



Coalition des familles
homoparentales

NEWSLETTER - VOLUME X- No. III – March 2009

The school experiences of adolescents raised by lesbian mothers: Homophobia, coming-out and support: Research report

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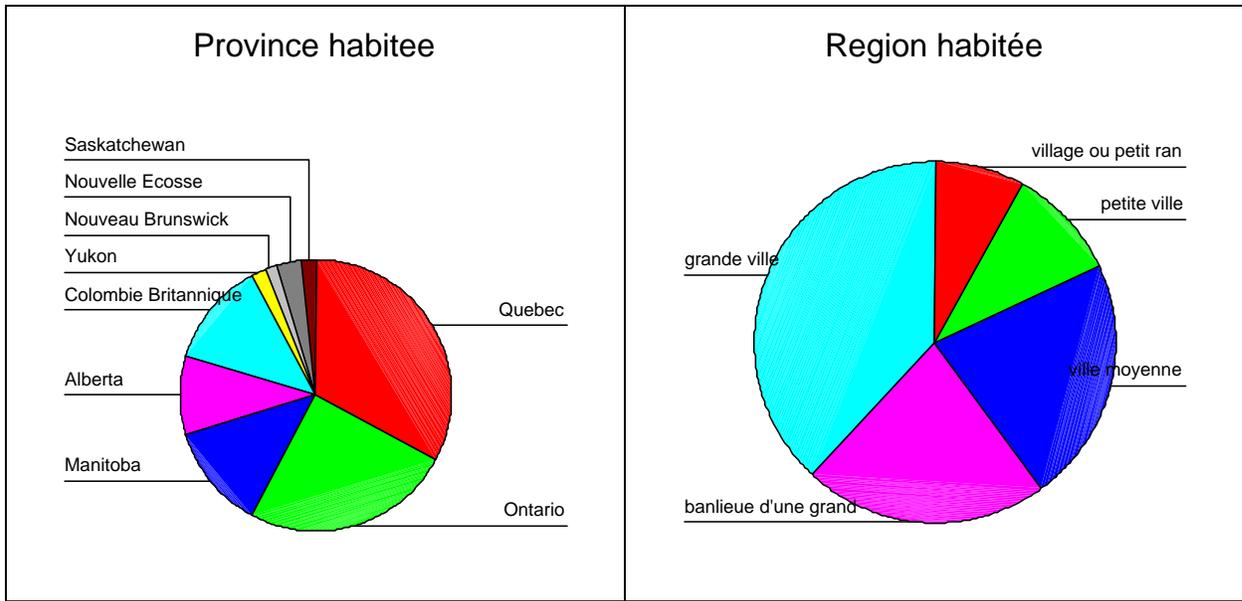
Six years ago, my supervisor, my colleagues and I started a series of studies looking at several aspects of the lives and experiences of lesbian mothers and their children. I am happy to say that I can finally share with you some of the findings from these studies (research is a very long process!) by reporting the findings from my PhD project looking at the school experiences of adolescents raised by lesbian mothers.

Until recently, research on lesbian mothers and their children had focused mainly on evaluating whether children raised by lesbian mothers differed significantly from children raised by heterosexual parents. These studies evaluated children's emotional, sexual, cognitive and social development. Twenty years of research have shown that children raised by lesbian mothers are no more, nor less, likely to have emotional or cognitive problems, to become gay or lesbian themselves, to have gender identity problems, or to be victimized or socially rejected than children raised by heterosexual parents.

This focus on evaluating differences, however, has kept researchers from examining experiences that are unique to sexual minority parents and their children, such as homophobia and coming-out. Several studies have shown that homophobia has a negative impact on the wellbeing of sexual minority individuals, but when I started this project, only one study had ever examined its relationship with the wellbeing of *children* raised by sexual minority parents. Despite the fact that children of lesbian mothers do not report being bullied or harassed more often than children of heterosexual parents, we know that children's experiences of homophobia, rejection and anxiety about "coming-out" about their parents' sexual orientation at school can be a source of considerable concern for some children and their parents.

