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New Family Values

As more singles and gay and lesbian couples are becoming parents by way of adoption, their children may face questions from their schoolmates or tough class projects. Here's how families thrive.

Today's families come in all shapes and sizes, from *Law & Order's* Mom and Pop model to families raised by lesbian or gay partners or a single mom or dad. According to the Census Bureau, between six and 10 million American children lived in gay, lesbian, or bisexual households in the year 2000. Single parents were heads of household in 27 percent of all families with children under the age of 18.

Unfortunately, our society isn't as open-minded as many of its families are. Whether it's questions from classmates or school assignments that don't fit their family makeup, single-parent and gay and lesbian-parented families face challenges beyond those of the mom-and-pop adoptive family. Here's how

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some of these families have dealt with the additional attention they receive.

Speak Up for Your Family

In generations past, adoption, single parenthood, and homosexuality were often treated as sad secrets. But today, people are proud and outspoken about their "alternative" family makeup.

Steven Salinas, a single, gay dad in Sacramento, California, had plenty of support from friends and family members when he adopted his son from foster care. So he was taken aback when he overheard, at a child's birthday party, one couple questioning his worth as a parent. Salinas walked up to the pair, took his 19-month-old toddler out of the woman's arms, and told the man that he was fully capable of raising his son.

"If you do not intend to be part of or supportive of the solution," Salinas told the man,

"please do not be part of the problem."

To this day Salinas remains calm about the event. "I truly believe that it is up to us to educate our society, and to advocate for ourselves and our families," he says.

As children get older, parents need to teach them to speak up for themselves. "There is a lot more homophobia than anti-adoption messages in our society," says Mary Nealon, who is raising two daughters with her partner, Vivian Shapiro. "I am concerned that these messages will take a toll on our daughters' self-esteem and feelings about their family."

Nealon and her partner worked with their daughters to come up with ideas for answering the hurtful questions kids often ask. In doing so, they found that many of the lessons taught to children about handling adoption-related questions can be adapted to handling questions about a nontraditional family structure.

For instance, kids can deflect questions about their two mommies or lack of a father in the same way that they'd stop prying queries about their birth family—by saying something like "That's personal" or "Why do you want to know?" Says Nealon, "We do our best to teach what's acceptable to say and not say, and what's acceptable to have to listen to."

Work with the Holidays

Holidays like Mother's Day and Father's Day, which often involve special art projects in elementary schools, can be awkward for children who don't have a father or a mother to celebrate—or who have two mothers (or fathers), and are only allowed to make one special craft.

Most teachers have allowed Nealon's older daughter to create two gifts, for her two mothers, on Mother's Day. But when one teacher forgot, it caused a lot of anxiety for their daughter.

THE NEALON-SHAPIRO FAMILY: (left to right) Vivian Shapiro, Sony (the dog), Cass (age 12), Mary Nealon, and Gable (age four) at their home in Bridgehampton, New York.



Laurie Rhodes Photography