

**The queer parent's primer: A lesbian and gay families' guide to navigating the straight world**

**Stephanie A. Brill (2001)**

**Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.**

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A handbook for queer parents may seem an odd choice of book to review for *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* but Stephanie Brill's *The queer parent's primer* is simply one of the best books I have read on lesbian and gay parenting.

Handbooks for lesbian and gay parents have been published since the mid-1980s (e.g., Pies, 1985) and offer advice to lesbians and gay men on 'creating families and raising children' – as the title of Clunis' and Green's (1995) book indicates.

Along with guidebooks for lesbian and gay couples, guidebooks for lesbian and gay families have become so popular that reference has been made to a queer families 'handbook industry' (Gabb, 2001: 323). The popularity of these books is a sign of the times: the anti-family ethos of gay liberation and lesbian feminists' calls for women to free themselves from compulsory motherhood are now whispers from a distant past (Kahn, 1995). Lesbians and gay men are now demanding the right to marry and recognition for their chosen families.

Handbooks typically offer advice and support to parents (and parents-to-be) about topics such 'coming out', religion and spirituality, getting babies/children, children's gender and sexuality, divorce and break-up, and dealing with homophobia (e.g., Drucker, 1998, Johnson and O'Connor, 2001, Pies, 1985).

Unlike *The queer parents' primer*, many of the books use the voices and experiences of lesbian and gay parents to illustrate key points (e.g., Drucker, 1998). Most of the books – including *The queer parent's primer* – are published in North America, which means that some aspects of the books have limited relevance for parents not living in the USA and in Canada.

Brill's book is rather different from most other handbooks for queer parents – whereas, most handbooks are firmly located in a liberal-humanistic framework and present queer families as 'just like' heterosexual families (e.g., Drucker, 1998), the point of departure for *The queer parent's primer* is a recognition of the 'significant differences' (p. 6) between queer and straight families. In particular, Brill notes that 'language, social and legal structures, and religions support most heterosexual families' (p. 6). In a constructionist reading of the lesbian parenting

literature, I organised pro-lesbian psychological and feminist work under two main headings: 'no different from heterosexual parents' and 'different from heterosexual parents and transformative' (Clarke, 2001). This book falls firmly into the latter – Brill writes that the queer community 'has the opportunity to totally reinvent what family means to us, who is in our family, how we would like to go about having children, and how we would like to go about raising those children' (2001: 1). She also offers a 'wake-up call' to lesbian parents who 'are not acting in good faith' (2001: 3) towards their co-parents when relationships end. She is critical of the 'appalling' (2001: 3) trend of biological or legal mothers refusing to allow their co-parents joint custody or visitation rights to their children. She argues that such mothers are acting in a 'homophobic fashion' (2001: 3) and asks:

why are we currently unable to honor the love, intention, and actual parenting of our partners as valid? Why are we choosing to defer to biology and law when it is convenient? ...If we want our families to be recognized as valid, we must recognize them as valid, and not just when the mood suits us (2001: 3).

Although *The queer parent's primer* covers the same ground – coming out, religion etc. – as most other handbooks, Brill's radical vision means that the book offers something different in relation to these topics as well as incorporating issues hitherto unaddressed. The book is organised into five parts and offers advice on subjects as diverse as choosing names and titles that both honour and debunk biology, raising children with gender awareness, encouraging activism in children, and being the first queer family in your child's new school. Throughout the book there are a number of exercises and examples designed to help parents (and parents-to-be) work through various issues including imagining their wildest dreams and worst nightmares about how school could be for their child.

I discovered Brill's book when struggling to write the discussion chapter of my PhD thesis – my thesis had centred on a critique of psychological research on lesbian and gay parenting that aims to prove lesbian and gay families to be just as good as straight families and of (psychological and popular) discourses that construct lesbians and gay men as 'just like everybody else'. Brill's book helped me to articulate an alternative vision for research on lesbian and gay parenting: one that centred on social change and making the world a better place for lesbians and gay men rather than squeezing lesbian and gay families into

traditional understandings of family and parenting. For instance, most psychological research on schooling is concerned to demonstrate the minimal developmental impact of homophobic bullying and children's ability to form functional peer-relationships and play with gender-appropriate toys. I suggested that psychologists working within a positivist-empiricist framework look instead at the negative psychological impact of a school curriculum that fails to acknowledge queer families. Brill writes about progressive curriculum building as the ultimate vision, noting that it would be wonderful if a teacher were presenting a math problem and said: 'Sarah's family had a loaf of bread. Sarah's mom ate three slices of toast. Her other mom ate two slices of toast. There was one piece of toast left. How many pieces of bread were in the loaf?' (2001: 143).

I strongly encourage anyone with an academic (or a personal) interest in lesbian and gay parenting to read this book. Although it is written as a popular book for lesbian and gay parents (and parents-to-be), it provides a way of thinking about lesbian and gay parenting that as an academic I have found invaluable. Having read just about everything there is to read about lesbian and gay parenting when writing my PhD thesis, I can say with some confidence that this a lesbian and gay parenting classic in the making. Brill is political, passionate and not afraid to tell you what she thinks.

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