I had three important aims in this study. The first was to paint a portrait of children's experiences of peer teasing/bullying and coming-out about their mother's sexual orientation in the school system. The second was to examine the association between these experiences and children's wellbeing. Finally, a third aim was to find factors, both at home and in the school, that could help protect children from the harmful effects of homophobia.

Thanks to the help of Mona Greenbaum and member of the AML, as well as mothers from across Canada, sixty-four adolescents (age 12 to 18) and their mothers agreed to participate in my study. I conducted telephone-questionnaires with adolescents, asking them about their experiences and perception of homophobia in the school, about their wellbeing, about their disclosure of their mother's sexual orientation in school and about the support they received from their school, from their friends and from their mothers.



Results

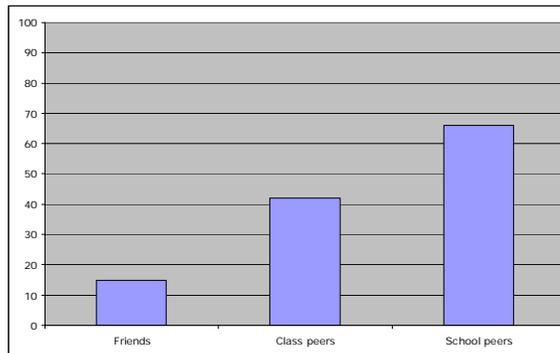
-1- A portrait of adolescents' experiences at school

TEASING AND BULLYING: I asked adolescents to let me know how often they had been teased or bullied at school. Overall, rates of teasing or bullying were relatively low.

- ✓ 66% of adolescents reported that they had never been teased, and 33% reported that they had been teased "rarely".
- ✓ 90% of adolescents reported that they had never been bullied, and 10% reported that they had been bullied "rarely".

COMING-OUT ABOUT THEIR MOTHER'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION: I asked adolescents to tell me whether they had disclosed their mother's sexual orientation to close friends, to class peers and to school peers.

Rate of non-disclosure



Most adolescents disclosed at least some information to their close friends. However almost half were not “out” at all to their class peers about their mother’s sexual orientation, and two third were not “out” to their school peers.

PERCEIVING HOMOPHOBIA: A large proportion of adolescents were not “out” to their class and school peers about their mother’s sexual orientation, which means these adolescents were unlikely to be teased or bullied for that reason. I was therefore interested in asking adolescents about their perception of their peers’ homophobia independently of their experiences or non-experience of teasing and bullying. I found a lot of variability in the levels of perceived homophobia, with some adolescents reporting very high levels of peer homophobia and some reporting very low levels (with most somewhere in the middle). There were no differences in these perceptions across provinces. Boys and girls also reported similar levels of perceived peer homophobia.

-2- Homophobia and its impact on adolescents’ wellbeing.

- ✓ Adolescents who reported being teased or bullied more often also reported lower levels of wellbeing
- ✓ Adolescents who were more “out” to class peers reported more teasing.
- ✓ Adolescents who perceived more peer homophobia reported lower levels of wellbeing. ***This was especially true of boys.*** Boys who perceived more peer homophobia reported higher levels of opposition, defiance and delinquency.
- ✓ Boys’ preoccupation with disclosing their mother’s sexual orientation to peers was associated with lower level of wellbeing. These preoccupations were not associated with girls’ wellbeing.

-3- Can anything protect adolescents from homophobia in the school?

The negative impact of teasing on wellbeing was lessened for those adolescents who reported more support from their school (support from school = representation of GLBT subjects/realities and availability of GLBT resources). These results are coherent with studies showing that children and adolescents who attend schools that actively represent and support sexual minority families develop a sense of security, knowing they will be protected and supported by school staff in the event of harassment or victimization. They may also feel more confident that they can manage their family’s minority status in the school setting.

