embarrassing, regardless of family structure; it is a typical aspect of individual-identity development.

Typical, healthy, age-appropriate behavior is often over scrutinized by both LGBTQ parents and the rightwing as having to do with the parents' sexual orientation or gender identity. A parent recently told a Mountain Meadow staff member that their newly adopted children were adjusting well to having two gay fathers, but that they weren't completely comfortable yet. Their only source of perceived discomfort was that the children didn't like it when their dads kiss in front of them. What child hasn't gone through a stage where they didn't want to see their parents kiss?

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LGBTQ people in our society have been so deeply wounded by prejudice that most are hyper sensitive and are always subconsciously on alert for traces of discomfort with their sexual orientation or gender identity. The result is that LGBTQ parents, as well as gay hate groups, often read more into a child's reaction than is really there. This scrutiny is never placed on heterosexual parents. It would be absurd to say that a child's discomfort with their parents kissing was due to heterophobia, yet our society constantly places that scrutiny on same-sex couples.

*Do children need a mom and a dad?* It is extremely important for youth to have role models who are similar to them in gender, race and other areas of difference. There is no reason, however, that these role models need to be a child's parents. In fact, there is a great deal of benefit that comes from having non-parental role models. Youth continue to look up to these role models during the teenage years when they are fighting for

independence from their parents. Youth from all families, including those who have a mother and father, benefit from having other adult role models in their life.

*Do children from LGBTQ families turn out okay?* I am disheartened by how frequently I am asked this question by LGBTQ parents. LGBTQ people often internalize the messages they hear, including that they can't be good parents. The rightwing has based their arguments against LGBTQ parenting on the misconception that LGBTQ parents somehow damage their children. Heterosexual parents have never been forced to prove that their sexual orientation does not harm a child; the LGBTQ community has. Our nation's leading children's health, children's welfare and mental health organizations have issued statements declaring that a parent's sexual orientation is irrelevant to their ability to raise a child.<sup>3</sup> These organizations include, but are not limited to: the American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Bar Association, American Medical Association, Child Welfare League of America, National Adoption Center, National Association of Social Workers, North American Council on Adoptable Children and Voice for Adoption. It is the quality of the home, not the sexual orientation or gender identity of the parents that matters.

*What do youth with two moms or two dads call their parents?* There is no universal answer to this question. A few of the common ones are: mom, mommy, ima, mama, dad, daddy, aba, and papa. Some youth call their parents by their first names.

*How do LGBTQ people have children?* Many people are surprised that LGBTQ people can have children.

Children become a part of LGBTQ families in many different ways. Many youth have a mother and father who divorced as one of their parents came out; others were adopted into LGBTQ families. Medically supported alternative insemination and surrogacy are also available to those who can afford it; others have friends or family who serve as sperm donors or surrogate mothers.

*Do all LGBTQ families look gay?* No. Many bisexual and transgender people partner with people of the opposite sex, and therefore don't "look gay." In addition, many LGBTQ families are headed by single parents. Single people in our society are typically assumed to be straight. Sexual orientation and gender identity are personal identities independent of the sex or gender of someone's partner. For example, a bisexual woman who is in a relationship with a man is perceived by most people to be heterosexual. Bisexual people remain bisexual whether they are partnered with a man, a woman or someone who identifies as transgender.

*Why are marriage rights such a big deal?* The federal government often takes the lead in protecting minority groups from discrimination, but the federal government penalizes same-sex couples based on their inability to marry. Same-sex couples are excluded

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from 1,138 federal policies and protections conferred by marriage.<sup>4</sup> These policies and protections are not extended to any same-sex couple, even those who have the ability to marry at the state level. Not all same-sex couples want to marry, but they should have the right to if that is what they want for themselves and their families.

The word “marriage” is also important beyond the legal protection it offers. It is part of the American dream. I have never heard a child say they dream of growing up and obtaining a civil union. Marriage rights under a different term, such as “civil union” or “domestic partnership,” will never be the same as marriage. Our country’s history has shown that separate cannot be equal.

## How to Become an Ally

*Educate yourself:* Most people know very little about the experiences of people from LGBTQ families, including LGBTQ people. Take the time to learn about this unique sector of our society. Read and ask questions. Visit Mountain Meadow’s website at [www.mountainmeadow.org](http://www.mountainmeadow.org) for a list of resources.

*Make LGBTQ affinity groups inclusive:* LGBTQ affinity groups in schools and workplaces are typically open only to people who self identify as LGBTQ. These restrictions exclude straight people from LGBTQ families. Many people who grew up in LGBTQ families identify as culturally gay, even if they identify as romantically and sexually straight. Excluding them from affinity groups excludes them from their own culture and denies their experience in the LGBTQ community.

*Make Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) a welcoming home for youth from all families:* Youth from LGBTQ families often feel excluded from Gay Straight Alliances. They are typically welcome as allies, but their specific needs are not recognized or addressed. For more information on how to make your school’s GSA welcoming to youth from LGBTQ families, contact Mountain Meadow and request the organization’s GSA guide.

### **Tips for Supporting Youth from LGBTQ Families\***

1. Don’t treat us different from other kids.
2. Don’t judge us.
3. Be supportive.
4. Learn about us and our experiences so you can imagine walking in our shoes.
5. Don’t assume that a family is heterosexual just because they appear to be.
6. Stop people from talking bad about us and our families.
7. Stop people from saying things like “that’s so gay.”
8. Don’t assume that we are gay just because our parents are.
9. Don’t out youth from LGBTQ families without their permission.
10. Don’t discriminate against anyone no matter what.
11. Be nice to everyone.

