



What's a Family?

ENVISIONING JUSTICE
FOR LGBTQ FAMILIES AND OUR ALLIES

BY

JAIME M. GRANT

DIRECTOR, NATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN TASK FORCE POLICY INSTITUTE

KASEY SUFFREDINI

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC POLICY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT,
FAMILY EQUALITY COUNCIL

WITH AMANDA HARRIS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Task Force is grateful for the generous support of the Arcus Foundation, which funded the development and publication of *What's a Family*.

This project began in November of 2008 when the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, in partnership with Family Equality Council, convened a group of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) family advocates to consider the vitally important question: "What's a Family." Participants hailed from large cities with well-developed LGBT families programs and services to those from rural enclaves where they act as the sole advocate or program provider. Some have served as founding leaders for over two decades in the LGBT family advocacy movement. Some members of the group are working in the arena of assisted reproductive technologies or in foster care/ adoption services. Others are scholars and thinkers with expertise in such areas as the psychological literature on LGBT families, and issues such as immigration, incarceration and racial and economic injustice.

We want to thank those who participated in that gathering and without whom the dynamic thinking contained in these pages would not be possible: Judy Appel, Terry Boggis, Amity Pierce Buxton, Jennifer Chrisler, Rachel Epstein, Kenyon Farrow, Meredith Fenton, Elizabeth Friegato, Robert-Jay Green, Pauline Guillermo-Togawa, Stephanie Hazen, Colleen Healey, Jill Jacobs, Sujatha Jesudason, Kathy Kelly, Amanda Litwin, Bethany Lockhart, Michelle Mapp, Mala Nagarajan, Yasmine Orangi, Lisa Orduna-Arcia, Julia Po, Larry Riesenbach, Abby Riskin, Cathy Sakimura, Yensing Sihapanya, Mark Snyder, Claudia Stallman, Alice Ruby, and Lisa White.

We want to thank Task Force interns and fellows and Family Equality Council staff that helped organize and facilitate the convening: Somjen Frazer, Amanda Harris and Nina Selvaggio.

Finally, Task Force Clinton Fellow Amanda Harris was essential to organizing and revising drafts and shepherding the project to completion.

We convened our first night as many families would — over dinner — where we spent a few hours examining our own families. We discovered that each process of constructing our families entails a unique, sacred path and commitment. We brought this insight into the next day's discussion, where we engaged in active, participatory large and small group exercises to uncover and explore often complex, difficult issues facing the LGBT families movement.

The document that follows summarizes and brings to life the vibrant, thought-provoking, and challenging discussions that these intrepid community leaders undertook together. The Task Force Policy Institute and the Family Equality Council offer it as a visioning document for the LGBT families movement — the power for change LGBT families hold, the challenges we face in achieving justice for all families, and suggestions for a direction forward.

FOREWORD

What's a family? Until recently, conventional wisdom held that LGBT people had no family. The story told was this: cast out of our families of origin, incapable of creating our own families, social pariahs in the larger community, LGBT people led lonely, singular, "queer" lives. Even in 2010, the fact that LGBT people are raising children still occasions surprise.

The truth is that despite powerful obstacles and a modern movement for LGBT equality that is only 40 years old, LGBT people have always formed families – working against institutions and attitudes that prompted their families to deny them; creating new families out of extended kinship networks of friends, lovers and life-long beloveds; and finally, for some, choosing to parent in creative and multi-faceted ways against myriad social, legal and medical prohibitions.

Once a barely visible "wing" in the LGBT movement, the struggle to secure the rights of LGBT families has grown into a vibrant part of the larger LGBT movement. In 1979, a group of gay fathers came together to form what became the first national LGBT parents organization, known today as Family Equality Council; at the same time, the first LGBT families programs were emerging at the larger city-based community centers. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force founded its families program in the early 90s, launching a Census education campaign to record same-sex partnerships and creating seminal coalitions with organizations like the Children's Defense Fund and the National Association of Social Workers.

There is a great deal to celebrate in our work to date, and yet, relative to the larger LGBT movement, the family equality movement is still in an emergent stage with respect to its politics, tactics, and resources. As the number of LGBT families continues to increase and as the most visible fights for LGBT equality, such as

marriage and schools, increasingly engage core family issues, the family equality movement must evolve to meet these opportunities and challenges.

Understanding the implications of this, Family Equality Council and the Task Force set out in November of 2008 to catalyze a deliberate effort by family movement leaders to discuss vision, deepen trust and cooperation, and ultimately define and promote a shared agenda that will advance wholesale change in the way this country regards LGBT families.

This document records the vibrant, respectful wrestling these LGBT family movement leaders undertook together in that first conversation in November of 2008. We understood that only in approaching the topics that triggered our greatest anxieties, and in some cases, defined fault-lines in our movement, would we begin to create the clarity essential to forging a vision for the future of our movement and our families. We engaged in spirited dialogues and debate with each other, which we offer here, without immediate resolution. We do so knowing that our work ahead is to build upon these discussions to create a far-reaching, integrated vision for our movement.