We also found that support from school and from friends was especially related to adolescents’ wellbeing when adolescents were “out” about their mothers. Given that adolescents whose peers are aware of the mother’s sexual orientation are more likely to be teased or bullied, support from both friends and school may be especially important in enabling adolescents to cope with their increased vulnerability.

Conclusion

These findings confirm that homophobia hurts the adolescents of lesbian mothers, and that what peers, teachers and schools do to counter homophobia and to support children of sexual minority parents does make a difference. Specifically, these findings point to the importance of assessing the specific dimensions of school support that are effective in protecting children (e.g., teacher or school staff responses to heterosexist victimisation, jokes, or name-calling? Representation of family or sexual diversity? Teacher training? Anti-discrimination policies?). These variables may have a significant impact on the school experiences of children of sexual minority parents, but also of sexual minority youth themselves.

I wish to thank all the adolescents and mothers who gave of themselves and or their time to tell me about their experiences. I know all of them are hoping that their involvement in research would have a real impact on the day-to-day lives of children across Canada.

I also need to thank Mona Greenbaum and the Lesbian Mothers' Association for their invaluable help, both in finding families and in developing our questions.

This research was supported in part by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and the Fonds de Recherche sur la Société et la Culture.

For further information on this project, please contact Johanna Vyncke (Johanna.vyncke@hotmail.com)

Interested in writing for our newsletter? Send your articles at any time to info@familleshomoparentales.org or by post to CFH, 2401 Coursol, Montreal, Quebec, H3J 1C8

News Briefs: December 2008- February 2009

Canadian News

January 30, 2009 (Winnipeg, Manitoba) A Manitoba lesbian couple rejected by a family doctor from Egypt for religious reasons says Canada must better educate foreign-trained physicians.

Andrea Markowski said she and her partner Ginette were stunned when the Winnipeg doctor told them during a "meet-and-greet" appointment she was uncomfortable accepting them as patients and had never treated "people like you" before.

The doctor said she only treated "husbands and wives," said Markowski, who is legally married to her partner of 18 years. "It was definitely a traumatic and unexpected experience ... She is a doctor who is paid with public funds".

The couple has lodged a complaint with the province's human rights commission and the Manitoba College of Physicians and Surgeons. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms ensures no one can be denied health care on the grounds of sexual orientation.

Dr. Kamelia Elias did not return phone calls seeking comment. But she told the Winnipeg Free Press that she has no experience treating gays and lesbians who have "sexual problems" and "a lot of diseases and infections."

Gay-rights organizations are calling for better programs specifically aimed at nipping prejudice in the bud. The registrar of Manitoba's physicians college, Bill Pope, said that doctors coming from other countries suffer from culture shock when they come to Canada. Some of them have never done a pelvic exam on a woman or put on a plastic cast.

"All physicians need to get more training on this," said Gens Hellquist, executive director of the Canadian Rainbow Health Coalition. "What little they get tends to be focused on HIV and AIDS, which is only one of the range of health issues."

Gay Marriage - A Time Line

December 2, 2008 (Rome) International human rights groups denounce the Vatican for condemning a proposed United Nations declaration which would, for the first time, call for civil rights for gays, lesbians and the transgendered. The Vatican in a statement said the declaration would force countries to legalize same-sex marriage.

December 15, 2008 (Budapest) Hungary's Constitutional Court says it has annulled a law giving rights to domestic partners because it would diminish the importance of marriage. The law, passed by parliament a year ago, would have allowed unmarried or gay couples to register their domestic relationships beginning Jan. 1, 2009. The court says the new legislation is unconstitutional because it would give unmarried heterosexual couples practically the same rights as married ones, "downgrading" the institution of marriage. At the same time, the court says, in its decision, that a law allowing domestic partnerships for gay couples would not be unconstitutional - as long as it applied only to them and not to heterosexual couples, as well.

