



# **Lesbians negotiating parenting**

## **Overcoming biologically based cultural prescriptions of parental and household roles**

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# Lesbians parenting

- Lesbians bring children into their relationships to instant families
- Plan to have children in their relationships
- Parent and plan to have children as solo parents
- They are creative and flexible 'do family' and negotiate parenting relationships
- I will focus on the instant family and planned lesbian families from 25 Victoria families



# Forming families outside the mainstream

- Must overcome socially and culturally constructed scripts of mothering and parenting
- The decision to have children, or enter relationship with children, inevitably involve negotiation of relationships and roles
- These decisions will impact on family concept, family functioning and parental roles (Baetens, 2002)
- Concepts not well defined for lesbians



# Breaking the mould

- Outside gendered understandings of parenting allows for greater flexibility and creativity in choices in family structures and parenting arrangements
- More choices - who will give birth, sharing domestic labour, time spent inside and outside the home, who to involve
- Have more egalitarian couple and parenting relationship – because they are not bound by traditional and gendered roles -although birth mother's spend more time doing childcare



# Achieving egalitarian relationships is not without its challenges

- Must overcome socially and biologically constructed scripts which influence their own ideas about motherhood and parenting
- It takes a conscious and deliberate effort to counter these scripts that otherwise prescribe role relationships (Dalton & Bielby, 2000, p. 41)



# Parenting Intention & Organising Parenting

- Parenting intention is a significant factor in how family and parenting is organised
- ‘Parenting intention’ - the negotiated role and desired level of involvement of each of couple
- Also extends to the desired and negotiated level of involvement of biological fathers
- Parenting intention varies across families and across different types of family
- Beyond ‘intention’ is parenting ‘organisation’ when they consolidate family life and how parenting and domestic labour is negotiated and plays out



# Forming the instant family

- When children are brought to the relationship couples will be negotiating parenting from the beginning of their couple relationship - there is little time to be a couple
- They have not planned to have children, the birth mother's partner may never have imagined having children or birth mothers imagined sharing parenting
- They need to negotiate the level of involvement the new partner will have in parenting and her relationship with the children, which may also involve negotiating with the children and their non resident parent



# Negotiating step-parenting with another woman

- High expectations that women will take on a 'mothering' role in heterosexual stepfamilies, but different when there is already a mother
- Some expected to or expected to take on a role in parenting, some did not want to, some thought their partners expected too much or too little, some involved in parenting activities but not considered parent
- Maureen
- Liz, Susan, Nikki, Peta





# Step parenting

- Striving for and achieving equality in their relationships, not necessarily in parenting
- The younger the children the more likely the partner would be involved
- Expectations greater for women than men - expected to be caring and nurturing, at the very least understand the significance of the mother/child relationship
- Involving another woman could be perceived as a potential threat because the children already had a mother
- Led to some difficulties negotiating a role and place in the family



# Planning and having children

- Begin from a more equal position as planned together
- Face similar issues to any prospective parents - how it will affect their relationship, financial concerns, whether they will be good parents
- Have more choices - will both be birth mothers, who will get pregnant first, how they will create their family with a known or unknown donor, the level he will be involved in the family

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# Will also face different challenges to other couples

- More likely to encounter varied attitudes about their decision to parent, confronted with their own and others' attitudes and beliefs about lesbian mothers
- Challenges regarding rights, responsibilities, social and legal status as a family
- More need to negotiation of roles without scripts
- NBM's some (7 or 13) ambivalence about having children –motherhood and being lesbians seemed at odds, hadn't imagined having children
  - Mauve and Janet
- Spend a long time a long time planning and considering their options



# Parenting intention in planned lesbian families

- Once decision made likely that intention was to share parenting equally than in step families where the role of the non birth mother was not always clearly defined (11 of 13)
- In two non birth mothers remained ambivalent until after their child was born - Libby



# Motivation for being equally involved

- To ensure a clear place for non birth mothers in their children's lives not only for within their family but so they would also be recognised as mothers outside the family
- Non birth mothers seeking to facilitate bonding with their children



# Overcoming traditional prescribed roles

- Doing more cuddling and settling – “cuddle momma”, night feeds
- Taking on more childcare on weekends
- Changing paid work arrangements to spend more time at home
- Choice of language mummy and mummy, mummy and mumma, choice of the same surname
- Flexible work arrangements so they could both spend more time at home
- Taking on the primary caregiver ‘at home’ role



# Striving for equality not without its challenges

- Need to negotiate and re-negotiate roles as the needs of children changed
- Needed to overcome biological roles e.g. dependence on birth mother for breast feeding could undermine a sense of equality
- Needing to overcome assumptions about mothering



# Overcoming social assumptions

- Parenting organised around particular interests rather than prescribe roles
- Showing children women can meet the family needs – domestic tasks, childcare, home maintenance, working in paid workforce
- Sharing the time spent at home and in the paid workforce
- Presenting publically as a family
- Equality does not mean sharing all household tasks and childcare responsibilities equally





# Overcoming socially constructed scripts of fatherhood

- Creative ways of involving donors and fathers
- Level of contact determined by 'parenting' intention, role and place in the family
- Language played a part - donor dad, biological father, friend, uncle, Mike, father (more likely to be in stepfamilies)
- Few involved in parenting in planned families, more likely in step families
- Facilitated social rather than parenting relationships
- Separated biology and the caring practices of parenting – this distinction is more likely in planned rather than step families



## In Summary

- Mothers in de novo families did strive for and believed they are achieving equality within their relationships
- Couples in stepfamilies strive for and achieve equality within their relationships but not necessarily in parenting
- Non-birth mothers worked hard at being involved as equally as possible in the planning, nurturing and caring for children
- Being involved as equally as possible was not only important to secure the NBM's place within their family, but also so others in the outside recognised them as mothers