



Visibility without being in the spotlight

Some suggestions for primary schools that want to be open for lesbian,
gay, bisexual and transgender families

GALE THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE FOR LGBT EDUCATION

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“Rainbow” families...

There is an increasing number of “rainbow families”: families where one or both parents or/and co-care takers are lesbian, homosexual, bisexual or transgender. Although the upbringing of children in such rainbow families does not differ from heterosexual families, rainbow families often have to deal with specific challenges. They often get negative or prejudiced comments and questions about their family composition. Parents, their children, but also their environment have to learn how to deal with such events. This makes rainbow families different to some extent. This brochure helps you to prepare your primary school in being a welcoming environment for rainbow families.

Did you know that ...

- There are thousands of children who grow up in rainbow families and that this number is growing steadily since marriage or partnership contracts are open to same-sex couples?
- 30% of children aged 8-12 with same-sex parents are confronted with rude questions, nasty comments, gossip and social exclusion?
- 70% of the population thinks that “gay” marriage is OK, while only 21% thinks that gay or lesbian parents should be able to raise a child?¹

It is not surprising you are probably not aware of such facts. This brochure offers a look into the world of rainbow families.

Can you answer the following questions?

- ✓ What does your school want to offer rainbow families?
- ✓ How safe is your school for rainbow families?
- ✓ How do you discuss sexual diversity in your lessons?
- ✓ How do you arrange your student care on the topic of sexual diversity?

This brochure offers suggestions on how to answer each of these questions.

¹ Statistics from the Netherlands (2014). Check available statistics for your own country. They may be different but the difference between heterosexuals condoning same-sex marriage, adoption by same-sex couples or raising children by same-sex couples often turns out to be similar.

Incidents

“Being prepared” - The children in group 4 (age 8) are asked to make a collage on the class closet doors about different types of families they live in. Rob of course wants to make a collage on his “rainbow family” but there are not enough closet doors for all types and Rob is the only one from a rainbow family. Master Rick says that this type of family is rare, so no matter, Rob can join another group. Rob is upset and does not understand; why can he not make a collage on his family? When the parents of Rob engage in a discussion about this incident with the school, it turns out the school never reflected on sexual diversity or rainbow families or the consequences of ignoring such diversity.

“Creating a safe environment” - During the daily circle conversation in group 6 (age 10) children discuss their vacations. Mary tells she has been to a camping in France with her two mothers. She gets different reactions of the group. Amina says she finds it “courageous” that Mary told this. But there are also some children who say this is “weird” and “stupid”. Miss Clarice supports Mary and engages in a dialogue with the class. Mary feel good about this afterwards. She feels relieved that the teacher and some students support her.

“Teaching inclusively” - In group 6 (age 10), Miss Denise teaches. Anne likes how Miss Denise often uses different examples in lessons. That makes it more clear. Last week, the class had to write a dictated text. They had to write this sentence: “The two fathers of Sandra are going to the supermarket”. After the dictation a few children say they think this is a strange sentence. Miss Denise discusses why they think this and gives Anne space to tell about her “rainbow family”. Anne feels free to tell she has two mother and declares: “by giving this example it is more clear”.

“Warm-hearted student care” - Ahmed is being raised religiously. When he came home and told about the two mothers of Rose (a girl from his class) his parents reacted shocked and declared that such relations are forbidden by Islam. Now he does not know how to behave towards Rose, he likes her! Ahmed shares his concern with the school counselor Hank. Hank schedules a private conversation with Ahmed. Hank explains how everybody is different and that it feels good to be respected for who you are. This means that Ahmed and his family are religious and can show this, but also that Rosa and her family can be who they are and deserve respect for their family. Now Ahmed understands: “You don’t have to agree, but you have to respect it”.

These are true examples taken from daily primary school realities. Could such events take place in your school? Where does your school perform well or not well enough yet?

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Your mission

What does your school want to offer rainbow families?

Every school has ideas, rules and plans on how to organize the quality of the school services and well-being. How do you “plan” a school which is welcoming to rainbow families? Without a plan, it will be up to individual staff to make up her or his mind and to implement certain interventions or not. Rainbow families will appreciate if you have a plan to implement these two goals:

The school staff agrees on how negative behavior towards sexual diversity will be dealt with

All schools who provide quality education have an anti-bullying policy. However, such policies often do not yet include an explicit reference to negative behavior towards sexual diversity. This is necessary because for both children and staff, it is not always clear that homophobic bullying, ‘teasing’ or name-calling is hurtful and therefore unacceptable. The school should reflect on this and make a clear statement about what type of behavior is stimulated or unacceptable. Rainbow parents prefer this to be named explicitly because they expect it to be ignored when it is not. To make such an explicit statement more acceptable to everyone, you can frame it in a broader mission statement on “citizenship”, “code of conduct”, or “non-discrimination” that also includes other forms of inclusion.

A question you can discuss with your teaching staff:

- ✓ Which specific goals do we want to set to make us welcoming for rainbow families?

The school takes the needs of rainbow families into account

Rainbow parents think it is important their school reflects on the varying needs of non-heterosexual families. For example, how will you celebrate Father’s Day and Mother’s Day and involve children from rainbow families in this?

Questions you may want to discuss with rainbow parents are:

- ✓ How do rainbow parents prefer to be introduced to other parents?
- ✓ Do rainbow parents of their children be open about their home situation to other children, if not, what do they fear?
- ✓ Do rainbow parents have other concerns, questions, ideas or proposals?

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Your school environment

How safe is your school for rainbow families?