January 12, 2009 (New York City) Same-sex couples and their supporters hold demonstrations across America calling for the repeal of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), similar laws in several dozen states, and the legalization of gay marriage. The rallies were organized by the group *Join the Impact*.

In California, demonstrations are staged in a number of cities including Pasadena and San Diego, with protestors also denouncing Proposition 8, the voter initiative that passed last November limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples. Prop 8 overrode the California Supreme Court ruling last year that opened up same-sex marriage in the state. Following the election, LGBT rights groups filed suit with the high court charging the vote was illegal in that it attempted to undo the constitution's core commitment to equality for everyone. The court is expected to hear oral arguments later this year.

In Boston, people rally outside City Hall to urge President Barack Obama to keep his campaign promise to fight for the repeal of federal DOMA. Same-sex marriage is legal in Massachusetts, but DOMA prevents those marriages from being recognized by the federal government or other states.

January 14, 2009 (Edinburgh) A proposal to change **Scotland's** civil partnership law to marriage will be considered by a parliamentary committee. Scotland approved civil partnerships in 2005.

January 22, 2009 (Creston, British Columbia) Two men accused of practicing polygamy appear in court. Winston Blackmore and James Oler who live in the controversial southeast B.C. community of Bountiful, were arrested earlier in the month. Blackmore is accused of having 20 wives, while Oler is alleged to have two wives. They face a maximum of five years in prison if found guilty.

Bountiful has about 1,000 residents and has been the subject of several investigations involving allegations of polygamy, sexual abuse and trafficking of teenage brides across the border to sister communities in the United States.

"I have some knowledge of the history of both sides," says Blackmore's lawyer Blair Suffredine, a former member of B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's Liberal government. Suffredine said earlier that he intends to use Canada's laws permitting same-sex marriages in his defense of Blackmore on the polygamy charge.

International News

December 1st 2008 (St. Marc, Haiti) A dozen men in T-shirts declaring "I am gay" and "I am living with HIV/AIDS" have marched with hundreds of other demonstrators through a Haitian city in what organizers

called the Caribbean nation's first openly gay march. The march, held a day ahead of World AIDS Day in the western city of St. Marc, called for better prevention and treatment in a country long plagued by the virus.

About 500 participants that included health ministry officials and workers with United Nations programs followed a speaker-truck through the dusty city, chanting and carrying banners en route to the mayor's office. No officials received them.

AIDS awareness marches have taken place before in Haiti, but organizers called this one the first march to include an openly gay group in Haiti. The nation of 9 million remains the most affected by HIV in the Caribbean, itself the region with the highest infection rate outside Sub-Saharan Africa.

December 12 (Charleston, West Virginia) The West Virginia Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case involving a lesbian couple's appeal of a lower court ruling that removed a child they had reared from birth because the judge wanted the child placed with a married opposite-sex couple.

Fayette Circuit Judge Paul Blake originally agreed to allow Kathryn Kutil and Cheryl Hess to be foster parents for the infant girl, following a positive assessment by the Department of Health and Human Resources.

Court records show that the little girl was born to a drug addicted mother and the baby had had cocaine, opiates and benzodiazepines in her system. Shortly after birth the baby went through drug withdrawal. The father was unknown. The Department placed the child with Kutil and Hess, who had been approved as foster parents, when it could not find any blood relatives of the mother.

But nearly a year later when the couple applied to adopt the little girl both the Department and Judge Blake balked. In his ruling Blake ordered the child removed saying the baby should be permanently placed in a home where the parents would be a married opposite-sex couple. The ruling said that he had agreed to allow the women to foster the child because it was the best option at the time. But he never intended it to be permanent.

