



BEST PRACTICES: SEVEN AREAS OF INTERVENTION IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF
HOMOPARENTAL FAMILIES



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TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF HOMOPARENTAL FAMILIES

Over recent years, more and more homoparental families have begun to affirm their identities at their children's school. Many factors have played a role in this evolution: the greater social tolerance of family diversity and homosexuality, the greater visibility of homosexual parents, and the improved access to parenthood for homosexual couples. The school community must recognize that these families exist and that they have the same rights as families with heterosexual parents. It is also important to be aware that these families have specific needs. The following pages are meant to offer administrators and school personnel, as well as all professionals working in schools, suggestions and action plans to help better meet the needs of parents and children from homoparental families in their institutions.

This section contains a wide variety of potential interventions. In an ideal world, all of these suggestions could be implemented. If not, or if only limited interventions are possible, it is important to remember that even a small action can have a big impact. It is also possible to create an intervention plan with several steps.

Before anything else, the school's personnel must recognize that homosexual parents are just as competent as other parents, and that they too take the education and well-being of their children to heart. The school must make efforts to communicate this reality to its employees. A fruitful partnership between school and family plays a critical role in children's academic success and the professional success of employees. There are a number of obstacles to overcome in building a positive relationship between the school and homoparental families: homophobia, certain personal or religious beliefs, a heterosexist vision of family, a lack of knowledge, etc. Administration and school personnel must work to correct these problems.

A whole-school approach is necessary to promote the inclusion of all families. All school community members must work together, from administrators and teachers to social workers, schoolyard supervisors, parents and students.

The following subsections identify seven areas that need to be addressed in educational institutions in order to establish a positive environment for children and their families. The tables that summarize each area for action can serve as reference lists to qualitatively evaluate the school's level of inclusion. The level of inclusion can also be evaluated using the *Institutional Climate Survey*. To promote a group discussion between colleagues on this topic, use the 'Evaluation of your institution' activity.

POLICIES AND THE ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATION

A school's administration must ensure a school environment that values and respects diversity. To do so, the administration must publish and promote an official policy of acceptance and inclusion that calls for the respect of all types of non-traditional families. In the same vein, an anti-violence policy that specifies, among other things, that homophobia is not tolerated, is an important starting point. This sets the tone, both for families and school personnel. It is important that all families feel accepted, and the promotion of the school's inclusive philosophy



will reassure homosexual parents and encourage their participation in school life. For teachers, this guarantees the support of administration in their proactive initiatives on topics such as homoparental families. An antidiscrimination philosophy also helps to set up a healthy climate in the school community, allowing people to speak freely, to share their fears and to reach a better mutual understanding.



POLICIES AND THE ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATION

GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
Respect and inclusion of all children and their families is an integral part of school values.	Documents explaining the school's mission should contain clear statements about the inclusion of all types of families.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' (example of inclusive mission statement) module.
Homophobic harassment and insults are considered unacceptable and are not tolerated in the school environment.	Documents explaining the school's policies as well as the code of conduct contain clear statements about homophobic insults and harassment as well as clear instructions for teachers and support personnel on how to handle homophobic incidents.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module (examples of inclusive policy and code of conduct).
The school's principal understands the needs of homoparental families.	The school's principal learns about homoparental families.	Resources and training programs of the LGBT Family Coalition.
The principal establishes a school climate in which teachers feel comfortable and supported when they use an inclusive curriculum.	The school's principal understands the legal, social and ethical responsibilities of the school in regards to homoparental families.	'Homoparental Families: Society's Legal and Ethical Responsibilities' module. 'Explaining to Parents and Colleagues' module in the 'Safe and Inclusive Environments' section.
The school's social climate is evaluated in order to determine the effectiveness of policies and practices concerning homophobia, heterosexism and inclusion.	The school uses data such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The number of reported homophobic incidents; ○ The type of reported incidents; ○ Parents' feedback. 	'Reacting to Children's Homophobic Words and Actions' module in the 'Safe and Inclusive Environments' section. 'Institutional Climate Survey'.

SENSITIZATION OF PERSONNEL

School personnel must have access to a training program that introduces them to the specific issues of gay and lesbian-headed families. By learning more about the concerns faced by homosexual parents, they will be better prepared to discuss the topic with other parents, students and colleagues.

For future teachers, it is important to include discussions of diversity— particularly non-traditional family structures— in their academic training, which unfortunately was not the case in the past.



