

Focus on activism

Challenging preconceptions of lesbian parenting

Victoria Clarke in conversation with Lisa Saffron

Lisa Saffron is a true lesbian parenting pioneer. She is a lesbian mother and the author of a number of groundbreaking books on self-insemination. The most widely known of these books is *Challenging Conceptions: Planning a family by self-insemination* (Cassell, 1994). Her first book on the subject was *Getting pregnant our own way: A guide to alternative insemination* produced for the Women's Health Information Centre in London in 1987¹. *It's a Family Affair: The complete lesbian parenting book* (Diva Books, 2001) is her latest volume. Lisa has also addressed the experiences of children with lesbian and gay parents in *What About the Children? Sons and daughters of lesbian and gay parents talk about their lives* (Cassell, 1996). Lisa was the founder and first executive director of PinkParents (established as a charity in June 2000, charitable status given up in June 2005²), an organisation that offers support and guidance to lesbian, gay and bisexual parents and educates and informs both lesbian, gay and bisexual parents and the wider community (see www.pinkparents.org.uk). Lisa still provides workshops and individual consultations for lesbians and gay men wanting to become parents and workshops for service providers. She has also emerged relatively unscathed from numerous encounters with the media over the last two decades! I spoke to Lisa at her home and transcribed and edited our two-hour conversation. Lisa has read and commented on the transcript. To begin with I asked Lisa about how she first got involved in supporting and raising awareness of lesbian parenting.

Early beginnings

VC: Tell me how you first got involved in the work that you do?

LS: I got involved through working at the Women's Health Information Centre (WHIC) in London in the early nineteen-eighties. WHIC provided information on all aspects of women's health and produced various leaflets and information sheets. We got a lot of inquiries from lesbians about starting a family. I started working with another woman from WHIC on a booklet on self-insemination because I was trying to get pregnant. Around that time, I moved into a shared house with other lesbians and there was a woman there who had a son by self-insemination. She and her group of friends had self-published a little booklet called *Self-insemination* in the late seventies and this was a bible for lesbians wanting to have a child. She had the contacts and information in relation to self-insemination so I set about the process of getting pregnant. After my daughter was born I finished writing my guidebook (*Getting pregnant our own way*) to replace hers - hers had gone out of print - and

¹ Now Women's Health (see www.womenshealthlondon.org.uk).

² Since Lisa resigned as executive director in June 2005, PinkParents has been managed by the D'Arcy Lainey Foundation.

because I was working at WHIC I could make it more widely available. It was just a little guidebook - I interviewed a few people and it was very DIY in all aspects!

VC: What kind of reaction did *Getting pregnant our own way* get?

LS: It was incredibly popular. In fact, a year after we produced it we had to reprint it. We had workshops and meetings about self-insemination and there was a great deal of curiosity about the process. We tried to publicise the guidebook by sending out press releases. None of the mainstream or establishment media were interested but the tabloids were very intrigued (laughs). We got a little bit of publicity. But it only really got into the media when it was their issue, their agenda; not our agenda. So that is the beginning of my story. I worked at WHIC for seven years and during that period I had my daughter and updated my book on self-insemination for the publisher Cassell – this version was called *Challenging Conceptions*. Then Cassell asked me to write another book and that was *What About the Children?* So it was through Cassell that the books got into the mainstream.

VC: How was *Challenging Conceptions* received?

LS: People said it really opened up the possibility of having children for them. They would send me photos of their babies. The whole point of the book is to say there are lesbians self-inseminating, it's not that complicated, and you can do it too. It made people aware that they're not on their own. It was a message of empowerment. A book is one way to get that message across, but not the only way. That's why in the early nineteen-nineties I started doing workshops. Workshops have been a very satisfying way of empowering lesbians who are thinking about having children. I run weekend workshops for small groups - about 12-15 people - and give people a chance to talk about the issues. I also do consultations - often with lesbian couples and sometimes with couples and the men they want to act as donors.

VC: Why did you set up PinkParents?

LS: Because rather than me doing all this work on my own I felt that the work would have stronger foundations if it happened under the umbrella of an organised group. I've passed the organisation on now to Kelly Higson of the D'Arcy Lainey Foundation in Manchester, but I'm still doing consultations and workshops. It might be time for me to move on though – there is only so long that you can talk about self-insemination! It was very exciting when it was new to me as well, but that was a long time ago. My daughter's twenty-one now! The issues for me are different.