"I think I've indicated time and time again, this court's opinion is that the best interest of a child is to be raised by a traditional family, mother and father," Blake's ruling said. In their appeal to the state, Supreme Court the women argue that Blake exceeded his authority and violated their constitutional rights. The appeal argues that Blake is "setting a dangerous precedent" for discriminatory treatment of non-traditional families. A different judge recently approved Kutil's adoption of a 12-year-old girl whom she'd been fostering for over two years, the appeal notes.

West Virginia law allows either single individuals or married couples to adopt. It says nothing about same-sex couples. In a 4-1 vote the high court agreed to take the case. Oral arguments will be held on March 11. The court had granted an emergency stay of Judge Blake's order. The little girl will be allowed to stay with the women until the Supreme Court rules.

December 19, 2008 (New York) In a powerful victory for the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 66 nations at the UN General Assembly supported a groundbreaking statement confirming that international human rights protections include sexual orientation and gender identity. It is the first time that a statement condemning rights abuses against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people has been presented in the General Assembly.

The statement drew unprecedented support from five continents, including six African nations. Argentina read the statement before the General Assembly. A cross-regional group of states coordinated the drafting of the statement, also including Brazil, Croatia, France, Gabon, Japan, the Netherlands, and Norway.

66 of the U.N.'s 192 member countries reaffirmed "the principle of non-discrimination, which requires that human rights apply equally to every human being regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity." They stated they are "deeply concerned by violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms based on sexual orientation or gender identity," and said that "violence, harassment, discrimination, exclusion, stigmatization and prejudice are directed against persons in all countries in the world because of sexual orientation or gender identity."

According to calculations by *ILGA (the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association)* and other organizations, more than six dozen countries still have laws against consensual sex between adults of the same sex.

Human rights violations based on sexual orientation and gender identity happen regularly around the world. For example:

In the **United States**, Amnesty International has documented serious patterns of police abuse against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, including incidents amounting to torture and ill-treatment. The United States refused to sign the General Assembly statement, and thus became the lone major western nation to refuse to sign.

Other countries besides the US who refused to sign the declaration were Islamic countries, Russia and China. The Vatican also has voiced its opposition.

In **Egypt**, Human Rights Watch documented a massive crackdown on men suspected of homosexual conduct between 2001-2004, in which hundreds or thousands of men were arrested and tortured. Egypt actively opposed the General Assembly statement.

The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) has documented how, in many **African countries**, sodomy laws and prejudice deny rights protections to Africans engaged in same-sex practices amid the HIV/AIDS pandemic - and can actually criminalize outreach to affected groups.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and the General Assembly statement reaffirms the reach and breadth of UDHR principles. Earlier in the day, the General Assembly also adopted a resolution condemning extrajudicial executions, which contained a reference opposing killings based on sexual orientation. Uganda moved to delete that reference, but the General Assembly rejected this by 78-60.

Meanwhile, a report issued by Human Rights Watch called laws against homosexuality an oppressive legacy of colonialism. The 66-page report is called "This Alien Legacy: The Origins of Sodomy Laws in British Colonialism." It details that sodomy laws were imposed on over three dozen countries, from India to Uganda and from Nigeria to Papua New Guinea by the British Empire in the 1800s.

The British colonial rulers imposed the law against sodomy in India in 1860. This year, the High Court in Delhi ended hearings in a years-long case seeking to decriminalize homosexual conduct there. A ruling in the landmark case is expected soon.

"Half the world's countries that criminalize homosexual conduct do so because they cling to Victorian morality and colonial laws," said Scott Long, director of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights

program at Human Rights Watch. "Getting rid of these unjust remnants of the British Empire is long overdue."

December 19, 2008 (Cape Town) The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) and Gender DynamiX announced the successful conclusion of their first ever African Strategy Workshop for transgender activists. Held in Cape Town, **South Africa**, the historic workshop brought together 15 activists from 9 East and Southern African countries-Burundi, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe-to address the very specific needs of transgender people on the African continent. It marked a key step in the process of defining and building the African transgender movement by African transgender people.

