



kort's korner

Handling Homophobia: Gay Rights or Children's Needs?

WHEN PEOPLE THINK ABOUT CHILDREN, rarely is their focus on how homophobia can hurt them. Usually it is raised when talking about a gay parent and how they may “impact” their offspring, or how the

behavior of gay and lesbian adults will influence them. But even more rarely do people concentrate on how homophobia impacts children, gay and straight alike—which is far worse than anything a child might be exposed to in a gay pride parade or in observing gay relationships.

Studies show, in fact, that developing gay or lesbian adolescents can handle their sexual orientation. What they can't cope with is the homophobic acts and verbal statements they encounter in the media or in their schools, homes or communities. A heterosexual adolescent can no more handle acts of homophobia upon him or her as well.

In this article, I'll first define homophobia and talk about words related to it, then address how we all, straight and gay alike, pay a price for it.

In his 1972 book *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, George Wein-

berg coined the term homophobia and wrote about how it related to gays and lesbians.. Since then, the word has been examined with a discriminating eye. People claim that it does not apply to them, inasmuch as they aren't afraid, or “phobic,” of gays.

Phobia

Phobia is a persistent, abnormal or irrational fear of a specific thing or situation that compels one to avoid the feared stimulus.

Homophobia

Homophobia is the feeling(s) of fear, hatred, disgust about attraction or love for members of one's own sex. It is prejudice, based on the belief that lesbians, and gays are immoral, sick, sinful or somehow inferior to heterosexuals. It results in fear of associating with lesbians and gays in close proximity—physically, mentally and/or emotionally—lest one be perceived

as lesbian or gay, and fear of venturing beyond “accepted” gender role behavior. (This can be true of gay men as well, though straight men are typically more homophobic.)

When a heterosexual asks if I'm married, I tell him that I am. When he asks my wife's name, I educate him that I am gay and that my male partner's name is Mike. Usually he takes a step back and says in a manly voice, “Dude, I am not gay.” I respond, “Dude, I didn't think you were. I was just responding to your thinking I was straight.”

A young heterosexual man of high-school age once asked me if gay men are attracted to straight men too. I told him, “Yes, just as straight men are attracted to all women, lesbian or straight.” He gave me a frightened look and said, “No more questions!”

I tried to educate him that this attraction wouldn't always be acted on, but he rapidly walked away from me with the parting line, “You and your kind are sick!” This is a prime example of homophobia!

Homonegative

Homonegative is the term for those who hold negative beliefs and feelings, but aren't afraid about

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being perceived as gay to the point that they'll avoid gays and lesbians. These people say things like, "I have gays and lesbians as friends. I just don't agree with their lifestyle." These people are friendly toward gays and lesbians. They can be co-workers, family members and even be gay or lesbian themselves—but still hold negative views about gays and lesbians!

A client recently told me that his mother is "against my being gay, but loves me anyway." This is a good example of homonegativity.

Homoprejudice

The word homoprejudice means discrimination against gays and lesbians. At a recent talk I gave, a woman told me that she thought I was "promoting the homosexual lifestyle" and telling her to "accept" gays and lesbians. I smiled back nicely and said, "No ma'am, I am asking you not to accept discrimination toward gays and lesbians."

That people would pass laws to prevent gays and lesbians from marrying, making them lose their jobs and/or their housing, are examples of homoprejudice. Most people don't even know that no federal laws prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians in the workplace—and that you can be fired for simply being gay!

Another example is when Governor Mitt Romney dusted off an old 1913 law making any marriage in Massachusetts void, if that mar-

riage would not be legal in the couple's home state and encouraged his attorney general to enforce it. This prejudicial statute was the same one used to prevent inter-racial marriages. Think of using this same law against other minorities, and it's hard not to see the homoprejudice on Governor Romney's part.

Homo-ignorant

Most people fall into the homo-ignorant category. If you're never exposed to gays and lesbians and have no interaction in the gay community or with gay and lesbian traditions and customs, then you're just not familiar with the culture.

