

Same-Sex Parented Families and Separation/Divorce



Common Terms Associated with Same-Sex Parented Families

- Co-Parent/s
 - two or more adults, not necessarily in a couple, who share significant parenting responsibilities. Currently neither Victorian nor federal laws allow for equal recognition for more than two parents. The legal parent's of a child will be its birth mother and her partner at the time of the birth. The law is therefore clear that a sperm donor is not a parent. Some donors however might see themselves as a father (donor dads) or might be seen that way by the child/ren for which they donated.
 - ***This term is particularly confusing given the context of separation and the way "co-parent" is used in separation language.***
- Known (sperm) donor
 - A man who is a sperm donor, known to the lesbian couple or single woman and who donates to them through a direct donation made at a clinic or through home insemination.
- Parent
 - Person who has parental responsibilities for a child. This includes the birth/bio mother and non-birth/bio mother (for female couples who are parents) and the biological and/or non-biological father (for male couples who are parents). It may include a non-residential donor dad.
- Rainbow Families
 - a term used to describe the many different forms of families parented by LGBT people
- Surrogate
 - a woman who carries and gives birth to a child with the intention that the child will be raised by another person or couple. May or may not be a commercial agreement.

Myths about same-sex parented families

“Very few same-sex couples have children”

- 22% of lesbian couples and 3% of gay male couples have a child living with them at home – Australian Census 2011

“Rainbow Families only live in inner-city locations”

- Just over 40% of the same-sex parented families who participated in Bouverie research lived in the inner metropolitan area. While 35% lived in the outer metropolitan area, 16% of participants lived in regional areas and 7% lived in rural/remote areas.

“Same-sex parented families mimic traditionally gendered family models with one person occupying the mother/domestic role and the other the father/breadwinner role”

- Research tells us that the division of labour in same-sex parented households is more egalitarian than in heterosexual households, and that the roles of primary carer and primary ‘breadwinner’ are often shared and fluid over time.

“Children who grow up in same-sex parented families are disadvantaged”

- 30 years of research has shown that the children of same-sex parented families do equally as well as the children of opposite-sex parents socially, educationally, physically and emotionally.

“Children raised by gay and lesbian parents will grow up to be gay or lesbian”

- Research on adolescent and adult children raised by GLBT parents shows that, like their peers, the vast majority grow up to be heterosexual (and really does it matter?)

“Children from same-sex parented families will inevitably experience bullying at school”

- All children can experience bullying for various reasons. Children of same-sex parents may be bullied because of their family structure. However children can build resilience by gaining support from their parents and developing strategies to deal with bullying.

“More children born into lesbian families are conceived from an unknown donor”

- Research shows that in the many if not most lesbian-parented families the identity of their donor is known. Children conceived with unknown donors do just as well as other kids

Same-Sex Divorce Trends

Note: Same-sex couples whose marriages are recognised can access Australia's divorce system if they meet the requirements for divorce under the [Family Law Act 1975](#), regardless of when the marriage was solemnised. See [Marriage equality in Australia](#) on the Attorney-General's Department website and the Fact Sheet, [Family Law implications of the recognition of same-sex marriages](#) for further information.

Applications for Divorce (Same-sex couples) **cannot** be completed online at this stage. Please contact the [National Enquiry Centre](#) for more information.

From: <http://www.federalcircuitcourt.gov.au> – **February 2019**

- Above notice appeared on Circuit Court website in December 2017
 - No online applications
 - Paper Divorce Forms did not say “Spouse/Spouse” for several months
- Divorce Equality came with Marriage Equality -> but a few things still need working on
- Higher Risk of Divorce according to Scandinavian Research
- Sweden 20% of male and 30% of female marriages were likely to end in divorce within five years of formation compared to 13% of heterosexual marriages in Sweden. (Andersson et al. 2006)
- Norway 45% of female, and 40% of male marriages contracted in 1993, (*the year it became possible in Norway*) were dissolved by 2011, compared to 31% of Norwegian opposite-sex marriages from 1993. (Wiik et al., 2012)
- Having one or more children significantly reduced divorce risk among female couples BUT increased divorce risk for male couples

Separated Same-Sex Parent Research

“elephant in the gay parenting community’s living room”
Firestone (2000)

- Limited discussion to date on this topic – Just 4 studies located (all from USA)
- This study: First in Australia on separated same-sex parents & First in world to include Separated Same-Sex Male parents

Unpublished doctoral thesis, Turteltaub (2002)

- Explored the dissolution process for lesbian parents and their children.
- Ten mothers and seven children were interviewed about their or their parents’ separation
- Highlighted a need for greater supports for separating same-sex parented families from knowledgeable service providers and from a more accepting community (including the lesbian community)
- Parents believed that societal privileging of biological motherhood contributed to conflict regarding parental roles, and that legal inequality and social invalidation of non-biological parenthood exacerbated separation conflict and influenced post-separation custody arrangements
- Parents’ held the view that it was important for lesbian parented families to be portrayed as stable and did not seek supports as a result