"Transgender people throughout the world experience frequent and unacceptable discrimination, violence and abuse," said Paula Ettelbrick, IGLHRC's Executive Director.

The African Strategy Workshop was designed to help activists document human rights abuses against transgender people, derive best practices for human rights advocacy, and share information on gender identity, reassignment surgery and hormone treatment. "This long overdue meeting forms an integral part of trans history on our continent and a cornerstone for our future work," said Liesl Theron, Director of Gender DynamiX.

January 15, 2009 (Strasbourg, France) Members of the European Parliament have approved a motion calling for the recognition of the rights of same-sex couples and an end to homophobia in all 27 EU countries.

"It is high time the EU practices what it preaches," said Spanish deputy Ignasi Guardans. "The European Commission wants to be a champion of human rights, but sadly every day we hear about anti-discrimination laws being flouted by member states."

The document also calls for equal access to reproductive methods and guarantees for the rights of Roma - also known as Gypsies. The measure still needs the approval of the EU's Council of Ministers before becoming law.

January 21, 2009 (Washington) As President Barrack Obama began his first day of work at the White House expectations were high for America's LGBT citizens. Within minutes of Obama's swearing-in at the Capitol the office White House Web site was completely updated to reflect the new administration - including the President's LGBT campaign pledges.

The Web site says that the President supports the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Act, an inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act, repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Federal Defense of Marriage Act. It also says that Obama would fight for civil unions and federal rights for same-sex couples and guarantee adoption rights. And it pledges to fight any attempt to pass an amendment to the Constitution that would ban same-sex marriage. In addition, the site said the President is pledged to support for AIDS relief, both nationally and abroad.

But while Obama is supportive of the LGBT community, it will be up to Congress to pass the necessary legislation. Even with Democrats firmly in control of both houses it will take intensive lobbying to pass any of the bills that the President has committed himself to sign.

News from the LGBT Family Coalition

UPCOMING MEETINGS

MARCH 2009:

□ TUESDAY MARCH 17TH from 7 p.m.

PART 5: Parenting Course: UNDERSTAND AND ANSWER (OR NOT?) THE MOST COMMON QUESTIONS (FOR WOMEN)

Is he your real child? Are your kids really brothers? Where is her father? Which one of you carried the child? Which of you is the mother and which is the father? An open discussion and role play to think about what people's questions really mean, how and when to answer them, and how to keep your cool in that awkward situation.

Location : UQAM, 320 Ste-Catherine Est, Room DS-2901 (metro Berri)

See attached flier for details on this series for future parents and parents with young children.

□ TUESDAY MARCH 24TH at 7 p.m.

PART 4: Parenting Course: UNDERSTAND AND ANSWER (OR NOT?) THE MOST COMMON QUESTIONS (FOR MEN)

Is he your real child? Where is her mother? Which of you is the mother and which is the father? We will use role-playing to illustrate some of the common situations that both gay parents deal with on a daily basis.

Location : UQAM, 320 Ste-Catherine Est, Room DS-2901 (metro Berri)

See attached flier for details on this series for future parents and parents with young children.

APRIL 2009:

□ SATURDAY APRIL 18th AT 10 a.m.

SUGARING OFF PARTY

On **SATURDAY April 18th 2009 at 10 a.m.**, the **LGBT Family Coalition** will have a **SUGARING-OFF PARTY** at the **Cabane à Sucre Chalet des Erables**.

For the kids and adults there's a full traditional lunch, maple taffee on snow, a General Store, Quebec artisans, mini-farm, magic show, a climbing wall, horse-drawn sleigh rides, a guided tour of the sugar shack, etc.

Our space must be reserved in advance please fill out the enclosed form before March 31st, 2009.

