

## Chapter 9

# What About the Kids?

*“Eve and Stephanie and I would sometimes talk about women loving women and men loving men. One time, Eve said, ‘Mom, why are people mad about that? When you love somebody, that’s really good.’ The wisdom of a child ...”*

—Erin, speaking about her daughters

Six of the eight people I interviewed for this book have children. All of us were concerned about how our coming out would affect our children. Several of us were afraid that we might lose custody.

The fears and challenges that gay parents face are not all that different from those of straight parents going through a divorce. You don’t have to be gay to worry that something you do might harm or burden your children, or that your ex might try to restrict your ability to be with them, or that it might be challenging to find a new partner who will accept your children and co-parent them with you. None of those concerns are limited to gay parents. For people who are in a straight marriage and considering coming out as gay, however, fears about how their coming out will impact their children—and their relationship with their children—can be daunting. Those fears can make it even harder to know what to do.

Here are some of our stories about coming out to our children and how coming out affected our relationships with our children.

## —Adam—

Adam told his three children that he was gay as part of the same conversation in which he and his wife told them they were separating. He explained that it was difficult to decide what to tell them when. “Kate and I really battled with that,” he said. “There were some people who said that’s a lot for the kids to take in at one time. To be honest, nobody said that we should talk with them about all of it at one time. But what all those people didn’t realize was what a strong family we are. There was no way we could have told our kids that we were separating without telling them why. It would have been too big a disconnect otherwise.”

Adam explained that all their lives, his children had watched Kate and him cook, laugh, smile, and dance together in the house. “They were always telling us to quit kissing—that we were making them sick. They’d never seen us fight—and remember, the youngest was in his late teens at the time we separated. All they’d ever seen was a loving relationship. If we didn’t tell them why we were separating—if I didn’t tell them I was gay—they would have inevitably started making up things, like thinking that one of us was having an affair. We felt that we owed them the truth. I didn’t want them to have to try to figure out what could have possibly gone wrong.”

If Kate and he had had a contentious, unloving relationship with a lot of fighting, he said, then there would have been no need for an explanation. “We would have told them that we were getting divorced, and they probably would have thought, *It’s about time. You two don’t get along. Thank God you’re getting a divorce.* That wasn’t the case. With us, it was the complete opposite. And they reacted like someone had died. It was that traumatic for them ... until I told them why.”

It’s been years now since Adam and Kate separated, and he said that his kids are all doing well with his coming out, although his older daughter still struggles a bit with it. “She’s religious and her husband is a pastor,” he explained. “I think she struggles a bit because she knows there’s nothing wrong with me, and she knows I’m not a bad person, but I think it’s a struggle for her to make sense of it all. But she’s very supportive and loving toward me and so is her husband.”

Adam said that his relationship with his children is still basically the same except for one thing. “Sometimes I feel a little on the outside of things,” he said. “When they come to town, they always stay with their mom. She lives in the house they grew up in, and it’s comfortable and familiar to them.

I understand it, and I'm fine with it. It's just that sometimes I feel a little like I'm on the outside looking in."

He noted that his children have made only one request of him regarding dating: "They've asked me not to drag a lot of people in and out of their lives, to wait till I feel comfortable that this is somebody I want to be with before introducing them to my kids. I can respect that. That's good advice for anybody who has children and is dating."

### —Drew—

For Drew, parting from Susan was almost as difficult as living with her. They went through a contentious divorce and then a contentious custody battle. Susan sought sole custody of their two children. Drew sought shared custody. He got the best attorney he could afford.

This is how he described the custody hearing and its aftermath: "During the custody hearing, Susan's attorneys tried to bring up the fact that I'm gay, as though I was some lesser human being because I was gay. The judge swung around in his chair, looked at my ex-wife and her counsel, and abruptly declared, 'That is completely irrelevant!' He later handed down his decision in my favor. It was a glorious day for my kids and me. Gay or straight, being a good parent is a choice and something that you need to make a priority. Being gay does not make you a bad parent."

Drew noted that the irony of his story is that as his children have gotten older, they've wanted to spend more and more of their time with him. At the time of our interview, they were living with Drew practically full time. "My ex-wife, who wanted to deny me any time with my children, now has children who don't want to be with her," he laughed quietly and shook his head. "There is karma."

