



GAY DADS HAVE THEIR DAY by Ian Gould



Gary Hampton, left, pictured with his partner Andrew, their son Oliver and Oliver's mothers Catherine (rear) and Francine

THEY MAY REMAIN IN THE MINORITY, BUT OPENLY GAY DADS WILL CELEBRATE DIVERSE PARENTING MODELS THIS FATHER'S DAY

For Gary Hampton, coming out 20 years ago meant announcing himself as part of a group stereotypically seen as childless hedonists. But the then 17-year-old was not about to abandon a long-held dream.

"I always knew that I could be a father and when I came out as gay I didn't discount that option," Hampton said.

Twenty years on, Hampton has witnessed his ambition come to life. On Sunday he and his partner Andrew will celebrate Father's Day as dads to their three-year-old son Oliver.

The Sydney couple will join other men who, though part of a firm minority, are issuing a challenge to convention by parenting as openly gay men.

Determining how many gay men in Australia have children, and ascertaining the nature of their parenting arrangements, is a tricky business. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' most recent population and housing

census, five percent of an identified 11,000 gay male couples in Australia had children, compared with about 20 percent of lesbian partners.

But the 2001 information made no distinction between offspring from previous heterosexual relationships and those from other parenting arrangements. Nor did it take into account single gay dads.

University of Sydney law academic Jenni Millbank, who has written major parenting reports for the NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, said in her experience most gay men who were parents tended to have had their children with a former female partner.

In LGBT community consultations Millbank observed that when openly gay men formed families in partnership with another woman or couple, it was commonly "a friendly, avuncular relationship with the kids, ranging from casual to regular contact."

Gary Hampton and his partner wanted more than that when they decided to become dads about five years ago.

After dismissing an international surrogacy arrangement as "unattractive and difficult-looking", and with adoption in NSW out of reach for same-sex couples, the pair were introduced through a mutual friend to a lesbian couple who also hoped to become parents.

Hampton agreed to donate sperm, and after about six months one of the lesbian partners became pregnant.

Under a parenting model downloaded from the Internet – "a co-parenting arrangement for lesbian and gay parents ... that spells out everything, areas of responsibility and that sort of thing" – the four parents-to-be agreed their child would live in each couple's household half the time, after spending his first six months with his mothers.

It's an arrangement that works well, according to Hampton, despite early insecurities and continuing scepticism from some. In contrast to his parents' initial agreement, Oliver was about eight months old before he spent his first night

with his dads, and almost two when he began living with his fathers 50 percent of the time.

“That was difficult for everyone involved because all of us were a bit insecure about our positions,” Hampton admitted. “I think there is a sort of culture among the gay male ‘donor dad’ people that shared parenting is too hard and doesn’t work. But for us it really does work.”

Oliver’s four parents have family planning meetings every two to three weeks, and communication between the mums and dads helps ward off possible parenting rivalry.

“Certainly we could go down that track of competitiveness ... but they are general fears that everybody has,” Hampton said.

Not all gay dads are so keen on female involvement in the parenting process. Lee Matthews became a dad for the second time two weeks ago, and is quick to emphasise he and partner Tony are the only parents their two-year-old son and new daughter have.

“Our children have two dads who love them and look after them. They don’t have a woman as a parent. So because there is no female parent, there is no mother,” Matthews said.

The Melbourne man can make the assertion with confidence because he and his partner became fathers through a surrogacy arrangement in the United States.

The same surrogate bore the couple’s two-year-old son Alexander and new daughter Lucinda, both times using another woman’s egg and sperm donation by Matthews and Wood.

Commercial surrogacy arrangements like those taken up by Matthews and Wood are unlawful in Australia. Even where they are permitted – like in parts of the United States - a price tag running to the tens of thousands is often a deterrent.

But while commercial surrogacy’s critics resent what they see as a business-like transaction, Matthews’s experience has been positive. “We’ve received nothing but support from so many aspects of the broader community, including the crèche that our first child goes to,

right down to good old playgroup or Mums’ group that the local council offers new parents.”

He attributes the outcome to an inner city postcode and a robust defence of their parenting model. “I think we have actually been quite proactive in asserting why we want to be parents and that may result in people not asking.”

“[And] I think with most aspects of being gay, as soon as you can personalise it, people look at you as individuals.”

Meanwhile, gay men hoping to independently form a family in Australia face a struggle. Fostering, adoption and surrogacy are the three main options, according to Jenni Millbank. But fostering is not usually intended as a permanent parenting arrangement. And since same-sex couples cannot adopt in NSW, gay men must apply as individuals.

“There is much less likelihood that as an individual you’re going to get an [adoption] order compared to a couple,” Millbank said. International adoption is also competitive and skewed towards heterosexual couples, while commercial surrogacy is unlawful in Australia. Altruistic surrogacy – where the surrogate receives no payment – is highly complicated and prohibited in many states if medical expenses are paid or advertising occurs.

Adding to the legal complexities is possible discrimination, an area in which gay dads’ experience appears mixed. Like Lee Matthews, Gary Hampton said he and his partner had yet to experience much serious prejudice. The pair appeared on Channel Seven’s *Sunrise* program this week in a bid to raise awareness of same-sex parents, but will decline media appearances once Oliver starts at school to protect their son’s privacy.

They will also ensure teachers and parents at Oliver’s school know he is from a same-sex parented family, and are hopeful their son won’t experience harassment.

But another gay father believes prejudice is a real issue for would-be gay dads to weigh up, particularly if women aren’t involved as parents. Paul van Reyk has fathered six children to

different mothers since the 1980s through private sperm donation arrangements.

“I think that there is a significant part of the population who is entirely comfortable with two women having kids,” the Sydney 53-year-old said. “[But] I think that they’d be less comfortable with two gay men who chose to have a child where there wasn’t, say, a ‘mother’ somewhere involved.”

“There is still a really strong prejudice against the notion that [gay men and lesbians] are absolutely reasonable parents.”

Gay dads can also expect limited support options, according to another gay father Reymon Leglise. After the then married father-of-three came out as gay two years ago, he faced a battle.

“I spent six months either searching the web, going to forums, going to different groups and outings and anything else, trying to find some form of support for children [of gay and lesbian parents].”

Leglise eventually established social group Gay Dads And their Young (GDAY) late last year.

GDAY runs social outings for about ten gay fathers and their children, but Leglise said it and a similar organisation in Melbourne were rarities.

The prospect of limited support, combined with legal complexities and possible prejudice might be enough to warn many gay men off fatherhood. But Lee Matthews dismissed those fears in the lead-up to his first Fathers Day as a two-time dad.

“It certainly cools the lifestyle down, there’s no doubt about that,” he said of parenthood as an openly gay man.

“But it opens up whole new social experiences that are quite wonderful and rewarding.”