

GAYBIES

A CELEBRATION OF
THE MODERN FAMILY?



WORDS DANIEL SCHEFFLER

In today's gentrified, post-Stonewall culture, gay adoption and gaybies are the media darlings and bastions of the LGBT rights brigade. But before we all throw out our dancing shoes and climb the heteronormative barricades, should we meditate on whether we're doing it for the sake of underprivileged children or about stroking our fabulously color-coordinated egos?

YOU'VE SEEN THEM IN THE PARK with a perfect, cream-colored stroller, you've seen them buying fruit at the neighborhood market with an elegant sling around their chests, and you've definitely seen them at the ABC home store discussing fabrics while holding a stylish carrier. They are the gay dads and they have one, sometimes two or three gaybies with them at all times. With finesse it does appear less drool and more chic, but perhaps that's a stereotype that is already getting busted as the gaybies start to infuse the world – from New York to Berlin, and all the way to Singapore.

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The times have certainly changed: gay men have abandoned the clubs, the picket lines, the overpriced fashion stores – perhaps even the gym? – and are now parenting like never before. (Maybe the gym is squeezed in while the nanny watches over the little one, or when the bambino is having daily nap number 74 in the health club's kids' zone.) Over the last 10 years, the number of children living with same sex parents in the US has doubled, according to the US Census, and the figure is growing every day.

Gary J. Gates at the Williams Institute at UCLA presented a report that specifies that as many as six million American children and adults have an LGBT parent. He indicates that *"same-sex couple parents and their children are more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities, with an estimated 39 percent of individuals in same-sex couples with children under age 18 at home are non-white, as are half of their children."* The states with the highest proportion of same-sex couples raising biological, adopted or stepchildren include Mississippi (26%), Wyoming (25%), Alaska (23%), Idaho (22%), and Montana (22%). Still a minority – roughly 1% of US households – the "phenomenon" is gaining traction and even support from more conservative avenues in the country and, it seems, the world.

CALL ME BABY - BUT WHY NOW? How has the world tipped towards gaybies all of a sudden – or has it been queer plus little one all along and we haven't noticed? Dana Rudolph, founder and publisher of "Mombian: Sustenance for Lesbian Moms", says this is hardly a new "phenomenon". She recalls "The Daughters of Bilitis", the first lesbian activist group, which held discussion groups about lesbian motherhood in 1956. She also mentions that the term "gayby boom" was first used in 1990 in an article in Newsweek – almost 25 years ago. She thinks that, of course, not all gay people will choose to become parent, just as some different-sex couples choose to remain child-free. All this, just when we thought gaybies were taking over the world.

"People get babies in all kinds of ways – through previous marriages, fostering, adoption,

sharing with a lesbian couple and biological parenting. Those who choose bio-parenting are those with more financial resources so they are a small subset of all gay parents," says gay parent, Huffington Post LGBT blogger and psychotherapist Liz Margolies. *"Even the very experience of parenting is often quite varied, depending on the children and how they were procured. Some gay couples, those with resources, are choosing the genetics of their child and ensuring the care and nutrition of the child from conception. Others are taking in children with health problems, mental health issues."*

MILLION DOLLAR BABY

There are so many options available (each with a different complication and reward) now for gay parents to have children that adoption, which was previously the most popular, is now just another one of the many. Adopting from Russia has come to a halt, thanks to President Putin's wrath on America, but other choices include fostering or using a carefully selected surrogate mother (who carries the baby with either her own eggs or the eggs of a donor). Of course, there is also donor insemination, during which one or the other father provides his sperm. Lastly, there is co-parenting which, according to the gay support site "Pride Angel," is popular amongst gay men and their lesbian friends – think Madonna and Rupert Everett in *The Next Best Thing*. But as with everything else in life, complications can occur – the narcissist in all of us might want his sperm to be the main attraction and swim faster than the other sperm, there are health and mental issues to consider, and let's not forget the enormous costs involved, which narrow the gap for gay dads with middle incomes to afford even just the process, never mind bringing up baby. According to Rudolph these decisions vary tremendously and *"sometimes it's a matter of age, as younger eggs, especially, have a better chance of forming healthy embryos"*. She also mentions other factors, such as certain risks including genetic disorders, money issues or that the desire to be the bio-dad or mom is stronger in some men and women.

