For queer parents, support starts online

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It’s no secret that despite changes in social attitudes and laws (and in some regions, marriage rights), queer parents still experience discrimination and prejudice, even from those closest to them. The lack of a support network for any new parent would be difficult, but it’s more so for queer parents who are already facing homophobia and its accompanying social isolation.

That’s where the Internet can step up.

Becoming a parent is often a time of adjustment and even transformation; parents find their friendship circle changing, especially they seek new homes to accommodate their growing families. The fluctuating social landscape of new parenting is mirrored by entering a zone of new interaction online. Suddenly there are ads for baby products, toys, strollers, and diapers in your inbox. Before you can say Google, you’ve searched for reassurance that the angry rash on your kid’s back is not fatal and checked in with a parenting forum for advice on treating mastitis, a common infection of the breast. Perhaps most weirdly, those friends who spam you on Facebook with pictures of their adorable offspring seem less annoying and more like, well, you.

If you’re a queer parent, chances are the impact of the overwhelming changes that come with parenting is amplified by the difficulty in finding good parenting support offline. The outside world can be lonely for queer families. At every turn, same-sex parents are reminded that their families are “different.” Book shops rarely stock children’s books with images of same-sex parents, and right-wing groups, like Focus on the Family or One Million Moms, are designed to fight inclusion. Schools address parents as “moms and dads” as if that is the only conceivable family configuration. Strangers give queer couples with children pained, suspicious looks, often asking intrusive questions (i.e., “Whose baby is it?”) For queer parents who just want to raise their kids with the same acknowledgement and support as other parents, the stress can get pretty exhausting.

The work of parenting, in all its messy relentlessness, is anything but virtual. Being present with your kids means interacting with your local community and requires practical, hands-on support. Anyone who’s ever posted a late-night Facebook status despairing at their screaming child who just won’t go to sleep already will tell you that virtual support will only go so far; I love expressions of empathy, but I love someone taking over the rocking so I can take a nap even more.

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Relationships that start in online parenting spaces, however, can develop into face-to-face interactions. I spoke with Anna (whose name has been changed for privacy), a friend I met on a lesbian parenting blog; she says that like me, she met most of her queer parenting friends online, an increasingly common practice for parents of all stripes. It’s important to realize that while studies show children raised by same-sex parents are just as healthy and balanced than their peers, their well-being is affected by the level of stigma their families face. As such, helping queer parents to find supportive community is one way to protect their kids from the negative impacts of bigotry.

It’s no wonder then that LGBT parenting blogs are exploding. From Mombian to Gays With Kids, the queer blogging revolution is giving voice to the lived experience of LGBT parents and their individual joys and challenges. Likewise, platforms like Twitter and Facebook facilitate quick connections with people all over the world. My partner, herself a queer step-parent, says she has to “battle to even be seen as a parent” in interactions with teachers, doctors and even friends, whereas her online networks have been far quicker to respect the role she plays in our daughter’s life.

Anna further explained that this acceptance has been crucial for her. “[A]s a queer parent online spaces have provided social support and solidarity in parenting challenges specific to queer parenting,” she told me. These include questions about “how to conceive, how to deal with negative comments, how to build resilience in children, how to explain (or not) our family, how to understand parenting outside of traditional gender roles and dynamics, how to parent a gender creative child, how to manage extended family, and how to deal with schools and communities.”

Bringing people together across geographic boundaries is, of course, one of the Internet’s triumphs. Sometimes my partner and I feel like the only queer parents in the suburbs; online, we are only a click or a tweet away from others like us raising children in families of every type. One highlight of Anna’s digital experience has been getting to know her son’s donor siblings, an enriching and rewarding opportunity that would not have been possible without the Internet.
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Yet, even with supportive queer Internet communities, we are obviously still a long way from eradicating the cultural tendency to assume all parents must be heterosexual. Despite the rapid change in LGBTQ acceptance elsewhere on the Internet, most parenting spaces remain dominated by the voices of straight writers who barely pay lip-service to non-normative families. “Straight people believe and act as though parenting is by straight people and for straight people, even if they sometimes ‘welcome’ us interlopers into their ranks,” argues writer Arwyn Daemyir, author of the Raising My Boychick blog. “The assumed-heterosexuality (and assumed-cisgender status) of children is one way that I am reminded again and again that I am considered deviant, both as a queer parent, and as a queer person and formerly queer kid.”

Queer kids are on the frontlines of homophobia. Mental health experts have noted that while being queer is not in itself a risk factor for low levels of well-being, LGBTQ youth are at greater danger of self-harm due to the bigotry they may face. Given the serious stakes, it’s clear that parenting communities need to take some responsibility for promoting a nurturing environment for all children, not just the heterosexual ones, and not only the children of heterosexuals.

Perpetuating the myth that all families are the same is bad news for all parents, not only queers. The plethora of blogging that blatantly excludes the existence of primary caregiving and single fathers, for instance, aids the perception that childcare is “women’s work.” Feminists (among others) have rightfully critiqued this tendency to assume that fathers are largely uninvolved breadwinners as it locks straight women into oppressive gender roles, too. Additionally, dominant voices in parenting tend to erase the role of non-biological parents, a particular problem for non-birth mothers, step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, their children, and their extended families.

However we become parents, the job remains the same. As Anna says, “While we do have some specific challenges of our own, we are largely dealing with the same dramas day by day as straight parents. Fighting the never ending assumptions of heterosexuality and nuclear families becomes exhausting.”

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Both on and off the Internet, queer families deserve more than “special interest” status. Queer parents are at the vanguard of modern life, finding new ways to make family (biological and not), negotiating work-life balance, and exploring the possibilities of changing gender roles and alternative family structures, often outside the institution of marriage. Recognition that not all families are “mom and dad” units would not only help queer people feel more welcome on parenting sites but would support all parents to explore new ways of doing things. It would also unequivocally help them more sensitively parent their LGBTQ children.

Research by organizations like the Family Equality Council demonstrates that changing social attitudes to queerness has had an impact on the lives of LGBTQ parents and children. The battle to obtain recognition of diverse families through legal protections, marriage rights, and the policies of institutions like schools and hospitals is an ongoing one. We need more than Modern Family and Neil Patrick Harris’ Halloween photos (although these are a start). Queer parents and their children need resources and parenting information that is responsive and thoughtful, and we need parenting sites to stop addressing all parents as if they are moms with husbands.

The increasing visibility of queer parents online, and in real life, can only be a positive step in promoting the kind of family values that can be embraced in the 21st century. Acceptance of alternative family structures can help deliver what those of us who care about young people all hope for: families that are well-supported and full of love, raising thriving kids who know their own hearts and minds.