

When supermom's a superdyke

by Alisa Gardner
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VICTORIA—Cynthia, Sheila and Carrie face more problems than most mothers. Along with runny noses, dirty diapers, tantrums, chicken pox and the monster under the bed, they have to deal with being lesbian mothers in a homophobic society.

They fall into a kind of political gap. This society is uncomfortable with lesbianism in the first place. When lesbians choose to have children, an activity closely associated with heterosexuality, straight society pretends they don't exist. And because motherhood is not an issue for most lesbians, lesbian mothers often receive little or no support in their own community.

"There's still a lot of strong societal attitudes -- that lesbians are not real women. That real women want to have babies and stay home and take care of their men," says Sheila.

But society is rapidly changing, and the stereotypical nuclear family of a father who works and a mother who stays home with the kids is now far from the norm.

Some studies indicate that two of three marriages will end in divorce. More and more single women are choosing to have children on their own. Along with biologically-related parents and children, definitions of family now commonly include step-parents and half-siblings, families with only one parent, and families with adopted or foster children.

But much of society is slow to accept a definition of family that includes two moms or two dads.

Cynthia, Sheila, and Carrie are all "out" as lesbians, and it affects how they are accepted by friends and family, in the workplace, and in society at large.

"It's bad enough for single women, single moms," says Sheila, "but for a lesbian who's out as a mom...when you've got a kid, you feel protective. You're responsible for your kid as well as yourself."

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Alternative families

Carrie says that although she is not completely "out" at work, she doesn't hide her lesbianism in her day-to-day life. When her son was born, she and her partner appeared on CBC television as part of a program on alternative families.

"I try to be out in that way. I try to let people know we're doing it, we're out here," she says.

Cynthia describes herself as "not super-politicized."

"I'm just doing my thing. When I got pregnant, I didn't feel like it was a big political stand."

Pregnancy in itself may not be a political statement, but lesbian mothers stand out in both the lesbian and straight communities. The straight community has difficulty accepting that lesbians can be mothers, and some members of the lesbian community sometimes have trouble accepting that a mother can be a lesbian.

Once, Cynthia was talking to a woman at a gay bar who asked why she hadn't seen her there before. Cynthia explained she was usually at home with her daughter. "She got pretty freaked out," Cynthia says.

Carrie says the lesbian community in her area is generally not that supportive. "They're living their own lives, and that doesn't include kids."

Like other lesbians and gay men,



Cynthia, Sheila and Carrie face the subtle heterosexism that pervades the social structure. When a child is enrolled in school or daycare, the forms must be filled in with the names of both parents -- mother and father.

"On the consent forms, I put down my partner's name. That's the problem with filling out these forms. You're put in a position to erase the existence of your partner, or come out," says Sheila. "You're putting yourself, or your child, in a potentially dangerous position."

"We kind of worried what was going to happen at the playschool," says Cynthia. "But when we were first there, looking around, we said 'we're her parents' and that was absolutely fine. We were really lucky. It could have been a big problem."

In search of sperm

When they decided they wanted children, Cynthia and her partner ran into problems right away. They tried an alternative often used by many straight women -- a doctor specializing in donor insemination.

"He was extremely homophobic. He threw me out of his office when he found out I was a lesbian," Cynthia says.

Cynthia and her partner decided to go elsewhere for their sperm. A friend of a friend became the anonymous donor, and Cynthia got pregnant the first try.

Outdated ideas about what constitutes a family can put unnecessary stress on lesbians who are or want to be pregnant.

Cynthia says that when she went for ultrasound tests while pregnant, they wouldn't let her partner Dawn in, but they would let a father in. "That made me really angry. The hospital said it was their rule. That was it, no exceptions," she says.

However, she says "once I was in the hospital, they were more open. They were really good, and accepted Dawn as the other parent."

Custody conflicts

Anonymous donors have their advantages, especially for lesbian mothers. If a donor knows the identity of the child he fathered, he can sue for custody. Although he probably would not immediately be granted custody, he has a good chance in the court system as it now exists. And he definitely has more rights than the non-biological parent in a lesbian family.

But Cynthia's lawyer, who is also a lesbian, has assured her there is little chance she could lose custody to an anonymous father.

"I don't have the father's name on the birth certificate. I honestly don't know his name. I got protected as well as I could," Cynthia says.

For women with children from previous marriages, however, the question of custody is much more tenuous.

