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Lesbian and Gay Parents Communication and Education about Consent with their Adopted Children

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Discussions of Consent in Lesbian and Gay Adoptive Families

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Introduction

Current Study

Consent can be defined as a process of communication that emphasizes the assertion of boundaries and desires; it also requires the mutual acknowledgment and respect of one's desires, well-being, bodily autonomy and the understanding of how one's actions affects others. Consent is an important topic for loving and respectful relationships.

Lesbian and gay adoptive parents may have unique experiences and challenges when discussing the topic with their adopted children. Drawing on critical feminist theory, this study focuses on the ways lesbian and gay parents discuss consent with their adopted children while exploring how those conversations differ based on parent and child gender.

Why does this matter?

- There are established differences in how heterosexual couples discuss consent that indicate there may be differences in how lesbian and gay male parents discuss consent.
- Adopted children may have specific needs and challenges (e.g., higher rates of precocious puberty, higher rates of sexual trauma, higher rates of disabilities) that affect the relevance of consent as well as the ease of discussing consent (i.e., discussing consent may be difficult with autistic children because of difficulties in communication).
- The experiences and needs of adopted children may be particularly relevant to lesbian and gay parents because of the children they tend to adopt (e.g., gay fathers adopt disabled children at a higher rate).

Research Questions

1. How do lesbian and gay parents initiate conversations about consent with their adopted children?
2. What are the different strategies parents use to discuss consent?
 - 2a. How are the strategies for talking about consent different depending on the gender of the parent and child?
3. What topics do parents choose to focus on, and are the topics different based on the gender of the parent and child?

Method

- Data were collected from semi-structured phone interviews with lesbian and gay parents between September 2018 and May 2020.
- Participants were analyzed independently to understand each parent's approach.
- Interviews were from a larger, longitudinal qualitative study researching adopted children in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Couples were recruited through adoption agencies.
- For the current study, interviews occurred 10-12 years after adoption and focused on puberty, mental health, birth family relations, and other aspects of development.
- The data for this study were primarily collected from a question asking about sexuality. Participants in this study were either directly asked about how they discussed consent or the parent volunteered information. Participants were chosen to reflect a wide range of approaches and perspectives.
- Thematic analysis was used to better understand patterns, commonalities, and differences between parents

Results

How Parents Initiated Discussion of Consent (n, %)

Lesbian mothers frequently initiated discussions of consent because the child witnessed or experienced a violation of consent (6, 46%)

"then at camp this summer, she came home one day, and was like, "My friend so-and-so was sexually assaulted!"

A primary reason gay fathers did not initiate a conversation of consent was the child's perceived disinterest in sex and sexuality (4, 31%)

"we haven't talked about consent because I haven't felt like [target child] or [sibling] either are there yet."

When gay fathers did initiate a conversation, it was because their child violated someone's consent (2, 15%)

"[he] touched him on the leg and the thigh and he told him to stop and he did it again. ... we talked to him about the appropriateness of that and that people have to explicitly say yes right now... "

Strategies Utilized (n, %)

Lesbian mothers primarily utilized current events, like the #metoo movement, (7, 54%) though strategies also included using digital and print media (4, 31%) and their own experiences (3, 23%)

"the conversations around sexual assault and sexual abuse and stuff really started with, unbelievably, you know, "Grab her by the pussy."

Gay fathers did not favor a specific strategy and utilized fewer strategies compared to lesbian mothers

Topics Discussed (n, %)

Both lesbian mothers and gay fathers discussed a variety of topics, though lessons and expectations in power dynamics (4, 31%; 1, 8%), bodily autonomy (4, 31%; 2, 15%), and appropriate behavior (3, 23%; 3, 23%) were commonly discussed

Lesbian women also frequently discussed violations of consent (5, 38%)

"[a] woman alone, unfortunately in our predator society, is a target."

Gay fathers endorsed more topics (compared to strategies) particularly topics focused on lessons and expectations (6, 46%). All of the gay fathers who endorsed a topic either had at least one female daughter or a son who violated someone's consent.

"But, I want my son to know what is appropriate in a way to interact with a woman. ... Each step is a negotiation and requires consent."

Sample

Table 1. Parent, and child variables for the full sample and by family type

	Lesbian (n = 13)	Gay (n = 13)	Full Sample (n = 26)
Parent Demographics			
Parent Race n (%)			
White	12 (92.3)	13 (100)	25 (96.2)
Biracial/multiracial	0	0	0
Black	1 (7.7)	0	1 (3.8)
Latinx	0	0	0
Asian	0	0	0
Native American	0	0	0
Parent Age M [Median] (SD)	53.36 [54.00] (4.86)	52.30 [52.50] (2.79)	52.86 [53.00] (3.95)
Child Demographics			
Child Race n (%)			
White	5 (21.7)	8 (50.0)	13 (33.3)
Biracial/multiracial	6 (26.1)	4 (25.0)	10 (25.6)
Black	7 (30.4)	1 (6.3)	8 (20.5)
Latinx	4 (17.4)	3 (18.8)	7 (18.0)
Asian	1 (4.3)	0 (0)	1 (2.6)
Native American	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Child Age M [Median] (SD)	11.78 [12.00] (2.55)	12.69 [12.5] (3.20)	12.15 [12.00] (2.83)
Child Gender n (%)			
Girl	12 (52.2)	4 (25.00)	16 (41.0)
Boy	7 (30.4)	9 (56.3)	16 (41.0)
Trans/nonbinary/questioning	4 (17.4)	3 (18.8)	7 (17.9)
Adoption Type n (%)			
Private Domestic	11 (47.8)	12 (52.2)	23 (100)
Public Domestic/Foster Care	6 (54.6)	6 (50.0)	12 (52.2)
International	4 (36.4)	5 (41.7)	9 (39.1)
	1 (9.1)	1 (8.3)	2 (8.7)

Conclusions

Gay men talked about consent much less

- An exception to this pattern were gay fathers of female children and/or children who've misbehaved, who discussed consent more
- Gay fathers lack of discussion aligns with heterosexual fathers who discuss sex with their children less than heterosexual mothers (Bennett et al., 2018).

Lesbian mothers initiated conversations more and used varied strategies and topics to discuss consent

- This aligns with previous research on lesbian mothers (Cohen & Kivalanka, 2011; Gabb, 2004; Mitchell, 1998).

There was almost always an emphasis on violations of consent

- It was a common topic and mode of initiating conversation among lesbian mothers and some gay fathers
- It was especially relevant for female children because of their own experiences with violations of consent.

Limitations

- The study had a small, majority white sample. Parents of color and child's perspectives were not included. Current events (i.e. the #metoo movement) may have influenced the strategies used by parents

Implications

- Gay fathers may need encouragement to discuss consent. Additionally, all parents need to decouple consent from sex to ensure children understand the importance of communication, boundaries, and bodily autonomy in all situations, not just when consent is violated