



CASE STUDY

Fiona and Hamish: A response to teasing

Fiona and her partner, Camille, live in the inner-eastern suburbs of Melbourne where their eight-year-old son and daughter, Hamish and Sasha, go to the local state primary school. They are the only same-sex family at the school, but the school has acknowledged them both as mothers and been sensitive to them as a family. A while ago, they came up against a problem that worries many of us. Fiona describes how they, as a family, dealt with the issue.

Can you tell me how this all started?

Hamish started saying he didn't want to go to school. Some of it was just normal separation anxiety, like after a holiday or at the end of the weekend. We spoke to him about it, and we spoke to his teacher, but he wouldn't tell us why; he just said he was tired.

Then, a couple of weekends later, he and I were lying on the bed reading books and he

was telling me a funny story. He's really quite humorous and I said to him, 'You've got a really good sense of humour. Do your friends at school think you're funny?' And all of a sudden he looked very sad – he was crestfallen – and I thought, *Something's going on and I've got to get to the bottom of it.*

But he just wouldn't tell me. In the end, I said that if it was something about Mama and me that we wouldn't be upset by it, that we'd help him

work it out and that he didn't need to protect us. Then he said that some of the girls at school had said that it was weird having two mums and he'd felt really upset about it. He was clearly worried and he didn't know how to respond.

Sasha came along at that point and overheard the conversation, so we brainstormed what they could do or say. Sasha had lots of suggestions, including giving the girls '50 knuckle sandwiches'! We talked about how the knuckle sandwiches perhaps weren't the most appropriate response, but that it was really good to stand up for yourself.

Instead, together, we came up with some phrases: *There are all different types of families; there's nothing weird about ours.*

I know lots of people who have two mums or two dads, and some people only have one mum or one dad and some people are adopted.

There are all different types of families and that's what makes the world go around. You know, everyone's different.

People come from different countries. People are different shapes and sizes.

It was really a conversation about difference and diversity and afterwards Sasha wanted to role-play – we do a lot of role-play in our house. You know, *I'll be the bully and you stand up to me.* Hamish felt better after that; I think he was relieved.

We talked about me going to see the teachers. I told them we had some posters we could take to school and that we could go through the bookshelves and find all the books about families with two mums or two dads and show the teachers.

So you arranged to talk to the school?

Yes. The following week I went off to school armed with my posters and books: *And Tango Makes Three*, a couple of Todd Parr's (*The Family Book* and *Everyone's Different*), and

one about a dragon with two mums. I sat down with the two teachers and explained what had happened.

They were really very accepting and wanted to know what they could do. They had already thought about how they could incorporate normalising our family into the curriculum. They asked whether there had been any issues in prep and whether anything had been done previously. I explained that this was the first time anything had come up, and that we only wanted to respond as and when the need arose, rather than making a big song and dance unnecessarily.

I planned to give them two posters, but I had ten rolled up in a bundle and they asked if they could have them all. They were going to raise the issue at a staff meeting and discuss how they could use the posters with all age groups. They said the posters would be really helpful in explaining diversity on all sorts of levels, including adoption and separated families. And they said they would read the books and think about how to include them unobtrusively at story time.

That's a great response.

It was. So at the end of that discussion, I said that I was happy for them to ask me anything they liked, whether they were curiosity questions or anything they felt they'd like to know that would help their understanding of my family. I said, 'Don't feel like you need to be polite'.

One of them asked how we went about having the kids and who bore them. I explained it all, including the fact they didn't have a dad – they had a donor who was called Andrew, but who we didn't know.

The teacher said that she had come across a few lesbian parents – not just in teaching, but in her personal life – and they all seemed so loving and thoughtful about their families. She felt their families were so carefully planned and she'd been very impressed.

Then she gave us a whole load of positive feedback about the kids – that they were just the most beautiful, kind and thoughtful children who were very engaging and considerate of other people's feelings. She said they were just the most delightful children she'd had in years. I was really chuffed with all that!

Then, after drop-off a few days later, I peeked through the window and saw her pointing to the poster and having a discussion with all the children sitting on the floor. She told me later that lots of kids put their hands up; a girl who was adopted, a couple of kids from different countries, and some in different family arrangements. Sasha put her hand up and told the class, 'One of my friends who's called Ruben has two dads. We know lots of people with two mums and two dads and they're called rainbow families'.

How did the kids react afterwards?

When Hamish came home that day he was so excited. He had some friends over and he told them all about it – how the posters about rainbow families had been put up in the classrooms and how they'd talked about them and how they'd read the books. And it was all because he'd said something. He was really proud and impressed that speaking up about it had led to this really helpful course of action.

Afterwards, he was definitely a lot better, and I said to him that he seemed so much happier and he said, 'Yes, it's because they put the posters up'.

The very first time Hamish told me what had happened, I felt like crying. I was so upset and it was very intense. But then, it had such a good ending and Hamish felt so much happier, I felt really good. It was lovely; the teachers were so great. They gave us such positive feedback and they didn't treat us like we were a problem.

I think there is something about the attitude with which you approach this. We were not confrontational at all and I gave the teachers the chance to ask questions. Also, I explained I didn't want anything said to the girls who had made the comments in the first place; they're just children and they're learning. They need to understand about diversity and they don't need to be pulled up individually, unless it becomes persistent.

So, we didn't go in with a confrontational attitude like, *This is outrageous and it shouldn't be happening and what are you doing about it!?* We went about it in a collaborative way, so they weren't on the defensive with us, and I think that really helped.



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