Promoting the Health of LGBT Families

The Fenway Guide to LGBT Health
Module 5
Learning Objectives

By the end of the module, participants will be able to:

- Describe ways to communicate with LGBT patients about their partners and families
- Discuss the demographics, dynamics, and challenges of LGBT relationships
- Explain the methods by which LGBT people can become parents
- Summarize the research on children of LGBT parents
- List strategies for helping LGBT families thrive
What is a family?

“The family is a group of individuals with a continuing legal, genetic, and/or emotional relationship.”

--American Academy of Family Physicians
Appreciation for LGBT Families

- Types of LGBT families
  - Couples without children
  - Couples with children and/or stepchildren
  - Single parents with children
  - Multiple parents raising children together
  - “Families of choice” (close friends)
  - Multiple adults in a committed relationship
Appreciation for LGBT Families

As clinicians, we need to:

- Ask about family
  - *(Are you in a relationship? Do you have children? Who do you consider your family?)*
- Honor all family relationships as defined by patients
- Include family members in patient’s healthcare as appropriate
Discrimination in Healthcare

- In the early years of the AIDS crisis, many partners of patients were
  - ignored by providers
  - denied access to hospital visits
  - denied role in medical decision-making

- Today: Many medical professional associations have policies supporting equal rights for same-sex partners and LGBT parents

- In some instances, same-sex partners and non-biological/non-adoptive parents are still ignored and denied visitation rights
Language and Definitions

- There is no set language for relationships.
- Match the patient’s language.
- Or, ask patients to describe their relationships:
  - *How do you refer to your partner?* (e.g., spouse, life partner, wife/husband)
  - *How do you refer to your partner’s children?* (e.g., my son, my stepdaughter)

- When talking with children:
  - Initially say “*your parent, parents, or guardian*” (never assume “mom and dad”)
  - Ask: *What do you usually call your parent(s)?* (e.g., mommy and mama, papa and daddy, Daddy Bob and Daddy Mike)
LGBT Couples
LGBT Couples: Demographics

- Estimated 600-770,000 same-sex couples living together (Gates, 2006; gaydemographics.org)
- Does not include:
  - couples who live separately
  - transgender couples
  - opposite-sex bisexual partners
  - single LGBT-headed families
  - couples that did not report relationship to Census
Same-Sex Households

Each star represents 250 same-sex households
Map Courtesy: J. Bradford PhD. and K. Barrett PhD., SERL, VCU
Legality of Same-sex Unions

- State laws change often
- **Same-sex Marriage** (MA, CT, IA, VT, ME)
  - no federal benefits/recognition
  - no recognition by most other states
- **Civil Unions / Domestic Partnerships** (currently VT, CA, DC, NJ, NH, OR)
  - same rights as marriage
  - no federal benefits/recognition
- **Domestic Partnerships/Reciprocal Beneficiaries** (ME, WA, HI)
  - Limited set of rights
- **Laws/amendments against same-sex marriage** (34 states)
  (Human Rights Campaign, 2008)
Data on Legalized Unions

- More than 85,000 same-sex couples have entered a legal relationship since 1997
- In states allowing legal recognition, ~40% of same-sex couples have entered marriage/unions/partnerships
- Two-thirds of legal same-sex couples are female
- Dissolution rates similar to married different-sex couples (Gates et al., 2008)
Characteristics of Same-Sex Couples

- Equal relationship quality and satisfaction as heterosexual couples (Roisman et al., 2008; Balsam et al., 2008)

- Summary of research: compared to heterosexual married couples, same-sex couples (Kurdek, 2005):
  - Divide household chores more equally
  - Receive less support from family, but more from friends
  - Resolve conflict with more positive approach (use humor; act less hostile) (Gottman et al., 2003)
Potential Conflicts

- Disclosure of same-sex relationship sometimes an issue if one partner is more “out” than the other

- Couples with different sexual orientations (e.g., bisexual woman with a lesbian or straight man) may experience friction based on lack of understanding of partner’s orientation
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