□ TUESDAY April 28th 2009

PART 5: Parenting Course: IMPACTS OF THE ARRIVAL OF A CHILD ON THE COUPLE (MEN ONLY)

Sleepless nights, bottles at odd hours, parental leave and a lot of other adjustments can take their toll on what used to be a healthy relationship for a couple. Impacts on the couple's sex life, the division of labour within the couple, different parenting styles, losing old friends and making new ones, and other subjects will be the theme of this open discussion.

Location : UQAM, 320 Ste-Catherine Est, Room DS-2901 (metro Berri)

See attached flier for details on this series for future parents and parents with young children.

MAY 2009:

□ FRIDAY MAY 8TH at 7:30 p.m.

GROUP PARTY

A chance for old and new members of the group to get to know each other and catch up on news. We will meet on the 1st floor of **Le Café Européen at 1560 Ste-Catherine Est (metro Beaudry) in the gay village.** You can get snacks or dinner at the restaurant next door.

□ Monday May 25th at 7 p.m.

Part 6 : OUT IN THE WORLD : SURVIVING DAYCARE AND PRIMARY SCHOOL (FOR ALL PARENTS AND FUTURE PARENTS)

Should I meet with the principal and teachers to discuss our family before school starts? Do the teachers have any training or experience with children of LGBT families? What if my child doesn't want me to be "out"? Our guest speaker will animate a discussion regarding questions facing families with children entering or currently in daycare or primary school. The workshop is intended to give parents a forum to discuss this major change in their children's lives.

Guest Speaker : Karine Igartua, Centre d'orientation sexuelle de l'université McGill (COSUM)

Location : UQAM, 320 Ste-Catherine Est, Room DS-2901 (metro Berri)

See attached flier for details on this series for future parents and parents with young children.

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SVP contactez Melodie Paquette et Sylvie Roy au melodiepaq@hotmail.com

◆ **Le Centre des femmes de Rivière-des-Prairies ! 514-648-1030** - Nous sommes ouvertes aux lesbiennes ! Si vous avez besoin de plus d'informations vous pouvez consulter notre site web : www.cdfrdp.qc.ca ainsi que le site de notre regroupement : www.rcentres.qc.ca/propos.html

◆ **L'Écho des femmes de la Petite Patrie** est un centre de femmes qui offre des rencontres pour lesbiennes. Ces rencontres ont lieu les lundis soirs aux deux semaines de 19h00 à 21h30, et sont animées par une personne ressource. Ces rencontres, qui se veulent un lieu d'échange, de ressourcement et d'information, s'intéressent aux réalités et aux conditions de vie des lesbiennes. Les rencontres sont en français. Un service de halte-garderie est disponible avec réservation faite une semaine à l'avance. Le centre est situé au **6032 St-Hubert (métro Beaubien). Téléphone (514)277-7445, télécopieur (514)277-1689**

MISCELLANEOUS

◆ **Traducteurs, redacteurs, etc:** We are looking for volunteers to help translate this newsletter from English to French. Any contribution (even 1-2 pages a month) would be appreciated. If you are available and willing, **please contact us at: info@familleshomoparentales.org**

◆ **Batshaw Youth and Family Centres** is encouraging English speaking and bilingual gay and lesbian couples, and singles, to consider becoming **foster parents**. There are babies, pre-schoolers and older children who are waiting for a foster home. For some the plan will be to help them return to their families. For other children, the plan will be to work toward **adoption**. What a remarkable feeling it is to know you have made a difference in the life of a child by providing a stable, safe and loving environment. For more information, please call, **Rena Rubin, Foster Care Recruiter, at 932-7161, local 416, or send an e-mail to rena_rubin@ssss.gouv.qc.ca.**

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The bulletin board is a free forum for members to communicate amongst each other. If you want to post an announcement in the next issue please send it to us at any time to info@familleshomoparentales.org or by post to CFH, 2401 Coursol, Montreal, Quebec, H3J 1C8. If you have something to advertise, sell, rent or buy...anything where money must change hands, you can place an ad in the newsletter. Ads cost 20 cents per word.

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