

RESPONDING...

simply to children's questions



Educators can use children's natural curiosity as a springboard for teaching about the society in which we live and the acceptance of differences.

For an adult, talking about family diversity with children and approaching the subject of homoparental families through the book *Otis and Alice* (or by other means) is to accept the possibility of questions about how families are formed, about diversity and about sexual orientation.

Children are naturally curious about where babies come from. However, when a young child asks a question about a family with two moms or two dads, he is not really interested in what goes on in their bedroom.

Generally speaking, children are looking for the simplest explanation. Homoparental families can be explained simply as the desire of two men or two women who love each other to have a baby, just like a man and a woman who love each other might want to have a baby.

For the teacher, it is important to identify the level of the child's questioning and to respond at the same level, with clarity and respect.

We have assembled some of the questions asked by 4 to 8 year-olds after they have read *Otis and Alice*. We suggest some possible answers, that should, obviously, be adapted to the individual personalities and characteristics of the children in your group.

Questions

Where is Otis' daddy?

Otis' family is a family with two moms. There is no daddy. Look here (refer them again to pages 14 and 15 of *Otis and Alice*), there are all kinds of families: families with a mom and a dad; families with only one parent; families with two moms; families with parents of different origins; families with two dads, etc.

That isn't possible! How can Otis have two moms?

Most children have a mom and a dad, but there are all kinds of families. A child whose parents are separated can have two families: one part of the week he or she lives with the mother and the other part of the week with the father, in another house. Some children have only one parent looking after them, whether a father, a mother or, sometimes, a grandmother. Some children have been adopted. Some families have two mothers or two fathers. There are all different kinds of families. We have to respect all of them.

How can two moms have a baby? I thought it took a man and a woman to make a baby!

The passage on the last page of Otis and Alice: "And that's how Otis' family grew...until next time" may occasionally provoke this question. Some children have a very clear understanding of how babies are conceived; others have only a vague notion. It's up to you to adapt your answers to their level of questioning. We suggest three levels of information you can provide, depending on the age and knowledge of the children.

BASIC LEVEL

Alice also wants to know how you can have two moms. Otis explains (pages 14 and 15): "When two people love each other very much, they often want to have a baby. So some children live with a mother and a father. Others live with two mothers or two fathers. Sometimes, children have only one parent, others have adoptive parents. There are all kinds of families that love each other and where everyone feels comfortable." That's how two moms can have a baby.



INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

If two women love each other very much and want to have a baby, they can ask a man to help them make the baby. That's how Otis' mother got a new baby.

ADVANCED LEVEL

It's up to you to identify the vocabulary most suitable to the children's age group.

It's true that, to make a baby, you have to have a tiny part of a woman and a tiny part of a man. The woman's part is called an egg and the man's part is called a sperm. When the egg and the sperm come together, a baby begins to grow in the woman's belly.

When two women love each other and want to have a baby, they can ask a man to give them the sperm. That way, he helps them to have a baby.



How does the man give the sperm to the woman?

It's up to you to identify the vocabulary most suitable to the children's age group.

If a man and a woman want to have a baby, the man puts his sperm in the woman's belly where it meets the egg to create a baby. If two women are in love and want a baby, the man gives his sperm to a doctor, and the doctor puts the sperm into the woman's belly, where it meets the egg to create the baby. Then, the baby grows inside the woman's belly.

How can two men have a baby?

If two men want to have a baby, usually they have to adopt a child.

Don't children need both a mommy and a daddy?

The most important thing for children is to have parents who love them, who will take care of them, and who help them to grow up. In some families, it's a mom and a dad. In other families, it's two moms or two dads. Sometimes, it's only one mom or dad. Other times, it's an aunt, uncle or grandmother who takes care of the child. There are all kinds of families. What matters is that the parents love their child and care for him or her.

What does a child call two moms? Does he or she get the names mixed up?

In the book, Otis solves the problem by calling one of his mothers Maman and the other Mamo. In other families with two mothers, the children call one mother Mama Nicole and the other Mama Joanne. Any sensible name will do. It really isn't all that complicated!