Complicated conceptions

VC: Is lesbian and gay parenting just as complicated now as it always was?

LS: I'm afraid there are just as many complications. More people know about parenting and more people want to do it. We have a greater wealth of experience to draw on, but there have been so many difficult stories. When I started out my message was one of empowerment for lesbians - we don't have to get married and live with a man in order to start a family. But my message has changed. I tell women having a child is not so straightforward. They need to watch out for this, this and this, and think through all the implications. What women are doing is starting a family; not having a baby. Women can't go into the process thinking of a man as a commodity to get sperm from. They should remember that the donor is another person whose

feelings are part of the process. A lot of lesbians come to my workshops with that attitude - it's their right to have a child and they just go for it. They don't think about questions such as: How am I going to set up a family? Who's in my family? What kind of support is there for my family? Where do I place my family in the wider community?

VC: Has your agenda changed over the years?

LS: Over the years the story I'm telling has changed because of the complexity of family making. I've also broadened my focus beyond lesbian parenting to parenting in general. I've trained to become a facilitator with Parentline Plus (see www.parentlineplus.org.uk), which runs support groups for parents around topics like getting on with your teenager, more co-operation, less shouting! Courses about the everyday dynamics of family life from a humanistic perspective.

VC: Have you ever had any criticism from other lesbians of your promotion of lesbian parenting?

LS: I spoke about self-insemination at a lesbian conference in Italy in the late nineteen-nineties and some of the women there felt that lesbians who have children are consorting with the enemy, that by having sperm inside you, you are no different from heterosexual women. I'm not impressed by these arguments. There are lesbians who want to have babies, just like many heterosexual women.

VC: What about the relationships between those members of lesbian and gay communities who have children and those who don't?

LS: Those communities are very separate. When lesbians and gay men have children most cease going out on the gay scene, they make a different set of friends and spend more time with other parents. I don't think it's as bad for lesbians as it is for gay men. Gay men are really in a difficult position because it's so uncool to be a gay father on the gay scene. Gay fathers live two different lives.

VC: Do people still bring guilt to the workshops?

LS: Yes. I think every parent has that. It's just part of the nature of parenthood. In the workshops we talk a lot about whether people are ready for the responsibility of parenthood, and what they need to be ready for taking on this responsibility. It's a rare person that can say 'I'm mature and I'm ready'. Parenting does generate extra anxiety for lesbians. I often talk about what support there is, what their parents' reaction will be, what their friends will say, and whether they know any other lesbian mothers. Raising a child is very different from living your life as a lesbian couple. You have to be much more out. You can't hide it! The issue that generates most anxiety is probably that of whether to have a known donor, and whether children have the right to a relationship with their biological father. That's where I think lesbians face the same sort of debates and confusion that heterosexuals face - what is a father? What is his role? Is he expendable? The women who come to my workshops are not representative of the lesbian community on the issue of known donors. I see women who want to talk through this issue and have lots of feelings about denying the child a relationship with their father. Leading workshops in London has been different from leading workshops in other parts of the country because outside of London I've met many more lesbians or gay women who wouldn't consider themselves feminist. I think these women have a lot more angst about parenting because they don't have the

analysis that feminism gives. These are big issues and nobody's got the answer. People find things that work for them.

VC: And often the arrangements people make don't work?

LS: There have been lots of cases where donors have taken lesbians to court. I'm not sure how the law could be changed to deal with this.

VC: What's complex for me is that there's not one 'right' way of thinking about this issue. Is there a direction that we should be heading in that would represent something better?

LS: I've been working with lesbians before they set up these family arrangements and I've been counselling gay men who've been asked to be donors. Everybody has got to be really clear what their needs are. What a lot of men are doing is going into this process saying 'I want a baby and I'll do anything that the lesbian couple says'. They don't acknowledge that what they actually want is to be a dad. What it means to them to be a dad is making decisions about where the child goes to school or having the child live with them for half the week. People have got to be honest at this early stage.

VC: There are also problems between partners.

LS: Yes, we've had people calling up the PinkParents helpline saying I had a joint residence order with my partner and now she has gone to court to have it taken away and nobody will support me. This isn't a clear lesbian rights issue and that's even without a donor involved. Family relationships are always complex but they will work if people can communicate with each other and they're honest with themselves. There could be changes in the law that could help but I don't know what they are.

In the vanguard of social change

VC: I almost feel a sense of disappointment when I hear about biological mothers revoking any access that the social parent has to the child. It seems to me that relationships that exist outside of the remit of law are only going to work if we make them work, and we don't fall back on biology and legal status. It is only through our actions that our families work and biological mothers revoking access is tantamount to an admission that non-traditional families can't work.

LS: What does 'work' mean?

VC: That's a very good question! How about parental relationships being sustained in some kind of way, where one parent doesn't attempt to take the other parent's access away?

LS: They don't resort to the privilege that they have because they're in a lesbian relationship. The birth mother does have more power than her partner and it's nasty when she uses that. But I've talked to birth mothers who have been through that process and they say their partner was not a good influence for the child. In terms of individual stories, it's not always so clear cut. The biological mother might say the only way she could keep her partner away was to go to court. It's important to remember that a lot of people aren't very together in their lives, and they're not holding the banner of non-traditional families

VC: It's expecting too much from people.

LS: All they wanted was a baby; they didn't ask to be in the vanguard of social change!

VC: When you're a lesbian parent, you're not just a parent. You have to

uphold these amazing standards and do all these wonderful things, otherwise you'll let the side down.

LS: It's hard being a parent. I wouldn't say from my own experience that I've done it very well, that it worked. I mean my daughter grew up, I fed her (laughs), but did it work? I don't know. If I thought that I had to represent myself as a paragon of lesbian motherhood I would definitely freak out! I couldn't live up to that. All you can do is your best and it may be that your best was to go to court and kick out that girlfriend who was driving you crazy. It's very hard for lesbian parents to share with other lesbians how difficult they're finding parenting because they're afraid of being criticised. They're worried they're letting down other people because the view you expressed is what most of us feel. Oh god, I'm not just me, Lisa Saffron, raising my daughters and living with my partner, I am a lesbian mother. That's too hard for most of us to carry. Ultimately, our responsibility is to ourselves as individuals and not to someone else's idea of what we should be.

Family planning

LS: One of the best things about being lesbian is that you can't get pregnant accidentally! You have the opportunity to think about it. That's what I tell people who come to the workshops because often they feel resentful about all the planning. The most important thing about family planning is imagining what your life will be like when you have a child.

VC: The technicalities and practicalities of getting the child overshadow having a family.

LS: That's right. But most people are not in a space where they can think about family making and child development. They want to focus on really minor details like the last name they will give the child. Even with adoption you can't tell people what it's going to be like because they have this fantasy that drives them through the process - it's going to be wonderful, they're going to rescue a traumatised child, and that child will love them and be grateful. Actually children are not sure whether they have been rescued or whether they've been kidnapped. What is needed from the adopter is a sense that there is a traumatised child and they have got to be there as a rock for that child. The child has basically built up defences to cope with their chaotic family and when they were taken into care they came apart in pieces. The only thing an adoptive parent or foster carer can do is put the child back together. In a sense some of that attitude would be helpful with birth children - it's not 'my family', 'my baby', all starry eyed romantic stuff. This little person is dependent on you. They are another human being and you have a relationship with them.

Raising awareness

VC: Tell me about the workshops that you run for service providers.

LS: I run workshops for social workers in the field of adoption and fostering and for staff at fertility clinics to raise their awareness and to help them with their practice and policies. Some fertility clinics are still struggling with whether they should accept lesbians as clients. People at these workshops always ask about research - it reassures them if I can say there's a large body of research that shows that lesbians are pretty good as parents. I always feel

deeply uneasy presenting that research, but I will do that if it helps them think about lesbian parenting in a more positive way. I always share with them the limitations of the research, especially when I'm running a workshop with an adoption social worker. That social worker might have a lesbian couple sitting in front of her at work - what does the research tell her about that couple? Her job is to assess those two individuals and see if they're suitable to adopt. It isn't to say 'they're lesbians, oh that's all right, the research says lesbians are good parents'. Rather, the question is: do these two people have the emotional maturity to look after traumatised children from the care system? No research is going to help that social worker with that question because there's no research on that couple. Adoption social workers and people working in fertility clinics are not dealing with the mass of people called lesbian, they are dealing with individuals who want to adopt or have fertility treatment.

VC: The research process creates that category – lesbian/gay parent - and everything that person says or does gets seen through that category.