By Mark Bryan

Separated Same-Sex Parent Research *Continued...*

National Lesbian Families Study (USA) by Gartrell et. al. (2006)

- longitudinal study of seventy-eight lesbian parented families in the USA with children conceived by donor insemination
- By the time the children were aged seventeen, 55% (n=40) of the couples had separated (Gartrell et al., 2011)
- 71% of the separated mothers were found to be sharing custody of their children and a majority of mothers rated their communication with their ex-partner as cordial
- Custody was more likely to be shared between mothers in situations where the non-biological mother was a legal co-parent of their child prior to separation, and the percentage of adolescents who reported closeness to both mothers was significantly higher in families with legal co-parent adoption

Separated Same-Sex Parent Research *Continued...*

Goldberg and Allen (2013)

- Interviewed twenty children, aged fifteen to twenty-nine, from separated lesbian, gay, and bisexual parented families
- Provide valuable contribution to understanding the experiences of separation by the family as a whole, including those of the parents, albeit through their children's eyes.
- Study participants described their parents' separation as amicable and recalled little conflict in the navigation of custody and contact post dissolution
- Children's stories often spoke to an unacknowledged power of biology to define and construct familial relationships, and Goldberg and Allen (2013) highlighted the implications of this power in the creation of a hierarchy of relationships following separation
- Highlighted the lack of social support for the relationships between children and their non-biological parent following separation.

Separated Same-Sex Parent Research *Continued...*

Longitudinal study by Farr (2017)

- Examined the relationship experiences of 27 lesbian couples in the USA who had adopted a child through private domestic adoption.
- The study found that lesbian adoptive couples may have a heightened risk of dissolution with nearly one third of the couples separating in the five years between the two waves.
- Couples who had been together for fewer years at wave one were more likely to have dissolved their relationship by wave two

New Realities – Social & Legal

“Everywhere you look these days, gays are all in the family. From the neurotic gay dads in TV’s new hit sitcom Modern Family to the lackluster lesbian moms in The Kids are All Right to the louche but hip gay teens of Glee - it appears that homos, once relegated to the decidedly unattached netherworld – are now cropping up in all the old familial places ” (Walters, 2012)

Same-Sex couples more likely to become parents today than ever before – gayby boom

- **2016 Census:**

- 46,796 SS Couples (0.9% of all couples) → In WA SS couples are 0.7% of all couples (VIC & NSW = 1%, ACT=1.4%)
- 93.3% reported partner as de facto, 6.7% husband/wife (up from 4% in 2011)
- 57% of same-sex couples “no religion” compared to 28% of opposite-sex couples
- SS Couples tend to have a greater age gap between partners than opposite-sex relationships
Age difference of more than 10 years (25% of male ss, 14% female ss, 8% of opposite-sex)
- 15% of Same-Sex Couples have children (under 25) living with them (up from 12% in 2011)
- Female same-sex couples were more likely to have children than male same-sex couples (25% compared with 4.5%)
- Census likely an underestimation (only counts in-tact couple families – eg. Can’t identify separated Lesbian/Gay parent)

- **Wider social, cultural, and political changes:**

- In 1984-84, 64% of adults opposed homosexuality compared to 48% in 2000 (De Vaus, 2004)
- **2017 Marriage Postal Survey – YES: nationwide: 61.6%, Every State/Territory YES,**
- **Majority YES vote in all electoral divisions in WA (The No vote was largest in Western Sydney NSW)**
- **WA 63.7% (2nd highest of states after Victoria at 64.9%), Perth 71.5%, Forrest (Busselton) 63.8%**
- Greater visibility of LGBT people in film, television, and sport (Walters, 2012) (Brocchetto, 2016)

- **Legal Changes**

- *Family Law Amendment (De Facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Act* (Clth) 2008
 - broadened the federal definition of *de facto relationships* to include same-sex couples
 - Recognized non-biological mother / female parent
 - Provided separating same-sex couples with access to the Family Court in order to resolve any custody or property disputes.



