

**Facilitator reflections:  
Talking about Rainbow Families Event on 281017**

Written by Tracy Duncan

I came to this event as a children's entertainer and adult tutor working from the basis that childhood is a period of astonishing growth. When children are protected in childhood the basis for a good life is in place. Play happens when a child feels secure – the perfect hotbed for creativity, learning, discovery, modelling, growth, laughter and happiness.

I am also a Mum to a transgender child. Talking to my child about LGBT+ people happened at a young age because it was essential to his well-being that he understood he was not alone in the world. This awareness of diversity has given my child a layer of protection from those who do not understand. I have wrapped this child in Pride. He has learnt that we have laws which protect the freedoms of LGBT+ people. He is growing up with an awareness that transgender people have always been here, they have a rich history found in many cultures. He has learnt that there is an enduring biological underpinning to gender identity. In other words trans is a gender just like male/female. However these truths must be taught by Jack to his friends to achieve acceptance among his peers.

Sometimes when finding his voice he meets opposing, ridiculing, insensitive and uninformed views on the school playground. Sometimes he explains to his curious friend and he thinks they now understand but that can change the following day. He relies on the adult teachers to always have his back. But I ask myself regularly, is this enough? If Jack is tolerated why does he not feel included? Even when he is loved and accepted in his home life, his self-confidence and healthy development are undermined by a simple lack of knowledge and careful planning.

**Why is it important that we teach children about LBGT+ people?**

When health and education professionals assess the well-being of a child they ask is this child safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, responsible, respected and included? For children of transgender parents, same sex couples or children who are themselves transgender, non-binary, intersex the answer to the question, "Is this child respected and included?", is No. Even with policy and guidance in place teachers often lack the time, skills, resources and support to implement the policy and affect meaningful change to the minority child in the classroom. This child suffers, their educational attainment and social standing is affected and the child may then require added support. A dominant heteronormative culture falls down on the child as a personal problem. In time it can threaten their lives. Discrimination is a systemic problem. It impacts the child for the rest of their life, it will affect their mental health and access to opportunity. It can only be remedied with change; honest and open conversation about equality and compassion. It starts with our children, all children. Everyone will benefit from inclusive education and visible representation of LGBT+ achievement, value and history.

As parents and carers we are a child's sense of security. We are their first and most important teachers. We act as models to them and from us the child can stretch their secure attachment, free to explore and learn then return to a warm home filled with love and encouragement. If only it was as easy to write the last sentence as it was to be responsible for raising a child. We carry our experiences with us. Fear, shame, anxiety and anger impact our relationships and communication. Only by addressing these oppressive emotions can we start to live and teach from a place of pride. We cannot do this alone, it takes a village. As a teacher we are in a contract of trust with a child. Our children will experience the best and the worst of our nature. We cannot wear a mask with our children, we must relax and be our most authentic self. Then we must connect with our village and act with anti-oppressive practice and values in hand with the sole goal of equality and peace between people.

### **How do we use resources?**

PRIDE. We can use pride to challenge the status quo. We can be proud of who we are and the others we represent in a minority. We can be loud about equality. We can undermine outdated attitudes by insisting upon our voice. We can be a voice for others whose circumstances are unheard and unseen. We can rely on the protection of our allies who know just as much about the history and value of LGBT+ people as we do ourselves. Because the education we have all been given will be equal and delivered in a safe space.

When teaching we should be mindful that gender stereotyping is limiting to all children. Inanimate things are just objects without a gender. It seems so obvious. There are no boys' toys and girls' toys, only toys! There are no boys' interests and girls' interests, only activities that can benefit anyone who wants to participate. When we teach this we should be reminded that social pressure to conform to these norms contributes enormously to gender dysphoria, a condition which endangers a gender queer child before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Let us start with the obvious, let us laugh at how ridiculous gendered products are and dispel it in nursery schools where the divide begins. Boys are not more gifted at grasping tricky concepts and girls are not more gifted in emotional expression. We were merely taught this long ago. Now we listen to and encourage the heart's desire. As babies we began to learn with our senses. How we feel, what we feel is how we learn and then what we share.

### **What did guests share about their needs?**

They and their children are struggling to participate fully in society without inclusivity and visibility of LGBT+ identity. Many people were accessing/trying to access mental health support for themselves or for a child. Feedback from the day reflected how relieved people were to come together and share the burden of universal disadvantage. A dialogue began and it became clear that a need for greater understanding from other families/non LGBT+ people in their community. A new network was formed and people opted to stay in touch. Organic support was found that day. As facilitator I was mindful to help only as a sign-post to other meaningful

support. I could only offer empathy and promises to continue to highlight the predicament that change is needed and to try offering solutions that had helped my family. LGBT+ people are not the problem, lack of inclusive education is.

### **What are the next steps?**

Talking to children about rainbow families is essential. PRIDE has helped to overcome so much. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZg1VxeZ-hM>

We know now that when gender queer children are supported in all aspects of their life their mental health is on a par with their cis peers. Meaningful outcomes of changing the culture of education and communication are far reaching as we know that girls attainment thrives when they are assured they are just as capable at all things as boys. They will experience equality of opportunity and be reassured of it in the main stream attitude that envelopes them. There is no place for embarrassment or fear of getting it wrong when we act for equality of all children.

It became apparent that there was willingness to teach children about diversity from a young age in the room. But there was also a fear that to do so is to challenge the status quo and that is frightening when we already carry experiences of rejection and isolation. Society needs to fly its rainbow flag as an ally. It needs to be transparent and whole hearted in its welcome. Perhaps by asking the question to non LGBT+ people "*Why do we NOT talk to children about LGBT+ people?*" will we be able to dispel myth and move beyond tolerance into visibility and equality.

### **Example of beginning diversity conversation:**

"There are boys and girls and there are trans boys and girls. And some lucky people feel they are both a boy and a girl. They call themselves a person just like me and you. Everyone likes to give and receive kindness and the best kindness you can give to a rainbow person is to accept that person knows their own gender.

Some people tell you to like something or to not like something based on who you are. You can tell them this "There are no girls toys or boy toys, there are only toys." Only people have a gender and only they can tell you what it is for them."

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