Isn't it true that only a woman and a man can get married?

A marriage is a special ceremony that some people who love each other choose to have. In Canada, since 2005, as well as in a number of other countries, two men or two women can marry if they want to. But a lot of people who love each other, whether or not they have children, decide not to get married.

Are the words "gay" and "lesbian" bad words?

It's up to you to decide how to present this information depending on the age of the children. You could also ask them if they have ever used these words or heard them used at school. The question can lead to an interesting discussion with the children about hurtful language (words based on ethnic origin, physical appearance, etc.).

The word "gay" means that two men love each other. The word "lesbian" means that two women love each other. "Gay" and "lesbian" are not bad words in themselves, but some people use them as insults. Perfectly good words can be hurtful depending on how we use them. Kids that use words to hurt other kids' feelings are being mean. Such behaviour is unacceptable. We have to respect people no matter who they are or what type of family they are a part of.

My parents say homosexuals are bad. My big brother says it isn't cool to be gay.

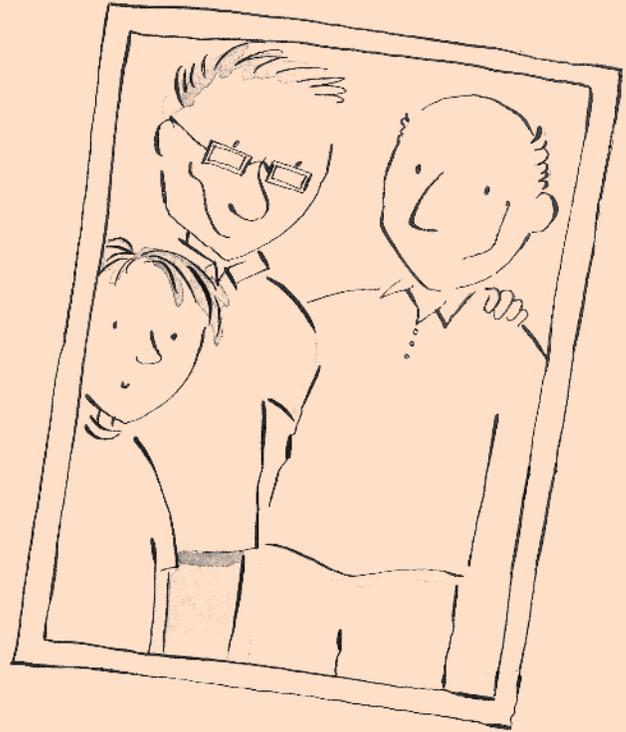
Is that true?

Right from when we are born, we are all different. Some people have dark skin; others have light skin. Some are short while others are tall. Some people are born with a handicap. We can't change who we are.

What's important is to know that it's never okay to judge or be mean to someone because they are different.

A man will sometimes fall in love with another man or a woman can fall in love with another woman. Instead of a man and woman being in love it's a man who loves another man or a woman who loves another woman. It's important for everyone to be who they are and not to hide their true feelings of love.

Whether we're brown or white, short or tall, whether we love a man or a woman, we all have the right to be respected by others. Everyone, whatever his or her differences, deserves respect. Being different doesn't mean "being bad" or "not being cool."



If a child has homosexual parents, does that mean that he or she will grow up to be gay or lesbian?

Kids in families with two moms or two dads are no more likely to be gay than other kids. Being gay is not something you learn from your parents. You either are or you're not. That's the way you are born.

We don't learn how to be gay from other people. Some people are born gay or lesbian, just like some are left-handed and others are right-handed. Some kids with right-handed parents are lefties. It's the same when we talk about being gay. You're either born that way or not, no matter what your parents are.

Won't those kids that have two moms or two dads get teased a lot?

Kids that are different in any way can get teased, so for sure those kids might get teased because their family is a bit different from other families. If you think about it, everyone is different for one reason or another, including you. People have different skin colour, look different from each other, eat different kinds of food and dress differently. Most kids do get teased at one point or another and so, yes, kids with two moms or two dads might get teased sometimes. If people would understand that families with two moms or two dads are just as good as anyone else's then maybe they would get teased less.