- Men in same-sex relationships (Greenwood et al., 2002):
  - 39% experienced physical, psychological/symbolic and/or sexual abuse from partner

- Women in same-sex relationships equal or lower rates compared to women in heterosexual relationships

- IPV is about exerting power and control

- In same-sex relationships, can include:
  - Threats of “outing” partner
  - Persuading victim that leaving relationship means same-sex relationships are deviant
  - Assertions that women can’t be violent
  - Assertions that men are violent and therefore violence is expected
Intimate Partner Violence Screening

- Inquire about current and past domestic violence as part of routine social history
- At any time, has anyone hit, kicked, choked, threatened, forced him or herself on you sexually, touched you in a sexual way that was unwanted, or otherwise hurt or frightened you?
- Have LGBT-friendly resources on hand (see Handout 5-A)
Challenges for LGBT Couples

- Internalization of societal stigma can hamper ability to form safe, strong, nurturing relationships
  - Solid self-identity and social support enhance ability to form relationships
- Couples may lack family and peer acceptance of relationship – can cause stress
- Minimum legal protections and benefits if unable to marry or form civil union
Healthcare Access, Health Behavior

- Women in same-sex couples compared to women in opposite-sex couples (Heck, et al., 2006):
  - Less likely to have seen a provider in last year
  - Less likely to have usual source of healthcare
  - More likely to have unmet health needs as result of cost

- Gay men in couples less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior compared to single gay men (Klausner et al., 2006)
Bisexuals and Relationships

- Bisexuals can have straight, bisexual, or gay/lesbian partners
- Potential challenges:
  - Invisibility (a bisexual couple looks gay or straight)
  - Needing to come out to a date
  - Disinterest by lesbian/gay partners
  - Partners may feel threatened or insecure
  - Pressure to id as gay/lesbian when partner is gay/lesbian; bisexual identity devalued
  - May experience conditional family and/or peer support depending on gender of partner
  - May experience support and inclusion from gay and lesbian community only when in same-sex relationship
Transgender Relationships

- One or both partners may be transgender
- A transperson may identify as any sexual orientation (or not use a label), and may partner with people in the full range of sexual orientation

**When a partner comes out as transgender while in a long-term relationship:**

- Some couples remain committed
- Non-transgender partners need time and support. They will often question their own sexual identity
- If divorce occurs, transgender partners often face bias in family court

- Marriage laws differ by state
Non-monogamy

- Don’t assume any patient (LGBT or straight) is monogamous, even if s/he is in a long-term relationship
- Ask patients about sex outside the primary partnership (as part of routine sexual history)
- Types of non-monogamous relationships
  - “Affairs” (does not tell partner)
  - Partners who agree to have “open relationships” and set up rules (some call this “polyamory”)
  - Three or more people who are exclusively involved with each other (some may also call this “polyamory”)
LGBT Families with Children
The LGB “Baby Boom”

- 27% of same-sex couples are raising children (Gates and Ost, 2004)
- >1 in 3 lesbians have given birth
- >1 in 6 gay men have fathered or adopted a child
- >50% of gay men, 41% of lesbians want to have children (Gates and Badgett, 2007)
- Hispanic same-sex couples are raising children at 2-3x the rate of white non-Hispanic same-sex couples (Cianciotto, 2005)
Support of LGBT Parental Rights

- Professional orgs that have issued policy or position statements in support of LGB(T) rights to parent:
  - American Medical Association (2004)
  - American Psychoanalytic Association (2002)
  - American Psychological Association (1976 and 2004)
  - National Adoption Center (1998)
  - Voice for Adoption (2006)

(list from Human Rights Campaign website: http://www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/professional-opinion.asp)
Becoming a Parent: Options

- Alternative Insemination
- Surrogacy
- Adoption
- Foster parenting

Patients often look to healthcare providers for information and guidance on parenting options.
Adoption

- An estimated 65,500 adopted children are living with a lesbian or gay parent.
- Gay and lesbian parents are raising four percent of all adopted children in the United States.
- An estimated two million LGB people are interested in adopting.
- Adopted children with same-sex parents are more likely to be foreign born (14%) compared to heterosexual married couples (7%).