So, perhaps we are currently in an interesting new territory. A place where we, as gay men, are seeking a better understanding of exactly what it means for two men (or women) to have children in a society that values the traditional family unit of mom and dad, but is clearly changing and

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starting to see things differently. Rights for gay parents vary by state (and sometimes within a state) in the U.S., while in Europe things are changing fast (with Holland as the cheerleader). Rudolph points out that, *"In some American jurisdictions, we have full legal rights. In others, we cannot jointly adopt or have a non-bio partner perform a second-parent adoption."* According to Margolies it will take time to sort it all out and it may be a generation or so before the LGBT people truly figure out the marriage and kids idea. *"Being denied babies and marriage for so long, many have lost sight of their authentic wishes. What we see now is a temporary leaping on the bandwagon when it finally pulls into the station. But isn't it all equally possible that many gays tenaciously celebrated dancing and partying because they were denied the option of settling down?"*

So if that's the reason, now that gay men can more easily join the Dad brigade does it mean it's pretty easy? At the moment it might sound fabulous - a baby dressed in Burberry, all smiles. But what about the real issues that will affect gay dads as they join parenthood? Some have overlooked these in the hope of a new accessory, or a less selfish but equally ridiculous reason: for the sake of procreating. But the issues are real and they raise plenty of valid questions, such as what does it mean to raise kids of another ethnicity? Is it the same as raising bio kids? Also, crucially, children from foster families can arrive with scars from their earlier life experiences and placements - how are gay dads coping with that?

The support groups, like Men Having Babies menhavingbabies.org (and their conferences on youtube.com/user/menhavingbabies) are trying to help these issues by way of free advice, as well as funding for new dads. They facilitate workshops and seminars that provide medical, legal, financial and moral advice regarding surrogacy, egg donation and fathering children. But there is no real blueprint, for as much as there have always been gay dads throughout history, the books on Amazon don't quite reflect that, and society's rather fickle nature isn't easily measured. But then, some of the issues are just too

big to tackle all at once.

Gabriel Blau, the executive director of the Family Equality Council, a national advocacy group that supports parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered, speaks about being a married gay man in New York and raising an adopted son with his husband. His concern is *"insufficient marriage and adoption laws across the country"*, which can discriminate against LGBT couples and their kids. Right now the barriers to family sit in a state-by-state lockjaw. Child welfare professionals and judges make the decisions - some states will only allow single parent adoption, thus isolating the partner. According to the Family Equality Council some child placement agencies even discriminate on the basis of religious or moral grounds against gay men. In contrast, the adoption and foster care placement policies of six states have explicitly prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation: California, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, and of course New York.

PAPA, PA-PA CAN YOU HEAR ME?

There are freedom fighters in many states in the US and in European countries campaigning for rights as gay parents, but for the first time, in 2014, the largest battle has been won: the Western World now sees it as more normal than ever before. Mass culture has already injected the proverbial gay parents (think *"The New Normal"* and the big hit Emmy winner *"Modern Family"*) into contemporary television and has even started giving us a less obvious, less stereotypical depiction of it all as seen in *Sean Saves The World* and *The Fosters*, produced by Jennifer Lopez. In France, the sitcom *Plus Belle La Vie* is watched daily by around 5 million people and tackled same-sex parenting years ago. Now the U.S. is catching up fast, and apparently so is reality TV with BBC Three's *The World's Strictest Parents*, which features same-sex parents from across the globe including South Africa, a country that has since the end of Apartheid in 1994 embraced gays and their rights in its highly advanced Constitution.

In Australia, the documentary film *Growing Up Gayby* is currently doing the rounds. The film follows the director, Maya Newell, as she interviews a variety

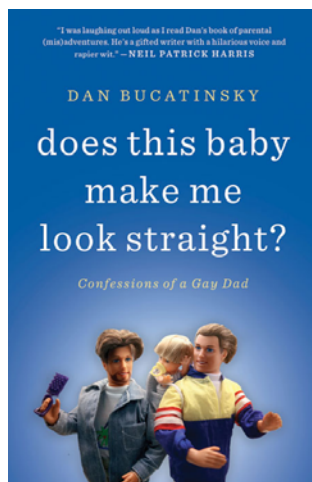
of children brought up by gay parents, aiming to "make sense of what family means in the 21st century". Newell, a gayby herself, is continuing her work on a full-length film called *Gayby Baby* that is currently getting the Kickstarter treatment and hopes to give the kids, rather than just adults, a voice. She calls it a documentary *"that will create a voice for children in same-sex families and help the rest of us make sense of what it means to be raised culturally queer."*

Last year Rupert Everett claimed that children born into gay families are in imminent peril