As leading organizations working to build a long-term movement to change the way this country thinks about and treats families outside of the “traditional” constructs, we realized that one avenue for deepening the opportunity for change was to turn inward first – to the tensions and pressure points that prevent us from creating the trust essential to carrying us forward together, and that prevent us from creating the coalitions essential to getting us across the “finish line” to full equality.

We are grateful to be working in a movement with such committed thinkers and activists, and offer this work to you as a thought-piece and visioning exercise in the struggle for justice.

Jaime M. Grant

Director, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute

Kara S. Suffredini

Director of Public Policy and Community Engagement,
Family Equality Council

WHAT'S A FAMILY?

WHAT'S A FAMILY?

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GBT advocates have posed this question, pointedly, in the public sphere for more than two decades. Throughout this period, we've coined some catchy responses: We are Family! Our Families Count! And perhaps the one that has gained the most traction in the media and among friends and enemies alike: Love Makes a Family!

LGBT people call the question to those who would deny the existence of our families – that cast of essential loved ones we enlist with such care and determination. We pose it to those who suggest that because our extended families

are often not descended from bloodlines, and our children may or may not carry our genes, LGBT families are - unworthy, transient, or dysfunctional. And perhaps most importantly, we pose the question to condemn the position that people whose sexual orientation or gender identity fall outside the boundaries of a heterosexist, gender-rigid prescription have no right to create families, period.

While we are eager to carry on this debate publicly, LGBT people seem wont to ask this critical question in the privacy of our homes, our community centers, or other intimate spaces. Like many conversations we are reluctant to approach, the silences around them are thick with the attacks we are fending off as we work to secure the foundations essential to any vibrant, growing family unit: legal and economic security.

For years, LGBT people have noted that our families are “constructed” rather than inherited. But the truth is, *all families are constructed*. All adults strike out from their given bloodlines and decide whether to choose partners, or beloveds, around which to build a family unit that may or may not also consist of children. Some of us, whether heterosexual, gender conforming, or LGBT, determine that a romantic partner is not the focal point for the creation of our families, and we choose instead intimate friends or colleagues as foundational to our lives. Still others decide that parenting, rather than romantic love or friendship, will be the primary commitment around which we will construct our lives.

In decades past, LGBT people often constructed our families without the support of our families-of-origin, who, steeped in cultures of homophobic and transphobic contempt, were often forced to choose between the lives and communities they’d built and their children. More and more, parents and relatives of LGBT people are finding support within their communities, cultures, and faith traditions to embrace their children, and so LGBT families increasingly consist of blood relations as well as those we bring into the fold.

These crucial, life-affirming gains aside, ***What’s a Family?*** remains a critical question in LGBT communities today. As we continue to pursue fundamental rights to create and protect our families, LGBT advocates must turn our experience, talents and best thinking to the question of ***What’s a Family?*** if we are to move our struggle for family justice forward.

What’s a Family? How does the way we answer this question constrain or expand the possibilities? How does it shape law and society? How does it empower or afflict the

LGBT families in our midst? Below are some of the essential facets of families and family advocacy that experts explored at the November 2008 gathering that necessarily inform the approach to the larger question of *What's a Family?*.

STRENGTHS AND VULNERABILITIES

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amily is a source of strength and vulnerability. Participants discussed how their families can be a source of closeness, commitment, resilience, laughter, forgiveness, and open communication. For many LGBT people, family can be a place of unique thoughtfulness and intention, particularly with respect to how LGBT people bring children into our lives or create extended families of sisters, brothers, aunts and grandparents who are often not blood relatives.

Participants also explored how family can be the seat of worries about finances and separation because of citizenship status or death due to illness or injury. Participants noted how social and legal discrimination fueled by heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia not only denigrate our relationships and harm our children, but also cause stressful internal family dynamics such as gender policing and poster child syndrome, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The following are a few of the particular strengths and vulnerabilities participants brought into the room from their own families:

- Loss of love

STRENGTHS:

- | | | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to forgive and assume best intent • Enjoyment in being together • Always there for one another • Commitment to open communication • Love | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional responsibilities are big • Beyond borders • Resilience • Flexibility • Liberation • Global and inclusive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My spouse killed in line of duty • Poor communication • Heterosexism/heteronormativity • National borders and immigration laws • The effects of the economy • Invisibility and (mis)recognition • Policing of gender |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

VULNERABILITIES:

One informative take away from this conversation was how all of the strengths listed are driven by the individuals involved (intention, commitment, flexibility, resilience, beyond borders) while most of the vulnerabilities are a result of external social and legal factors (immigration laws, economy, gender policing, invisibility). Perhaps, then, a universal strength of LGBT families is their insistence on forming families and their resilience in so doing despite substantial negative and intractable legal and social forces.

