

Queer spawn on school

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This article is about the school experiences of young people with LGBTQ parents.¹ Based on 31 interviews with youth, ages 10 – 18, the article attempts to summarize what these young people had to say about the challenges they encounter in school, and the strategies they adopt in the face of them.

There is a large and growing body of literature addressing the experiences of sexual minority youth. Many studies have documented the stresses of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) identities (disclosed or not) on young people. Schools, in particular, are identified as environments where LGBTQ-identified youth experience ongoing harassment and bullying.² Distressingly, the literature shows that little is done to address homophobic aggression. It appears that, while teachers are aware of homophobic bullying, they are “confused, unable or unwilling

¹ A previous version of this text has been published in “Who’s your daddy and other writings on queer parenting, 2009, edited by Rachel Epstein. Toronto: Sumach Press.

² Baker, 2002; D’Augelli, 1999; Goodenow and Hack, 1998; Renold, 2002; Russell, Seif and Truong, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994; Thurlow, 2001; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001.

to address the needs of lesbian and gay pupils.”³ In recent years, this research on the impacts of homophobia on LGBTQ youth has been utilized, alongside the efforts of community activists, to support struggles for basic human rights with regards to sexual and gender diversity. One such hard-won victory is the legislated requirement that all publically funded school boards in the province of Ontario, Canada must support students who want to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

However, anti-homophobia initiatives in schools typically focus on queer youth, often excluding children and youth with LGBTQ parents, sometimes referred to a “culturally queer” or “queer spawn” (QS), terms coined by Stefan Lynch of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere).⁴ Many young people with LGBTQ parents are recognizing, as they grow older, that their experiences being raised in LGBTQ communities and cultures can have a bearing on their identities and sense of belonging. Many are challenging queer communities to create spaces that are welcoming to them, particularly to those who are, in Lynch’s terms, erotically straight but culturally queer. The term “queer spawn,” like “queer”, is not embraced by all to whom it refers. Differential responses to these terms are embedded in history, in preference, and in identity. We choose to use the term “queer spawn” (QS) in this article to refer to children and young people with one or more LGBTQ parents. We recognize that not all the people for whom we are using the term would self-identify in this way.

However, we do think that most young people with LGBTQ parents would agree that they often have a unique experience at school. The homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist teasing

³ Warwick et al., 2001.

⁴ Garner, 2004.

and harassment of which they may be targets are not necessarily due to their own sexual orientation or gender identity, but often stem from their parent's sexual and/or gender identities and their family structures. They may be straight-identified themselves, but find themselves identifying with and defending queer people and cultures. Abigail Garner, in her book *Families Like Mine*, refers to the "bicultural identity of heterosexual children who are linked to queerness through their heritage." While not all children of LGBTQ parents identify as straight, those that do sometimes find that it is not always clear where they fit, in relation to queer or straight culture.⁵ Sometimes even in anti-homophobia initiatives and committees such as Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs), queer spawn have to explain their presence, as reported by one of our participants:

There was one instance where I was at the lesbian/gay orientation week activity. And people were like 'why are you here?' They were kind of confused and so I had to explain my history to them...
(girl/16/lesbian moms)

This exclusion of queer spawn within LGBTQ communities is echoed in the relatively scant literature attending to their lives and concerns.

Studies that do exist on culturally queer children and youth link their safety at school with strategic choices about whether, and how, to disclose the sexual and/or gender identities of their parents.⁶ Elsewhere, queer spawn experiences of school are framed more theoretically, exploring how experiences of heterosexism and homophobia impact personal identity development.⁷ For the most part, research on queer spawn

⁵ Garner, 2004; Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011; Ryan, 2010.

⁶ Garner, 2004; Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011; Ryan, 2010.

⁷ Kavalanka and Goldberg, 2009.

experience provides broad accounts of queer spawn life, with school as one facet.

Between 2007 and 2009, the Egale Canada Human Rights Trust⁸ surveyed more than 3,700 students across Canada and found that more than a third of youth with LGBTQ parents reported being verbally harassed about their parents' sexual orientation, and 27 per cent reported being physically harassed. Those youth were also more likely to be harassed about their own gender expression, and their own perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Just over 60 per cent of students with LGBTQ parents reported that they feel unsafe at school, and that young people will sometimes avoid disclosing that their parents are LGBTQ in order to protect themselves.

This article foregrounds the voices of 31 queer spawn, as they share the day-to-day nuances of the challenges they face at school, the strategies they adopt in response to these challenges, and the supports they feel are important. Based on these accounts, we offer QS-centered recommendations to help parents, teachers, and administrators offer appropriate supports, while working towards transformative changes that will make schools safer for all members of LGBT communities, including queer spawn.

The study

The LGBTQ Parenting Network (PN), a community-based program located in Toronto, Canada, provides resources, information and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) parents, prospective parents and their families

⁸ Taylor and Peter with McMinn, Elliott, Beldom, Ferry, Gross, Paquin, and Schachter, 2011.

(see www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca). The PN was initiated in 2001 by the Family Service Association of Toronto, and is currently a program of the Sherbourne Health Centre in downtown Toronto. At its inception in 2001, the PN held a series of focus groups asking LGBTQ parents about the kinds of programs they would find helpful. Across the board, the issue of biggest concern was schools: How will our children experience homophobia/heterosexism at school and how do we prepare them to respond? When and how do we intervene individually and/or collectively with other parents and community members?

