

Mostly Moms by Sylvia Edgerton and Sylvie Gascon

We are now pregnant with our second child. My partner carried our first child and now it is my turn. So we knew from experience, and are now even more certain, that the insemination process is one of the most trying periods in our lives. Months of questioning and waiting, fear of infertility, enormous financial investment and emotional instability with no assurance that one day it will work. We also knew, after having experienced it with my partner's pregnancy, that once it is over, once your period is late and those two little lines show up on the pregnancy test, you forget the whole thing. Honestly, you wonder what the big deal was and can't believe you ever doubted your fertility. Even though my partner did succeed in getting pregnant, I was not saved from the roller-coaster deception ride when it was my turn. I was so used to being let down that I could hardly believe I had good news when I actually got pregnant. I was happy but also a little in shock. Part of me really didn't believe that I would ever conceive. And then of course, there is the shock of the reality of what pregnancy means: nine months of total body changes, growing a huge "bump" as the British call it, concerns for the health of the developing baby, doctors, midwives, ultrasounds, stretch marks, and of course, the inevitable delivery. Not to mention raising the little worm into a decent human being and transmitting values and respect while accepting sleep deprivation as a way of life. Reality sets in quickly, especially when you are carrying the second child. You know what crying for five hours straight sounds like, you know what "the terrible twos" mean, and you know that you can't go back. When inseminating, you have two weeks out of every month to change your mind. Once you are pregnant, you are no longer in control of your life, for the rest of your life. Doesn't this sound like fun?

Being a lesbian mom is a lot more about being a mom than about being lesbian. I know that for society it is the inverse, although frankly, I don't know why. No two families raise their children exactly the same, and yet everyone does their best and somehow manages to survive, and even produce lovely children. My observations of lesbian parents and heterosexual parents over the past three years have led me to conclude that our differences are no greater than any two sets of parents when compared. Lesbian mothers are more of a conversation piece, and we are lacking some very fundamental laws to protect our rights. Everything else is the same. Sometimes we think we have found a difference. We thought that maybe lesbian moms are more jealous of the other mother's bond with the child, for example. But of course, men and women go through terrible jealousy as well. It is in all the maternity magazines. There is nothing that I have found so far as intrinsically lesbian about the way we or other lesbian mothers parent. What is interesting and challenging is the conversation piece element. Dealing with neighbors, baby sitters, educators, co-workers, travel agents, dry-cleaners, ice-cream vendors, etc. In other words, dealing with the society around us who still believe that lesbian parents have very little in common with heterosexual ones.

Being pregnant is so associated with heterosexuality that it is somewhat mind boggling to find one's place in the world of maternity. The image of a pregnant woman in our society is a symbol of marital success and the fulfillment of feminine duty. It has religious, moral and historical weight. In all the literature and resources available to a pregnant woman,

there is little mention of the single mom, the mother with AIDS, the teenage mom, the surrogate mother, the adoptive mother, the older mother, not to mention the lesbian mother. There are no marginal moms, as far as maternity magazines, books, clothing stores, web sites or prenatal classes are concerned. So where in this world of labeling and assumptions does a pregnant lesbian fit in? As of yet, there is no place for her. The public, in general, has not created a strong opinion or stigma yet. True, there are plenty of homophobic individuals who hate us before they even know our names. For the most part, though, the public is too in awe of the mystery of us to know how to react. Lesbian mothers, although we have been around for several decades, are growing in numbers and gaining enormous attention from the media. We have entered into the world's consciousness and have not yet been known personally by very many people. This precarious moment in history could lead us either way. Our families are being watched and monitored, studied and analyzed, and we must work to be understood and respected.

I believe that the way we present ourselves to the public, be it our neighbors or the ice-cream vendor, will make all the difference. If enough people in the heterosexual community know a lesbian family personally, they will not be able to deny our presence as respectable people. As lesbians we can choose how much we want to show the world our sexual orientation through the way we dress, the words we use, the stories we omit. As families there is a limit to how closeted we can be. If we are out to our kids (and it must be very hard not to be as they get older), we are out to the world. We love our children and want them to be happy. We want to protect them against the hatred in the world, and we want to arm them with tools so that they can protect themselves without being afraid. To do so, we need to be out to ourselves and to our children as they grow into an understanding of relationships. We need to educate the people who are closest to our family.

