

GAY FATHERS



Robert L. Barret
Bryan E. Robinson

NEW
AND
REVISED
EDITION

**Encouraging the Hearts of
Gay Dads and Their Families**

Gay Fathers

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Gay Dads and Their Families

JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Company
San Francisco

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barret, Robert L.

Gay fathers : encouraging the hearts of gay dads and their families /
Robert L. Barret, Bryan E. Robinson. 1st [i.e. 2nd] ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: Lexington, Mass. : Lexington Books, © 1990

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7879-5075-0 (alk. paper)

1. Gay fathers—United States. 2. Gay fathers—Counseling of—United States.

I. Robinson, Bryan E. II. Title.

HQ76.13 .B37

306.874'2—dc21

00-032731

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Gay Fathers

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Bryan E. Robinson

This book is dedicated to gay fathers, their children, wives, parents, brothers, and sisters who are developing alternative new families that affirm the rich potential of gay parenting.

Preface

In the ten years since *Gay Fathers* first appeared there has been a virtual revolution in the public's understanding of gay and lesbian people. Today it is not unusual to see gay characters on television or to read reports of the appointment of gay men and lesbians to important positions in both the public and private sectors. The decade of the 1990s surely will be remembered as a time when gay and lesbian people became more a part of mainstream America. Naturally this movement has faced considerable opposition, and one of the prime areas in which resistance continues to occur is that of gay parenting. Still, in urban areas across the country a "gayby boom" has quietly taken place. The privilege of parenting is no longer seen as an exclusive right of heterosexual persons. Gay men have begun to claim more assertively the right to parent. Men who have identified as gay from an early age are becoming fathers through adoption or surrogate mothers, or by serving as foster parents.

The first edition of this book played a role in that transformation. Initially sold primarily through gay bookstores to gay fathers who were looking for support in their efforts to be effective parents, the book became a resource for counselors, social workers, psychologists, and attorneys as well as others who wanted to know more about gay men who choose parenting. As the large chain bookstores began to include gay and lesbian titles, *Gay Fathers* began to reach a larger market.

Today gay fathers are not nearly as exotic as they were in 1990. School officials, clergy, social service professionals, and many in the general public have come to realize that gay and lesbian parents are effective in their roles and that their children do quite well. A continuing challenge is working with a legal system that seems unwilling to trust research findings about gay parenting. Unfortunately, in too many states, laws restrict the rights of gay fathers or do not allow them to openly adopt children.

Still, the number of married men who are coming out continues to grow, and those with children encounter the same questions they found in the past. What is the impact of gay fathering on child development? What hurdles can be anticipated and how might they be addressed? Do other gay fathers share my concerns? How do I come out to my children? What will my life be like if I live as a gay man? Parenting is no longer such a foreign topic in conversations between gay and lesbian people. Children of gay parents are showing up at social events, parades, churches, and schools. And there are more coming behind them. More students are coming in contact with gay parents and their children. The topic of gay parenting is not nearly as unusual in class discussions on child development as it used to be.

Back in 1990, almost as soon as we had sent the manuscript to the publisher, we had an urge to take it back and work on it more before publication. There had not been enough attention paid to men who become fathers through adoption or foster care. The law was changing rapidly, and we feared the book would be dated before it hit the bookshelves. The gay rights movement was taking major steps forward, and our sense was that gay fathering could become more of a focal point. We knew there would be more research published that would expand our knowledge about gay fathers.

Whereas Bryan Robinson and I collaborated equally on the first edition, he has not been available to assist with the revision. The revised edition contains work that both of us have done but that re-

sults from my vision and experience as a psychologist, a gay father, and gay grandfather. The book before you is different from the original in several ways. The literature, which continues to support the strengths of gay fathering, has been updated. New cases appear at the beginning of each chapter. There is more information on adoption and less information on HIV and AIDS. As a matter of fact, the chapter that had been devoted to AIDS has been dropped. In its place you will read about gay stepfathers, spiritual aspects of gay fathering, and gay grandparents. Our colleague, Claudia Flowers, whose area of expertise is research methodology, reviewed the gay fathering literature over the past decade and rewrote Chapter Seven. Finally, the original appendix of resources has been replaced by a listing of Internet resources. With so much information available electronically, it hardly seems necessary to use more paper and more space just to print lists of materials that are easily found using the Web.

There is much work that still needs to be done. As Dr. Flowers comments in Chapter Seven, the research findings are too impressionistic. There is a great need for well-designed research studies that generate knowledge about gay fathers. There are too many school counselors who do not know how to respond when a child, in the course of a session about grades or some other related matter, mentions that he or she has a gay father. There are too many children waiting to be adopted to justify denying a family experience to them solely because the potential adopters happen to be gay.