In 2004, partially in response to these concerns, the PN initiated a research project designed to explore the experiences of young people with LGBTQ parents in relation to the ways that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism manifest in their daily lives, with particular emphasis on their school experiences. The project took place at a particular political moment in Canada: a nation-wide debate about same-sex marriage. While, in fact, the majority of Canadians supported same-sex marriage, the debate unleashed a torrent of homophobic outrage, based on arguments about the “natural connections between marriage, sex and procreation,” on the immorality of homosexual relationships, and the risks to children living in lesbian/gay households. Many LGBTQ parents were concerned about their children being subject to these debates; some were shielding their children from news sources, and others felt isolated in the face of this backlash and worried for the well-being of their children.

In this context, and with funding from the Wellesley Central Health Corporation, the PN launched a research project designed to explore the impact of the same-sex marriage debate on children and youth with LGBTQ parents, with particular emphasis on what was happening in schools. Centered around

the level of awareness of children and young people about the public debates on the marriage rights of parents like theirs, this study engaged 31 queer spawn, as well as 17 parents and 15 teachers in discussion about the school experiences of culturally queer kids. These conversations were specifically focused on the impact of the public debate about whether or not it is good for children to live in LGBTQ households, on queer spawn and their parents; while more generally exploring the experiences of culturally queer kids in urban, rural, and suburban Canadian classrooms. Our questions included: What have teachers who are committed to anti-homophobia work in their classrooms noticed in terms of the impact of the debate on what is happening in their classrooms? What kinds of experiences are kids and young people with LGBTQ parents having in schools, with extended family, in community? What factors help them to feel safe to talk about their families, experiences of discrimination, exclusion, bullying, name-calling or other forms of homophobic and transphobic harassment at school, in their families and in communities?

Our research methodology was guided by principles of community-based participatory research as synthesized by Israel, et al.⁹ These include the establishment of collaborative working partnerships between community members, organizational representatives and researchers in all aspects of the research process, with the aim of increasing understanding and knowledge of research priorities and questions that arise from community concerns. The knowledge generated is used to enhance the health and well-being of community members and to further social justice.

The project was guided by a community advisory committee, consisting of partner organizations, academics, community

⁹ Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker, 1998.

activists, LGBTQ parents, teachers, and service providers to LGBTQ families. Our triangulated research approach included documentation of the public discourse surrounding the same-sex marriage debate; interviews with key informants; and on-line surveys and group interviews, with children/youth living in LGBTQ-led families, LGBTQ parents and teachers. In total we conducted group interviews with 31 young people with LGBTQ parents, 17 LGBTQ parents of teenagers, and 15 teachers.

This article is based solely on the group interviews with 31 young people with LGBTQ parents. The interviews were conducted by Rachel Epstein, a long-time LGBTQ parenting activist, coordinator of the PN, and an LGBTQ parent herself. Interview groups consisted of 2 – 7 young people at a time, based on age group (10-11; 12-14; 15-18) and availability. Most were held at the Family Service Association offices, although one took place at a regular meeting of COLAGE (Children of Lesbian And Gays Everywhere), a support group for children/youth with LGBTQ parents. Interviews were guided by a set of questions (see Appendix A), with room to follow up on areas of interest and themes generated by participants. We found that the interviews, in most cases, became primarily focused on school experiences. Young people spend an enormous amount of their time at school and it appears to be at school that young people with LGBTQ parents are most confronted with negative ideas and behaviours based on the composition of their families and/or the sexual orientation/gender identity of their parents. We have focused in this article on young people's accounts of their school experiences.

Below we have tried to capture some of the distinct and under-recognized school experiences of queer spawn, and to draw out some of the strategies they employ to deal with the homophobia

and heterosexism they encounter. Our interviewees range in age from 8-18. 18 are girls, 13 are boys. More than a third speak a language in addition to English, and they identify with a variety of cultures and ethnicities, including Canadian, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), Jewish, Sri-Lankan, First Nations, Caucasian, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, African-Canadian, British, Chinese, and Armenian. They describe an array of family arrangements. About one quarter have at least one heterosexual parent. Others describe a gay, lesbian, and/or trans two-parent “nuclear family,” or a “blended family,” created when their birth parents separated and formed new families. Several are co-parented by lesbians and gay men. Because the majority of the young people we interviewed have parents who identify as gay or lesbian, the workings of bi and transphobia are less addressed in this article. For an excellent resource for children of trans parents, see the *Kids of Trans Resource Guide*,¹⁰ developed by COLAGE.¹¹

The main commonality amongst the QS interviewed here is that almost 90% have at least one lesbian parent. Another common feature is their urban location: 87% were living in a large Canadian city at the time of the interviews; 4 respondents describe living in a mid-size community.

This article is written by three queer activists, one of whom is also a parent. Thus our use of the words “our” and “us” rather than “they” or “them” when talking about members of LGBTQ communities. Interspersed with our reflections, the voices of these 31 queer spawn offer insight into the questions: How do homophobia and heterosexism manifest at school? What helps?

¹⁰ Canfield-Lenfest, 2008.

¹¹ People with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer parent: www.colage.org

What doesn't help? More specifically, how do those who are involved with QS in school (their peers, parent of their peers, teachers and administrators) contribute to making the experiences of QS more or less challenging? This article is written for parents, teachers and school administrators and we conclude with a summary of suggestions from QS about the factors that assist in creating positive experiences at school. These suggestions can help inform the practice of parents, teachers and administrators as well as others who are in a position to advocate for the well-being of QS.

What happens: Queer spawn at school

It is important to state at the outset that while the young people we talked to described profoundly heterosexist and homophobic school cultures, they do not have only negative experiences at school. Some have experienced very little homophobic harassment at school; others describe supportive actions and attitudes from teachers and peers. This section will focus on QS's accounts of their experiences of homophobia and heterosexism within classrooms, and attempt to tease out their understandings of the links between institutional practices, and the attitudes and actions of teachers, parents and peers.