PINK ELEPHANTS

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s would be expected, the most provocative part of our family visioning process was our “Pink” Elephant conversations. Most of us are familiar with the term: The Elephant in the room is that smelly, oversized issue

that is taking up all of the air and the energy, while we politely try to ignore it. We do this out of fear or exhaustion, because we don't have enough time or resources, or because we've determined that addressing the Elephant simply isn't useful or wise (what if recognizing it causes a stampede?). But there s/he sits, in the middle of the party, impossible to ignore.

Participants identified seven distinct Pink Elephant Questions, six of which were addressed over the course of the afternoon. These were the questions that make participants queasy or make the hair stand out on the backs of their necks; these are conversations that they don't have in their organizations because they are likely to exacerbate tensions or cause divisive arguments.

The results of those dynamic discussions are summarized here:

WHAT'S A FAMILY?

What do we mean as a movement when we say "family"? Are we conflating partnership and parenting? Are we privileging partnership? Are we positioning marriage as an ideal? What is an LGBT family?

Participants identified a tension between defining LGBT family to the larger culture – a concept that has been maligned and misrepresented to our social, economic and legal detriment – while our own internal definition of LGBT family within our movement is still “a work in progress” or “under construction.”

Attendees struggled with the basic limiters of the structure: Is LGBT family a unit defined by parents and children? Are we putting forth images that marginalize larger kinship structures, polyamorous family arrangements, single parents or single people? Many noted that while family as a concept is inherently relational, we need to be careful not to promote a version of family such that that single people living on their own cannot locate themselves in our definitions or representations of LGBT family.

Advocates reported that while many families programs at the major LGBT centers were founded to address the needs of LGBT people navigating a path toward parenthood and raising children, there is a need for the LGBT family movement to construct and position the broadest possible definition of family.

Groups like Family Equality Council are likely to continue to attract and serve primarily LGBT people who are seeking to raise children and are thus focused on threats to LGBT-headed households with children. While these concerns may continue to drive their policy agenda and programmatic priorities, in its public work Family Equality can promote a vision of LGBT families that is much broader than families with children exclusively. This is also true for grassroots family service programs situated in LGBT community centers or within small non-profits across the nation. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, also positioned at the national level and the driver of both community conversation (like this one) and policy agendas, must also embrace and promote a broader definition of LGBT family with the overall goal of strengthening all families, not exclusively those that

hinge on marriage or children. Other national, multi-issue LGBT advocacy organizations like The Task Force would do well to follow suit.

The benefits of an expansive definition of family were described as manifold:

- It would prompt the movement to consider policy priorities in the broadest possible terms, addressing the needs of perhaps the “most queer” within our communities — those most disenfranchised in the larger culture and thus most vulnerable at the hands

of institutions that typically ensure our well-being such as the workplace, health-care settings, criminal justice system, etc.

- It could lead to deeper engagement with our processes of considering and defining family, as illustrated by one participant, an adult heterosexual daughter of a gay father, who asked: “Is the family that I am creating an LGBT family? Or just my Dad’s?”
- It could provide a natural bridge to allied communities’ struggles for legal and economic security and provide the opening for connective conversation and action.

Participants noted that “traditional” family models can be very constraining and stigmatizing for heterosexual people as well. A participant said: “The struggle of limited and restrictive policies privileging some mythic ‘traditional’ family is a heterosexual problem as well. We have to break these stereotypes about how we define ourselves.”

By leading with the value that people should be able to define their families and who sustains them without fear of discrimination/oppression, we can build a larger movement among LGBT people and our allies, joining with communities facing similar attacks in terms of family recognition and rights. Many other vulnerable families, such as single mothers, large families and families with limited incomes, are stigmatized and read as “Queer” (i.e. not legitimate) by the larger culture.

POSTER FAMILY/CHILD SYNDROME

How does our need to promote a version of the “perfect LGBT family” as a strategy to secure family rights affect our movement? How does it affect children of LGBT parents? How does this affect our research frames on our families? And how do these frames serve to police both parents and children around their gender expression, sexuality, and mental health?

Participants agreed that the positing of the “perfect LGBT family” as a strategy to “earn” our rights creates multiple tensions for LGBT parents and their children.

First, LGBT parents express fear when their children are evaluated in any arena as not meeting or exceeding the “norm,” because they do not want to fuel the Right’s insistence that our families create “bad outcomes.” There are endless areas for concern here, and they include such issues as social and sexual behavior, gender expression, substance abuse, and learning dis/ability. This fear silences and isolates LGBT parents dealing with important, possibly life-threatening challenges and increases the potential for negative outcomes. A participant reported: “It’s all about this fear. We’re always on the defensive. We’re always defending our right to have rights, our right to be a family, our right to exist and have the same rights and validation. The cost of that often comes in having to show that we are ‘normal.’”