New Realities – Social & Legal *continued...*

- Birth Certificate Legislation
 - Every state & territory now allows 2 female parents on their child's birth certificate
 - In each jurisdiction parents can retrospectively change certificates to have 2 female parents & remove sperm donor if applicable
 - In NO state or territory can 2 Males be on the certificate
 - In NO state or territory can more than 2 parents be on certificate (unlike California and British Columbia)
- Since early 2000s more Australian same-sex male couples began having children via overseas commercial surrogacy (Dempsey, 2013, Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010).
 - Commercial Surrogacy Illegal in Australia
 - In QLD, NSW, ACT it is illegal to go overseas to engage a surrogate
 - Australian law allows altruistic surrogacy (although different restrictions in each jurisdiction)
 - Eg. In Victoria surrogate can not use their own egg, or in WA woman must have given birth to her own child previously
 - Family Court of Australia (*Re Mark: an application relating to parental responsibilities* 2003) ruled that the legal parents of children born in Australia via surrogacy are the surrogate and her husband, irrespective of whether they had donated any genetic material to the child.
- Same-Sex Couples can foster in every State and Territory
- Can adopt (known child/unknown child) in WA, ACT, NSW, TAS, VIC, QLD
- Divorce Equality? Couples legally married abroad can now divorce in Australia.
 - Watch this space

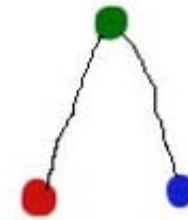
Polyamory and Poly-Parenting

- Polyamory?
- Many different shapes and sizes
- Dr Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli – Deakin Uni
- Can have more than 1 *de facto* in Oz
- Canadian Couple divorce as they wanted to bring in a third husband

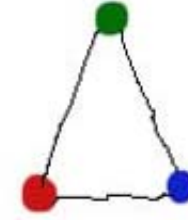


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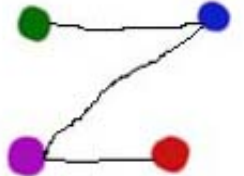
Sebastian Tran, Adam Grant, Shayne Curran



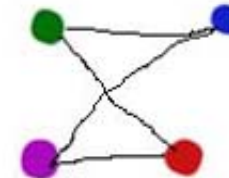
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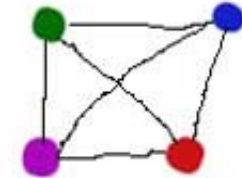
Green is involved with Red and Blue and Red and Blue are involved with each other



Green is involved with Blue, but not Purple and Red. Blue is involved with both Green and Purple, but not Red. Purple is involved with Red and Blue.



Green is involved with both Blue and Red, but not Purple. Blue is involved with both Purple and Green, but not Red.



Green is involved with Blue, Red and Purple. Everyone is involved with everyone else.

Separated Parented Families Study

- Same-sex parents who had either experienced separation within their own same-sex relationship, or had experienced the separation of another same-sex couple within their multi-parent family
- Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, and rural and regional Victoria.
- 22 Participants → 19 different separated same-sex parented families
- 18 Female (16 from a couple relationship, 3 part of multi-parent family with male)
 - 11 Biological Mothers
 - 6 Non-Biological Mothers
 - 1 Both
- 4 Male (1 from a couple relationship, 3 were part of multi-parent family with female/s)
 - 2 Biological
 - 2 Non-Biological
- 50% Inner metropolitan, 36% Outer Metropolitan, 14% rural/regional
- Average Age 43 years old



Before the Legal Recognition of Female Co-Parents

Losing their child...

“(My ex) and her parents wanted me out of the picture and they were hassling (our son) to not spend time with me...When (my ex) was dropping off (our son) she would smack him if he called me mummy and my mum grandma...

The only think that keeps me sane is...I just think about when he is 18 I can find him again. I don't know...how I would handle that because he wouldn't really know who I am, he wouldn't remember who I am, and I don't know what story he has been told”

