

## **Presentation for CVLPG 'We do it our way' conference – 17 Nov 2012**

### **Personal Perspectives on Being a Lesbian Parent**

When I started to write about the ins and outs of becoming and being a lesbian parent, one theme came through very strongly: communication and commitment; communication within relationships involving children and the commitment we make when we start or become involved in a family. So that's what I'm going to talk about.

Communication isn't a ground breaking idea and it's relevant to all relationships and families, but I think the thing that makes it particularly pertinent to Lesbian Families is that we perhaps cannot make as many assumptions about our family set ups.

Probably, in an ideal world, no families would have assumed roles based on gender or who gave birth, etc, but I think that it does go on a lot in 'straight' families.

From my experience I feel it's really important that as lesbian parents, or potential parents, we examine our assumptions about roles within families and our expectations.

The theme of this conference is We Do It Our Way and there are many ways of doing it, from full on 2 mums with total equality, to choosing to be a single mum, via other set ups, for example a main parent and a supporting parent, or one family I know that has two mums, two dads and a co-parent, the co-parent's partner, plus involved family- needless to say there is a lot of communication going on there!!

It might be that you believe that you can't have two mums that have equal status, and that children can only make one primary attachment, or you may believe that children can have equally important attachments to more than one person at a time. You may like to place an emphasis on biological links or you may think that biology isn't important.

Thinking about roles will also affect things like going back to work or stay-at-home parenting and how that will affect your relationship with your children and your partner, if you have one, as well as your income.

Or you may not have any great theoretical belief system but have gut feelings about what you want to do and how it will all work....

It doesn't really matter, many different ideas and models are ok. But what does matter is that all the adults directly involved have a clear, honest and open dialogue about roles and assumptions, preferably before any children have arrived. And that this dialogue continues as the family develops, because people's feelings and their roles may also develop.

Since there are so many different models, I am going to talk about my personal experiences by way of illustration.

My ex and I decided to start a family – she had tried on numerous occasions over a number of years with a previous girlfriend, but eventually they split up. Then after we had been together for a couple of years she said, as she was in her late 30s she wanted to give it a last try. I wasn't particularly 'broody' – I was only in my late 20s, but agreed, and we started to make plans. During that time we discussed roles a bit, mainly that we'd both be mums, tho she was desperate to be 'mummy' and I was happy to be 'mama'.

We searched for a known donor, used a clinic in the meantime, then found a donor, tried on numerous occasions, and my ex had several miscarriages.

I tried a couple of times, on spec really, but due to my ex's age we decided to then go for adoption, via fostering.

Nowadays, 'concurrent planning', whereby you are approved to foster and adopt at the same time, is becoming more common I believe, but at the time (1999) our local authority didn't do that.

So we fostered a 6-week old baby girl in Feb 2000 and when she came up for adoption some months later we applied to adopt her, amongst much tutting and disapproval from the fostering and adoption teams. However our social worker and the baby's social worker were both very supportive and positive and, eventually, so was the adoption social worker and we adopted our little g

I say we, it was pre-equality for non-married partners so my ex adopted her.

In the meantime, the birth mother had had a second baby and we fostered her from 13 days old and adopted her as well in due course.

Of course this path was not all smooth, and there were many moments that were particularly shaped by the fact that we were lesbians. For example, the adoption social worker from Hackney who came to assess us told us, "I've never met any lesbians before!" Really, Bob, apart from 50% of your female colleagues....I mean, Hackney Social Services?

But by June 2003 we had adopted these lovely siblings that we'd had more or less from birth.

Then almost immediately after we adopted our younger daughter, when she was nearly 2 and her sister was 3 and a half, my ex left and, using the homophobic status quo that existed, she reduced my contact, eventually to the point where they now all live abroad and my contact is through Skype, letters, phone calls and annual visits.

One of the most surprising things she said, during the legal proceedings that ensued, was that she had always wanted just to be a single parent and for it to be just her and the children.

I'm sure when we had discussed having a family we talked about equality – it is certainly what I assumed, so maybe I was mistaken or maybe she hadn't been entirely honest with me, the point is that our communication was obviously lacking, and worst of all our girls have been pretty traumatised by the whole thing. Not ideal.

Then I met my current partner, who is quite a few years younger than me, and after a couple of years said she wanted a baby! We put it off due to the legal stuff that was going on but eventually started looking for a donor. In the end we decided to use ADI (anonymous donor insemination) through MFS, which was successful and we now have a gorgeous and wonderful 3 yr old boy.

Given my experiences my partner was really mindful about what our roles would be and was at pains to make sure that we discuss really clearly and openly our feelings and expectations, however difficult and painful this might be.

She was really clear she wanted to be the main parent, she wanted to be pregnant, stay at home with a baby, have the deciding vote over decisions to be made regarding our children, and possibly most importantly, she wanted to be clear that if we ever split up she would remain the main carer and while I would be involved, etc, (and she made a commitment for us to remain living close to one another) our child/children would spend the majority of their time with her.

She was really worried that I might find this really hard.

But, do you know what? I don't.

It was a relief that she was open and honest about her feelings and expectations from the start and that was like a breath of fresh air. I knew and know what the deal is and I'm fine with it. And I totally trust her.

And we keep talking and working things out. And I am totally a parent to our son and he is clear he has two mummies who love him and who he loves. And I work 4 days so I can have a day a week with him and my partner works 3 days and has 2 days on her own with him and we have weekends together, tho sometimes they do stuff on their own together but that's cool, coz I'm on the wrong side of 45 now and am happy to have some time off!

And we are both totally committed to each other and our son, but more than that we are committed to our family, to each other as parents, even though are roles are not 100% the same.

And this brings me onto something I feel really strongly about. Commitment.

Once we have started to parent with someone else, under whatever circumstances, we are joined for life. Forever.

When we have children in a relationship we are not just making a commitment to our partners/co-parents/whoever we involve in the process, we are making a commitment with that person/those people AND to our children. It's not just a relationship between the adults; it's to the family unit, the group as a whole.

Because once children are involved you can't just haggle over who gets the Suzanne Vega/k d lang CDs and never see each other again. Not if you want to be fair to your family.

So if we go into having a family with an awareness of the issues that can arise, the stresses that all families may experience and the added ones we will experience because we are 'doing it our own way' we'll be doing ourselves a massive favour.

If we are able to talk about how we want to parent, what roles within our families we will assume, and what we would do if we were to split up, it might mean we have less conflict and stress together, a bonus, surely and then we may be less likely to end up in an acrimonious, and potentially massively expensive, mess even if we do split up.

And, most importantly, conflict between parents/co-parents etc can be massively damaging to children, as can writing previously important adults out of a child's life.

All that said, as I'm sure all the parents here can vouch for, parenting is fantastically rewarding and permanently life changing in the best possible way. It can be an exciting roller coaster ride and a fantastic voyage. But it needs to be done mindfully.

So I hope that what I have talked about this morning will make us feel very positive about our commitment to our partners or co-parents, or whoever, and our current or future families, and our commitment to continuing communication. I hope you will think, "Yes! We will commit to doing the best for our family, whatever happens; however tough it gets, no matter how much yoghurt ends up in my hair or if there is forever a little bit of baby poo on the ceiling!"

Thank you and happy families to you all.