Working with gay fathers over the past twenty years has been a rare privilege. This past Easter I was asked to attend a party for gay fathers and their children. Watching those families play together was a wonderful experience. Today's children are growing up with a different understanding about what it means to be gay or lesbian. The day will come when gay families will be viewed just as other families. My hope is that this book will help us get closer to that goal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The list of names of those who have been instrumental in the revision of this book grows each day. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte has been generous in supporting our research. In particular, Dr. Mary Lynne Calhoun, chair of the Department of Counseling, Special Education and Child Development, has been steady in providing resources to support our work. Dean Jack Nagle and Vice Chancellor Denise Trauth have provided support in the form of a reassignment of duties that has allowed the senior author the time to complete this work. Further, the support of faculty colleagues and students has constantly encouraged us. And the special assistance of Ken Roess is gratefully acknowledged.

Gil Torre retyped the original manuscript, which no longer existed on disk. Claudia Flowers's work on Chapter Seven, as well as her willingness to read and make comments about the entire manuscript, has strengthened the book. The fathers who have volunteered their time either as research participants or as authors of case material have added to the depth of our knowledge about gay parents. Most of the fathers who wrote the cases that begin each chapter appear as themselves. In some instances, however, names and other identifying information have been altered to protect both the fathers and their children from public exposure. Without all these people, this book would not exist today.

May 2000
Charlotte, North Carolina

Bob Barret

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Introduction and Overview

Carl and his partner, Wilson, live in a large city on the East Coast. Both of them have lived as self-identified gay men since their twenties and have been in a committed relationship for twelve years. They began six years ago to discuss the idea of parenting, and four years ago made arrangements to adopt their son. They are active parents and participate in many family activities along with other adoptive gay fathers.

For us, the question of having kids was one of those first big questions that arose when we recognized that our relationship was getting serious twelve years ago. As such, it was a make-or-break issue for our relationship. Neither of us wanted to take the relationship further if it wouldn't eventually include kids. From the moment that we had talked about it enough to realize that this was essential to our idea of a lifelong commitment, we began making all our decisions (about jobs, moves, finances, community involvement, and so on) with an eye on how they contributed to our creating a larger family.

We had good jobs and many longtime friends where we lived in Florida, but when a professional opportunity came along for one of us that would require that we move, we took it. Even though it meant leaving a new house that we had lived in for just barely a year, the move would also take us to a state where adoptions by gay dads are

legal, unlike Florida. A lot of people, of all stripes, didn't understand why we would make such a radical change in our lives, but to us it was a way to get one step closer to our goal of parenthood. It really wasn't that big a sacrifice if you think of what our son went through, being abandoned and living in an orphanage before he came to live with us.

We talked about whether to adopt or to find a way of having biological kids. The more we talked about it, the more it made sense to adopt, especially since we were moving to a place where we could jointly adopt. There wouldn't be the issue of one of us having more claim to being "the" parent. Once we agreed that the surrogacy route wasn't right for us, then we had to decide about whether to adopt domestically or internationally. There had been lots of news about custody battles where gay and lesbian parents had lost fights with biological relatives of their kids. We decided to reduce that risk by adopting internationally. One of us had a problem with what felt like an issue of colonialism in doing this, but having to explain that concern someday to our kids seemed to pale in comparison to having to tell them why our family might be torn apart by a custody battle. Now that we're parenting a toddler, some of those more worldly, intellectual concerns seem less relevant—not less important, but less pressing.

When we had gotten settled into our new community and had figured out how we could make the adoption work with our careers (neither of us would work for the parental leave period, then one of us would only work part-time thereafter), we started examining all the different ways of adopting. We called an agency we heard of that worked well with gay and lesbian parents, but it was located too far from us, so they couldn't work with us. When we told the director our story, she was willing to spend an hour on the phone answering our questions about what we could and couldn't say to prospective agencies as we interviewed them. From this information we developed a script we would use to learn about an agency's willingness to work with a gay couple without having to identify ourselves as gay. It

was strange having to do this, but one of the things we learned was that agencies had to protect their relationships with countries that did not allow queer folks to adopt. If we didn't tell the agency and it didn't ask, then the agency could portray us in the home study in a way that would be acceptable to the foreign country and leave the agency in a position of plausible deniability if it were asked about our sexual orientation at any point.

We interviewed about sixty agencies over the phone before we had a short list of those that we went to visit. Our first visit was with an agency that seemed fine over the phone, but when we got to the meeting, the director and program coordinator were clearly uncomfortable when they realized we were a gay couple. We left feeling very hurt and angry that they had given us a good liberal line over the phone but couldn't overcome their prejudice when we actually met. We went to other meetings that went much better and so winnowed our list down to two agencies that were highly recommended by parents who had been through their programs and that had good reports from the state agencies that license and oversee adoption agencies. The costs of their programs were comparable too. One was a large agency that didn't seem to have any gay or lesbian staff members (that we met at least), and the other was a small agency managed by out queer folks. What made the difference for us was that the small agency was quick to return our calls, was very thorough in answering our questions, and had a clear and logical explanation of the entire process; the other one just wasn't good about those things.

