

EXPLAINING...

to parents and colleagues



Books like *Otis and Alice* and classroom activities about family diversity are tools to help those working with young people to promote acceptance of differences. Using these tools is not, therefore, a course in sexual education.

Talking about family diversity and families with same-sex parents is an appropriate subject for children ages 4-8. School is the ideal place to do it, since schools have a mandate to oversee children's global development. Amongst the fundamental goals is the development of children's understanding of the world in which they live along with their social development to encourage relationships with others that are harmonious and respectful, regardless of individual differences.

The identity of young children is closely linked to their families. Children from homoparental families must see that their particular family reality is recognised and respected in their school in the same way as any other kind of family. Ignoring families with two mothers or two fathers in a presentation of family diversity amounts to denying their existence, and for children living in that situation, denying who they are.

The vast majority of people are open to talking with children about family diversity. Despite that, you will occasionally have to convince them of the importance of your choices and approach. Here are some questions and comments you might encounter, along with suggested responses, to help you deal with any doubts or criticisms. We offer several ways to respond, as well as a variety of arguments. You can select those that are most suitable to the particular situation.

Questions

Why are you using the book *Otis and Alice* (or other books about family diversity) with children?

Otis and Alice is the first book published in Québec for children ages 4 to 8 that tells the story of a family with two mothers. It presents homoparental families as one reality amongst the many kinds of families that exist in our society.

Otis and Alice uses an approach adapted to children ages 4 to 8 to introduce the homoparental family. It presents a situation that enables children to observe a particular reality. From its first pages we know that Ulysse has two moms. In the following pages the family does what all other families do. There is nothing in the story or the language used that is either shocking or provocative.

Finally, the learning activities concerning family diversity in this resource relate to broader school objectives. For instance, the activities are linked to the competencies of the Preschool Education Program and the Elementary Education Program of the Ministry of Education of Québec.

How is talking about same-sex parenting part of the school's role?

The role of the school is the global development of the child. Adults who work with youth on a daily basis are well placed to help them achieve their intellectual and social potential. Our school's goal is the education of the whole child, not just the academics. That includes informing them about the realities they confront or will confront, helping them to construct their understanding of the world in which they live, showing them how to communicate appropriately and interact successfully with others. The learning activities based on *Otis and Alice* were created with those objectives in mind.

It is important that those responsible for educating children transmit values of openness to difference. From their earliest years, children should develop the values of self-respect and respect for others.

Our institutions reflect the values of our society, which has the welfare of all its children at heart. Schools should provide an environment that welcomes all children, regardless of their ethnic origin, social status, or the sexual orientation of their parents.

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Why are we talking about this?

It doesn't concern us, since we probably don't have any children with homosexual parents here.

Actually, talking about gay issues is pertinent to everyone. There are kids in alternative families, but there are also kids who themselves will become gay or lesbian when they grow up. Furthermore, almost everyone has someone in their families who is gay or lesbian and if not, in their lives they will certainly encounter gays and lesbians, at their work, their neighbours, and their friends.

It is thus essential that the school create an environment open to gays and lesbians by informing children about that social reality. It is never too early to begin the fight against homophobic prejudice.

Through the transmission of knowledge, the school encourages the total development of children by helping them to become independent and responsible citizens, able to adapt to a world of constant change. Consequently, its role includes introducing young children to the idea of family diversity and instilling in them respect for all types of family difference.

Even if children of homoparental families are in the minority, they have the right to feel they are accepted like any other child. Children with two moms or two dads are part of a family that is as valuable as any other. It is important to communicate that basic message to all children.

NOTES

Aren't these children too young to talk about homosexuality?

Today's children have already heard all sorts of things about gays and lesbians. Insults such as "fag," "homo," and "that's so gay," are not uncommon, even in daycare. While children may not always understand the meaning of these or other insults that they might use, they are, nevertheless, fully aware that they can be used to hurt. Even before they begin school, children have accumulated a wealth of information, whether correct or not, about the subject of homosexuality.

The use of such hurtful language should be discouraged as early as possible. It is, in fact, a kind of verbal violence that adults legitimise if they remain silent. No one, nowadays, would accept a child using insults based on ethnic origin. There is universal agreement that children should be taught the value of respect for ethnic difference. Respect for sexual diversity should be no different.