Although he'd probably never have a reality show, he is an icon and someone revered: Monsieur Tom Ford himself. Ford had a baby in 2013 and has suddenly become more than just a style icon - he's now a parenting icon in the media. Rudolph believes that there is value in having visible role models. Neil Patrick Harris, another new gay dad, has been seen around Manhattan with strollers and kids' stuff - suddenly he's no longer just 'the funny guy', he's representative of how normal a celebrity can be. Just another guy with a kid, sure, but because of his position in the spotlight we can scrutinize, which perhaps inspires better parenting as our generation's gay icons show their more paternal sides. Angry actor Rupert Everett and a very conservative talk show



Burberry bear



host, Bryan Fisher, last year claimed that “*children born into gay families are in imminent peril*”, to which Ben Summerskill, Chief Exec of LGBT Rights Advocacy Group, Stonewall, responded by saying, “*There is absolutely no evidence that the kids of gay parents suffer in the way they are brought up or in how they develop.*” In fact, in every study, from every University and Institution, you will find research to support the fact that anyone can be a bad parent, and anyone can raise a perfect child, regardless of sexuality.

Rudolph, however, thinks that there are still too few portrayals of lesbian and gay parents on film and television and that there is a tendency to actually see less diversity. She says, “*We form our families in many different ways, and come from all socioeconomic classes, races and cultures, and that is what we want to see on film and in television*”. She posted on her website about the television show *The Fosters*, (about two moms and their mix of adopted, foster, and biological kids), discussing how much the show met her expectations. She promoted it and asked her readers to tweet about it, suggesting that they use #TheFosters hashtag and respond with what the show meant. The movie *The Kids Are Alright*, with Annette Bening and Julianne Moore, brought gay parenting to the Oscars and suddenly the world sat up and paid attention. The new norm was to have a gay kid, a gay parent – or a little bit of both.

BUT ARE THE KIDS REALLY ALL RIGHT?

In Carlos A. Ball’s book “*Same-Sex Marriage and Children: A Tale of History, So-*

cial Science, and Law” he argues that all the research studies he consulted for his Oxford published book looked at the psychological adjustment and social functioning of children and found no differences in outcome between kids of gay parents and children of heterosexual parents. In fact, he argues that the findings are so uniform and consistent that they “*render efforts to defend same sex marriage bans on the basis of concerns about children’s psychological adjustment and social functioning irrational (and therefore unconstitutional) because they lack a defensible factual foundation.*”

Megan De Beyer, Psychologist and Transformation Facilitator in South Africa, firmly believes that children are very adaptable to circumstance as long as they are safe and nurtured – in particular in the “attachment phase” of the first two years, where affection with unconditional regard makes for normal development. She says, “*If parents are aware and knowledgeable of the developmental stages of a child’s life (i.e. the attachment phase, the exploration phase and the identity phase for instance) and cater for this at the child’s level with positive attention then a child will thrive.*” De Beyer, who has worked in the field for more than a decade, says, “*Well-functioning adults have had at least one person in their childhood who believes in them, loves them and is available for guidance with consistency. The gender of the caregiver is not as relevant as the type of regard. If caregivers offer positive, warm regard this is most important.*”

The profound Zach Wahls and his viral YouTube clip and subsequent book reminding told the world in no uncertain terms that whether your parents are gay or not, it doesn’t matter – what matters is violence at home and substance abuse. Wahls, and his now huge following, reiterates this on social media channels and hundreds of speaking gigs: “*I am ok, I am better than just alright.*”

But maybe it’s not just the parents; perhaps what helps is society offering support and reducing the stigma, making life and living situations for kids (and their gay parents) more acceptable. Terrance Heath, an activist and New York Times writer, speaks in the column about raising kids with his husband. He believes that “*families do best when parents have the support of the community and society at large.*”

De Beyer agrees, “*All human beings need relationships with both genders and so does a child. If male parents are sensitive they can find reliable female role models amongst their community to provide this balance.*”

Gay men are altruistic and emotionally attuned to the needs of others – these are essential parenting skills

But do gay men make suitable parents? According to De Beyer they absolutely do, as “*Gay men are altruistic and emotionally attuned to the needs of others - these are essential parenting skills.*” Rudolph thinks that gay parents can wear their dancing shoes and teach their kids to dance. She says, “*Some grown children with lesbian or gay parents have described themselves as ‘culturally queer’ regardless of their own sexual orientation, because they grew up with queer parents. I don’t think that becoming parents means giving up on our queer culture (although it may require some scheduling adjustments).*”