Many participants cited the Prop 8 loss in California as a typical proving ground. Throughout the battle for marriage equality, LGBT families across the board were silenced and invisibilized in an attempt to reach a “moveable middle” that reported in focus groups a discomfort with images of LGBT families. Discussants reported a heightened anxiety during the heated ballot measure campaign, in which LGBT families were directed to carefully project “a certain image” that is not representative of our larger communities. One advocate said: “Politically, we need to accept a lot of different kinds of families. Then put *all* of those families forward as representing our families.”

Second, LGBT parents, whom we might assume would be very accepting and supportive of gender variance and a broad range of sexual identities and expressions in their children, may instead be exceptionally challenged by the notion of their children exploring their sexual orientation and gender identity. One researcher noted that some research suggests that “children of LGBT parents are more likely to question their own gender identity and sexual orientation. Our kids have broader senses of many of the things in the world because they’ve been brought up in a community that faces homophobia, transphobia and other forms of prejudice. Because they’ve had their minds open to fluidity when it comes to gender and sexual orientation—that does make their experience different.”

Nonetheless, children of LGBT parents feel multiple pressures as well. Many are fiercely protective of their families, especially their parents, and feel pressure to perform as “SuperChildren” for the larger culture. This may cause them to hide or suppress debilitating or even dangerous challenges. In this vein, some may hide their

gender variance or sexual orientation for the “benefit” of the whole. Others may identify with their parents or perceive a parental belief in the superiority of gender transgression or a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation, pushing them down a path toward an inauthentic gender identity or sexual orientation. Others still may suppress an authentic LGBT identity because they resist the notion that, as one participant reported, “their parents *made* them that way.”

A third issue the group explored in the “poster family” category is that some LGBT families fall into “poster” categories through their authentic choices and expressions. These families – headed by monogamous, white, affluent, largely suburban, men and women who may be affiliated with mainstream faith traditions, drive SUVs, etc. – often feel vilified or rejected within the LGBT communities for not presenting as “queer enough.”

Participants expressed the desire to reject “poster family syndrome” without stigmatizing or disavowing families that fit a profile that has been glorified in the mainstream. One participant spoke with emotion: “I definitely feel like there are times when, if you are seen as sort of buying into the suburban kind of family cultural way of raising your kids, that you’re somehow a sellout to the more ‘liberating’ portion of this movement.”

Finally, our panel of experts talked about how “poster family syndrome” comes into play in the arena of LGBT research. One participant situated in an LGBT research and resource center noted that: “Researchers face tensions about publishing research that is seemingly unfavorable toward LGBTQ people regarding parenting, monogamy, or relationship issues, because the Right may use it as a political tool for marginalization.” Others noted that our research frames themselves often belie a kind of internalized homophobia, such as the emphasis on “normal” outcomes in children of LGBT parents.

It is important to note that our “poster families” discussion very much centered on an image of LGBT families as families with children, period. “Poster family” strategies not only mask the vibrancy of a much more diverse portrait of our families as they are configured today, but also erase a very significant history of extended childless family networks in LGBT communities that carried us through the worst years of state-sanctioned violence and abuse. Minimizing or ignoring the strengths and beauty of these kinship networks – past and present — is a loss for all of us.

Much like the discussion about what a family is, the poster family discussion surfaced the deep tensions and challenges that “traditional” family constructs pose for LGBT families and efforts to advocate for them. We must dig deeper into these tensions to identify when to leverage our similarities and when to leverage our differences – because both are strengths — as a strategy to advance not only equality, but justice for LGBT families.

RACIAL & ECONOMIC JUSTICE

If racial and economic justice were foregrounded in the LGBT families movement, how would our priorities change? How would our discussions of family change?

Participants agreed that LGBT advocates generally report openness to foregrounding issues of racial and economic justice in our families work; however not enough action is being done on this front because programming and services would undergo a major shift. One participant working in an LGBT community center-based family program noted: “We cannot continue to do the level of programming that we currently do if we’re real about wanting to put issues of racial and economic justice up front.” Another participant responded to this tension by suggesting that if all organizations would redirect 10% of their budgets to explicit racial and economic justice programs or strategies, we would see a shift in our movement’s progress on this front.

The tension of wanting to “live our values” around racial and economic justice has to date been largely trumped by the reality of serving majority white constituents with specific needs around family creation and raising children in a context of homophobia, transphobia and legal discrimination.

Participants noted that in terms of our family policy goals, LGBT advocates cannot expect “peer” justice movements to collaborate on issues of sexuality and gender without a parallel commitment. One researcher said: “All of our families, regardless of what they look like—all of us need shelter, nourishment, and safety in order to even get to the next level of identity and looking at our own identity, personal growth, and community growth. The majority of the world does not live with shelter, nourishment, and safety, and if we prioritize that first, we’d actually find a lot more commonality among our families.”

A racial and economic justice framework for LGBT families work would redirect our movement energies and strategies as a whole: “If we put racial and economic justice in the foreground, our priorities would expand... I think we would start framing our movement in ways of human rights, labor rights, health, public and personal safety.”