Drew has never had a specific conversation with his son and daughter to tell them he is gay. "My kids were so young when I came out," he explained. "Gay is how they know me. It's natural for them that I have relationships with men. As far as they're concerned, life is just that way. Whenever I've been in a relationship with a man, my kids have never made it an issue, and neither have their friends or the parents of their friends. It's just what's so." He added that he and his son, who is now in his late teens, recently had a conversation in which his son said that he just wants Drew to be happy. "He said he hopes I meet someone who'll be good to me."

## —Trudy—

Asked if her sons know that she's a lesbian, Trudy answered, "Absolutely."

How did she tell them? Did she have a specific conversation with them? She said that she did but explained that she was careful about when she had that conversation with them.

"They knew that I had good women friends and that our house was always full of women," she said. "We'd have dinners all the time with lots of women there. I'm trying to think how old they were when I actually used the word *lesbian*. I mean, they knew who I was. By the time they were teenagers, I think they'd figured it out. If they had asked me, I'd have told them, but I didn't want to give them a word that they couldn't use in a way that wouldn't cause them trouble. The word *lesbian* seemed very loaded to me for them. They were in their teens when I talked with them. I just told them that I liked women and I hoped they understood that and would respect me as they always had. And they were like, 'Yeah. Cool, mom. No big deal.' They knew it. It was that easy."

Trudy then told me the following story as an example of how comfortable her sons seem to be with her being a lesbian. A year ago, in honor of her retirement, she was named the grand marshal of the Pride Parade in Pittsburgh. She was riding down the street in a convertible, and one of her sons and some of his friends were standing on a street corner. She heard her son yell out, "Mom, I love you." She explained, "That was really nice. There I was, the grand marshal of this Gay Pride Parade, and he wasn't embarrassed to yell out that he loves me in front of his friends."

## —Gene—

Gene's daughter Bennett was seventeen—a junior in high school—when he and I spoke.

"When she was five," Gene said, "I had to sit her down on my lap to tell her I was leaving. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do." Most parents who've had to explain a separation or divorce to their children can empathize with Gene about how difficult that conversation can be.

But compared to many divorced fathers, Gene's experience since that conversation has been easy. "I've never had a rigid schedule with Casey

regarding our daughter,” he explained. “Whatever works is what we do. We’ve never fought over who got to spend time with Bennett when. That’s not even an issue with us. If I’m home and I call Bennett and she wants to stay with me for the weekend, that’s fine. If she wants to stay with her mom, that’s fine too. Now that she’s getting older, I see less of her, and that’s harder for me—but I think that’s true for many parents of teenagers.”

When Gene talks about Bennett, he describes her as being “just wonderful” and “the perfect daughter.” He was dismayed to learn recently that his daughter had been dealing with issues that he had no idea existed. “Even when I was living at home,” he said, “I traveled a lot for work, and I was away a lot. Bennett would get angry, and she used to take her anger out on my wife. It took some time for me to figure out that she was angry with me. Because I was home so little, she didn’t want me to see that anger so she would always take it out on Casey. Now that’s changed. I just texted my ex-wife, saying that Bennett seems to be angry with me or to resent me. Clearly there’s something going on. I know she’s stressed out. She’s coming to the end of school with her finals.”

Gene said that he suspects that Bennett is coming to terms with his being gay. “She just started therapy a couple weeks ago. It was so tough getting her there but now she loves this therapist, so I’m hoping she’s working out her issues. I would love to go too, to help her out. There’s that big gay white elephant in the room that’s never been discussed.”

Although he has never had a specific conversation with Bennett telling her that he is gay, Gene said that his daughter knows that he is a gay man—without question. She knows that Jake is his partner. He and Jake use the term “my partner” when they refer to one another. He recently started writing a letter to her to try to explain this all to her.

He said, “You think they’re well adjusted, but my ex-wife just told me something that I was completely unaware of. She said, ‘Do you realize that Bennett went all these years through school and made some friends but never had any close friends that she could really tell about her life?’ She could never open up to me about what kind of life she’s had. That’s tough for her but it’s also tough for me knowing how difficult it’s been for her.”

Gene explained that he does try to talk to his daughter. “I try,” he said. “Bennett’s now learning through her therapist that she’s better off telling me things, because it hurts me more when she doesn’t tell me something than when she does. Bennett’s always been afraid of my reaction, which I don’t understand, but it makes sense to her.”

Since he's learned of the issues that Bennett is having, Gene said that he has tried to be more sensitive to her. He told the following story as an example. "The other day, I was checking my nieces' and nephews' Facebook pages, and I noticed something I hadn't been aware of before. They all taunt their friends by writing things like 'Oh, you're such a fag' and 'You're so gay' and 'You're a homo.' So I texted them to remind them that not only do they have an uncle who's gay, but they also have a cousin who could be sensitive to how people use the word *gay*. I suggested that they have a bit more compassion and stop saying those things. Actually it's never bothered me that people say things like that, but now that I have a daughter who could be bothered by it, I just want them to be aware of what they're saying."