(Gates and Badgett, 2007)
Adoption: Working with Agencies

- Private (Domestic)
  - ~80% non-religious agencies accept applications from LGB clients (Brodzinsky et al., 2003)
  - Jewish (100%) and Lutheran (67%) agencies accept LGB clients (Brodzinsky et al., 2003)

- Public (Domestic)
  - State child welfare agency (often neglected or abused children)
  - Most accept gay or lesbian clients

- International
  - Some agencies specialize in non-traditional families
  - No country allows openly gay or lesbian parents to adopt
  - If LGB, must adopt as single parent (no mention of sexuality)
  - Some countries make you declare you are not homosexual
Adoption: Challenges

- Expensive
- Some states prohibit any LGB parent adoption
- Some states only allow single LGB people to adopt
- If a couple cannot adopt together, partners must decide who is the adoptive parent
- Trans-racial/cultural adoption
  - Important to address any biases, and to expose child to birth culture
Fostering Children

- Estimated 14,100 foster children are living with LGB parents
- LGB parents are raising 3% of foster children in the U.S. (Gates and Badgett, 2007)
- Most states permit LGB people to foster children
- Some discrimination by agency workers
- Few specific supports for LGBT foster parents
- Some become guardians to nieces, nephews
- Some provide support, mentoring, homes to youth in need
Alternative Insemination (AI)

- Popular option for lesbian women and couples
- Gay men sometimes donate sperm and co-raise children with lesbian friends
- Less expensive than adoption (but can still be costly)
- Fewer legal issues than adoption
- Most private non-religious fertility clinics accept clients who are single women or lesbian couples
- Transgender – surgery/hormones and loss of fertility
  - should be counseled about banking sperm, eggs, or embryos
AI: Decisions

1. “Known” or “Anonymous” donor?
2. “Yes” or “No” anonymous donor?
3. Which partner will be inseminated?
4. At home or with medical provider?
# AI: Known vs. Anonymous Donor

## Known donor

- **Pro’s:**
  - Free
  - Fresh sperm more potent
  - Traits/health are known
  - Donor can be involved in child’s life

- **Con’s**
  - No disease screening
  - Donor can sue for rights
  - Potential conflicts if donor involved in parenting

## Anonymous/sperm bank

- **Pro’s**
  - Screen for infections, genetic disorders
  - Greater availability
  - No conflict with donor

- **Con’s**
  - Frozen sperm less potent
  - Expensive
  - Limited donor selection (esp. minorities)
Surrogacy

- Usually male couples
- Sometimes chosen by lesbian or trans couples that cannot carry a pregnancy
- Unknown surrogate
  - Through agency -- Very expensive
- Known surrogate
  - Friend, relative
  - Sometimes arrange so surrogate mother has some relationship with the child
- Illegal in some states
- Legal assistance suggested in all cases
Traditional Surrogacy

- Surrogate mother inseminated with an intended parent’s sperm
- Risk that surrogate will opt to keep child – legally complicated
Gestational Surrogacy

- IVF creates embryos from sperm or eggs of donor and one of intended parents

- Surrogate carries pregnancy, but no biological connection

- Some lesbian couples: Embryos created with one mother’s eggs and implanted in other mother’s uterus (rare; usually not covered by insurance)
Second Parent Adoption

“A legal procedure that allows a same-sex parent to adopt her or his partner’s biological or adoptive child without terminating the legal rights of the first parent. States must honor second-parent adoptions from other states.” — National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce website

Also known as co-parent adoption
Second Parent Adoption, cont’d

- Provides second parent:
  - Hospital visitation rights
  - Access to medical records
  - Better interface with school, medical providers