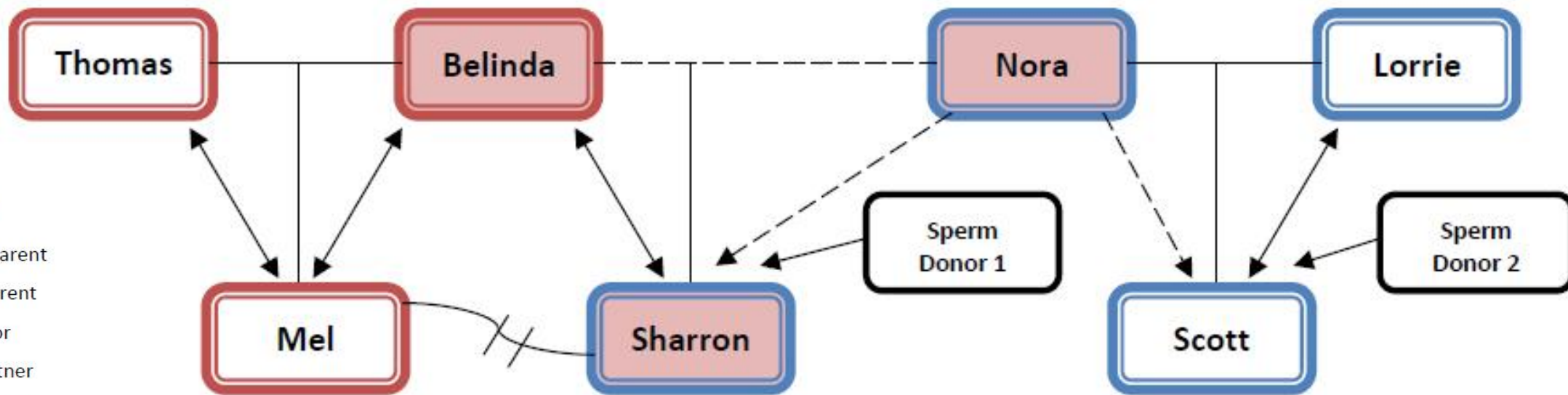
- Elizabeth

“Initially we had negotiated half half time...gradually she cut back my time and left a phone message saying you will never see her again...We went through the family court process which didn't recognize me (as a mother)...The family counsel at the court said she is more bonded with you but there is nothing we can do, legally you do not exist...I guess the only kind of thing I could correlate it to...is the (Aboriginal) Stolen generation where your child is taken from you purely out of discrimination and not because of anything that you've done...that's a very lonely and hard thing to deal with.”

- Karen

Before the Legal Recognition of Female Co-Parents

Finding a way to make it work



FAMILY TREE KEY

- ↔ Biological Parent
- - - -> Non-Bio Parent
- Sperm Donor
- - - - - Former Partner
- Current Partner
- ~ Full Biological Siblings
- X 1/2 Biological Sibling
- Original family

Border color denotes current household

After Legal Recognition of Female Co-Parent

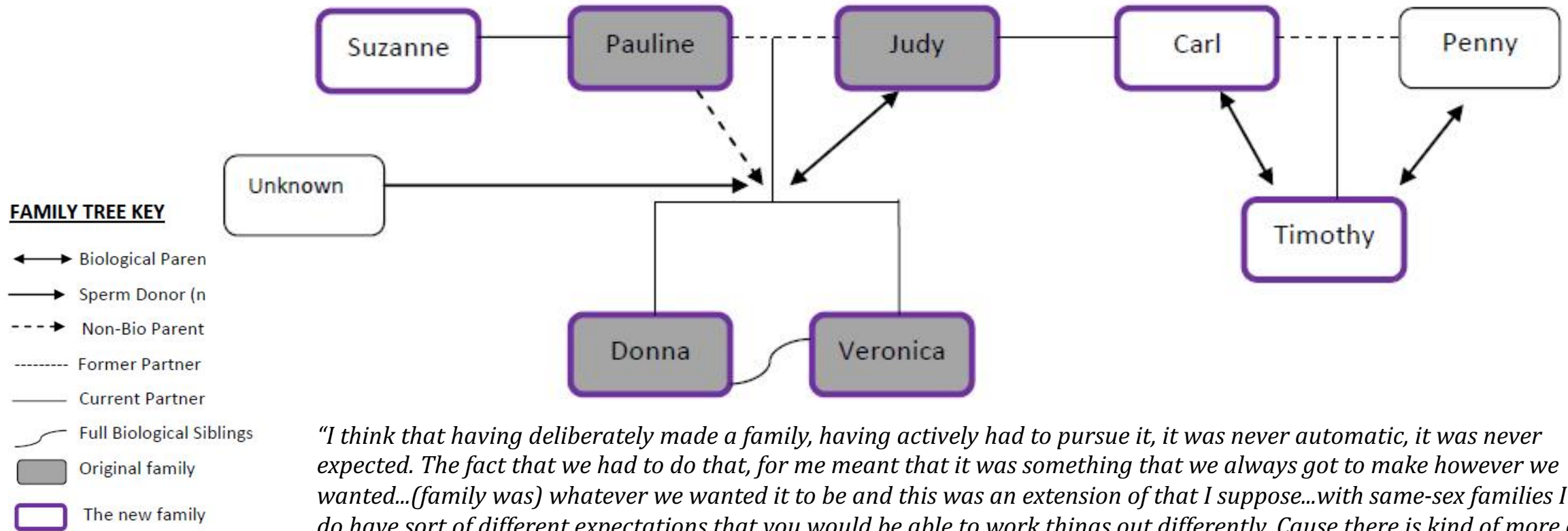
Forced To Share...