Participants noted that our peers in justice struggles often view LGBT people as possessed of significant disposable income, though there are many lowincome LGBT

people that need the support of our programs. We know from U.S. Census data, for example, that one of every four LGBT families lives below the poverty line.

An opening step in working toward a racial and economic justice framework might be to examine how white privilege and economic privilege in our organizational structures (board, staff, constituents) shapes our priorities. Further, one participant said: “Some organizations think their idea of racial and economic justice is to be color-blind, but we lose opportunities with this kind of ideology. We have to be more critical than the “everybody is the same” rhetoric that some movement leaders use. We must look at how marginalization of many groups affects our work and our communities.”

While being careful not to equate people of color with poverty, there should be an analysis of how racism lays the groundwork for economic injustice, and that a racial and economic justice approach would build the critical coalitions essential to “crossing the finish line” in terms of our family equality goals.

Though not examined directly, this group unearthed a tension between the ***demand for services*** in the families movement, which is largely driven by the needs and concerns of a majority of white, middle-class constituents and the ***demand this constituency expresses to end social and legal discrimination***, which requires a racial and economic justice analysis to both serve the full breadth of families within LGBT communities, and build essential allies in the fight for LGBT family equality.

BECOMING PARENTS:

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES, TRANS-RACIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION, FOSTER CARE, AND SURROGACY

What are our values around racial and economic justice as they relate to assistive reproductive technologies, trans-racial adoption, transnational adoption, and surrogacy? How do we reconcile deep desires and limited options to parent with ethics around the potential for the exploitation of poor people and people of color in the creation of LGBT families?

LGBT family advocates appear to be caught between a rock and a hard place in discussing this formidable Pink Elephant. Given the concerted, virulent, well-funded opposition to LGBT people's right to form our families and raise children – and given the reality that this opposition has gained some ground at the ballot box — any conversation that seems to judge or impede an individual family's path toward parenting is extremely painful and fraught with difficulty.

Up against enormous attack, LGBT advocates must vigorously and continuously argue for our right to form family as we choose. But a serious question begs consideration: do we believe LGBT people have the right to parent by any means necessary?

Given these tensions and the reality that forming our families is an emotional and deeply personal path, LGBT advocates have not proposed or promoted an overarching value system or language around assisted reproductive technologies, trans-racial and transnational adoption, foster care, or surrogacy. In the absence of an articulated value system, or an offering of “best practices”, advocates note that the movement has essentially “left people to figure this out for themselves.”

Discussion in the community to date has been very parent-centered, which often ignores the governmental and economic forces that surround bringing a disadvantaged child into an advantaged nation, family or community. While most programs emphasize the “how-to” of bringing a child into one's family, participants noted that the U.S. often creates the conditions (through war or economic policy) that undergird transnational adoption, yet these issues are not raised or considered thoughtfully in (most) adoption processes.

Racial and economic injustice is a key causal factor in the availability of children of color within the U.S. as well; we know that white LGBT parents are raising a significant

number of adopted children of color, and are looking for help to meet the needs of these cherished children. One director of a family project reported that they offer an eight-part series for parents of adopted kids of color that helps white parents “unpack our own racism. It should be a goal to instill anti-racist frameworks before children of color are brought into a family.”

One advocate asked: “When is the time to ask ourselves how these children become available? We have to think beyond the simple story that these children were in terrible, distressed situations, and we are ‘saving’ them. What caused the extremity in these families? How are we as a movement working to address these underlying issues: war, the targeting of men of color for incarceration, drug economies in impoverished nations and neighborhoods, etc.”

A participant noted: “We don’t talk about the larger structural issues, power relationships and economic relationships. So, we’re only left with a conversation that feels very blaming about any individual choice.” One advocate reported with some distress that before coming to the gathering, a man whom she is very close to called jubilant that he had located a very inexpensive surrogate in India and was about to get on to a plane. “I care about him. I support his choice to be a father. What do I say?”

One expert in reproductive justice cautioned that the many different ways of bringing a child into a family should be carefully considered and also distinguished in our advocacy work. There are in fact *many* big conversations to be had about structural issues on several distinct fronts. Another advocate seconded this, noting that the conversation about anonymous donor insemination and its impacts on children is a very under-researched and under-discussed arena in our families work.

At this point, a veteran advocate noted that a solution that has been posed in terms of the movement’s framework or strategic approach is that “while the current value system is very parent-centered, we might move toward a child-centered view in creating our litmus test for best practices.” An example of this might be, as in the case of transnational adoption, we could develop a series of best practices based on the voices and outcomes described in emerging research by and about transnational or trans-racial adoptees.

PINK ELEPHANTS

This might also shift the “rescue” narrative of foster care and adoption that can be counterproductive to the identity formation of fostered and adopted children. One contributor said that parents need to rethink the story of: “we take the kids no one else wants.” This can have devastating effects on children who come to internalize that they are unwanted.