Everyday heterosexism: "Straight until proven otherwise"

Despite the positive experiences described by some respondents, the culture in most schools continues to be deeply homophobic and heterosexist. QS describe a range of ways this manifests in daily school life, from every-day put-downs, to direct teasing, to harassment and bullying from peers and their peers' parents, as well as from teachers. They are aware of heterosexism within day-to-day administrative practices and curriculum:

It's also about forms, when it says 'father' and 'mother' (*a lot of agreement in the background*) and we have to cross it out and write 'mother.' I hate that. I should be like parent or guardian one and parent or guardian two. It's really oppressive, every time having to cross it out...even at my school which was very progressive, a very awesome school, but even they had forms that said 'mother' and 'father.' It's just annoying...it's like straight until proven otherwise. (girl/18/lesbian mom)

Last year I was taking an introduction to sociology, anthropology and psychology and you had to make this chart and I couldn't do it - it didn't work with my family so I went up to my teacher and she's like "oh well, you can just do it on some other famous family." And I'm like, "No, I don't want to. I want to do it on my family, just like everyone else is doing". She was like, "No you can't." It's this scientific stupid thing. So I made one up and was like "You can fail me if you want because it's not real, but I don't care. I'm not doing it". She's like "do the Eaton's." I was like "No, I want to do my family." She knew my parents were lesbians and didn't even think when she gave the assignment that it might be an issue, and it was just ridiculous. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

Identifying the exclusionary functions of ordinary classroom practices such as permission forms and classroom activities, respondents describe feelings that range from invisibility and not-belonging, to a sense of being deliberately ignored, uncared for, and/or excluded.

Harassment: "That's so gay! Who's your real mom?"

A sense of not belonging is heightened when QS become the target of teasing or harassment. QS describe harassment from peers that ranges from yelling "ewwww" at them in the playground, to taunting them for supposedly "gay" behaviours, to shutting them out of social circles. They recount many variations on the ubiquitous "that's so gay": many of their peers commonly use words like "Gaylord", and "Lesbo", and sing homophobic rhymes and songs.

The time I felt most awful... I was talking to one of my best friends and I told him my parents were gay....He kind of like sat there and looked at me and he's like 'are they Gaylord?' (boy/10/ trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

Some interviewees distinguish between these more generic insults, which are often applied as random put-downs, devoid of understanding, and more deliberate teasing, name-calling and harassment.

They were just always teasing me...I'd be minding my own business in the playground or doing whatever at lunchtime and they'd just come up and start calling me names...I don't think they knew the word lesbian, they weren't smart enough, they were just like 'you're gay' or 'you're a fag'. ...always asking me questions about my mother, 'do you have two mothers...that's so weird, that's so stupid.' (girl/16/lesbian mom)

Name-calling, calling me stupid and saying that it was my fault that my mother was a lesbian and that it was a problem that she has a partner that was a woman...and that it was against every religion known to mankind and that it was the wrong way to be... He wasn't a Christian, but he used that as an excuse to pick on me. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

QS also describe questioning from both peers and adults, based on stereotypes and misinformation, framing it as unwanted and intrusive:

'So who's your real mom?' 'Where or who's your dad?' 'Do you know your dad?' 'How were you born?'...the worst I got that from was actually adults...a close family friend [*of a friend*] was there and she found out I had four moms and she just didn't get it, and I spent the whole TTC ride trying to explain. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

It is within this context of teasing and unwanted questions about the intimate details of their home lives that QS describe the emotional and social impact of negative messages and homophobic attitudes:

I kind of built a wall against myself like to shield myself from certain people. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

They would suddenly accuse that boy of being gay and say ‘Oh, you’re so nasty. Oh that’s wrong.’ It’s kind of like a movement-sensored dynamite - you flick, you take one little move, the dynamite goes off. (boy/10/ trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

I especially wanted to beat the crap out of one guy...but I knew that I’d be the one who’d be hurt, cause it was all of them who were saying it...I was like really sad and angry at the same time, but I didn’t do anything. I didn’t say anything, I just, I just stood there, and then I felt like, why am I gonna stand here with six bastards around me, so what I did was go back inside the school...they like, nobody knows, nobody except people I can actually trust. (boy/9/lesbian mom)

Faced with the ever-present possibility of a homophobic comment or unwanted question, QS describe their school experiences as sometimes involving constant vigilance, self-protective behaviour and a sense of helplessness.

The target of teasing: “They go for your weak spot”

Some kids note the constant presence of teasing in their lives, “every day, every week.” Many come to understand that homophobic teasing, like most teasing, is designed to hit at your ‘weak spot.’ One young woman describes how information about her parents was used against her:

...once they found out about my parents they used it against me. I was harassed on MSN...they accused me of looking down girls’

shirts, and because my parents were gay they suspected that I was gay. And everyone knew it and no one defended me and honestly it was terrible, and I'm thinking to myself 'you know that I'm not, and you're just making this up so you can get to me'. And then it really did. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

This account stands in stark contrast with that of another respondent who describes mostly positive school experiences:

All my life I've gone to an alternative school and I've never been bullied. It's also like how confident you are. It's part of my opening introduction now, it's like "Hi, I'm ... and I have two moms." Just because I want to get it out in the open, I don't like to leave it there cause then someone figures it out...so like I feel confident about it. If you're not then people might see that weakness and start bullying you. It's about being confident and not trying to hide it. Cause you try to hide it and I think that's how people see your weakness. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

Both of these accounts suggest the need to look more deeply at how classrooms address bullying and harassment more generally. They also suggest the need to examine individual supports for children and youth—the ways that teachers and parents might encourage comfort and confidence in QS, which the second respondent seems to suggest has the effect of inoculating her against potential teasing.

