

Embracing Equality

Pre-school Learning Alliance

Promoting equality and inclusion in the early years



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2.3.4 Homophobia

“Homophobia is the irrational hatred, intolerance and fear of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. These prejudicial feelings fuel the myths, stereotypes, discrimination and violence against people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual.” (Definition taken from the Stonewall website www.stonewall.org.uk. Stonewall is a major organisation campaigning for equality and social justice for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the UK)

Negative attitudes and behaviours, including comments, towards gays and lesbians should always be challenged and addressed in early years settings.

Some children who use our settings have gay or lesbian parents. Many will have gay or lesbian relatives and/or family friends. These children’s family realities need to be positively reflected in their experiences in early years settings. For children growing up without these links to gay or lesbian people, positive words and images about gay and lesbian families will also challenge any negative attitudes they may have picked up. All children benefit from contact with people from a variety of backgrounds as it adds to their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

It is important that settings are as welcoming to lesbian and gay parents as they are to other parents. Settings should specifically state in their literature and in equality and diversity policies that gay and lesbian parents and their children will be welcomed and supported. Do not wait for ‘something to happen’, but take a proactive approach and include a mention of families with two mums or two dads.

Acknowledge both parents in a lesbian or gay couple and be aware that some lone parents, too, are lesbian or gay. Consider how you deal with occasions like Mothers’ Day, