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Back to school with 2 daddies

Gay parents share tips for easing stress as classes resume for kids

By KATHERINE VOLIN

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Jennifer Chrisler knows the score on gay families. The mother of two runs Family Pride, an organization that provides support and secures rights for gay families.

When Chrisler took her twin sons to preschool, she picked a liberal, private school in downtown Washington. The school had a reputation for being friendly to gay parents and Chrisler and her partner, Cheryl Jacques, met with and came out to the principal and their sons' teachers before school started.

"Then we got a letter, actually from their preschool teachers: Please remind your mom and dad ..." Chrisler says. "I'm always amazed."

Chrisler and Jacques called the school, set up another appointment and discussed the issue with the teachers.

"While we believe that what happens in 99 percent of these cases is that teachers just don't think about it, not only did that leave our children out and make them feel like they didn't have the right family, but ... there's a whole slew of people that get left out when all you're focused on is having a mom and dad," Chrisler says.

It's issues such as these that Family Pride tackles in its Back to School fliers, which are available online. Suggestions on the fliers include sharing with the teacher which names each parent uses, talking about proposed curricula and offering books that include depictions of gay families.

Other gay parents are generally a wealth of information, too.

"One of the universal pieces of feedback that we hear from LGBTQ parents is that being proactive is the single best thing you can do to shape a positive environment for your child in the classroom," Chrisler says.

Being honest about sexual orientation is critical, Chrisler and other gay parents say.

"The more open and honest we are, the better, in the schools because there are so many gay families out there," says gay parent Kevin McGarry. "To be in the closet sends a message to the school, to our kids. To be open and honest about it makes it normal and acceptable even in red states. I come out every chance I get."

McGarry is a father to two sons he adopted from Vietnam as a single parent. His work raising his sons, Andy, 9, and Vincent, 6, was the subject of a book he wrote in 2003, "Fatherhood and Gay Men."

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He now has a boyfriend, but even when he didn't, McGarry was careful to be out with his sons' teachers about being gay rather than wallowing in the ambiguous territory single parenthood can provide.

"I think it's so much more obvious when two guys show up with their kids. When you're single, it's not so obvious," McGarry says. "You could be a widower, [it] could be ... the wife left and you're raising the kids by yourself. It's less obvious, so I think you just have to make more of an effort to come out to the teacher and I just think it's important that the teachers know so that they can look out for any slurs or if my child feels bad because of something that was said."

Mother's Day and Father's Day make for tricky holidays. McGarry says he tries to talk to teachers in advance to better handle the holiday.

"My kids always have a lot of issues right then," he says. "It stirs up all kinds of stuff. So I also tell the teacher way ahead of time. They can do something for grandma or nanny or for the birth mom. We have a mommy box that they can put things in for their birth mom. Whether or not it would ever get to the mom is another story, but at least they can make something for her."

When his older son, Andy, entered third grade last year, McGarry decided to talk to the principal, knowing that fourth or fifth grade would probably mark the beginning of other kids using bigoted language. Although McGarry and his sons haven't faced any difficulties at school, that doesn't mean they've been warmly accepted by everyone.

"When I talked to the principal, she said 'We're all-inclusive here,'" he says. "She didn't embrace it, but she gave me sort of a pat answer. That was OK."

Joan Garry, former executive director of Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, was a parent long before it was common for gay couples. Her successful attempt to adopt her partner's biological child Sarah, who is now 17, marked the first second-parent adoption in the state of New Jersey when it happened in 1993. The pair also has a set of twins, Kit and Ben, 12.

Sending Sarah off to kindergarten caused the usual trauma.

"We were big wrecks, just like the straight parents dropping their kids off at school [but] instead of one female wreck, there were two female wrecks," Garry says. "We had the good fortune of being able to settle in a town that had a reputation for being welcoming and diverse. The other thing ... is we also kind of made a decision that I, as the non-biological mom, would take more of a primary role so that ... in some ways I became the grown-up face of the family. That actually helps kind of create a balance for the school."

Garry joined the school board and volunteered her time to show that even though her partner gave birth to the children, they were equal parents to them.

"Truthfully, at school, as with everything else as it related to LGBT people, it's all about knowing us and seeing us — making yourself visible and making a contribution [by saying things like] 'Gee, I'll drive on one of the field trips,'" Garry says.



The goal, Garry and other parents say, is to be perceived as a family by the school, students and other parents.

“LGBT parents should remember how much they have in common with the other members of the PTA,” Garry says.

The burden is still tilted to the heavy end for gay parents, but that’s part of the gig, Chrisler says.

“It may be really unfair and it is, but at the end of the day, our No. 1 job is to clear the way for our child so they don’t have to do the work for us.”

Jennifer Chrisler (left) and partner **Cheryl Jacques**, former head of HRC, accompany their twin sons to an Easter egg roll on the White House lawn. Chrisler says it's important for gay parents to come out to their children's teachers. (Photo by Ron Edmonds/AP)

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