- Child could lose relationship to second parent if breakup, or death of other parent
Second Parent Adoption, cont’d

- Available in some states; in some jurisdictions of some states; not clear in some states

- Other options to create legal relationship:
  - Guardianship
  - Legal judgment of parentage

- Otherwise, families should do estate planning, draft agreements
Becoming a Parent: Concerns

- Societal disapproval – worries that children will be discriminated against because their parents are LGBT

- Internalized homophobia – doubts about own fitness to parent if haven’t come to full acceptance of own identity as LGBT
LGBT are “Fit to Parent”

“*The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that a considerable body of professional literature provides evidence that children with parents who are homosexual can have the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment, and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual.*” – Perrin et al., 2002

“*Research has shown that the adjustment, development and psychological well-being of children is unrelated to parental sexual orientation and that the children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish.*” – Patterson (APA), 2004
Research Evidence: Children of LGBT Parents

- Outcomes for children of LGBT parents = outcomes for children of heterosexuals (Tasker, 2005; Patterson, 2000; Lambert, 2005; Wainwright et al., 2004)
  - psychological wellbeing; development
  - personal, family, and school adjustments of adolescents

- Sexual orientation and gender identity of children in LGBT families are no different than in general population (Wainwright, et.al., 2004; Bailey, et.al., 1995; Tasker, 2005)

- Children with LGBT parents possibly more willing to explore same-sex experiences during sexual development (Wainwright et al., 2004; Golombuk and Tasker, 1996)
Children of LGBT Parents: Challenges

- Coming out as a child of LGBT parents happens often – school, camp, new job, etc.
- Some children will experience harassment, bullying, rejection by peers
- Children may worry that others think they are LGBT because their parents are
- Closeted parents can cause problems – secrecy causes distance, feelings of shame, lack of feeling supported
- Parents who breakup/divorce: limited social or legal supports; potential for one parent to lose all rights
Strategies for LGBT Parents

- Enroll in programs, schools that support diversity
- Meet other LGBT families
- Read books for LGBT families
- Read books that include all kinds of families
- Find positive role models for children
- Help children practice responses to negative comments, but without raising fear level
- Attend community events that boost respect for LGBT
- Educate schools, community and religious centers about LGBT families
Legal Protections

- Encourage LGBT families to protect themselves, their loved ones and their estates with legal documentation, such as:
  - Living wills
  - Medical power of attorney/ Health care Proxy
  - Durable power of attorney
  - Second parent adoption (where available)
  - Joint adoption (where available)
  - Sperm donor agreement
Profiles of LGBT Families

Jill and Nadia:
Both in their late 30’s. Together for 8 years. Live in Oregon. Raising a 2-year old boy conceived and birthed by Jill, through anonymous insemination. Nadia stays home to care for their son. The couple wants Nadia to have a child using alternative insemination, but Nadia does not have health insurance.
Profiles of LGBT Families

George and Luis:
Together for 25 years but have never “come out” about their relationship. Live in Florida. George, 72, has been hospitalized for heart failure. Luis has not been allowed to visit George in the hospital. George’s family has never acknowledged Luis as George’s partner and has not consulted with him about George’s care.
Allison and Margaret:
Married for 20 years. Have two teenage children. A year ago, Allison (formerly Daniel) came out to her family about her true gender identity as a woman. She now wishes to pursue surgery and medical intervention to affirm her gender. Allison and Margaret wish to remain married for the children’s sake. The couple and family are getting supportive counseling and therapy to adjust to the change.
Resources

- Human Rights Campaign (Parenting, Relationships)
  http://www.hrc.org/issues

- Family Equality Council
  http://www.familyequality.org

- COLAGE: Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere
  http://www.colage.org

- Transparentcy
  http://www.transparentcy.org

- Fenway Community Health, Alternative Insemination Program
  http://www.fenwayhealth.org

- See Handout 5-A for more
Family Rainbow

“Love Makes a Family”