Nontraditional family structures, especially those with one or more gay parents, are an overlooked segment of school populations. It is estimated that between 8 million and 10 million school-age children live with a gay parent. Regardless of individual political or social beliefs, it is important that these students and their parents feel welcomed, included, and safe in our schools.

Not all principals are experienced or knowledgeable about working with gay parents. Here are five tips from an experienced elementary school principal who has conducted research; spoken at local, state, and national conferences; and written about school climate for gay students, families, and staff members.

Review your school and district forms for inclusivity. Do school forms indicate “mother” and “father” or are they more inclusive? Review documents such as school handbooks and enrollment and emergency contact forms to make sure they are inclusive of gay parents and other nontraditional family structures. My school district revised its enrollment forms to indicate Parent 1 and Parent 2, which sends a positive message that we care about and respect all parents.

Be knowledgeable and aware of your state, district, and school policies for harassment and name-calling. It is often in unsupervised areas where children with gay parents are teased, taunted, and harassed. These kinds of behaviors should be dealt with in the same way you respond to other types of harassment and name-calling. I know a principal who meets with every class in his school at the beginning of the school year to review school policies and expectations; he talks about anti-gay words and harassment in the same context as other unacceptable behaviors.

Provide language to describe the variety of families in your school and community. When we use age-appropriate words such as two fathers, two mothers, and gay parents, we demystify the language and model appropriate behavior for others. It is important for children with gay parents to know that their principal and teachers know about their family and aren’t afraid to talk about them. One principal colleague acknowledged the variety of family structures, including same-sex parents, in her school during an open house. Consequently, a new family with two fathers approached her after the meeting to introduce themselves and to thank her for the acknowledgement.

Welcome and include gay parents in the same way you welcome all parents into your school. Include them in classroom and school volunteering opportunities and in any way parents are invited to be a part of your school. I encouraged a family with two mothers to be visible at our school, volunteer in the classroom, and attend events as a family. Though they were hesitant at first, the more active they became, the more welcomed they felt—and we all benefitted from their involvement.

Consider including gay parents in units on families and addressing the accomplishments of gay individuals. This strategy provides other examples of gay families without putting pressure on one gay family to always have to educate others; we can all take part in that.

An online search of gay parents or families can provide video and print resources that can be incorporated into classroom lessons and district curricula. One organization that has curricular and video resources is GroundSpark (www.groundspark.org). Also, the Human Rights Campaign’s Welcoming Schools program provides resources for schools and families (www.hrc.org/issues/parenting/7201.htm).

A parent’s positive school experience can have a lasting effect on his or her child. If a gay parent feels welcomed and included, there will be more connection to the school, support for school at home, and advocacy for your school in the community, which will lead to a more positive experience for the parent and child.

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