Attitudes from home: "Bad as poo"

While education of teachers, school administrators, and students is critical, these accounts from young people call for education on a much broader front, by reminding us that children's attitudes do not develop within a vacuum. Many QS suggest that many of their peers learn homophobic attitudes at home, from parents and other family members.

...there are the kids who are exposed to homophobic views from their parents or wherever...when I first started school they weren't knowledgeable enough to even verbalize what they thought, like they wouldn't even know what a lesbian was, because if your parents don't literally talk to you about the issues, you wouldn't be able to even approach it at all. (girl/18/lesbian moms)

...with the kids you kind of have to say 'look, this is what it is,' and then after they've learned a bit about it then often they're fairly supportive but often they don't even really know about it at all...and then they'll say something that they've learned at home or that they've heard somewhere and it will be something bad about gays or lesbians, like once somebody actually said he heard it at home that gay and lesbian people were as bad as poo. (girl/13/gay dads)

These accounts, and others, call for recognition of the complex and layered ways that the beliefs and prejudices of families of origin play out in the schoolyard and classroom behaviours of individual students. In particular, they suggest that lessons learned at home have an impact on what children and youth perceive as normal or deviant, and thus might view as a 'weak spot' in their QS peers.

Teachers' attitudes: "A child should be raised by a man and a woman"

Complicating matters is the reality that not all teachers are on side. Many lack the cultural competency necessary to fully support the QS in their classrooms, while still others inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism. This lack of knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to the realities of LGBTQ families can lead to serious exclusions in curriculum and classroom activities:

When I handed *[the family tree assignment]* in to the substitute he was just utterly confused about how I could not have a father and

how could I not have filled it out properly. So I just didn't fill it out and I sat at my desk the whole day, the whole day, because he said that until I finished my work I wasn't allowed to do anything. (girl/11/lesbian moms)

...my teacher was really great except my mom told me that when I was in senior kindergarten, we were making pots for Mother's Day, and they didn't buy me two, but just because they forgot...like, the teacher was really supportive and it wasn't because she didn't want me to have two pots... I guess they just weren't aware to buy the second one. It wasn't anything against me, it was just like they weren't thinking about it. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

These accounts, and others, uncover heterosexist ignorance and oversight by teachers, which respondents link with feelings of invisibility and not belonging, as previously discussed. While these actions seem to be perceived as unintentional by QS, some young people report blatantly homophobic attitudes from their teachers:

This teacher was completely and entirely horrible and when he said that a child should be raised by a man and a woman I completely ripped his head off. I'm like, "You know what, you're completely, totally wrong 'cause I've grown up all my life with a woman and a woman raising me and I've had no problems." And he goes "Well, wouldn't you have liked a male role model in your life?" And I'm like "you're raised by who you need to be raised by. (girl/14/lesbian moms)

My Grade 5 teacher openly confronted me one day, he held me back from recess and he's like "Your parents are lesbian, and that's really wrong. You're like really screwed up"...I was really depressed for the next couple of days cause I didn't know anyone else with gay or lesbian parents, so I thought that I was the only person in the world who was royally screwed up like this... (girl/12/lesbian mom/FTM parent)

Respondents report feeling more or less able to respond to teacher homophobia, for a variety of reasons. The second young woman chose not to tell her parents about this incident, because:

I didn't want them to get all mad or something and get him in trouble or fired or anything like that. (girl/12/lesbian mom/FTM parent)

This participant's comments demonstrate the powerful effect that the attitudes of teachers and other authority figures can have on QS.

Lack of intervention: "There's so much homophobia and they never do anything!"

In the face of ongoing and pervasive use of homophobic language as insult, the young people we talked to were sometimes astonished at the lack of intervention on the part of teachers and administrators. Over and over, they relate how, even within equity-mandated boards, homophobia goes ignored and unchallenged:

...it's weird at my school cause there's so much homophobia and I know there are a few gay teachers, and they never do anything. They just see the kids doing it and they just sort of pretend like it didn't happen, like when kids say stuff they'll just look the other way, when it comes to the gay stuff they just brush it over. (boy/15/lesbian mom)

One participant explains that while certain types of teasing are off limits, homophobic teasing continues to be acceptable:

...there's hardly any kids who tease kids about fatness or anything else...cause they get in trouble more about the fatness and other things...this boy in my class came up to my friend and said 'oh

you're gay, you're stupid' and everything like that, and the teacher didn't do anything. (girl/9/lesbian moms and gay dad)

Confronted with the pervasiveness and acceptance of heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes, and the use of these prevalent societal attitudes as targeted weapons by their peers, it might be tempting to view QS experiences as overwhelmingly negative, consisting of constant harassment and bullying. However, as mentioned previously, not all respondents reported such experiences, and those who did experience homophobic bullying were not hapless victims.

What helps: Queer spawn fight back!

This section focuses on QS descriptions of resistance and support. It explores the complex strategies they deploy; the ways that they access support within their peer groups; and their perceptions of the impact of these strategies, on themselves, their peers, and their families.