I recall going to college as a freshman and discovering how many people were not familiar with Jews personally, much less Jewish customs. I had to teach my friends what being Jewish was all about—which seemed odd, since I came from the predominately Jewish city of Oak Park, Michigan.

Most gays and lesbians, of course, are not hetero-ignorant. We are forced to interact with both the gay and the straight world. As children, we are forced into playing the heterosexual role and conforming to what's expected of our gender. Later in life we come out and then, as adults, learn to create a seamless flow back and forth, between gay life and straight life.

Warren J. Blumenfeld edited an excellent book called, *Homophobia: How We All Pay The Price*, in which

he writes about how not only gays and lesbians, but heterosexuals suffer from acts of homophobia. Specifically:

1. First, homophobic conditioning compromises people's integrity by pressuring them to treat others badly—actions contrary to their basic humanity. This is where bullying begins, particularly against young boys who might be gay or effeminate ones who don't conform to male stereotypes. Calling other boys "faggot" and "queer" takes the focus off of the bullies.
2. It inhibits the ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of one's own sex, generally restricts communication with a significant portion of the population and, more specifically, limits family relationships. Limited communication contributes to the alarmingly high 30% suicide rate among adolescents who are either gay or lesbian and/or worry they might be. Some minimize this number by saying it's inflated or applies only to gay and lesbian teens, but they should consider numerous teenagers who are sexually abused or do not conform to socially accepted gender roles. These teens worry that they might be gay and in their confusion, also make suicide attempts—and are often successful.

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3. Homophobia is used to stigmatize, silence and, on occasion, target people whom OTHERS perceive or define as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but who are actually heterosexual. It locks all people into rigid gender-based roles, which inhibit creativity and self-expression. Many parents are preoccupied with ensuring that their children play with gender-appropriate toys, denying them the right to develop their own interests.

I think the best example of this is our expectation and desire for men to be good fathers. Yet we don't allow little boys to play with dolls, so they do not get practice in nurturing. Later, when they become fathers, we scorn them for not knowing what to do. Meanwhile, girls get permission for lots of practice in handling their doll "babies"—a mixed message that is very hurtful to men.

4. Homophobia is one cause of premature sexual involvement, increasing the chances of teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (or STDs). Young people of ALL sexual identities are often pressured to become HETEROSEXUALLY active to prove—to themselves and others—that they are "normal."

5. Societal homophobia keeps some LGBT people from developing an authentic self-identity,

adding to the pressure to marry. This in turn places undue stress and often trauma on them, as well as on their children and heterosexual spouses.

This reminds me of the joke, quoted in my book, by gay comedian Jason Stuart: "I wish you straight people would stop trying to prevent us from marrying each other. If you let us marry each other, then we'll stop marrying you!"

People never stop to think of the children who suffer as a result of mixed marriages between a heterosexual and a gay man or lesbian. Society tells us not to live an out and openly gay and then, when we finally can no longer live in the closet, questions them and asks, "Well, why did you get married in the first place?" This is crazy making!

6. Homophobia, combined with fear and revulsion of sex, eliminates discussions about the lives and sexuality of LGBT people as part of school-based sex education, keeping vital information from all students. Such a lack of information can kill people in the age of AIDS. And homophobia (along with racism, sexism, classism, sexphobia) inhibits a unified and effective governmental and societal response to the AIDS pandemic.

As Blumenfeld goes on to say, "The meaning is quite clear. When

any group of people is scapegoated, it is ultimately everyone's concern. For today, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are targeted. Tomorrow, they may come for you. Everyone, therefore, has a self-interest in actively working to dismantle all the many forms of bigotry, including homophobia."

Blumenfeld believes "that all of us are born into an environment polluted by homophobia (one among many forms of oppression), which falls upon us like acid rain. Some people's spirits are tarnished to the core, others are marred on the surface, but no one is completely protected. Therefore, we all have an opportunity—indeed, the responsibility—to join together to construct protective shelters from bigotry's corrosive effects, while working as allies to clean up the homophobic environment we live in.

Once enough steps are taken to reduce this pollution, we can all breathe a lot easier."

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