

happy families

Don't believe the myth – gay people can be successful, loving and happy parents too.

by CATHY ANDERSON

There are many ways lesbians and gay men can 'create' a family. The first step, says Felicity Martin, coordinator of the Love Makes a Family Campaign is to contact a support group such as Maybebaby or Gay Dads Victoria and meet other parents and prospective parents.

"Sometimes starting a family can be in a climate of fear and uncertainty, so it's best to speak with other parents who have been there before you," she said. Discovering how other families went about finding a sperm donor, setting up co-parenting arrangements, dealing with homophobia and coping with adverse familial reactions can save a lot of grief.

LESBIAN MUMS

Lesbian mums have several choices for artificial insemination: using donor

sperm through a fertility clinic, or using sperm from a known donor either in the privacy of your home or at a clinic.

In Victoria lesbians cannot legally access or assisted reproductive technology (ART) or IVF. They can travel interstate but there is a shortage of sperm donors and it can be expensive.

Many women choose to co-parent with a known donor, either a straight or gay man who they want to play a major role in the child's life. Melbourne IVF and the Royal Women's Hospital will test and quarantine known donor sperm for six months, after which time the birth mother can self-inseminate at home.

It took three years for lesbian parents Libby Sandy and Carla Sgro to have their daughter Ella from the time they decided to become parents. They had two false starts with donors: the first was a straight man whose family reacted badly to the idea, and the second was a



Co-parents Nick Testro, Libby Sandy (holding baby Ella) and Carla Sgro.

gay man whose partner did not want to be a co-parent. Then they found Nick Testro, a gay man who always wanted to be a dad.

"We spent a lot of time discussing it with Nick," says Libby. "We always wanted someone to be a co-parent, not an anonymous donor."

Nick said one of the hardest parts of his coming out experience was that he may never be a dad. When he heard about Carla and Libby through a friend he approached them. He sees Ella every weekend and will play a very hands-on role. "One of the attractions was being able to give her back to the girls, but I do get a bit sad when she leaves," he said.

The trio say despite some initial shock, their families have been fantastic. "I think it's wonderful for Ella to have so many people who will love her," says Carla.

The trio are very comfortable with each other and their arrangement, mainly because they share the same beliefs, easygoing

natures and politics, and are unworried about negative reactions to homophobic taunts in the playground.

"We will be confident about who we are, and not take a 'gently gently' approach," says Nick. "We want to give Ella the right message as well as other families and the schools she attends."

BRADY BUNCH

There are also many lesbian parenting units that include children from a heterosexual relationship. These, according to Ruth McNair, Rainbow Families 3 Conference co-convenor, have their own challenges, particularly for the non-birth mother.

"Some non-birth mothers say they are not parents, they are just supporting their partners," she says. "The father is often on the scene and it can be difficult for the partner if they live with the mother and they have to discipline the children."



Ever Thought About Foster Care?

Can you give a child a place to call home for a while? Why not become a foster carer? Share Care is currently recruiting more caregivers in the City of Yarra. No formal qualifications required, just a genuine interest in providing a safe and loving home for a child. Singles and couples are welcome to apply. Share Care provides training, professional support and a non-taxable foster care allowance up to \$180 per week.



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SURROGACY

Gay dads who want sole parenting rights, rather than a co-parenting agreement with the birth mother, are increasingly turning to surrogacy, where a woman agrees to carry the child usually using a donor egg.

Currently, surrogacy is illegal in Australia, which is why many gay dads are pursuing legal surrogacies in the USA and Canada.

Lee Matthews and his partner Tony Wood are the most well known surrogate dads thanks to the documentary *Man Made: The Story of Two Men and a Baby*.

The pair have two children, Alexander and Lucinda, and it was a long journey.

"It took us six IVF tries before we became pregnant with Alexander," Lee told *bnews*. "I have to admit that toward the sixth IVF attempt we did start to wonder whether it was ever going to happen. To contrast that, we got pregnant on the first try with Lucinda."

But surrogacy may not be for everyone. "Unfortunately it's a very expensive way to create a family. Very few gay men can do it because of the costs," says Lee.

FOSTER CARE

Late last year the issue of gay foster parents hit the news big time as NSW and Victorian foster care associations openly called for gay and lesbian carers to



Surrogate dads Tony Wood (left) with partner Lee Matthews and baby Lucinda and toddler Alexander.



Lee with a young Alexander.

register in order to combat the decline in heterosexual recruits.

But gay foster parents have been around much longer than that. Ian Seal has been caring for children whose home lives have become unstable for more than ten years. He signed up through an agency and has looked after two brothers for the past seven years.

Foster children may come from abusive households or from a family that voluntarily asks for occasional care. Ian says his sexuality was never a problem with the agency (he was always up front) but it can cause some concern with the family.

"With the boys, there was a very homophobic response from the family, so we took several months to get to know the boys, who were already in institutional care before they came to live with us," Ian says.

Who should be a foster parent? "Anyone who cares about kids and has the time and energy to do it can be a good foster carer," says Ian.

ADOPTION

It is currently illegal for a single gay person or a gay couple to adopt a baby in Australia or from overseas. Most hetero couples look to countries such as Korea, China and the Philippines to adopt, but these countries have very strict conditions, one of which is no gay parents allowed.

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