

Strategies to Strengthen Our Anti-Bias Practices

by Margie Carter



In recent months, I have been interviewing directors around the country seeking stories about successfully negotiating conflict to include in an upcoming book for directors. To my surprise, nine times out of ten I was told a story about conflicts that erupted when something about gay and lesbian people came up in their program. The stories varied in how they unfolded — sometimes they were about a staff member, a child and family in the program, or a book or curriculum activity — but in each case, fierce emotions and tensions were unleashed. The directors involved impressed me with their courage, tenacity, and clear thinking.

“How can I claim to have an anti-bias program if I don’t take up this issue?” one director remarked. Another said, “All these biases are interrelated and based on fear. My own fears about having to deal with the homosexual questions initially made me stay away from the anti-bias approach. When I finally mobilized my courage, I found more support than I imagined and new friends who mentored me.”

As directors told me their stories, I began to realize how instructive

their own learning process was. Some had to face a general pattern of avoiding conflict and wanting everyone to like them, while others came to terms with aspects of their own homophobia. “The turning point for me,” acknowledged one director, “was recognizing that I had not responded to a number of stereotypic and derogatory comments about gay people from parents and staff. I knew that if these were comments about someone’s race or disability, I would have immediately challenged them. This was a hard thing to face in myself; but once I did, I was able to strengthen our anti-bias practices.”

Perhaps some of these directors had heard that I am a lesbian, but that didn’t come up in our conversations. On both a personal and professional level, I was encouraged by several directors who acknowledged that, as heterosexual women, they realized they had the privilege to avoid this issue without any personal consequences. One said that it was precisely the contrast between her personal and professional safety and that of a terrific gay teacher on her staff that finally motivated her to start some in-service training on welcoming gay and lesbian people

in their program. I was particularly impressed with another director’s description of how she learned “to step out in front with leadership” on gay and lesbian bias issues.

“We started discussing our anti-bias work as part of our accreditation self-study. At one point, I said, ‘We are going to have to deal with the gay issue if we are going to be truly anti bias.’ Several staff members were objecting to our need to take up this topic because we didn’t currently have any children from gay and lesbian families in our center. This could have gotten me off the hook, but I pressed forward and asked them how they knew that. Do we feel confident that our center is a welcoming and safe place for a parent to tell us she is a lesbian or he is gay? We took a walk through our center looking at the images and written materials around. We looked at our enrollment forms, handbooks, and newsletters to see if they gave any messages of inclusion or exclusion of gay and lesbian families. It was a real eye opener.

“Several committees were formed to address our findings. Over the course of a year, we struggled to

develop several written statements. The first was our WE BELIEVE statement which was followed by a piece for our parent handbook that said our commitment to embracing diversity welcomed all kinds of staff and families to our program and would expose children to all kinds of families in our discussions and materials.

“In developing the WE BELIEVE statement, we started with the idea that our program should be a safe haven for every child and family. As we got to the gay issue, I had to repeatedly clarify that we are not talking about sex education here but rather an appreciation of diversity in the world. I had to help several teachers with vocal religious objections to homosexuality see that they already knew how to keep their personal religious beliefs out of the program without compromising themselves. I said, ‘You know how to maintain your self-respect and still respect those with different beliefs. You can do that on this issue, too.’ It took some work, but we learned how to bring the concept of *agree to disagree* to life with what felt like genuine respect.”

These directors’ stories and my own experience have made it obvious that embracing anti-bias practices is a developmental process for adults as well as children. In your leadership efforts to strengthen your program’s anti-bias work, here are some strategies to consider.

STRATEGY
Use inclusive language and images in your parent and staff orientations.

As the director above described, examine the written materials and images that make up the life of your program. On your enrollment

forms, try expanding your terms to include the possibilities of multiple mother or father roles, guardians, other family members or significant adults in the child’s life. General terms suggest your awareness of and comfort with a variety of family forms.