Talking about same-sex parenting, with the right approach, is an extension of those values of respect for difference. Teaching children that family diversity is a reality and that different kinds of families all deserve respect is a concrete way of preventing or combating verbal violence, harassment and physical violence based on the excuse of difference.

Broaching the issue of homoparental families with children ages 4 to 8 is, therefore, entirely appropriate if the adult uses material and language adapted to the children and communicates information by responding at the level of their questioning. It provides an opportunity for children to acquire respect for the many differences that they will certainly encounter throughout their lives and in all areas of society.

Why talk about homosexuality in school?

It is neither appropriate nor necessary. It isn't the place to talk about such things.

Pejorative comments about gays and lesbians are commonly heard in school classrooms and playgrounds. It is a kind of harassment, often the result of ignorance about homosexuality. All children (not just those from homoparental families or those who will later recognise their own homosexuality) are negatively affected by this kind of ignorant comment.

Educational institutions are the most logical place to communicate accurate and pertinent information to children, particularly with regard to family diversity. Schools are the ideal venue for combating all kinds of ignorance and stereotypes, and for refuting the misconceptions and myths that often lead to comments and actions that hurt many children and families.



Are there any authorities that state that this subject should be discussed in schools? How is this part of the school curriculum?

A number of official organisations explicitly state that schools should take action as early as possible to prevent homophobic acts.

Québec's Ministry of Education urges schools, including the pre-school and elementary levels, to develop in children an attitude of openness to the world and respect for diversity. The school should teach children openness with regard to differences, including sexual diversity, as well as self-respect and respect for others. It should play an active role in encouraging the fight against homophobia taking into account the age of the children.

According to the Québec Human Rights and Youth Rights Commission: "it is essential that school boards, administrations and other bodies, associations and professional corporations, parents, along with all personnel working in the education sector provide unconditional support in the fight against homophobia in the schools."

A judgement by the British Columbia Court of Appeals in 2005 concerning a school board, serves as a warning to all school boards in the country, with respect to their responsibility for acts of discrimination and harassment related to the real or perceived homosexuality of a student. According to the Court, it is not sufficient for schools to wait for acts of intimidation to occur in order to take action. Schools must ensure the provision of a preventive anti-homophobic education adapted to their students. The school board in question was condemned to pay substantial damages for having omitted to intervene in order to prevent the homophobic harassment to which one of its students was subjected.

In Québec, there is a consensus that homophobia in schools is a real problem. The real or perceived homosexuality of a student is all too often the source of verbal harassment, and sometimes even physical violence from peers. Early intervention with children is called for to prevent perpetuation of such unacceptable attitudes. Speaking about family diversity is an excellent way to start.

Homosexuality violates my beliefs. Why is the school talking about the subject?

Some adults may justify their reservations about discussing homoparental families in schools based on their personal, moral or religious beliefs.

Some examples: "I don't believe that all kinds of families are equally valuable"; "It's up to me to teach my child values regarding sexuality"; "I am opposed to homosexuality. It is a perversion"; "Homosexuals should not have the right to be parents"; "My religion is opposed to homosexuality"; "You're trying to make my child into a homosexual", etc.

How do you answer people who reject same-sex parenting or to those who fear the reaction of such people?

Since 2002 in Québec, homoparental families have been explicitly recognised in the Civil Code of Québec. The names of two mothers or two fathers are entered on the child's birth certificate; the parents have the same rights and obligations with regard to the child as any heterosexual couple. Similarly, the right of homosexual couples to adopt a child is entrenched in Québec law.

In Québec, this judicial reality recognises the will of a society to respect the sexual orientation of its individuals. Educational institutions must, therefore, transmit this information to all children, whatever objections certain people may have.

The Charter of Rights and Freedoms governing social relationships clearly states that discrimination based on sexual orientation is quite as unacceptable as discrimination based on ethnic origin. The Québec English School Boards Association (QESBA), the Québec Professional Association of Teachers (QPAT) and the Commission Scolaire de Montréal (CSDM) all have specific anti-homophobia policies.

Schools and other institutions for children have a responsibility to protect and support the children of homoparental families. They have the vital mission to teach respect for differences to all children. While everyone is entitled to his or her individual beliefs, society, its institutions and the individuals that work in these institutions cannot tolerate intolerance. Social realities, such as same-sex parenting, are recognised in our laws and therefore must be acknowledged. Through silence and inaction we become complicit to intolerance.