SENSITIZATION OF PERSONNEL		
GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
<p>School personnel are (or have become) informed on the subject of homoparental families.</p>	<p>School personnel are encouraged and provided release-time to participate in the LHF workshop and other awareness-raising activities for adults, and to increase their knowledge using the kit and resources recommended herein.</p> <p>The availability and location of the kit and other tools related to family diversity is made public.</p> <p>The kit is easily accessible.</p>	<p>Resources and training programs of the LGBT Family Coalition.</p> <p>‘Resources on Homoparental Families’ module.</p> <p>‘Awareness-Raising Activities for Colleagues’ module.</p>

SENSITIZATION OF PERSONNEL (CONTINUED)

GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
All school personnel, including support staff, have an adequate understanding of the issues surrounding homophobia.	The school's principal encourages all staff members to participate in the LHF workshop, to use the tools in this kit, and/or to participate in an awareness-raising activity for adults during the lunch hour or a professional development day.	Resources and training programs of the LGBT Family Coalition. 'Reacting to Children's Homophobic Words and Actions' module in the 'Safe and Inclusive Environments' section.
Personnel approve of and put into practice the school's inclusive and non-discriminatory policies.	Inclusive and non-discriminatory policies are developed and/or revised in consultation with staff and faculty members. Personnel is given release time to gain a better understanding of the policies. The personnel's roles and responsibilities are clearly defined in the documents announcing the policies so that all staff members have a good understanding of their role.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module.
All staff members are comfortable talking about homoparental families and are ready to be more inclusive in their practice, in conformity with the policy and mission statement of the school.	School personnel are given the time and the framework for reflecting on their own feelings towards homoparental families, their own degree of openness and their level of comfort with homoparental families, as well as their ideas about homoparental families without fear of punishment or judgment. Gay and lesbian parents are invited to come share their experiences with school personnel.	'Awareness-Raising Activities for Colleagues' module. Gay and lesbian parents.
The problem of school violence in general is described in such a way as to include homophobic harassment and insults.	Training programmes against bullying and harassment offered at the school include topics such as homophobic insults and harassment.	'Resources on Homoparental Families' module.

EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL

Like all students, children from homoparental families need to see their family reality reflected in the class curriculum and in their environment. Schools should have books and other educational material that reflects family diversity. These books should be readily available in the library and in all classrooms, even those not normally frequented by children with gay or lesbian parents. Parents from various family types could be asked to recommend books or videos for the school.



EDUCATIONAL MATERIAL		
GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
<p>The school environment promotes diversity and challenges gender stereotypes.</p> <p>Students (and parents) see a multiplicity of family types reflected in the school environment throughout the school year.</p> <p>Students feel comfortable talking about their families if they want to.</p>	<p>Resources that reflect family diversity and the inclusion of homoparental families, as well as the flexibility of gender roles, are available in classrooms and in the school (books, posters, projects, etc.).</p> <p>Inclusive educational material is visible so that children from homoparental families can see it and feel accepted within their school.</p>	<p>‘Resources on homoparental families’ module (for books that reflect family diversity and different gender roles to add to the school library).</p> <p>Classroom activities in the ‘Otis and Alice’ and ‘For Older Kids’ modules in the section ‘Classroom Activities: Preschool-Primary’.</p> <p>‘All Kinds of Families’ poster.</p>



INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

In the school environment, heterosexist and homophobic language can have a negative impact on all children and their families. Children use the expression “That’s so gay” as an insult, or worse, they use other homophobic terms like “fag,” “dyke,” “lezzy” and “queer” because they have learned to what extent these words can destroy someone’s self-esteem. Schools send letters home which make reference to the child’s mother and father, unintentionally excluding all other family configurations in the school community. School personnel have the responsibility of using language that includes all types

of families and people, to show children how to use vocabulary appropriately and to intervene when words are used hurtfully. Word choice is important when speaking to children (or adults) on the topic of homoparental families. If teachers are hesitant to call things by their names, perhaps using euphemisms to designate “homosexuality,” “gays” or “lesbians,” the students are likely to internalize this same sense of embarrassment when they talk about these subjects. Those in contact with students must be comfortable using appropriate language.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE		
GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
The language used in school correspondence or in any communication with students and parents is inclusive of all types of families, including homoparental families.	All communication aimed at parents— letters, bulletins, flyers, forms, etc.— use terms like “parent” or “guardian” rather than “mother” or “father.”	‘First Contact with Gay and Lesbian Parents’ module.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE (CONTINUED)

GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
<p>Appropriate language is used during meetings with parents from homoparental families.</p>	<p>Parents are asked what their children call them at home, and how their type of family can be discussed in general class conversations.</p>	<p>Gay and lesbian parents.</p>
<p>The words “gay” and “lesbian” are used appropriately, both in class and in public forums, so that children, personnel and parents understand their meaning.</p>	<p>School administrators and teachers include gay and lesbian parents when they describe the diversity of families that are present in the school.</p>	<p>Resources and training programs of the LGBT Family Coalition.</p>
<p>Personnel intervene immediately in the case of homophobic insults or harassment.</p> <p>Appropriate disciplinary actions are established, made clear and applied.</p>	<p>All personnel (including cafeteria staff, schoolyard supervisors and bus drivers) are trained to recognize homophobic harassment and labelling and to intervene when it occurs in their presence.</p> <p>A clear procedure for handling homophobic incidents is established.</p>	<p>‘Reacting to Children’s Homophobic Words and Actions’ module in the ‘Safe and Inclusive Environments’ section.</p> <p>‘How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies’ module.</p>
<p>Personnel are proactive in preventing homophobic language in class.</p>	<p>Teachers prioritize activities that tackle the issue of homophobic insults in class.</p>	<p>‘Understanding What Lies Behind the Words’ activity in the ‘For Older Kids’ module.</p>

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AND ACTIONS

Administrators in our school system can also take the initiative of introducing the question of homoparental families into the educational program. School personnel must demonstrate open-mindedness. This means adding issues related to homoparental families to the curriculum and making appropriate pedagogical material available, such as textbooks or other publications, that shows the life of children with homosexual parents. This could also mean introducing students to loving, same-sex relationships. The objective is to raise awareness among students about the diversity of family constellations to help them discover realities that are different than their own. Integrating the theme of gay and lesbian-headed families into the educational program right from kindergarten will bring the values of openness and respect for differences to the forefront.

Children of gay and lesbian parents need to see their lives reflected in what they see in class. For example, they benefit from being able to recognize their family situation in the books they read; this helps normalize their experiences. It is also important for teachers to lend an active ear to these students, should they feel compelled to talk about their family life.



CLASSROOM ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES		
GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
<p>The subject of family diversity, gender stereotypes and sexual orientation are, when possible, integrated into the curriculum.</p>	<p>Teachers carry out activities that emphasize family diversity.</p> <p>Teachers take advantage of special occasions (Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Family Week, International Day Against Homophobia, etc.) to discuss similarities and differences between various types of families.</p> <p>A general conversation about homoparental families is introduced through class activities.</p>	<p>Class activities on family diversity and stereotypes in the ‘Ulysse et Alice’ module.</p> <p>‘Resources on Homoparental Families’ module (for other activities available online).</p> <p>Brochures on the training programs offered by ‘les GRIS du Québec’.</p>
<p>Students help teachers and support staff identify the places where homophobic bullying takes place in order to develop a strategy to supervise the at-risk locations.</p>	<p>Teachers and students identify places in the school where homophobic harassment is likely to occur. In collaboration with support staff, they develop a plan of action to ensure better supervision of these places.</p>	<p>Sub-activity, ‘Safe/Dangerous Spaces’ in the ‘Understanding What Lies Behind the Words’ activity in the ‘For Older Kids’ module.</p>
<p>Students understand the impact of negative words.</p>	<p>Teachers plan activities to help students develop empathy for others and understand how others feel when teased or insulted.</p> <p>Teachers plan activities to encourage students to establish links between racism, sexism and homophobia.</p>	<p>‘Understanding What Lies Behind the Words’ activity in the ‘For Older Kids’ module.</p> <p>‘Reacting to Children’s Homophobic Words and Actions’ module in the ‘Safe and Inclusive Environments’ section.</p> <p>‘Resources on Homoparental Families’ module.</p>

CHILDREN'S ROLE

Children should learn about the importance of respect and open-mindedness from a very young age. Children can participate in many aspects of their school's plan to fight homophobia and to create an inclusive environment. This promotes not only their engagement, but can also help strengthen their understanding of how widespread homophobia has become and its impact on people.

