

## Queer Parenting Programmes at The 519 A Brief History

The 519 has had a somewhat rare historical roll in supporting queer families in Canada due in large part to the history of the LGBT communities, both locally and from afar, finding this community centre to be a safer haven. Since the late 1970's, The 519's *Children's Programmes* has recognized the need for and provided queer positive family programming (e.g. Family Resource Programme, day camps, workshops, field trips, special events) and resources (e.g. children's and parenting books and videos). In addition, The 519 has provided community meeting spaces over the years for such family-related groups as: *Gays and Lesbians Parenting Together*, *COLAGE (Children of Lesbians And Gays Everywhere)*, *Gay Fathers of Toronto*, and Toronto Public Health's *When Baby Comes Home*.

In recognition of emerging and varied needs for Queer Parenting specific support, information, and advocacy, The 519 formally created its Queer Parenting Programmes. These programmes serve members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender/Transsexual communities who are currently parents, their children, and those who are considering parenthood. We are concerned with continuity of care for these families; with a major focus is on supporting families with children aged 0-6, and expectant parents. The families that participate have diverse identities and structures, and are in constant need for safe and inclusive programming that all families with young children need (i.e. parenting classes, social support, and resources). There are very few early years programmes that specifically address the needs of people in LGBTT communities. As a consequence, many people feel isolated during the process of becoming parents as well as while they are parenting. Because we are one of the few agencies that offer programmes specifically for LGBTT parents and their children, we find a lot of families visit us from all over the downtown core, the Greater Toronto Area, and from outside the GTA. The same goes for students, community members and professionals seeking advice and information.

To help respond to these needs, we have created several initiatives with support of federal funding from the *Community Action Programme for Children* through our *Growing Up Healthy Downtown* project, and provincial funding from the *Ontario Early Years* initiative through *East York East Toronto - Toronto Centre Rosedale*. Some have also been developed in conjunction with important community services and partners such as the *LGBT Parenting Network*, founded in 2001, which greatly broadened information and support services to our families and communities. In 2006, the Ministry of Health increased funding to our programmes and that of the LGBT Parenting Network. Because of this, a new family service partnership is forming between The 519, Sherbourne Health Centre, and the Family Service Association of Toronto. We are now fortunate to have more financial support for programming for our families that ever before.

Below are a few of The 519's past and evolving programmes and services for LGBT-led families. (Also note initiatives from the LGBT Parenting Network on their website.)

## Family Support Programmes

- 1994-1997 *Lesbian Parents Group* – a monthly peer support group for women  
1998 *Lesbian Moms Try Fit* – a weekly fitness support group for mothers  
1998-present *Mum's The World!* – a monthly drop-in for LBTQ mothers and their young children  
2004-present *Daddy, Papa & Me* – a monthly drop-in for GBTQ fathers and their young children

## Educational Programmes

### Courses

- 1999-present *Dykes Planning Tykes* – a course for LBQ women considering parenting (co-created and lead by Rachel Epstein)  
2003-present *Queer Positive Pre-Natal Classes for Early and Late Pregnancy*  
2003-present *Daddies & Papas 2B* – a course for GBQ men considering parenting (co-sponsored by the *LGBT Parenting Network*) – the first course of its kind  
2001-2004 *Human Sexuality Program –Toronto District School Board: co-created Families Against Homophobia* – a series of workshops helping families work with the Toronto District School Board to offer queer positive programming, and the curriculum for a school readiness programme for children with queer parents.

### Discussion Forums

- 2003-present *The Queer Parenting Exchange* – a monthly discussion forum for queer parents and potential parents (co-sponsored by the *LGBT Parenting Network*)

### Working Groups

- 2005-present *The TransParent-cy Working Group* - a committee creating support for trans men considering pregnancy and other ways of becoming a parent. A unique pilot manual and course, *TransFathers 2B*, is in development for the spring of 2007  
2006-present *Positively Parenting* - a working group creating support for HIV positive LGBT people considering parenthood. (With Voices of Positive Women and The Positive Pregnancy Programme.)

### Educational Tools

- 2004 *Young and Proud: A Manual for Staff Working with LGBT Families* - a collaboration between The Metro Association of Family Resource Programs and The 519 to create a working tool to assist Early Childhood Educators, Day Care Staff, and Family Support Workers with creating supportive and inclusive children's programmes and spaces for LGBT-led families.

## **Special Events**

2001-present *The Annual Queer Family Fun Fair* – an annual celebration for queer families and prospective parents in early June

2006-present *Family Pride* - an annual collaboration with *Pride Toronto* to provide family-friendly space and activities during Pride weekend. Includes lunchtime events on Saturday and Sunday and on-going programming throughout the weekend.

## **Needs Assessment**

2006-present *Needs of Youth with LGBTTT Parents* - a survey and meeting process to ascertain gaps in service provision for older children and youth with LGBTTT parents. (A partnership with the LGBT Parenting Network, Central Toronto Youth Services, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere.)

2006-present *LGBTTT Parents through Public Adoption* - a parent-led special event designed to bring LGBTTT parents who have kids through public adoption to assess their families' particular needs for ongoing support. (A partnership with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto.)

## **Research Projects**

2006-present *Father Involvement Research Alliance – Gay Fathers Cluster* - the LGBT Parenting Network heads up the Gay Fathers Research Cluster of this national, SSHRC-CURA funded project on Father Involvement. We are currently assisting the project with data analysis and knowledge mobilization.

## **Training and Advocacy**

### Calls / Emails / Drop-Ins

We respond to enquiries about a wide range of LGBTTT parenting issues, including supporting potential parents, parents, children, service workers, professionals and students.

### Presentations/Workshops/Training

We frequently do presentations, workshops and training sessions in academic and community settings and for health, legal, social work and education students and professionals.

### Media Work

We frequently speak to the media on behalf of LGBT-led families, and/or to assist journalists in their research and in finding people to interview.

## **Public Outreach**

2001-present Co-sponsored queer parenting films with the *Inside/Out Film Festival*