

abuse may have impacted on the women she interviewed. It is a unique and distinctive book, which will provide a valuable resource for lesbian survivors, the women who love them, and for counsellors and therapists.

#### **Further Resources:**

The following resources may be useful for women needing help or support in the UK.

One in Four – a national charity offering one to one counseling and group support, where all the workers are survivors. This organization is for men and women.

0208 697 2112

The DABS Directory – Directory and Book Services –contains listings of all current resources for sexual abuse.

01709 860023

The Survivors Trust is a national umbrella organization for all specialist services around sexual abuse.

01788 551150

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## **The Complete Gay and Lesbian Parenting Guide**

Arlene Istar Lev  
Berkley 2004. 364 pages

### **For Lesbian Parents**

Suzanne M Johnson & Elizabeth O'Connor  
Guilford Press 2001. 242 pages

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The irony of agreeing to review two parenting books is that between sharing care for my two-year-old son and a busy therapy practice, I don't have time to read whole books. But I'm glad I read both of these, especially the Johnson and O'Connor. I read them both cover to cover and for gay parents and therapists, their benefits are, like all good parenting books, as reference texts to consult for ideas about a parenting issue.

Both books draw on real parenting experience with studies and examples gleaned from a specific research study in the case of Johnson and O'Connor and through client information and internet networks in the case of Istar Lev.

Both also cover basically the same territory including descriptions of different types of family, how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT)

families are created and the questions raised by various routes like insemination with known or unknown donors, concerns for biological and non biological mothers and the range of adoption issues, the different stages of family life and problems that might arise along the way through to race and culture (particularly in relation to trans-cultural adoption), legal information, family break up and the creation of new step family structures.

One word of caution though is that both books are American, so some of the legal facts are different and the assumption of the normality of trans-cultural adoption and surrogacy are very different from the UK where we may have more reservations about the rightness of using these routes to create a family.

Surprisingly the supposed audience for both books was largely, though not wholly, irrelevant. Istar Lev addresses some additional issues for bisexual and transgender parents, however she also appears to me to address co-parenting between gay men and lesbians more from the lesbian point of view and, from my experience, there are a lot of concerns specific to gay men as parents that deserve more space and thought. The Johnson and O'Connor also has relevance for all LGBT parents irrespective of gender because of the topics which it addresses rather than its audience and I wouldn't dismiss it because you aren't a lesbian or working with a lesbian parent. The key differences are those of tone and emphasis – the Istar Lev is primarily for parents about parenting i.e. the first third of the book is about how to get pregnant or adopt. She also comes from a more 'queer politics' perspective, and whilst I own up to being tired when I started reading it, I found it slightly bossy and politically patronising and probably wouldn't have got past the introduction if I hadn't had to read it. For example, Istar Lev tells us to be proud of our alternative family structures whilst Johnson and O'Connor focus on



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how to help our children to negotiate their feelings about their families including, hopefully, feeling proud.

However I'm glad I did read the Istar Lev as the book contains many useful reflections. In particular, as a therapist I enjoyed a chapter on traditional family life cycle models (e.g. Carter & McGoldrick, 1999) and gay coming out models (Cass, 1979) and their relevance and applicability for LGBT families. She discusses the critiques of traditional family life cycle models as not allowing for gay families, but also rightly points out that existing models of gay transition assume that the individual is single and without dependents. Family systems theories teach us that families struggle most when moving from one developmental stage to another and for LGBT people, these developmental stages are potentially more problematic. This chapter gives some useful indications of what to look out for both for us as parents and as therapists.

Johnson and O'Connor are, by contrast, both developmental psychologists and their book is largely child centred with the focus less on what issues will

arise for us as parents, but on *how* to approach the particular issues that we face as gay families in a way which will enable our children to grow up happy, healthy and proud. As such, I felt deeply affirmed and stimulated by the way this book spoke to me as a lesbian parent about my family and the needs of my child.

They start with the very clear message that it is almost impossible to remain in the closet if you have children and they therefore address as a priority how to discuss the nature of your family with your children and how to help them to negotiate the external world and talk about their alternative family structure. Later in the book this emphasis leads to a useful discussion of homophobia and discrimination which points out that your child's first response to learning that their parents may be subject to prejudice will probably be concern for your safety and they gently suggest not to give a political lecture but to reassure the child that you will take every precaution to stay safe. The chapter then goes on to discuss helping them to deal with the discrimination they face and how to bringing up your child to be open and celebrate diversity.

Another section looks at the development of gender identity and addresses the concerns of some lesbian and gay parents that their children might be 'missing out' on gender role models and what impact this might have. At the same time they recognize that many lesbian parents might not wish their children to grow up conforming to traditional gender stereotypes. Each chapter ends with a useful 'What You Can Do' section with bullet points for busy, stressed parents on what you can do to encourage good self esteem in your children in relation to the issues they are discussing.

As a lesbian parent, it's easy to get caught up only reading straight parenting books once you're achieved the miracle of actually becoming a family. The wonder of watching your child develop seems such a universal act, that apart from the relief of meeting up with other gay parents, I often forget what is unique and genuinely different about parenting in a lesbian family.

These books refocused me on my gay perspective, validated the parenting issues which I'm already facing and identified others to prepare for. Both books, but particularly the Johnson-O'Connor one, also gave me ideas and analysis of the applicability of mainstream parenting theories with which to feed my need to think about my parenting as well as doing it. So if you are a lesbian, gay or transgender parent or a therapist working with gay families my recommendation would be to buy them both and to keep them close to you on your bookshelf or bedside table, alongside your other parenting books to refer to on a regular basis for advice, recognition and inspiration.

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