

GAY PARENTING: HONESTY IS ALWAYS THE BEST POLICY

JAMES LATOUR

So gay parenting...what does that look like? Well it looks a lot like straight parenting, except that there are one or two GLBTQ parents doing the work.

Here's what gay parenting looks like to me....

I was in a hetro marriage for 13.5 years (yes I always knew I was gay and so did she). During that marriage I somehow managed to father three fantastic kids (Michelle 17, Sarah 13, and Tim 12). When I was 36 our marriage began to fail for several reasons and things started to change and not for the good either. So when things started to go south I decided that leaving was the only option. I also decided to come out at the same time and to be the person I was created to be.

Needless to say it was a very costly experience because I was very involved in a church at the time (both employed by and on the board of elders). I lost all my friends, family and support systems. It was a difficult time for my kids too because I was foolish enough to enter into a verbal agreement with their mother not to tell them the truth about my "choice" (as she called it) as it conflicted with their religious values. It took two years and a very traumatic event for it all to come out.

I took my eldest out to lunch despite protestations from her mother 6 months after I had left. She was a student at the local Christian School where the board of directors was very aware of my "choice" and some of their kids, including Michelle's friends, were already in the know. When I told her I was gay, she picked up her salad fork and said, "I knew it!" with that teenage giggle of hers. "Okay, so can I finish my salad now?" She was 14. No one had told her, but like many children, she was perceptive enough to figure things out for herself.

My son was the next to figure it out about 18 months later. He began asking me some rather round-about questions, and providing the answers went well. My middle daughter found out through a

schoolmate; she responded by defending her father and his "friend." She has since begun a "spiritual journey" that has helped her to see the "exclusion factor" in the signage at her church which says "All Welcome!"

My point of this story is that whether or not you are straight or gay, you have to be honest and upfront with your kids, especially if you want their trust. And this goes for ALL issues. If you think they are too "young" to handle it and they are asking the questions, you're dead wrong!

But you can be sensitive about how you frame your answers; and you can tell them in terms they understand. For example, my kids needed to know that Dad was gay. They didn't need to know what that looked like in the bedroom and nor did I tell them!

My kids still live fulltime with their mother who still doesn't respect my "choice". So there are issues that take place. For example, the week before Father's Day she stood up in a public church meeting and shared her "testimony" in front of the kids that she had been "happily married for 13 years when her husband suddenly left her to become a homosexual." There was never any mention of why the marriage fell apart really, just that I was a faggot (in nicer terms of course).

There are three issues here. The first is the issue of parental alienation. The second is denial and third, prejudice. The first is a common problem in straight splits. It's where one parent tries to "alienate" the other parent, whether they realize it or not, by making disparaging remarks about the other. This is a dangerous zone for anyone to go into (and I've been there myself) because ultimately it can backfire in your face and the child will hate you instead of your intended target. It also puts the child in a place that is NOT theirs. This can have long term negative effects on the child. If you're guilty of it-stop it...NOW! I fully understand it but it's not acceptable. If you need help with this get it.

Denial is the second issue, and is a common theme to all families. Denial keeps the two parents in a place where

both refuse to accept responsibility for a relationship breakdown. It also promotes "victim-hood" which is always passed on to the next generation. It takes two people to make a marriage and it usually takes two people to break one. This "marriage" can take many forms including a surrogate relationship, straight relationship, gay relationship, whatever. When a relationship becomes a "derailtationship" both people need to work on making the best of an otherwise less than desirable situation, especially when there are kids involved.

Prejudice, the third issue, is very common to gay parenting. Although we are living in a more open society where more of us are accepted for who we are, this openness does not extend to parenting in many people's eyes, including many in the gay community itself. My kids refer to my partner, Miles, as their "step-Dad" or "other Dad." It is very cute and loving. But when they are with friends, and especially their church friends, they realize that they have to watch how they frame things because of opinions they encounter. Our society just isn't all the way there yet.

So what's the answer? Do we as GBLTQ people have the right to be parents? Well that's a moot point because whether or not we do doesn't matter: many of us already are! So what makes gay parenting successful? The same

thing that makes "straight" parenting in my perception: honesty. My kids know that when they ask a question, they'll get an answer. They may not like the answer, but they know it's an honest one. No more hiding. Our kids can find whatever they need to know on the net, so why hide behind one (a net that is....you can be seen through it anyhow).

For those of you who are interested in or touched by this issue, the Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre is conducting an online survey (www.nanaimomen.com) to determine what the needs of queer fathers are. James and the Centre encourage people to participate in the survey to help them reach out and support queer fathers in the area more effectively.

JAMES LATOUR is a Program Developer at the Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre where family is a priority. James was also an ordained minister for 10 years with The Salvation Army, then 4 years as their Business Manager in Nanaimo before coming out. James is currently involved in three projects involving the GLBTQ Community: 1) The Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre Fathering Initiatives-for straight and GLBTQ guys 2) The Queer Men's Discussion Group with Captain Snowden meeting at the Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre, and 3) A Queer Youth Group in Nanaimo meeting at Nanaimo Youth Services Association. If you would like to talk to him you can email him at nmrc_james@shaw.ca or call 250.716.1551 or 877.716.1551 at the centre.