Strategies: "Confront, deflect, diffuse, poke back"

Many QS do carry a deep sense of confidence in themselves and in their families, and choose to directly confront homophobia as a problem that is external to them, and not a reflection of their worth. Sometimes they find themselves defending themselves, their LGBTQ friends, other kids with LGBTQ parents, and LGBTQ people generally:

...my friend whose dad is gay, they wouldn't stop bugging him and teasing him and all that, so I just went looking for the guys. I said, 'You make my best friend cry one more time, you will have to deal with me, and trust me, I am shorter than you but I can beat your ass up.' And then they like just stopped bugging him after that cause I think they kind of got scared... (girl/15/gay dad)

Many expressed incredulity at the ridiculousness, ignorance and stupidity of some of the remarks and attitudes they encounter. One response strategy involves toying with this ignorance by reversing what are perceived to be silly questions, agreeing with or not responding to provocative statements, and generally using humour to diffuse and to poke back:

She walked up to me with four girls behind her and they kind of pushed her forward and she looked back and she's like, 'can I ask you a question?' And she stood there for like 20 seconds and I'm like, 'what do you want to know?' 'Are your parents lesbians?' After like 20 seconds and I'm like, 'yeah' and she's like 'oh.' So then I said, 'okay Nancy, let me just back up here. Just stand there for a second.' And I walked down to the other end of the hall and I walked up and I like looked behind me sort of to the side and stuff and I'm like 'Nancy, could I ask you a question?' She was totally confused. And I'm like 'Are, are your parents straight?' (*laughter*) She was so taken aback. It was hilarious. And then she asked, 'why did you do that?' And I'm like 'cause you ask the stupidest questions in the world. You know, just ask me, 'are your parents lesbians?' And I'd be like, 'yeah.' But no, you know, she had to make a big deal about it, be all like creeped out by it. So that was fun. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

We were talking and I was like, 'yeah, no, I come from a sperm bank' and she's like, 'what's that? I was like, 'it's this place where you go if you don't have a male. She was like 'oh, really,' So she asked me all these questions like, 'how did the sperm get into your body?' I was like, 'you breathe it, it like goes through your mouth,' and she's like 'really?' (*laughter*)...It took like 20 minutes to describe what a sperm bank is. And then she's like 'which mom do you like better?' She actually asked me that, like which one. Like uh, 'both,' and she's like 'no, but like which one do you like more?' Like, 'do you like your mom or your dad more?' and she was 'neither' and I'm like 'there you go.' It was just really funny...I really enjoyed it. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

Although elsewhere in their accounts, both respondents describe feeling annoyed and targeted by intrusive and ignorant questions, they have each developed sophisticated assertiveness techniques to deflect and diffuse these unwanted questions, while educating their peers. Moreover, their accounts suggest that when these strategies are successfully deployed, they feel a sense of enjoyment and pride.

Peer support: Queer and straight

In the face of the uncertainty of support from school staff, and because so much of young people's school experience is centred around their peers, QS often give prime importance to peer interactions. Decisions about whether, when, and how to disclose their family configurations can be big issues for QS, and their disclosure and coping strategies vary widely. Some embrace a strategy of coming out early and always, as a way of heading off homophobic reactions and establishing their family structures as "not their weak point". Others are more careful and selective about where and with whom they disclose. Always involved is a process of safety assessment:

I don't really know, it's just sort of like you have a reluctance bringing it up with certain people, there's just something about them... (boy/13/lesbian mom and gay dad)

I went to a day camp and there would be two boys playing together and then kids would go, like 'ewww, that's nasty' and then later they were making rude jokes about gay people...Oh no! I never told them, the first time I heard those comments I zipped my lips, I did not want to get tormented. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

In these, and many other, accounts, QS emerge as sensitized to clues about safety, and picky about choosing friends. Sometimes it is hard to describe what the clues are, but there is just "something about them" that inspires caution; while in other

cases, they listen for homophobic remarks and limit their disclosure accordingly.

Youth describe the significance of a single bully in creating situations where QS are not safe to come out to their peers, for fear of being targeted:

He pretty much changed everyone's mindset to 'you have to pick on her because she has two moms.' (girl/14/lesbian moms)

The bully kid who had the anger management problem...if he saw two women walking down the street near my school he would be like 'oh my God, they're lesbians, oh my God everyone.. And then he would get everyone to point and laugh...there was no direct bullying but...it had an effect because...I knew that if I was...out like that...people would do that to me also. So now this person isn't in my class anymore but I still don't want to say anything... (girl/11/lesbian moms)

In both of these instances, QS demonstrate sensitivity to the complex dynamics of schoolyard interaction. In particular, they describe an awareness, bordering on hypervigilance, to the impact that one powerful person—whether an ally or an enemy—might have on the behaviours of the rest of the children or youth in their peer group.

It is within this understanding of group dynamics that knowing other QS can be an important, sometimes crucial, source of support and comfort.

At my new school there is a girl and her dads invited me over and we really bonded and I found that having someone to talk to about these kinds of things, it kind of helped, because you know I didn't feel like I was the only person in living history to have parents like I do. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

...at the beginning of Grade 7, we were in equity studies class, and I said “my dad and his partner are gay, so please don’t use gay as a general insult around me cause I could get very mad at you”...and then a number of other people stood up and said, ‘yeah, my parents are gay or lesbian too...so we’ll all get mad at you.’...I’m not sure if they would have said it if someone else hadn’t said it already because there are other people in the school who have gay or lesbian parents, you can see it on the phone chart, but they don’t say it...it’s nice to have help, instead of being the only one (girl/13/gay dads)

...(knowing other kids with LGBT parents)...I don’t feel like E.T. or something. And they back me up in lots of situations. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

These accounts speak to the powerful roles that both visibility and shared experience can play not only in lessening isolation, but in creating opportunities to challenge homophobic harassment and bullying.

Similarly, support from straight peers—friends who will recognize and confront the homophobia of other kids, and who will put themselves on the line—is equally, if not more, significant.