I said to (my ex)...you have a really important role to play in their life, but you're not their mother. I am their mother...Any child can only have one mother. (She) thought that she could just take my place and it would be okay. I guess she put no credence into the actual biological connection...Eventually I said that's it I am not doing it anymore you can see them on these days and that's it...That's when mediators got involved and court hearings and all that sort of stuff." - Sally

"I didn't ask for this recognition, we were quite happy before. We were quite happy being solid in our fact that we were the biological mothers. Now we've had that role threatened... The law has tried to bring both (women) to the table to be equal and they're not. If they are then why do we have biology? - Rebecca

After Legal Recognition of Female Co-Parent

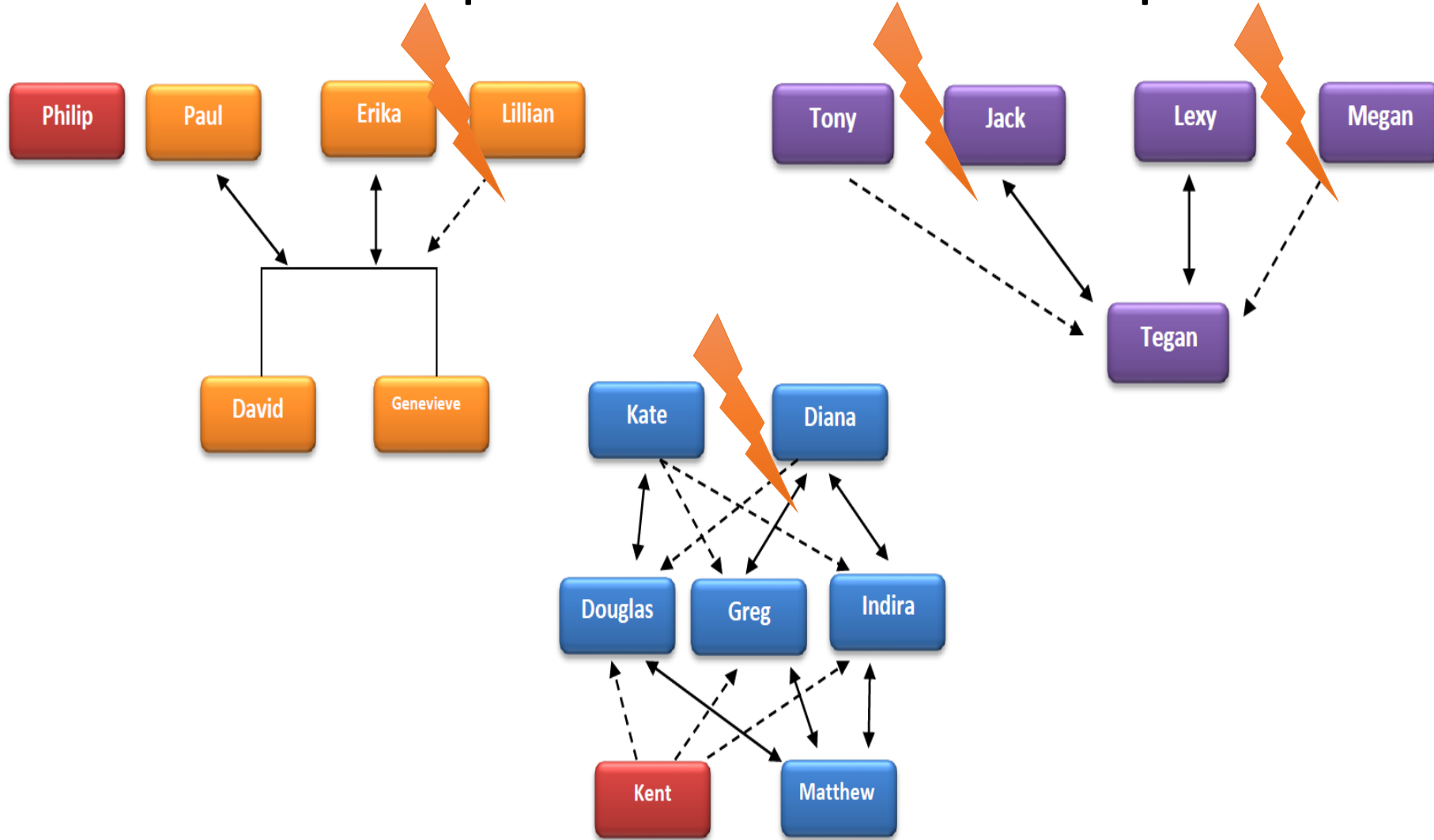
Separated Family of Choice...