When we made our decision to start looking for an agency, we told our families what we were doing. Because we had been talking about this for years, they were generally enthusiastic. Some of them seemed to have some of the standard concerns for how others might tease our kids, so we had to spend some time helping them realize that the whole family could help our kids learn to deal with those kinds of problems and that in doing so we would become a stronger family. One of us had parents who were retiring about that time in

another part of the country, and they decided to move to our city, in part to be closer to us. That has turned out to be a real blessing. Since our son's arrival, they have been an integral part of our lives and have given our son the gift of grandparenting at a really important time. We recognize how fortunate we are to enjoy this kind of support.

In moving to our new locale, we began to make friends with other gay and lesbian parents, other adoptive parents, and people from our professional lives. Since our son's arrival, our lives have come to include play dates and other social events focused on his social needs. Although generally this leaves much less time for the kind of interactions we used to have with our friends, most of those kinds of events that remain have evolved to be more kid friendly. We have come to be friends with a much wider and more enriching range of friends because of our becoming parents. It has also provided opportunities for nonqueer parents who have become friends to learn more about us, and many have remarked on the value of that learning to them.

One of the issues facing our immediate family is that none of us are of the same ethnicity. We have not had much direct conflict with racial bigotry, and although people may wonder why our son doesn't look like either of us, we suspect that there are enough mixed-race families in our area that we really don't stand out that much. So far, the biggest challenge has been to find adequate opportunities to expose our son to enclaves of people who share his ethnic background so that at least there are regular and frequent times when most everyone looks like him. As he grows and can offer his own opinions, we hope he will want to continue and even increase this kind of periodic immersion into his culture of birth, but if he chooses not to, we will respect his decisions.

Parenthood is a big change for us. The day-in, day-out responsibilities uplift and wear on us probably like they do on other parents. We may have some advantages though. By being adoptive parents, we have gone through a long and arduous journey to becoming parents, and that may have strengthened us to face some challenges just because we have already come over so many hurdles and

withstood so many invitations not to proceed. It would have been easy for us not to be parents; what we went through to get here has made us stronger. By being queer parents, we have been coping with lots of new opportunities for growth for which our lives could not have prepared us. We both grew up in an American culture that taught people some little bit about being mixed-sex parents, and much of that doesn't apply for us. And what we learned about being gay men, and later a gay male couple, did not offer much in the ways of parenthood and the ways that being a parent affects our relationship and roles. By being queer adoptive parents, we have had to make up our roles and revisit our adaptations over and over again. Gay relationships are formed without the guide of gender-assigned roles, and each couple must face the demands of daily life, creating agreements about who will do what. Being queer has made the newness of such creations perhaps more familiar, and being adoptive parents in touch with lots of other adoptive parents may have made the strains of repeatedly changing roles more familiar, but nothing has made the experience of balancing all these factors predictable or nonthreatening as has the power of the love we feel from our son. It seems that his smile holds all the answers.

Carl and Wilson

Springfield, Massachusetts

In recent years gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) citizens have been increasingly visible in demanding the basic rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. As these men and women have marched, lobbied, and learned to use the media to tell their story, the American public has become more familiar with their issues and more supportive of their cause. We can see progress in the number of companies and governmental organizations that extend protection in terms of job security, if not full domestic partner benefits, to their sexual minority employees. Support groups for GLBT adolescents exist in most major cities. In the 1990s the gay community across the nation came out more fully, and it continues to

successfully refute the long-held negative stereotypes of sexual minorities. It would appear that gay men and lesbians are poised to enter more fully into the mainstream of daily life. It is no longer so unusual for people to know a person who identifies as gay or lesbian. Even in the workplace, employee organizations of GLBT professionals are becoming almost commonplace. Once prevalent only in major metropolitan areas such as New York and San Francisco, gay and lesbian organizations are proliferating across the continent in virtually every metropolitan area. What appears to be a true change in social attitudes is clearly under way.

The gay parenting groups appearing in recent years are evidence of this new attitude. As gay men and lesbians throw off the negative attitudes that have limited their freedom, it is becoming increasingly common to see and hear them discussing parenting issues. Such questions as Should we have children? Where do we go to find an adoption agency that is open to sexual minorities? What about becoming foster parents? are common, as gay men and lesbians form relationships that closely parallel those created by heterosexual couples. In a survey of gay couples, one-third of the respondents under age thirty-five indicated they are considering becoming parents (Bryant & Demian, 1994). More and more gay men and lesbians are finding a rich source of life satisfaction in parenting.

The idea of two men becoming parents was once considered radical and even was seen by some gay activists as a sellout to heterosexism. Becoming involved with a gay man who had children was often seen as a betrayal of the gay rights movement. "Real gay men don't need to mimic the lives of straights by buying into the foundations of their lifestyle," said some leaders. Men shied away from involvement with children, fearing they might be accused of sexual molestation, an attribute of the negative image of gay men promoted by conservative groups. Still, the gay fathering movement has grown, and as many young gay men explore their expanding options, they too can dream of sharing their lives with children. The good news is that research consistently shows that they have the