Research turns complex individual lives into members of a category and everything about those lives gets seen through a very tiny lens.

LS: That's right. I can't see myself in any of the research papers. Who are they talking about? Over the years I have talked to hundreds maybe thousands of lesbians and everybody has their own take on things and their own issues.

VC: It does seem that all individuality and complexity gets taken away when you get plonked into the category lesbian/gay parent and that's what bothers me about the research. For example, you might make a decision to discipline your child in a particular way or talk to them about their donor in a particular way, and those decisions have got nothing to do with your sexuality, and everything to do with – say - how you were brought up.

Researching lesbian and gay parenting

VC: What do you want to know from research?

LS: Most of the research on lesbian mothers has been done for the kind of uses I've put it to - convincing policy makers or practitioners to change. Even though those people ask me for the research, is that the factor that really influences them? I'm not convinced that it does, so it would be interesting to do some research on how and why people change. What about adoption and fostering services? What would help those services to change their practice to accept lesbians? They have to by law; they can't justify turning lesbians away. But what they do is fail to place children with lesbian or gay couples. When we've done workshops it's always been with assessing social workers, we rarely get to work with the children's social workers. Assessing social workers say they are happy to assess and approve lesbian and gay couples but they can't place children with lesbian and gay couples because the children's social workers believe that children need a mother and a father, a heterosexual family. There is no research on adoption by lesbian and gay couples so assessing social workers ask why they should put people through this long process if they can't tell them honestly that they will get a child to adopt.

VC: Have you seen shifts in the broader social context? What kinds of changes are still needed?

LS: Lesbian parenting is definitely more acceptable. It's much easier to be out as a lesbian parent; there are certain pockets where it's easier than others. I think education is an area that still needs a lot of work. Most of the work that I've seen on homophobic bullying focuses on young people who have some idea of themselves as lesbian or gay or different. Initiatives on homophobic bullying don't take account of the fact that the children of lesbian and gay parents at primary school and nursery need a safe environment. I did some workshops with student teachers and most of them were so apathetic. Their attitude was 'what's the problem?' There was a group of mature students who had very strong views that little children shouldn't hear the word 'lesbian' or 'gay' and lesbian and gay parents should just keep quiet and not be out. The workshop was quite disheartening. Schools – primary and secondary - have got to recognise that there are children with lesbian and gay parents and they are part of the community.

VC: That apathy sounds very familiar - just like my students! How do we challenge that?

LS: Sometimes what lesbian and gay parents and their children have to do is be very visible and say this is our reality, this is our story. I started off being really out and talking to the media about my life. But you can't really do that when you have school-age children. Journalists call PinkParents and ask to talk to a lesbian mother who is willing to have her photograph splashed over the national media. I think that's an unfair position to put a lesbian mother in. Also, what they're doing is taking that one individual and saying here is a lesbian mother, everything she does is through the prism of being a lesbian mother. Yet all she's doing is walking her child to school or cooking the tea. It is very hard to manage the media and often the only people they do get are kooky people that don't represent the cause very well.

VC: When I watch a television programme on lesbian and gay families I usually ask myself why do they always get 'the freaks'?

LS: On the documentary *Making Babies the Gay Way* (broadcast on Channel 4 in January 2004) they had a number of lesbian and gay couples who were starting a family and they showed them in the most appalling way. They might have been really appalling people, but I think they were just ordinary messed up people. This does not advance the cause. So I don't know what to do in relation to the media. I've stopped talking to them because they've got their story and they're controlling it and that's not what I want to say.

VC: The 'positive' message that often comes out from the media is that 'it's okay, we're normal we don't make our children gay'.

LS: We try but we don't succeed! (laughs)

VC: All the negative assumptions that might be heard from judges dictated the research and they still do to a certain extent. It's a very negative message – every time you hear someone in the media saying 'it's okay there's a big body of research that says we're normal' – my reaction is 'of course we are!'

LS: How comfortable are we being lesbian mothers in today's society? Part of it is you make your own reality. I've always taken the line that I'm out and if people have a problem with me, that's their problem. I will educate people and I'm very patient, but basically that's their problem.

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Lisa Saffron is an activist who values belonging, connection, truth and justice. She puts her values into practice through her writing, training, parenting, fostering, advice work, campaigning, Ki Aikido, and academic health research. She is currently writing a novel set in Israel/Palestine.

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