“...then one of the guys made a joke, I knew they were talking about me but they weren’t saying my name, and then a girl goes, ‘oh my god, gay people are so egghhh.’ And one of the other guys says ‘shut up and sit down, no one wants to hear you talk.’ Everyone was just quiet then. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

...and then she’s like ‘you’re dad’s gay. Oh my god, that is like so weird!’ At first I kind of started crying a bit, and then my other friend she was like, ‘what’s wrong?’ and I said ‘...is talking trash about my dad...’ So then my friend, she’s known my dad the whole entire time, for like seven years almost, we say like she’s their adopted daughter, she just rolled up her sleeves, and she’s a year younger than me, and she’s like, ‘that’s it, where’s that ...(she called her the ‘b’ word) and then she went looking for her. (girl/15/gay dad)

These accounts point to the importance of recognizing ‘strength in numbers’ approaches as powerful strategies for resistance and education within child and youth peer groups. Sometimes, given the expectations young people come to have, they describe a sense of surprise and relief when they are supported:

...one time this 11th grader girl came up to me and she’s like, ‘is it true that your dad is gay? And I was like, ‘what makes you think that?’ and she’s like ‘I don’t know, we saw him come and pick you up..’ and I’m like, ‘well, maybe he is, maybe he isn’t,’ right, so kind of like not your business, right? And then she’s like, ‘no, no, no it’s just I wanted to ask you cause like a lot of kids when they’re your age and they come here they’re all worried about it,’ and she’s like, ‘don’t worry, here it’s a good school, everybody’s open about it. Like if your dad’s gay, good for him...’ I was like almost crying cause I was so happy... (girl/15/gay dad)

Teachers and parents: To tell or not to tell

While direct confrontation, peer support, and other forms of assertiveness can help, young people are often compelled to make complicated decisions about if and when to tell teachers or parents about painful incidents. As discussed above, QS describe teacher interventions as being rare and outside the norm: This, combined with experiences of homophobic attitudes from teachers, often makes asking for adult interventions a last resort. Moreover, these are not easy decisions when the consequences of teacher/parent interventions are not always straightforward, predictable, or helpful. Sometimes, despite good intentions, teacher and parent interventions backfire:

One day I couldn’t handle it (*harassment from other kids*) and I went to talk to the teacher about it. She seemed pretty okay and stuff, so the next day she tells me to go next door and so I leave the class, I hear her slam the door and yelling...when I came back the girl next to me told me she had screamed at them because they were treating me different and if she heard anything they would be

suspended.... She made it worse. Because I couldn't even go outside, I had to stay inside to help the teacher with something, because I couldn't handle it out there. You know it was ten minutes, but ten minutes of hell. "Oh, you need a teacher to defend you. Oh, you and your gay parents, why don't you just move out, go to the country man, no one wants you here. We're straight." Like, oh my god, it was terrible. (girl/17,lesbian mom)

In this case, the ongoing harassment that this student experienced was exacerbated by a teacher's well-intentioned intervention, which failed to take into account how a punishing lecture might be received, and the impact of this on the child in question. In other accounts, parental attempts at support or intervention had similar results, further alienating the student and escalating the behaviour of their peers.

I was working in the office and the girls come in "oh look, that's the girl with the gay parents, neh, neh neh." So my mom, for Easter, she sent me a flower to school right, to make me feel better. And then people found out, "Oh my god, see, see, she is gay, her mom had to send her this, neh neh.' The thing is I know my mom had good intentions but oh my god, it was terrible. I had such a bad experience, like honestly half the time I can't even talk about this stuff because it really hurts. [*crying*] (girl/17/lesbian moms)

In Grades 4, 5 and 6 I had a lot of problems, the students were making fun of me, calling me a fag, and I never told my mom and then one day I just got so upset and I called her and I just started bawling and she went and told my principal and then the principal suspended the two people who were doing the most. But then one of my best friends at the time was friends with them and she stopped talking to me because she said I got them suspended. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

Do you guys generally tell your parents when stuff happens at school?

You better believe this, never!

You never tell your parents?

Hell no!

How come?

Because once I told them and they told the principal and it made me really embarrassed in front of my friends. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

From these and other accounts, it emerges that zero tolerance approaches can have unforeseen negative impacts on the students who are targets of harassment. These accounts point to the need for sensitive, thoughtful and non-formulaic interventions from teachers and parents. In the instances above, the adult responses, while well-intentioned, are made without consultation with the student involved. This serves, in the end, to disempower them. We would advocate for approaches that are consultative and that leave targeted students with some sense of control.

Violence: “The build up just made me snap”

In the face of inaction from school staff, and the complexities involved in turning to parents or teachers for support, some young people respond to homophobic harassment from their peers with violence. Interesting, and potentially troubling, is the number of young people who respond with anger and with violence when they were harassed—and who describe it as the most effective strategy. Kids who do not perceive themselves generally as violent or angry people, talked about how, when incidents and anger accumulate, they sometimes snap:

I wasn't the type of kid who would yell and get aggravated, but I guess the build up of these kids just constantly tormenting me...it was winter and I think they were throwing snow at me, and so the build up just made me snap and I threw him in a tree...It was really an odd action for me to take cause I'm not usually that physical with anybody, but I don't know what happened. I just got really aggravated. But he never did anything like that ever again. (boy/16/lesbian moms)

I've known six kids that have had lesbian and gay parents, or bi or trans. And basically we would just hunt out the homophobic people and nail them down...Someone actually came up to me and said that they didn't like the fact that my parents were gay. Next thing they had a fist in their face. So yeah, that like went by pretty fast...I beat up a Grade 3 when I as in Grade 1.

Did you tell the teacher why you had punched the lights out of him?