"I think that having deliberately made a family, having actively had to pursue it, it was never automatic, it was never expected. The fact that we had to do that, for me meant that it was something that we always got to make however we wanted...(family was) whatever we wanted it to be and this was an extension of that I suppose...with same-sex families I do have sort of different expectations that you would be able to work things out differently. Cause there is kind of more of a tradition of...pooling resources and doing unusual things...like different ways of negotiating challenging situations"

- JUDY

Negotiating post separation parenting within same-sex parented families of three or more parents



Services - Legal Profession

Even at the lawyer who sees lots of same-sex couples, they just had so many questions like “how do you do this? How do you do that?” Like (we are) not that different, (we are) not that interesting...I wanted somebody who had a history in dealing with gay and lesbian issues...You know I just wanted somebody who didn't ask questions about that, because they got it and understands that there are lots of different ways to do family. - *Judy*

I think lawyers are much less of a known – I mean I think for us going to see a health and welfare kind of person you would generally assume that they're open. Lawyers I just thought – not that I thought they would not be open, but that there is just many of them and whom could you choose? You've got no way. So we just went with word of mouth. - *Carina*

I went to see this guy...and he could not wrap his head around it and he would just say the most inappropriate things and I would just be sitting going “I can't believe you said that” and he was really uncomfortable...and he couldn't wrap his head around the fact that I was in a relationship with a women, and I'd say “oh look there is a case in America” and he'd go “oh yeah it would be in America wouldn't it?” and I would be like “this is me, this is my life and you are making a joke of it” sort of thing. - *Elizabeth*

Counsellors & Mental Health

He was an older straight male. What does he understand about a gay female who has just gone through a breakup and has two kids and is in quite an unusual life situation? I mean he went through the normal coping mechanisms, all the usual psychology stuff, but I didn't find it that useful. I had a couple of sessions with him and then I just gave up.

- Rosemary

I had an awesome counselor and she just kept me on track with the kids to in saying "this is what needs to happen, they need to understand that it is not their fault, they need to understand they don't need to control it, they need to understand that your expression of emotion doesn't make you incapable of taking care of them"... We were really lucky to encounter that really good psychologist that we both then saw, and then took my daughter to.

- Tara

When we tried to recontact her last year, my ex went and saw a child psychologist that the family courts kind of respect and got this report done. The psychologist refused to meet with me or hear my side of the story, made all these assumptions about my intention, and said it was all about me and nothing about the child, and that the child doesn't know who I am and so why would you bother coming back into their life now. - Karen

When we separated, the counsellor told us that Donna the youngest (child), she was like two and a half at the time, needed to spend more time with Judy because she is the birth mum. We're just like "I don't think that's right." (The counsellor was) saying you know, Donna shouldn't be away from Judy for anything longer than three days, and Judy was like "but Pauline like no more or less a mother," like Donna would miss me just as much as Judy. You know what I mean? So it was a really interesting kind of thing that there is a (belief) that the birth mother has more of a bond. I don't feel we ever had anything other than equal love for them. That was the lesbian counsellor who said that! I think it is like a thing – that's what shrinks believe, that kids need to be with their birth parent.

- Pauline

Did Not Attend a FRC

We didn't get any supports. I wouldn't have thought that there was any. Because [the FRC] I didn't think did any work around gay issues.

- *Matthew*

I have heard about negative experiences and so for me it is like, you know you are already going through all this, you don't want to have to bother with that and it's really, it would be nice to know that there would be a service that you can just go into and not just have straight people that are you know are understanding, I'd actually just like a lesbian. - *Lillian*

I certainly didn't feel like there was places I could call. You know, [the FRC]? where do you go for stuff like this? ... I mean I think if there was...we definitely would have gone.

- *Judy*

I didn't want to go to [the FRC]. I could be completely wrong but I didn't want to go as lesbians to what you see as a straight kind of place. Because it's just, I don't know, you don't want to be a curiosity necessarily, especially when you are going through that kind of pain. - *Lillian*

I had heard quite a lot about [the FRC] but it never felt like an attractive option to help us through the separation process, really because it did appear to me to be aimed at heterosexual couples. I also had a sense that it could take a while to get into and you wouldn't necessarily have much choice around the counsellors you were given and I just didn't want to end up with someone who had no experience in working with same sex couples. - *Judy*

Negative Experiences At FRC

I can't remember what the title of the position of the lady was, but she had no idea. None. And she actually had involvement in the gay community, which completely surprised me. I just got the shits because I thought "you didn't even know." She asked me what Esther's rights were as the parent! Like "you are supposed to know that, you are the family centre, not me. Yes I know that, but you shouldn't be asking me that"
- Rosemary

We did go through yeah the generic [FRC] thing where they send you. I think we had sort of 3 sessions...(however) there was a little tinge of them kind of going "oh." There was just a sense of slight uncomfortability about the fact that they didn't know what to do with divorced lesbians. - Tanya

In the counselling my partner and I went to we spent some time explaining (our situation) to the counsellor and they would go "oh that is interesting" and ask a few questions, like it was obvious that it was a novelty. But they didn't run screaming from the room and we didn't feel that they sort of treated us any differently...It is sort of that common thing I think when you turn up to a health professional and they go "oh yes I have dealt with that before" and you can see them trying to feel cool and relaxed and comfortable about it but you are not really sure what is going on inside. - Jack