One director told me that when she describes aspects of her program to prospective families or staff members she is careful to interchange pronouns and references to counter bias and stereotypes. As she takes them on a tour of her center, she makes sure that there are always images of diverse families, cultures, and economic circumstances. When she passes their persona dolls, she introduces each of them, including the doll named Rochelle who lives with her two mommies.

STRATEGY
Examine your personnel policies.

Do you include sexual orientation or family composition in your non-discrimination policy statement for hiring and enrollment? Consider using a staff and/or board meeting to develop a list of the possible personnel policies which could be more inclusive of gay and lesbian caregivers and teachers in your child care program. These might include issues on health benefit packages, bereavement, and child care. Run your ideas by a few gay or lesbian people for their feedback.

Try using inclusive language in all your written policies, communications, and staff activities. One director told me how embarrassed she was to learn the way her casual reference to “bring your boyfriend or husband” to their fall potluck immediately made one of her staff feel unsafe to acknowledge that she was gay.

STRATEGY
Use staff and parent meetings to explore myths, fears, and conflicting views.

Myths abound about gay people and young children. This means many gay people find themselves forced into isolated, if not secretive or dishonest, lives. Is this the vision we have for the children, families, and staff of our programs? In the words of the above director, “How can we claim to have an anti-bias program if we don’t take up this issue?”

Take courage from the many directors who have taken up this challenge. Dedicate some in-service, staff, or parent meeting time to explore experiences, feelings, and conflicting views on the experience of gay and lesbian people.

Try adapting some of the anti-bias strategies from my articles in previous issues of *Child Care Information Exchange* and from the book I co-authored with Deb Curtis, *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice*. Draw on the resources listed below for more ideas and strategies.

STRATEGY
Continue to develop your leadership.

If some of the above strategies feel a bit risky or too big of a stretch for you, make a plan to get some support and further know-how. The more you strengthen your leadership to negotiate conflict and support the inclusion of gay and lesbian people in your anti-bias work, the stronger your program will be.

The following resources will be of help in this effort.

Recommended Resources

Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price, Warren Blumenfeld, Beacon Press. A very insightful book exploring how homophobia not only damages gay people but heterosexual people as well. Includes an appendix with many workshop ideas.

People of Every Stripe make a variety of beautiful persona dolls that can be used to tell their ongoing stories about living in different families. Contact them for a catalog at PO Box 12505, Portland, OR 97212, (800) 282-0612.

Both of My Moms Are Named Judy. A 10-minute video featuring diverse children ages 7-11 who have lesbian and gay parents. The children talk about their experiences and what their teachers could do to help them from being isolated. Produced as an in-service training tool for educators and administrators. Available from GLPCI, Box 43206, Montclair, NJ 07043.

It's Elementary, Talking About Gay Issues in Schools. A 60-minute award-winning documentary focused on elementary school work. Many classroom scenes, staff meetings, interviews with teachers and principals. Available from Women's Educational Media, 2180 Bryant, #203, San Francisco, CA 94110, (415) 641-4616.

Love Makes a Family. A traveling photo exhibit and now out-of-print book with beautiful pictures and stories of a variety of gay and lesbian families. For information about bringing the exhibit to your conference or community, contact the Family Diversity Project, PO Box 1209, Amhurst, MA 01004, (413) 256-0502.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG). A nonprofit organi-

zation with chapters all across the country helping parents, children, and friends learn to appreciate and support gay people. To locate the chapter near you, contact PO Box 27605, Washington, DC 20038.

American Federation of Teachers National Gay and Lesbian Caucus offers networking, resources, and legal advice for gay and lesbian teachers. For information, contact PO Box 19856, Cincinnati, OH 45219, (513) 242-2491.

Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition publishes a newsletter and sponsors a number of events for gay and lesbian families. A good resource for your parent library. Contact them at PO Box 43206, Montclair, NJ 07043.

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