Yeah. They said violence wasn't the answer. (boy/13/lesbian moms)

While these accounts speak to the effectiveness of violent responses in addressing the immediate problem—ending their experience of harassment—it is clear that violence has unwanted side effects. When QS respond with violence, they sometimes end up being punished, while the person perpetrating the original homophobic attack gets ignored. This can increase frustration, and reinforce that idea the only way to achieve justice is to take matters into one's own hands. One young man explains how his teachers' lack of interventions led him to react violently, and often end up being the one punished:

I usually got in a lot of trouble 'cause I got mad at them [kids who initiated homophobic bullying] and started punching them.

Did you ever tell the teachers?

They didn't do anything.

At which school?

At every school. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

I got all pissed off at a kid 'cause he insulted me. He made fun of me 'cause I was adopted, so I got all mad at him. I sent him home with a black eye and a bloody mouth...I was sent to the principal's office. I was starting to be suspended.

And did you tell them what it was about?

Yeah, and then he didn't get in any trouble at all. So the next day he was still insulting me so he still went home with bruises. And then the next day he came to school with like a hidden stick... So when he insulted me, I wasn't going to do anything that day

because I had gotten in enough trouble, he started smacking me with the stick. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

While we would not advocate for QS to react with violence, the above accounts illustrate how it sometimes seems like the only viable option. When harassment is incessant, when teachers ignore everyday homophobia, and when teachers or parent interventions can lead to negative reactions from peers, why not resort to violence—especially when it works?

“The key to change”: Queering education

It is within the context of individualized actions and double-edged interventions that the following section turns to a broader discussion of the transformative potentials that arise from the accounts of QS experiences of bullying and harassment, and their strategies of resistance. We offer some recommendations for parents, teachers, and administrators that are rooted in the voices and reflections of queer spawn themselves.

Starting with QS experiences, we argue for the importance of addressing how home life filters into the classroom, both for QS and for their peers from straight families. QS who express comfort and resilience point to the importance of feeling confident in themselves and their families. For LGBTQ parents this signals a profound need to reflect on ways to encourage and build confidence in our children. This might begin with a willingness to identify and confront the internalized shame we may still be carrying. If we convey to our children, in deep ways, that there is absolutely nothing wrong with their families, and that no shame is necessary, perhaps they will carry this confidence to school, and their family structure will not be their ‘weak point,’ the place they can be ‘gotten.’

QS experiences of the ways that their peer's attitudes are rooted in their families of origin can similarly be translated into a plea to straight parents to educate themselves and their children about the existence of a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and family configurations. QS accounts remind us that, just as homophobia can be taught, so can acceptance:

..there's this girl across the street and she teased our other friend because she's fat and me cause I have gay parents...but then she realized what she was doing cause her parents talked to her...she had a friend who had told her gay people are bad, which is why she kept teasing me. Her parents told her it wasn't right and then she stopped...if everyone had parents and they would talk to their children... (girl/9/lesbian moms and gay dad)

Little attention has been given to this kind of community anti-homophobia education; that is, education that could touch and potentially change the beliefs and attitudes of QS's peers and their parents – who are often the source of the attitudes that get carried to school, and that become the basis of harassment. Our interviews suggest that young people who are educated in their families about the diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and family configurations may be less likely to ask intrusive, uninformed questions, and less likely to harass. This shift in individual attitudes could eventually transform school climates.

Moving beyond individual interactions, QS accounts point to the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are deeply embedded in the culture of most schools. Transforming school culture requires more than a desire to oppose homophobia. It requires an ongoing commitment to understand the day to day experiences of queer spawn (and queer youth), the thoughtful implementation of education programs for teachers,

administrators, students and community members, and interventions and approaches that seriously prioritize the perspectives and recommendations of young people.

With regards to teachers, administrators and school practices, some of what these young people have to say is not surprising. Identified as helpful are the presence of both “out” and ally teachers and students.

[The teacher] had a meeting with all the kids in our class (*after an incident of homophobic name-calling*)...You know, we talked about what happened and how everyone felt, and we worked it out...in fact, I don't think I heard an anti-gay or lesbian comment for a year. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom).

My (*straight*) teacher comes to school in like dresses and skirts and he's really cool and really supportive...He wears pink triangle shirts and he didn't want to support Canada so much because Canada doesn't really support everyone, so he hung up a rainbow flag in his classroom. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

High school's been the best, people don't care and our school is really good about that, you can say whatever you want and be really open. And people are really accepting, the teachers especially. (girl/16/lesbian mom)

From their teachers, QS express that a willingness to confront and challenge homophobia; gender non-conforming attitudes and expressions; the display of LGBTQ-positive symbols; and a simple attitude of openness, respect and support can go a long way.

Within the classroom, and in schools, QS point to the importance of visible supports and ongoing education and activism. Some of the initiatives they identify as helpful include Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and/or equity committees working on anti-

homophobia; curriculum inclusion of LGBT issues, including books, films and discussions; and anti-homophobia workshops like those offered by TEACH (Teens Educating And Challenging Homophobia – Planned Parenthood of Toronto). QS particularly appreciate when LGBTQ issues are integrated into school curriculum in an everyday way:

I think the biggest problem is that the only time that LGBT issues are discussed is when something like same-sex marriage comes up, when it's a huge, big controversial thing...it creates a huge gap in the two views and people feel they have to take one or the other side, it separates people, whereas it should be an issue that gets discussed in everyday life, the more basic things, like growing up with gay parents or being gay, what is homophobia...these are things that should be discussed everyday in school and in our community, and they're not. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

This account asks us to think about how queer families might be integrated across subjects and activities, rather than pigeonholed into a one-time workshop or discussion. More importantly, it reminds us of the potential negative impacts of discussing queer families exclusively through the lens of controversial issues, such as same-sex marriage.