Prejudices and myths about gender, sexuality and sexual orientation are formed from an early age on. The primary school by no means affects this only, but it certainly has an important role in the informal social learning process of children. Next to the family setting, here is where they learn basic competences like expressing themselves, being tolerant about differences and to treat others with respect. Such competences flourish in a safe environment but wither in an unsafe environment. How safe is your school for children from rainbow families, children who 'fall in love' with someone of the same sex, who already at an early age may question their sexual attraction or who feel uncomfortable with their assigned gender identity (not feeling like a boy or a girl while your body is male or female). At least 1% of children may be transgender.

The school has prepared her staff to be welcoming to sexual diversity

We advise to have a staff discussion about sexual diversity. By agreeing on a common approach, set clear guidelines for behavior and by implementing them in a similar way, students get a clear picture of what is preferred or what is unacceptable behavior.

Possible questions you could discuss with your staff:

- ✓ What do staff think about homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism?
- ✓ Are all staff willing to correct students when they behave in a negative way to sexual diversity? Be clear and specific about behaviors. Don't consider homo-negative slurs to be harmless teasing; rainbow children will experience these as a total lack of respect for their parents.
- ✓ How do parents and children feel about sexual diversity, how does the school deal with this?
- ✓ How do staff deal with rainbow families and critical questions they may ask?

Another suggestion to makes rainbow children feel more safe:

- ✓ When children from rainbow families can meet each other, they feel not like 'the only ones' and can support each other

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Your curriculum and pedagogy

How do you discuss sexual diversity in your lessons?

Rainbow parents think it is crucial that schools teach children respect for diversity. When teachers express and role-model that sexual and other diversity is OK, this goes a long way towards acceptance. We suggest to think about the following points of attention.

The school offers education about sexual diversity

Explicit lessons on sexual diversity are necessary for improved knowledge, attitudes and skills.

Knowledge: children may not know what “homosexual”, “gay”, “lesbian”, “transgender” or “intersexual” means. They may confuse this with all kind of myths and prejudices. You can explain and correct this.

Attitudes: children may have negative emotions when thinking about diversity and sexual diversity. It is natural to feel awkward about the unknown, but often it is dysfunctional to develop negative attitudes. Teach children to be open and curious about the unknown.

Skills: Even when children feel curious and positive about sexual diversity, it may be difficult to express this in situations when a majority seems to be against diversity. How do you stand up against homophobic bullying? How do you react on seemingly harmless but nevertheless careless or hurting comments and questions? What when your friends or parents don't agree?

Suggestions:

- ✓ Students are interested in education which has a direct relevance to their own situation or that of fellow students. This may be their own experiences or what they heard or saw in the media.
- ✓ Don't ignore comments or questions about diversity in your groups, but systematically go into them and actively explore this with the students.
- ✓ When you use occasional examples of rainbow families in your teaching, it becomes more 'common', which will be appreciated by rainbow children.

The school offers suitable resources to students

It is helpful when the group activities are supplemented by resources like novels, films, posters, leaflets and games which children can use on their own. Find out which resources are available and make sure they are available.

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Student care and support

How do you arrange your student care on the topic of sexual diversity?

Student care is meant for any student who is challenged to learn adequately. In relation to sexual diversity, this applies not only to children who may be victimized because of their own gender identity, (perceived) sexual orientation or belonging to a rainbow family. It also should apply to children who are severely homophobic or transphobic and who may need counseling on how to deal with such dysfunctional feelings.

School counselors prepare for questions about sexual diversity

Rainbow parents appreciate it when school counselors have prepared themselves on how the school support system will deal with questions about sexual diversity.

Suggestion: think what answers you would give to questions like:

- ✓ Are you open to questions from rainbow parents?
- ✓ How do you counsel children who fall in love with someone of the same sex and experience this as a problem – considering their own feelings or the attitude of others?
- ✓ How do you counsel students with transsexual feelings?
- ✓ How do you deal with homophobic or transphobic comments by other parents?

The school knows which rainbow family related challenges they have to face

As mentioned earlier, rainbow families often have to deal with prejudice and rejection. When the counselors are aware of the nature of such challenges and know how to solve them, the school will be better prepared to deal with incidents and conflicts.

Suggestions:

- ✓ Contact your local or national same-sex family association. Most countries have such an association (check www.nelfa.org)
- ✓ Read more about transgender children (check www.lgbt-education.info)

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Dutch National School Alliance for Sexual Diversity



**onderwijsalliantie
seksuele diversiteit**

This leaflet was originally published by the Dutch National School Alliance for Sexual Diversity. This is a platform of organizations who cooperate on full integration of sexual diversity in all aspects of school policy.

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Global Alliance for LGBT Education

GALE
THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE
FOR LGBT EDUCATION

GALE, The Global Alliance for LGBT Education, is a worldwide network of educators who cooperate to identify, enhance and share good practices for education about sexual diversity and safer schools. The GALE Foundation, which supports the platform, is based in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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GALE has translated this brochure and edited it for international use. We hope this example can be used in your country by editing it to you specific needs. A Word version of this leaflet is available on request. We only ask in return that we get a copy of your edited version and that we are allowed to publish your version.

Colofon: Lisa Bieleman, Ingeborg van Dijk, Lavinia Langezaal, Nathalie Verheggen, Peter Dankmeijer (2014). *Visibility without being in the spotlight. Some suggestions for primary schools who want to be open for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families.* Amsterdam: Global Alliance for LGBT Education (GALE) and Dutch National School Alliance for Sexual Diversity.
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