The Stigma of Same-Sex Parental Separation

- Breaking The Rules
- Falling off a Pedestal
- Fearful Males

(It was) not being really able to talk about those intimate reasons in my friendship group. It was difficult because I think people saw us as this great couple. I think people enjoyed us as a couple before when we were – when we didn't have the child. And people thought our relationship was really strong – and it was. So you know I think dealing with that shock of other people. – Ruth

People have embraced diversity and same-sex couples if you are a really well behaved nice middle class same-sex couple. And if you are not, they absolutely have no framework in which to be the same people that they were with you when you were well behaved. That was a very big learning curve for me during that time because what I realized as a divorced lesbian is that people just don't get divorced lesbians, you know they can just about get married lesbians, they can just about compute the nice stuff and the happy stuff and when it is all good. And so I did get treated quite differently than I had ever been treated by my family and by my friends, including my lesbian and gay friends. - Tanya

we were sort of looked upon as a kind of you know pioneering, shining example of what could be done and strived for. I think our gay friends felt embarrassed - Tanya

Implications

For Services and Service Providers

- Help overcome fear/anxiety or perception the service is not for them
 - Ensure promotional material, guides, websites, waiting rooms, etc. are inclusive of diversity of sex, gender, and sexuality
 - If changes have been made already → outreach to the LGBT communities
- Ensure future staff (mediators, reception, lawyers, etc) are specially trained
 - Rainbow Tick - <https://www.qip.com.au/standards/rainbow-tick-standards/>