As an overall strategy, the young people we interviewed stressed the need for education, on many levels, as the most effective challenge to homophobia and heterosexism in schools:

...the cliché answer – education. For every social issue everybody is always like 'education', it's all about education, but it's true. The thing is you can't start when you're in high school...if the first time you're hearing about it is when you're 16 and you're struggling to be cool, it's difficult to break a bad habit. So you have to start when they're really young and that's where it becomes complicated because when you're young you don't have the ability to stand back from your parents and form your own opinions and say 'I don't agree with my parent's opinions.' That's when it becomes

really hard - you're going to have parents who don't want their kids to know about this. But it really is important that you have that in school, you have those books, you have discussions, especially when you do stuff like family trees because for a kid to not see their family represented or talked about and then they have to go and make this family tree, what do they put? They know they have two moms but if the teacher didn't say anything about it, 'is it okay if I put that I have two moms?' and then other kids are like, 'How do they have two moms? That doesn't make sense.' It's really up to the education system to kind of get on it... (girl/16/lesbian moms)

QS call for the education system to represent queer families in the early grades: Virtually all the young people we interviewed described the level of homophobia as much higher in elementary school than in high school. Many of the most painful incidents they described happened in Grades 1 – 6. For many, life got easier in high school. While this suggests an avenue for future research, we can conjecture that it may be due to maturity of their peers, an increase in confidence on the part of queer spawn or the development of a stable, supportive peer group. Whatever the combination of reasons, it is clear that anti-homophobia education cannot begin too early.

Summary of suggestions from queer spawn about what helps at school

- Facilitate ways of queer spawn connecting with other queer spawn to share experience and strategies.
- Discourage shame in queer spawn.
- Develop strategies for community anti-homophobia education that recognizes that homophobic attitudes are often learned in heterosexual families and communities.

- Establish anti-homophobia education for students from JK - high school, with special emphasis on elementary grades.
- Implement compulsory pre and in-service teacher education on anti-homophobia and other equity issues, with explicit inclusion of queer spawn experience.
- Include LGBTQ-led families and recognition of the particular experiences of queer spawn in school curriculum, beginning in elementary school.
- Solicit commitment from school staff to intervene in the everyday use of homophobic language and insults in school environments.
- Consult and empower students who are the targets of homophobic harassment when intervening in youth peer to peer conflicts.
- Encourage the formation and work of gay/straight alliances and equity committees.
- Display LGBTQ positive symbols in classrooms and schools.
- Create or modify school forms to recognize diverse family configurations.
- Promote a school environment which encourages teachers, administrators and students to be “out.”
- Create a school environment of openness, respect and support.

To the queer spawn who so enthusiastically participated in this project – thank you! We also acknowledge the generous support

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Appendix A: Interview questions, young people

Perhaps we could start by having each of you tell us a bit about your families...who are your parents or significant people, do you have siblings or others who live with you?

As you've grown up, have you known other children or young people with LGBT parents? How easy or difficult have you found it to connect with other LGBT families? What has made it easy or difficult?

Having lesbian, gay, bi or trans parents is only one part of who you are. How significant do you think the fact that you live in an LGBT family is in your daily life? Are there other parts of who you are that seem bigger or more important or more significant in a daily kind of way?

Tell us a bit about the school you are attending, or the school you attended most recently?

Where located, how big, what kind of school (private, public, religious)?

In general, how supportive would you say the school you are attending or recently attended is to LGBT families? What would you base this on?

What's it been like for you at your school, or schools, having an lgbt parent or parents? (Is it cool?) Have there been incidents that you recall? What's the stupidest thing somebody has said? How did you, your peers, teachers, administrators respond to these incidents? When these things happen at school, who do you talk to and where do you get support from? (other kids with lgbt parents? Siblings? Friends? Teachers? Others?) Who did you find really supportive, what did they do? What do you sometimes not

say, that you'd like to say? Do you generally tell your parent/s about what happens? What helps you decide whether or not to tell your parents? (protection, resentment)

In the past two years do you think there have been more/less/same number of these kinds of incidences in your school?

How comfortable are you telling other students at school about your family? What kinds of things help you decide whether or not to tell people about your family?

How do you mostly find out about things that are going on in the world?

Have you heard/seen anything in the media about the same-sex marriage debate? If so, what you have seen/heard and from what media sources?

Have you heard/seen anything in the media about lesbians and gay men raising children? If so, what you have seen/heard and from what media sources?

If you have heard negative things about lesbians and gay men raising children, how do you feel when you hear them? What are the commonly held ideas about what it's like for children to have gay or lesbian parents?

What would you like to say back? What do you not say? What would your full-page ad say?

Have you talked to your parents and extended families about these issues? If so, tell us about the conversations.

Do you think the media attention on lesbians and gay men raising children has had an impact on how comfortable you are talking about your family at school? On the number or kind of homophobic incidences at your school?

Have you heard other students in your school talking about same-sex marriage or about kids growing up with lesbian or gay parents?

Have any of your teachers brought up the subject of same-sex marriage or lesbian/gay parenting in their classes?

Has the subject of same-sex marriage or lesbian/gay parenting come up in your church, synagogue, temple or religious school?

Overall, do you think that the same-sex marriage debate and the media attention on lesbian/gay parenting has created a safer or a less safe environment for you and your family?

Do you have any other comments about how the same-sex marriage debate and the arguments about lesbians and gays raising children have impacted you or LGBT families generally?

What do you think would really make a difference in terms of making things easier for kids growing up in LGBT families?

Any other comments generally about the discussion we've had or any of the things that have come up?

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