

On Being a Gay Parent

by Brett Webb-Mitchell . Contributing Writer

It started in kindergarten

In Robert Fulghum's simply written, yet profound book, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," we learn how our communities would be a better place if we, who are adults, would remember to practice the same rules as kindergarten children. Of course, Fulghum did not mean all the knowledge that we would learn in life. Instead, many of the characteristics, attitudes, biases, sense of right and wrong, like sharing, being kind, living a balanced life, enjoying Oreo cookies and living a balanced life of work, play and learning would be well-honed by the time we are five or six years old.

What is also being learned in our early years, and may be set for life, is how we perceive each other. From the world in which we live, the neighborhoods and communities where we grow up, the friendships and parents who we relate with regularly, the television shows we watch, music we listen to, the books we read, images, voices and sounds we absorb from all around us, are teaching us how we interact and relate to one another. In other words, we are learning about race, class, sex, gender and abilities or disabilities.

We are also learning about sexual orientation.

As a parent, I have spent many hours playing with my children, joining in fun times on playgrounds, cheering them on as I stand on

the sidelines with all the other family members and friends on Rainbow soccer fields, waiting for dance lessons to end, celebrated birthdays with parties in which the average age was five years old

and participating in helping out in kindergarten classrooms as a helpful parent for special projects and school trips. It was, and is here, at these random places, at unscripted times, in the serendipitous occasions, that our children — and we — learn not only what is right and wrong, good and bad, but also who is normal and considered abnormal, ordinary and weird, permissible and something to be avoided at all costs.

Consciously or unconsciously, many of us learned how many people around us understand what it means to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer expressing. Sadly, what many young children learn is that "straight is good" and "gay is bad." I have heard "faggot," "queer" and "gay" said among my children's peers and parents in front of my children in playgrounds, soccer fields, dance rehearsal spaces, kindergarten classrooms and communities of faith. As a parent who is gay, it has been hurtful and sad to hear these epithets expressed freely and randomly by children as young as five years old or adults in their 40s and 50s. While I was often mute when I heard these comments earlier in my life, hiding in my closet, now that I am out as a dad who is gay, I have not missed the opportunity to correct such misperceptions and prejudice, whether in my writings or sometimes to the face of those espousing such hurtful rhetoric,

often in the presence of my children. I want them to witness what it means to correct a wrong and to address an injustice, to put a face on the issue.

As the school year begins again for those of us who have children in nine-month school programs — as well as for year-round public schools — we are about to re-engage with some of the joys and struggles, proud moments of accomplishment and endless gossip, sprinkled with lessons of virtues and

unanticipated troubles. I know that I will continue to help my child in a local high school think strategically and relationally about the gossip of having a dad who is gay, in which he too will be called names. As one former high school friend told him only a few years ago in a bullying moment: "You know, it runs in the family," the "it" being my being gay. From my children, I've learned that, thankfully, what also runs in the family is honesty, courage and love. That's what I can pass along to them. ▀

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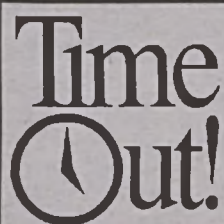
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