*\*Written by a group of youth at Mountain Meadow*

*Become involved in LGBTQ activities in your school, workplace or community.* Many people shy away from LGBTQ activities because they are afraid others may think they

are gay. If this fear has ever stopped you from attending an event, ask yourself why. What would happen if someone did think you were gay? When you are ready, attend an event. Keep an open mind and be ready to learn.

*Become aware of and shift your language:* For example, don't assume people have a mother and father. This can be challenging, as it is ingrained in us by our society. Even though I was raised in a single parent home, I still catch myself asking questions such as, "Is your mom or dad home?" Or to adults, "What is your relationship like with your mom and dad?" Try counting how many times you say "mom and dad" in a week. You might be surprised how frequently one word follows the other. Work to catch yourself and replace "mom and dad" with "parents" or "family."

Don't use the terms "dyke", "faggot" or "queer" to refer to people without their permission. While some people within the LGBTQ community have reclaimed these terms, they are hurtful and offensive to many. Use the term "homosexual" sparingly. This term carries a history of our culture's formerly commonly held belief that "homosexuality" was a curable mental illness. The terms "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual," and "transgender" are the most universally accepted terms, but whenever possible, use the terms people use to describe themselves. Never use the phrase "that's so gay."

*Don't make homophobic and transphobic comments, and stop others from doing so:* Straight, gender normative people who have LGBTQ parents or guardians are often seen by the world simply as straight, due to the invisibility of their families. On account of their "passing," people from LGBTQ families often hear more homophobic and transphobic comments than LGBTQ people. It is not acceptable to make homophobic and transphobic comments or jokes regardless of who hears them. Allowing someone else to make these comments without intervening is equally as hurtful.

*Don't assume that people from LGBTQ parents have two moms or two dads.* LGBTQ families are far more diverse than that!

*Curb your curiosity.* When people come out about having an LGBTQ family, they are often flooded with questions about what it is like. LGBTQ families are just like other families; each one is different, yet similar. LGBTQ families fight over money, chores and teenage attitudes. They go through good times and hard times. How would you answer the question, what was it like being raised by straight parents?

*Don't tokenize people from LGBTQ families:* Never ask someone from an LGBTQ family to speak on behalf of the community. LGBTQ families are far too diverse for one person to be able to represent the whole community. The only experience they have had is their own.

*Make forms inclusive:* Every time a child from an LGBTQ family encounters a form that asks for information about a child's "mother and father" it sends a message that they and their family are not welcome. The simple act of changing a form to request

information about “parent/guardian 1” and “parent/guardian 2” makes a huge difference to youth from LGBTQ families.

*Donate books to libraries:* Most schools and public libraries do not carry children’s books that are inclusive of LGBTQ families. It is extremely important for youth to see their families represented in the books they read. Help make inclusive books accessible to all families by donating them to schools and public libraries.

A list of inclusive books is available at [www.mountainmeadow.org](http://www.mountainmeadow.org).

## **Conclusion**

This article has presented you with more information about youth from LGBTQ families than most people in this country have ever been exposed to. I hope you will continue to educate yourself and become an ally to the community. This population is large enough, and the silence surrounding the issue is strong enough, that the odds are good that you work with or know someone from an LGBTQ family and don’t realize it. Make a difference to the people who live everyday in silence about their families by bringing the issue to the table among your friends, family, coworkers and especially in school classrooms.

If you want to learn more, or have any questions, don’t hesitate to contact our office at 215-772-1107 or [inquiries@mountainmeadow.org](mailto:inquiries@mountainmeadow.org) or visit our website at [www.mountainmeadow.org](http://www.mountainmeadow.org)

## Glossary of Terms

**LGBTQ:** lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

**Lesbian:** women who are romantically and sexually attracted only to other women

**Gay:** men who are romantically and sexually attracted only to other men (is sometime used to refer to homosexual men and women)

**Bisexual:** people who are attracted in varying degrees to both men and women. The term “bisexual” is often critiqued because it reinforces a gender binary system.

**Transgender:** a person whose gender identity (male, female, neither or both) does not match their assigned gender (the gender assigned to them at birth based on their biological sex) Transgender is a gender identity; it is not a sexual orientation.

**Queer:** an umbrella term used to refer to people whose gender identity and/or sexual orientation do not conform to a gender normative society. This term is considered to be offensive to some.

**Homophobia:** the fear of, hatred of, or discrimination against people who are, or are perceived to be homosexual.

**Transphobia:** the fear of, hatred of, or discrimination against people who are or are perceived to be transgender.

**Ally:** a person who understands and supports the LGBTQ community, but does not necessarily self identify as LGBTQ

**Gender Normative:** a person whose gender identity matches their assigned gender (the gender assigned to them at birth based on their biological sex)

**Second Parent Adoption:** the adoption of a partners’ biological or adopted child

**Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA):** school clubs where students can talk about sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and the issues that surround them. GSAs are typically found at the high school level and are open to all students.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Bergen, M.B. (1991). *Human Sexuality* (4<sup>th</sup> Eds.), Homosexuality and Bisexuality (pp. 385-415). New York: Harper Collins Publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Kosciw, Joseph G. & Diaz, Elizabeth M. (2008). *Involved, Invisible, Ignored: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation’s K-12 Schools*. New York: GLSEN.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Campaign, <http://www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/custody/professional-opinion.asp>, Retrieved March 19, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Family Equality Council, <http://www.familyequality.org/resources/publications/speakerstoolkit.pdf>, Retrieved March 19, 2009.