LE RÔLE DES ENFANTS		
GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
Children's privacy is respected.	Children with gay or lesbian parents and children who do not conform to gender stereotypes should not be used as examples when doing activities on homophobia without getting their permission in advance.	Students.
<p>Children use words like "gay" and "lesbian" appropriately, and not as insults. They are encouraged to be inclusive.</p> <p>Children take responsibility for different aspects of the fight against homophobia and homophobic harassment.</p> <p>Students have social skills such as conflict management and respect for others.</p>	<p>Teachers react consistently to homophobic, racist and sexist insults, and take the time to make sure students understand why their words are hurtful.</p> <p>Students are encouraged to oppose and question their peers' homophobic behaviour and to report homophobic harassment to school personnel.</p> <p>Class discussions emphasize respect for diversity.</p>	<p>Class activities on family diversity in the 'Ulysse et Alice' module. 'Understanding What Lies Behind the Words' activity in the 'For Older Kids' module.</p> <p>'Respecting Loving Relationships Between People of the Same Sex' activity in the 'For Older Kids' module.</p> <p>'Reacting to Children's Homophobic Words and Actions' module in the 'Safe and Inclusive Environments' section.</p>
Students are familiar with the school's anti-homophobia policy.	At the start of the school year, students are informed of the anti-homophobia policy and are made aware of the consequences for homophobic behaviour.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module (example of policy and code of conduct).

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Studies show that the more involved parents are in their children's education, the more successful their children are at school and beyond. Schools should encourage homosexual parents to participate in all aspects of their children's education. To do so, an inclusive school climate must already be established so that homosexual parents feel welcomed and accepted.

It is not, however, always easy to identify all the parents who are part of a homoparental family. There are a wide variety of homoparental family types. To work with these families, traditional conceptions of families based on biology need to be cast aside in favour of a more functional definition of a parent (for example, an adult who takes on the responsibility of raising a child). Identifying all people who take on a parental role is an element that promotes the creation of effective home-school relationships.

The openness of homosexual parents is also essential to establishing an effective home-school connection. This promotes conversation about homosexual parents and the integration of children in class, and opens the channels of communication to help fight homophobia. Unfortunately, many parents are hesitant about revealing their sexuality (due to a desire for privacy, fear of homophobia, concerns about custody, etc.). The school must work to support parents who do wish to affirm their sexuality within the school community and to respect those who are not ready to do so. Besides establishing a school climate that promotes diversity and tolerance, administration can take certain actions that demonstrate their willingness to put homosexual parents at ease. For example, registration forms can be modified so that the spaces previously reserved for the father's name and the mother's name are called "parent" or "guardian."



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
Parents know that their children are learning in a positive school environment.	The school's guide contains explicit mention of a "Zero tolerance" policy for homophobic words, actions and physical violence.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module (examples of inclusive policy, code of conduct and mission statement).
All types of families are encouraged to participate in school activities and contribute to school life.	Parents from diverse family types and cultural origins are invited to participate in school activities to help to accurately represent the school's population. Parents are encouraged to join the school board and can even create a subcommittee on diversity.	Parents.
Parents' privacy is respected.	Teachers encourage parents to get involved in school life and to help promote inclusion, but at the same time they respect that some parents want to keep their family situation private (for personal or professional reasons). Always ask parents first.	Parents.



PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT (CONTINUED)

GOAL	HOW TO REACH IT	USEFUL RESOURCES
The use of appropriate and inclusive language encourages parents from diverse family types to get involved in school life.	Ask parents what names they use at home and what names they would like teachers to use when speaking directly to their children or in a general class discussion about same-sex parents.	Parents.
A healthy environment is established in which parents can openly discuss problems and can express their worries about discrimination.	A procedure allowing parents to file a complaint is described in the school's handbook and in its policy statement.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module.
The school makes it clearly known to all parents and guardians that all information about their private lives, including their sexuality, child custody arrangements, etc. are welcome and promote interventions that favour the social and emotional development of children.	The schools policy on inclusion is made clear in its mission statement. Same-sex parents are encouraged to attend parent meetings together.	'How to Establish Inclusive and Nondiscriminatory Policies' module.
In case of doubts about how to proceed in a given situation, parents are consulted.	Teachers consult same-sex parents when in doubt (e.g. on how to approach topics like Mother's Day and Father's Day in class).	Parents.



CONCLUSION

Meeting the needs of homoparental families in schools is a team effort: administrators, school personnel, parents and students must get involved. It is also important to remain connected to community resources that could offer significant support to this undertaking. The goal is to instill a school climate that promotes tolerance and the respect of differences to allow homoparental families to feel accepted. The ultimate goal is normalization. But before homosexual

parents can be perceived by the school community as parents just like any others, society itself must experience a similar evolution. Thankfully, that day is not so far away as we might imagine. It wasn't so long ago that the children of divorced mothers were judged a lot like the children of homoparental families are today. Society has made a lot of progress, and nowadays the former goes almost unnoticed.





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