Finally, one advocate suggested that a child-centered approach would also likely recognize that children and parents need separate spaces to reflect on adoption, foster, assistive reproductive technologies and surrogacy. In that case, this child-driven focus would create new programs and priorities at LGBT family organizations. With current estimates at one million LGBT parents raising two million children, it is apparent that whatever way forward is identified, it must include balancing both the immediate and long-term needs in the communities we are creating.

SEX

Where's the sex? Are we promoting a version of parenting as sexless to achieve our goal of social and legal equality for our families? At what cost? Are we deemphasizing or suppressing expressions of sex and sexuality among LGBT people as a whole to achieve our goals for civil equality?

Once again, participants zeroed in on the struggle to establish and defend our rights as LGBT people – whether to parent, form partnerships or even hold a job – as a key factor in this Pink Elephant Conversation. Given the current historical moment, when our basic rights are contested at the ballot box so frequently, and our limited rights and options to parent are under increasing attack, dialogue about sex and sexual expression within our communities is increasingly constrained, while representations of our sexuality in the media are sanitized, when not excised altogether.

One participant noted how this plays out in everyday settings: “So while the straight parents might be holding hands or giving each other a peck on the cheek or the lips at a PTA meeting or on the sidelines of a sporting event, there’s no way that we would ever present that way. It’s this unwritten rule.”

In our quest for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” all LGBT people navigate the specific jeopardy of being stigmatized and marginalized around our sexuality. Participants were careful not to equate gender variance with sexuality, but noted that the larger culture does generally conflate the two and that the notion of “sexual deviance” is embedded in transphobia. One advocate noted: “Fear of being open about sexuality and experimenting with gender come from the same source—a fear of being seen as deviant, that one’s sexual orientation causes deviant behavior.”

For LGBT parents, the stakes are high. “Deviants” cannot adopt or foster children. “Deviants” cannot keep their biological children. The prospect of LGBT parenthood still evokes the highest “ick factor” in our detractors and potential allies and to a great extent, garners the strongest resistance. Advocates attributed some of this phenomenon to the reality that mainstream parenting values posit a firewall between sex and parenting as a protective measure, and LGBT parents are problematized and even vilified in this vein, despite decades of research indicating that heterosexual men remain the primary sexual predators of children in families.

PINK ELEPHANTS

Nonetheless, this position continues to traumatize and paralyze us as a movement. For decades, fear that LGBT people in positions as role models would turn children “deviant” has fueled successful opposition on every issue from anti-discrimination to marriage. Most recently, we’ve seen this in marriage ballot campaigns in California and Maine, where school curriculum issues were used as a wedge to scare potential allies into opposing marriage equality. One advocate noted: “One of the things that’s beautiful and wonderful about being queer is our radical sexual history, and I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to lose that sense of pushing boundaries... I think we can be sex radicals and be parents.”

Conversation turned to possibilities for reclaiming sexual liberation as both a value and a goal for our movement as a whole and how it might relate to families and parenting work:

- All parents, not just LGBT parents, have absorbed the sex-negative approach to parenting in the name of “protecting” our children. LGBT people have had experiences of being targeted and stigmatized around sex that make us excellent resources in a discussion of the damaging effects of internalizing sex-negative messages and approaches as we parent.
- Heterosexual parents often complain about not having time, energy or support for their sexual relationship. This can be a connective conversation that LGBT people can lead among our non-LGBT friends and family, and in our movement work. One advocate noted: “We’re doing our kids a disservice by not being fully sexual beings.”
- Some family programs are creating ways for people to have safe conversations about sexuality together. One solution for parent/groups/kids programming was offered: Ask people to put questions into a hat, mix them up, and have people read them “so that it’s a participant-generated conversation but an individual’s specific concerns are not attributable.”

- Organizing around comprehensive sexuality education offers a great way to connect with parents across the sexuality spectrum, and helps challenge the conservative mythology that sexless parenting is good parenting.
- We must examine the consequences of the lack of discussion about and representations of LGBT sexuality (on our part) during campaigns like Prop 8. In the wake of our silences, the only messages put forth are lies. A lot of good research around parenting and sexuality/gender exists for our good use — parents who adhere to more gender-rigid parental roles and rigid gender expectations of their children are more violent, for example. We need to gather up the best of this research and put it out there (during and beyond campaigns).

The reality is that downplaying or erasing our sexuality has not created the wins promised by strategists in ballot-measure campaigns, where the only narratives and representations of LGBT sexuality offered are homophobic and transphobic. Moreover, the consequences to our partnerships and families may be devastating. One researcher noted: “Gay dads are impacted by their own desexualization. They do not express their whole identities, and it has caused some really messy divorces.”