—Erin—

Erin knew she was a lesbian when she was separated from her husband Jack, but she waited until her divorce was final before she became involved with another woman. "As a lesbian, you could lose your kids back then," she explained. "That wasn't an *if*. It was definite."

She didn't talk with many of her friends about being a lesbian for the same reason. She told me, "I didn't want to take the risk that Jack might take me to court and my friends might be called to testify. If that had happened, they would have been stuck having to choose between lying and feeling like they were betraying me. That's one way it was very different then from now. You can't lose your kids now on the basis of being a sexual minority. Back then you could lose your parental rights if you were gay or a prostitute. I knew that very clearly, and I hired an attorney who knew that I was out and knew to be careful." Once her divorce was final, Erin was able to come out to her ex-husband and her friends.

I asked how she came out to her daughters. She said that she did talk with them, but even before she had a specific conversation with them, Eve and Stephanie had grown up around gay culture. When Erin went to gay political events, she would sometimes take her daughters with her. She explained that the gay men loved her girls, and the girls loved all the attention they got.

"Eve and Stephanie grew up with homosexuality politically before they had to deal with it personally," Erin said. "They were among the few children who were around the gay community a lot. There was a gay coffee

house, and one day I went there with my girls. Stephanie was about five, and she was invited to sing. She sang ‘Kookaburra.’ When she sang the line ‘Gay your life must be,’ she got a standing ovation.”

Erin said that her daughters met a lot of people, and people were very open and honest with them. “So they knew,” Erin explained. “I know we talked about my being a lesbian, but it was usually when one of them asked a question—particularly before my divorce was final.”

She gave the following example of how casual her conversations with them were. “One day, we were in the car listening to NPR. A book on homosexuality had just come out, and Eve asked, ‘Mom, what’s homosexuality?’ She must have been nine at the time. I said, ‘That’s when a man loves a man or a woman loves a woman.’ And she said, ‘Oh, like you and Karen.’ I said yeah. And that was the end of it.”

Erin used to work with children. “Kids are really good. Kids know,” she explained. “When I was working with kids from gay or lesbian couples, they weren’t ever mad that their parents were gay. They were angry when their parents didn’t tell them they were gay—particularly since the kids usually knew anyway.”

### —Grace—

Grace’s son Sam was nine years old at the time of our interview. He was four when Grace separated from her husband Luke and began a relationship with Christine.

“Christine and I were clearly a couple,” Grace explained. “We didn’t live together, but we were always together at her place or mine, and Sam was usually with us.”

Asked if Sam ever had an issue with Grace being with a woman, this is how she responded: “It’s interesting. I don’t think Sam thought there was anything abnormal about two women being together when I was with Christine. But then he started school and began getting more information from outside our home about same-sex relationships. I remember he came home one day and said something about two boys being together. ‘Oh, that’s gross,’ he said. I asked, ‘Well, what about Christine and me? Is that gross too?’ Then I brought up another couple we know, ‘And what about Jill and Sue?’ He didn’t say anything—but I could see he made the connection, and it was something for him to think about.”

After she and Christine broke up, Grace talked with Sam several times about the possibility of her being in a relationship with Christine again. He would say, “I don’t have any problem with you being with her, as long as you can be happy.” Grace explained that Sam is older now, and his problems with Christine are more vivid for him than their time together is. He remembers the breakup and how hard that was. She said that Christine was absent from their lives for a year and a half and wouldn’t communicate, and then came back for six months only to leave again after more upset. Now it’s been another long time with no communication—and Sam has had to deal with all that.

“Sam adored Christine,” Grace explained. “When she and I were together, they were very close. We still talk about it sometimes, and I still feel sad. We had a lot of fun together, and the three of us were our own family. A while back I was bemoaning the fact that she left me, and he said, ‘Well, get over it, Mom. She did leave you, and she left me too.’ I hadn’t really been aware that he saw it that way. Perhaps I just didn’t want to see that.”

Grace believes that Sam would prefer her to be with a man, because it would make their lives simpler, and they could talk about sports and other guy things. He’s said as much. “But I also know that if I were with a woman,” Grace added, “Sam would figure out a way to make that work and accept it too. He truly wants me to be happy. He’s said that, too.”