Sheila left her five-year marriage when her daughter was a year-and-a-half old.

"My ex-husband was banking on the

idea that I'd deny any involvement with women...a lot of lawyers I talked to said it's not legal to use the fact of a mother being a lesbian to deny custody," she says.

Sheila decided to be completely open about her sexual preference, which invalidated her ex-husband's only evidence against her.

"I said, 'yes I'm involved with this woman, now let's talk about whether I'm a good parent'."

Her custody case was dropped before it went to court. But if it hadn't, her lesbianism might have affected the outcome.

"The classic one [the judges] use is the excuse that the child is going to be put through hell. They say 'society is homophobic, so we'll be homophobic in court and not allow custody,'" Sheila says.

"It all depends on the judge you get and the mood he--because it's usually a he -- is in, whether he is homophobic."

Sheila says the issue of custody is also a concern when relationships between partners who have been co-parenting end --there are no provisions made in the courts to allow the non-biological parent the same rights given a heterosexual father or mother.

"It's never easy to go through a separation or a divorce, but at least (heterosexuals) have the courts. Our society does not recognize the non-biological parent as a parent."

"In the end, the kid gets hurt the most," says Sheila.

When the courts make no provisions for lesbian parents, they must do it themselves. Ensuring that the non-biological mother has a say over what happens to the child means the couple must make legal arrangements.

Cynthia's partner Dawn is the legal guardian of her daughter Chloe, and she has power of attorney as well. This means Dawn can make decisions for Chloe if anything happens to her or Cynthia. But there are no court rules which guarantee Dawn's right to see Chloe should the

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couple separate.

"It's scary. I could leave and cut off any visitation to Dawn. But we've done everything possible to make Dawn a legal guardian," Cynthia says.

"On the other hand, she's been the breadwinner, and (should the relationship end) I couldn't have any financial support, either."

Homophobic attitudes

For the children of lesbian parents, the most difficult part can be dealing with homophobic attitudes among their friends and classmates, in the media, and in society at large.

"Already she's coming home with attitudes like you don't marry people who are the same sex as you," says Sheila.

On television, and in the books her daughter Niamh is read at daycare, representations of lesbian families are virtually nonexistent.

"Her family life is being invalidated, and that scares me for her sake. It scares me if her world is telling her that her life doesn't exist," says Sheila.

Then there are the grandparents: some find it difficult to accept their daughter is a lesbian. For others, accepting a grandchild without a son-in-law can be even more confusing. A family's animosity toward a daughter's sexuality can affect the way her child is treated, often with unhappy results.

"My father never talks about my relationship with my partner at all -- he knows perfectly well what's going on," says Cynthia.

"When I told him I was pregnant, he was delighted -- then a while later, he asked how I did it."

Cynthia says her partner Dawn's family has never really accepted her daughter Chloe as a grandchild. "We go there for Christmas, and all the other kids are being showered with gifts, and Chloe's just standing there. That's going to get harder."

"It's all about understanding that you have a choice. How can I deny her the choice to have a boyfriend if I'm out here yelling about my right to be with women?"

Carrie wants to encourage her son to be with whoever he feels comfortable with. "What gender doesn't really matter to me. I hope I'll be able to stress that," she says.

But for now, she has more pressing questions to answer. Joshua and Meghan are already asking Carrie why they don't have a dad.

"Usually I just say 'that's right, you don't have a dad. You have two moms -- aren't you lucky?'"

They don't really see her as being Dawn's child.

'Chosen family'

To make up for support not forthcoming from their immediate families, lesbians often form a 'chosen family', a network of friends who support and understand each other.

"One thing we're trying to do is keep a balance of people in our lives," says Cynthia. Chloe spends time with a family with four kids, and with her parents' gay male friends as well as with lesbians.

Carrie says her children Joshua and Meghan are "definitely exposed to my lifestyle. They go to the women's coffee-houses, and I take them to women's events."

Sheila says she would like to meet other lesbian moms with young kids, both for her and her daughter's sake.

Being exposed to various lifestyles and relationship options gives the kids a chance to decide for themselves what their own preferences are -- an opportunity which combats homophobia by presenting gay or lesbian relationships as perfectly normal choices. When Niamh, Chloe, Joshua and Meghan get older, their parents hope they'll be able to stand up for themselves whatever their own choices and preferences may be.

"I just hope for her she'll find a partner who'll treat her with respect and be good to her," says Sheila.