Nevertheless, one participant noted, there exists a very wide gap between the average “Joe Schmo Republican” who opposes LGBT rights and those LGBT people in polyamorous or BDSM/leather communities who are pushing the boundaries of sexual practice and expression. Participants wondered: how do we talk about sexual liberation to the average American who is uncomfortable with open discussion of sexuality? Even within our communities, a great percentage of LGBT people are uncomfortable with discussion about leather communities, debates over monogamy, consensual domination and submission, pain and pleasure, etc.? How do we nurture a sex-positive LGBT community when faced with a repressive conservative movement? One strategy of course, is to co-lead this conversation with straight allies in our communities, so that a sexual liberation approach to parenting can be championed across sexuality and genders. Participants felt this was a big conversation and a big organizing possibility that they wanted to bring home and (somehow) jump-start in their organizations and communities.

PINK ELEPHANTS

GENDER

How are we as a movement supporting gender expression beyond the polar male-female gender-restrictive system? How do we support the construction of families, partnership, and parenting in the context of a full range of gender expressions and identities?

This conversation explored gender tensions on many fronts, including the tensions LGBT parents feel around presenting as gender-conforming to the general public in order to be perceived as appropriate, “not stereotypical” LGBT parents. One expert on our panel said: “Parenting is a deeply gendered process; we both bring our genders to our parenting and it genders people along the way.”

This “deeply gendered process” finds many LGBT families struggling to both construct parental relationships that authentically reflect their gender identities, and then working to protect their children as they share these truths to the world around them. How to respond to the helpful straight ally who says: “No, honey, Celia has two Mommies.” And then is dismayed when her child reports (accurately) that Celia’s parent, Miranda, is the Daddy. In this example, the entwined destinies of LGB and T civil rights struggles in parenting are crystallized.

Finally, advocates noted that parents in their programs often feel pressure to “police” their children around gender expression out of fear of drawing the negative attention and judgment from a number of sources: families of origin; the children’s peers, heterosexual-headed families in their networks, peer LGBT families, school officials, or state agencies. While many of us can recall traumatic childhood events that centered on the policing of our gender, LGBT parents may feel a need to enforce gender conformity around toys, clothing choices, and playmates for the sake of the safety and security of the family unit. One advocate called this “the uber-gendering of our children.”

Another participant shared that her refusal to enforce gender restrictions around her son’s clothing drew an enormous backlash both within her close LGBT extended family and everyone from school officials to casual passersby. She noted, “It was hard enough that his elementary school principal told me I ‘had an agenda’ for my son that ‘would backfire,’ but then all of my radical queer friends criticized me for performing a ‘dangerous social experiment.’ I had a sense that people were afraid I would ‘ruin it’ for all queer parents.”

An interesting tension in our movement is that while we continue to rely on the biological immutability of queerness as a foundational argument in our struggle for civil rights – “we’d never choose this, we were born this way” — we refute this in our parenting behavior. We often relinquish our values and authentic gender expression to a view that says our gender expression, or our failure to enforce gender conformity, will “cause” negative outcomes in our children — the “negative” in question being an LGB sexual orientation or a transgender identity or expression. One discussant noted: “We’re so afraid that if we raise gender queer or gender- nonconforming children then people will think we’re bad parents and that we’re totally radical, and we’re trying to make our kids gay.”

A number of concerns and ideas were put forth at the end of this session as participants considered ways to break out of the gender-constrained position we find ourselves in:

- Creating options for transgender parents and children in family programs is still challenging. The movement might need to rethink gender segregated groups to accommodate various gender identities and expressions.

- A suggested programming measure for family groups: limit gendered spaces, such as a boys or girls “line” or gender-segregated activities. Where are the dress-up boxes? Where are the fire engines and legos? Who has access to them? What activities are we crafting in our “camps” and to whom do we promote them?
- Make spaces more open for multi-gender experiences and expressiveness. Where do trans/gender nonconforming parents fit in gendered parenting spaces, such as moms and dads groups? We might broaden or increase our descriptors, such as: *people who identify as or have made a commitment to mother, birth mothers, adoptive mothers, spiritual mothers; and people who identify as or have made a commitment to father, bio dads, adoptive dads, foster dads, or spiritual dads*. We need to develop inclusive language and practices.
- There is a difference between opening up discussion about gender identity and expression in our education with parents/children and providing spaces where transgender and genderqueer people feel welcome. The Task Force

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has some good resources on creating Trans-inclusive environments in our organizations; COLAGE’s trans family program is also in the process of developing materials.

- Finally, participants acknowledged and expressed regret at the lack of trans-identified people at the summit. This discussion felt limited in the absence of transgender-identified leaders.

PROGRAM AND POLICY PRIORITIES

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From their unique vantage points, attendees brainstormed a long list of program and policy priorities for the LGBT families movement and then identified the top five priorities in each area.

In terms of programs, participants noted needs ranging from bringing families out of isolation by connecting them with other families to addressing the cultural competency of institutions that serve families (i.e., faith communities, schools, health care providers, economic support and housing programs) to improving program delivery and building political power through intentional engagement of parents, youth and allied movements.