Whether you like it or not, the people closest to a family are the people you pass on the street every day. If you choose to hide you will have to be very creative to come up with answers to all the little questions that bombard us, and you will find yourself rather alone. Mothers need support to get through all the ups and downs of raising children. We need other mothers, family and friends. We cannot raise our children all by ourselves. My neighbor was there for me when I was having my first hormonal surge during my pregnancy. I didn't know I was pregnant and I felt so depressed by the whole thing. Gardening next to her while we discussed life helped me get through another day. She is a remarried mother, step-mom and grandmother going through menopause. We learn a lot from each other and give each other the kind of support that makes life possible. She is an example of all the people around us who make up a community. She is also a blessing.

A pregnant woman is a target of queries: how many weeks are you, do you know the gender of the baby, is it your first, is your husband happy about it, etc... It isn't long before the questions become revealing. We are not prepared for the directness of the questions. A pregnant woman belongs to the world and is no longer a private individual. She is subject to having her belly touched without being asked, having assumptions made about her sexual life, her health becomes the concern of everyone, and advice and anecdotes from everyone else's sister-in-law's pregnancy seem to spin around her. If her

own interest in her pregnancy is strong, she can expect to virtually disappear while the baby-maker in her takes over. At work, when I announced I was pregnant to the staff where everyone knew that I was a lesbian mother already, one woman asked me if it was an accident. She laughed afterwards, realizing her mistake. Everyone felt comfortable asking the most personal questions: who is the father, where does the sperm come from, are you going to have twins, is it the same father as for our other child, do you have a picture of him, is it in vitro, how does it work? Who asks a heterosexual woman: what sexual position did you use when this one was conceived or, are you sure you know who the father is?

When people ask me if it is my first baby, I find it difficult to know how to answer. For me it is both my first and my second. I have been raising a baby since his conception three years ago as a "real" mother, and yet I have never been pregnant, never given birth, and never breast-fed. When my partner was pregnant I was bursting with pride and excitement, yet no one ever stopped me on the street to ask me how far along I was. I felt like the thinnest pregnant woman alive. Men can boast or seek support, even complain about their pregnant partners, but a lesbian mother waiting for her partner to give birth is completely cut off from that bonding experience. We can't find the support we need just by buying a local paper or magazine, but we can find it through making an effort. Since my partner's pregnancy we have discovered resources that we did not have the first time around. Not the least of which is the LMA, a blessing for all lesbians who are interested in raising children. Having active support and a community of other lesbian families for our children is of immeasurable value. We have also found baby-sitters, health care workers, books and videos on our own and through the group that have made the difference. Having that network has allowed us to build our strength and convictions and to clarify our needs.

Being so out-of-the-closet has really helped for my pregnancy. The neighbors now know about us. We have already gone through the experience of statements such as "that is not your mommy, I've seen you a dozen times with another woman you call Maman." Or another classic "there is a different little kid, the same age, I could have sworn he even has the same name, who lives on your block. The two are almost identical. You don't know them?" We have been through the "but who is the real mom?" and "you seem like such a devoted baby-sitter, do you take other kids on the weekends?" We wonder, when people give us the cold shoulder or look the other way, if they are judging us. Maybe, we say, but maybe they are just having a bad day or have their own secret to hide. Now my community knows I am not the baby-sitter and that my kid is perfectly right to call me Mommy even though he calls "the other woman" Maman. They may not be comfortable with it, but they know. The talk has died down and we are back to regular life. Diapers and day cares, discipline and discussion. Our local dry-cleaner no longer asks me who the real mom is. We have moved on to the weather and vacation plans. The parents across the street complain of ear infections and ask me how my morning sickness is coming along. We are still two women sharing the job of parenting together. We are still lesbians living in a straight world, and as far as our world is concerned, we are back to being mostly moms.