



Rainbow families: The challenges

One of the biggest challenges for rainbow families is that we constantly have to come out and explain who we are, and there can often be a level of anxiety about how people will respond to us when we do.

Just being different from the norm means we regularly have to negotiate things that other families take for granted. Often, we find ourselves having to educate people in our community, including other parents, childcare staff and teachers.

The lack of societal understanding and acceptance can be very difficult, especially when children reach an age when they start to understand the implications of this. Negative comments expressed by politicians, religious leaders and social commentators can be very harmful.

Perhaps the biggest fear is that our children will be teased or bullied at school because of their family structure. While this certainly can occur, many parents find their fears of this are unfounded.

For some parents, being isolated or not knowing other rainbow families can be hard. Other parents would like to see greater representation of our families in popular culture and in the media, and a formal recognition of our families through marriage equality.

Parents say ...

It's not that bad, it's just that coming out is never going to stop. **Michelle**

I don't find it difficult, to be honest. It's awkward having to come out all the time and I guess it's particularly awkward having to come out post-separation. That makes it a little harder. **Bec**

We've done quite a bit of travel and we have not always bothered to come out. You feel like you are misleading people a bit and my daughter will say, 'Hang on, what are you saying? What are you letting them think?' I do find that really hard and we have had to explain to her that sometimes it's easier to just let it be. **Bridget**

The biggest challenges

The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is probably just always being different to the norm and having to manage that difference on a day-to-day basis. **Mandy**

I think it's probably just that educative role – that you constantly have to explain your family structure to new people when you meet them. Constantly. **Patricia**

The constant second-guessing about how much of an issue it will be – and you don't want to get into the whole internalised homophobia, transphobia stuff – but is it really an issue or am I just considering something that doesn't exist? **Trudy**

I think it is challenging assumptions all the time. And not just us, the kids have to do it constantly, too. **Nicola**

One of the most difficult things for us would be going to a large event – like a traditional, country concert – where there were lots of people I was unsure about. Knowing we would be very visible as a gay family and not knowing what the response was going to be. **Anthony**

Protecting our children

Looking ahead, what I worry about for the kids is bullying, but we're not there yet. I have read interviews with people who say it does normalise your family a bit if you are involved, and that is something I would see myself doing – getting involved, trying to make a connection with other parents. **Michelle**

I think when he was younger it was my own apprehension and guilt. You think: *What is going to happen when he goes to primary school? Who do I need to protect him from – teachers, school kids, parents?* Anticipating all of that was probably the hardest thing. And that was all in my own mind, as it turned out. **Mark**

Probably just normalising it for the kids, that's the main thing for me. If your kid was getting bullied – but, touch wood, we haven't had any major issues with that at all – that would be hard. **Jenny**

The worst thing for me is anxiety for my child about discrimination or teasing, I think. **Alison**

Societal views

The thing that annoys me is all these politicians saying that kids of gay couples are going to turn out gay, or that we're not bringing them up correctly. That really pisses me off. They grow up just the same as in any other family. **Peter**

I think for Sally, it's probably that she's in the no man's land of, *You're not in the dad's movie-night crew, and you're not in the mum's movie-night crew, so where are you?* **Ruth**

Our kids have lots of female role models. They experience all of that just the same as any other family and it annoys me when people say that our sort of families don't work properly, because they do. We probably make sure our kids have access to role models more than heterosexual couples do. **Peter**

I think it's that invisibility; you walk down the street and everyone who sees me with the children assumes that I'm straight. People assume – or forget – that my partner is a woman. **Ruth**

For a while, we were doing a pretty awful impersonation of a straight family. I'm pretty butch, and Gab's not, and people thought, *Well you're not mainstream, but is that because you're from Melbourne?!* **Trudy**

The worst thing is not being able to be recognised as a family properly. Marriage is not necessarily important, but for us it's about the recognition that we are a family like any other family, and that's pretty important. **Peter**

You're also just battling the media assumption. Every program that the kids watch on *ABC4Kids* is always mum, dad and kids, so they constantly get this saturation about what families look like. And then you're saying, 'No, families come in all shapes and sizes'. I guess it would be nice if there were some children's programs that were more diverse. **Patricia**

Other challenges

You don't have anyone else around who's in the same situation; we're miles away from anyone else. **Ruth**

Being a lesbian primary school teacher, you have to be so careful. I remember one year I had grade ones and a couple of the kids came and stood behind me and started massaging my shoulders and I felt really nervous. **Sally**

The most difficult thing about being a rainbow family is that it's a bit like you're speaking in French and they're listening in Tswana. **Ruth**

I think there is a big lack of information out there for people wanting to start a family. It's not until you are really determined to have a family that you actually go to the effort of finding out how you can make this happen, and there are still a lot of hurdles to go through. **Sally**

At this stage, watching Jemima play mummy and daddy with her dolls and getting her to understand why there is no daddy. She is so young and kids don't get things at this age. **Eli**

I think just being a family in today's society – when you are trying to juggle all those balls – is tough. Trying to get the work/life balance is probably the biggest thing, which has got nothing to do with the fact that we're two mums. **Julie**

Maybe just having to explain or justify things, but I don't think our challenges are very different from other families. When I sit down with my mother's group and we talk, it's just the same sort of things. **Pia**

I don't find anything difficult about it, but I'm quite old now. **Claire**



jacquitolins.com

Researched and written by Jacqui Tomlins.

Also available:

Topics

- Lesbian mums and known donors or dads
- Telling the kids: What? When? How?
- Talking about how your family was created
- Non-biological parents
- Pregnancy and antenatal classes
- Birth, midwives and nurses
- Maternal and child health nurses and new parents' groups
- Starting kinder or day care
- Rainbow families and primary school
- Mother's Day and Father's Day
- Teasing, name-calling, and bullying
- Older kids and adolescents
- Rainbow families in rural and regional areas
- Educating the community
- Rainbow families: The challenges
- Rainbow families: The rewards

Research

- Child health and wellbeing in same-sex parent families: The evidence from Australia
- Work, love, play: Understanding resilience in same-sex parented families
- Transgender men and women and parenting
- Intersex status and parenting: Organisation Intersex International

Case studies

- Corin: 12 years of wisdom
- Julie and Marg, Noah and Georgia: Talking with teenagers
- Fiona and Hamish: A response to teasing
- Frances and her mums: Transgender parenting