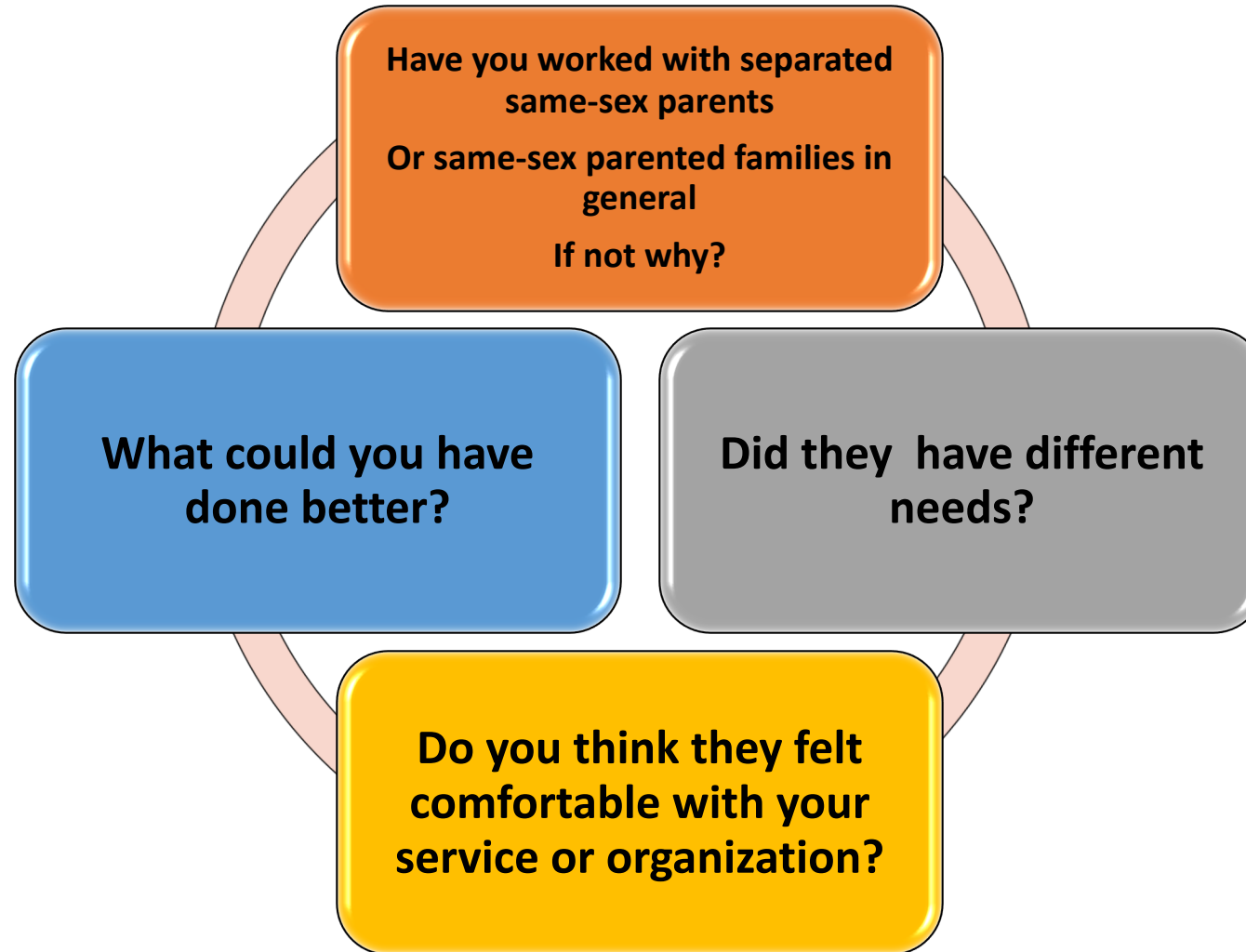
For Governments and Policy Makers

- Ensure that families/relationships adequately protected by law
 - Including anti-discrimination (Current Religious Freedom debate)
- Consider the impact of changes to the law have on families (even progressive changes)
- More than two parents on birth certificate (state legislation)
- Funding for efforts to reduce stigma

Other

- Children's book featuring a separated same-sex parent family ("Saturday is Patty's Day")
- Prevent pedestalling of "trailblazers" or creating "good gays v bad gays"

What has been your experience?



How to work with Same-Sex Parents

Create a Welcoming Environment

- Display LGBT inclusive signs in waiting rooms
- Have books in waiting room that represent diverse families (lots of rainbow family kids books available)
- Ensure your forms are inclusive “mother & father” or “parents”. “Relationship status” not “marital status”
- Promote organization in the LGBT communities!
- Door opening questions
- Staff Training
- Have referrals available

Reflective Practice

- Understand how your own social/cultural norms may be at odds with LGBT clients
- Educate yourself – clients should not have to educate you
- Be aware of diversity – not all same-sex couples/Rainbow families are the same!
- Support other staff members to challenge their assumptions

Be Sensitive to the Effects of Structural Barriers

- Assess same-sex parents without presuming the problem has anything to do with their sexual identity
- Be aware of the effects of stigma and oppression (historic or current)
- Be aware of additional barriers – CALD, ATSI, Religion, Age, Disability, Economic Status
- Recognize the shame/guilt same-sex parents may have due to separation

who is in your family?

one dad

two mums

mum and dad

co-parents

one mum

two dads

step-families

extended family

foster family

our families come in all different shapes and sizes.

These are just some of the family formations in our community. Australian children are being raised by mum and dad, by two mums or two dads, by one parent, step-parents, co-parents and grandparents, by aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, and in blended, extended, intergenerational, kinship, adoptive and foster families. Some children have a sperm or egg donor or a surrogate who helped to make them. Sometimes that person is known to the child, and might be part of their family.

In rainbow families, one or more of the parents or carers identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer. Australian and international research shows that it is the quality of parenting relationships that determines children's wellbeing, not their family structure or the gender identity of their parents or carers.*

It's love that makes a family.

*Simpson, S. (2013). Same Sex Parented Families in Australia. Child Family Community Australia Research Paper No. 16. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

People use different words to describe their family. At childcare, in kindergarten or at school, this poster can help start discussions about different families. Children can be asked, 'Who is in your family?' They can draw pictures of families, read books about different kinds of families and bring family photos to show. Material and Child Health and other community services can put up the poster to show support for diverse families. Service providers should ask, 'Who is in your family?' They should explain why this information is important to providing their service, and what they will do with it.

Printed produced by Rainbow Families Council and supported by the City of Borooro.

For information and more resources visit www.rainbowfamilies.org.au.

rainbow families council

RAINFOW FAMILIES COUNCIL

How to work with Same-Sex Parents

A co-parented family with two mums (who have the primary care of three children) and a dad who does not live with them comes for counselling in a family therapy centre. The therapist is unclear about the parenting roles each has with the child or whether donor issues are relevant. The therapist is also wondering what language to use with the family, how the children refer to their parents and whether or not being a same-sex parented family is relevant to the presenting problem.

- Provide sensitive intake forms where clear information about presenting problems are recorded.
- Start where the family is regarding their stated reason for coming to see you, rather than you making assumptions about why they are seeing a counsellor (it may or may not have something to do with being a same-sex parented family).
- Ask the family to describe their own family and perhaps draw a picture or diagram that represents their family and family relationships. Traditional genograms used by professionals can be limiting for diverse families.
- Be clear that you always ask each family coming to see you about the language they use to describe their family relationships both inside and outside the home, and ask for permission to use that 'family language' with them in the session(s).
- "So I can get a picture of your family, can you tell me what your kids call you at home? Is this different when you are away from home?"
- Remind the family that confidentiality is assured.

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