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To Be, or Not To Be... a Family

When we are born, we have a mother and a father. Upon our arrival, we become part of an institution known as the family. When stated like this, it seems too simplistic. In actuality, it is. We are born, we typically have parents and we are a family. Now let us make a minor modification. If we are born and raised by a man and a woman other than our biological parents, society still labels us as a family. However, when we modify it again to include two homosexual men or two homosexual women raising us, we are no longer considered a family in the moralistic eyes of society. What went wrong?

The term “family,” in conjunction with homosexuality, is controversial because the majority of the population believes that gays should not be allowed to marry and adopt. These controversies stem from prejudices, intolerant religious guidance, and fear, which reflect gay families negatively. Michele Eliason makes a valid argument in her article on lesbian and gay family issues:

If family is defined by blood relationships or legal marriage, lesbian or gay families are not counted. If family is defined as having at least one child, lesbian and gay childless couples are excluded. Even when family is defined more broadly, such as two or more people who provide emotional and/or financial support for each other, lesbian and gay relationships have been rendered virtually

invisible because of negative social attitudes, lack of legal protection, and the potential for discrimination.(1)

Gay marriage and parenting controversy have occupied many pages of magazines and newspapers over the last few years. Many authors concluded that love ultimately unites the family, whether biological or not. Other than love, families, be they heterosexual or homosexual, share financial and household management responsibilities. Homosexual and heterosexual couples alike share these responsibilities. Committed homosexual couples are families because they share mutual love, they raise children well, and they manage households by dividing responsibilities equally.

Similarities exist between heterosexual and homosexual forms of love and marriage. When homosexual couples decide to make a commitment, they make the decision to remain faithful and true like any heterosexual couple. These commitments center around on love whether they involve a man and a woman, a man and a man, or a woman and a woman; the only distinction between these relationships is institutionalized marriage. Heterosexual couples confirm their love in the eyes of God or in the eyes of the law whereas homosexuals, at this time, do not have this right. A survey by Arkes concluded that 70% of the public were opposed to same-sex marriage (1). This is troubling because the minority is denied a basic right that the majority refuses to recognize. If legal marriage is necessary to define a family then homosexuals should be given the right as well. Many gay couples create marriage-like commitments outside of this institution. Eliason estimates that 40%-60% of gay men and 45%-80% of lesbians are in stable committed relationships and that these relationships are as satisfactory as any heterosexual relationship: “The difference is simply the way society treats the couples” (3).

Because of this opposition, the majority makes it difficult for homosexual couples to adopt and raise children. Homosexual couples can raise children; however, because of a concern over the emotional development of children, people protest homosexual parenting. Eliason cites six studies conducted by several psychologists from around the country, and she concludes that “there is no evidence that being raised by a lesbian or gay parent has any adverse effects on the child” (5). She resolves by saying, “Indeed, some research suggests that children of lesbian and gay parents are better adjusted and more flexible in their thinking than children of heterosexual parents”(5). Much like Eliason’s opinion, Coyne and Frum believe that,

If it were ever proven that children raised by gays and lesbians suffered serious psychological harm from the experience, then the prohibition would be justified.

But no evidence to this effect has been deduced, nor is there much intuitive reason to think it exists. (3)

Those opposed to gay parenting also fear that children will be teased at school (Shapiro 3). In Shapiro’s article on children with gay parents, he claims that the majority of children who have openly gay parents are faced with “unwanted teasing”; however, he also says that children raised by heterosexual parents are also teased for other things (3). For example, when I went to school, other students sometimes teased me about my overweight mother. Shapiro concludes this condition of rebuttal by saying,

Despite such occasional ugliness, perhaps most striking about the children of gay parents is how little they say having a homosexual parent truly upsets their lives.

(3)

Many studies deduce that homosexual couples are capable of raising children well. I am not claiming that they can raise children any better than heterosexual couples because that is not true.

There are no instructions for parenting and it is a learning process for both heterosexual and homosexual parents.

Finally, responsibility is essential for a well-functioning family. There is an essential financial and emotional responsibility needed to maintain a healthy family institution. If a couple, gay or straight, is responsible enough to make the decision to commit then they can be considered a family. For example, let us observe the way that heterosexuals and homosexuals deal with child care responsibilities. In the majority of heterosexual relationships that I have observed, the women want their husbands to shoulder more responsibility. In homosexual relationships, couples tend to negotiate tasks based on a system consisting of likes, interests, abilities, and fairness whereas heterosexual couples must choose whether or not to succumb to preexisting social roles (McPhearson 1). Both sets of couples identify the problem and make adjustments. However, society does not acknowledge this similarity. Homosexual couples are still not considered a family.

To identify and correct the problems society has with homosexual couples and aspects of homosexual families, we must first disencumber any misconceptions and prejudices placed on the gay community. There is no compromise that can be reached until society discovers compassion for love and all its distinct subdivisions. Families are based on love and love is what builds families. The homosexual family is parallel to the heterosexual family with minor differences including gender and society's fears. Through more extensive published research, the homosexual family will gain more recognition and acknowledgment as a family form. Current research suggests that change is inevitable because no negative results have been reported. The perfusion of knowledge concerning gay marriages will appease the concerns of the majority and ultimately eliminate any fear.

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