The following emerged as the leading five program priorities:

- **Partner with other movements.** Building authentic relationships with labor, reproductive justice organizations, racial justice leaders etc. is vital in order to make program delivery more comprehensive, and to build political power.
- **Address bias in schools.** Schools are an institution with which most families interact. Developing programming that validates all different types of families in the schools setting will reduce the experiences LGBT families and children have with shame and invisibility in this setting. Developing a racial and economic justice approach that considers performance gaps based on race and economics as a “safe schools” issue offers an immediate connector to peer justice movements.
- **Confront structural barriers in the creation of programs.** To reach all LGBT families, and to serve them comprehensively, a holistic approach to families work that confronts structural barriers across class, race, culture and economics is essential.
- **Organize and build leadership and political power.** Programming that builds the leadership capacity of LGBT parents, youth of LGBT parents, and allied advocates will translate into greater political influence than the family movement currently enjoys.

PROGRAM AND POLICY PRIORITIES

- **Create visibility programs.** Visibility programming aims to show the faces and stories of LGBT families through campaigns, educational programming, media, and more. As our fight for legal equality increasingly turns on the ballot box, we must increase the

public's understanding of the richness of and challenges to our families through visibility.

Many similar themes emerged in the policy priorities analysis. Participants laid out an agenda ranging from reforming systems that govern family formation and recognition to building a larger data set on LGBT parents and families to engaging in intentional ally and intersectional work to build political power and improve reform efforts.

The following are the leading five policy priorities:

- **Secure universal healthcare.** Participants feel that being healthy is a right and not a privilege and the family movement should work toward a universal healthcare policy insures that everyone—regardless of income, citizenship status, etc.—will receive the proper medical care needed to live a full life.
- **Press for legal recognition of family relationships.** Through a combination of relationship recognition advocacy including marriage, domestic partnerships, civil unions, or new legal statuses, as well as the de-privileging of “couple status,” the family movement should work to ensure that all families receive legal acknowledgement and support from the government regardless of their formation.
- **Prevent passage of adoption and foster bans.** The ability to form a family is core to the family movement and adoption and foster parenting is a central way that LGBT people bring children into their families. Pro-actively preventing passage of laws that would restrict LGBT parenting is thus a priority.
- **Work on statewide pro-LGBT education policies in schools.** Ending bias in schools, which is identified as a program priority, is greatly aided by legal and policy reforms that prohibit bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and family structure.
- **Build Allies Across Movements.** Partnering with allied communities to build trust, improve service delivery, and expand political power is as much a priority in the realm of family policy as it is for program work.

Significantly, common themes emerged between the program and policy priorities. The urgent desire to build the power and scope of the LGBT family movement through partnerships with allied movements, to provide services and seek policy reforms through an intersectional lens that accounts for structural barriers and privilege related to race, gender, and class, and to proactively address bias in schools. Some of the top

priorities are in fact currently being advanced by family organizations, suggesting that some of the tensions in the Pink Elephants conversations are already being unpacked and addressed. Together, the program and policy priorities that emerged provide a good starting place for mapping a path forward for the family movement.

FINAL THOUGHTS

FINAL THOUGHTS



nce barely visible in the LGBT movement, LGBT families and the struggle to secure rights and protections for them is a dynamic part of the larger LGBT movement. Millions of LGBT families live in 96% of our nation's counties. Despite pernicious and pervasive stereotypes about being a largely white, affluent LGBT community, research shows that LGBT parents of color are more likely to be raising children than white parents, and one in four LGBT families lives in poverty.

Family also is central to many of our movement's most visible and core struggles and wins. From marriage equality to fair and inclusive hospital visitation policies to inclusion in the Family and Medical Leave Act, recognition of our families has risen as a priority in — and in some instances outpaced the success of — our long-time efforts to enact basic employment protections for LGBT people.

As a result, LGBT families are more visible and more secure than they have ever been. This has enabled LGBT parents and their children to use the transcendent identities of “parent” and “child” to connect deeply with allies, changing hearts, minds and votes. Research shows that knowing an LGBT person is the single most important determinant of whether an individual will support LGBT equality. Before signing marriage equality bills into law, the Governors of New Hampshire and Maine both credited meetings with LGBT families with having moved them to support equality. Every day, millions of LGBT parents and their children do this work, transforming straight peers into allies simply by openly living their lives and telling their stories in school, at play dates, at basketball practice or in their places of worship.

As this community grows, its needs expand, and its reach and power deepens, we must engage more deeply and intentionally in the work of identifying what is we seek and how we will get there. What's a family? How do we build an LGBT families movement that creates social and economic security for all families? That supports all children? That confers dignity and respect on the many different family configurations we choose to create?

This document is intended only to start those conversations. We hope it has inspired you to forge ahead.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Family Equality Council

The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the grassroots power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. We do this by training activists, equipping state and local organizations with the skills needed to organize broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement's premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

1325 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005
202.393.5177 www.theTaskForce.org

Family Equality Council

PO Box 206, Boston, MA 02133
617-502-8700 www.familyequality.org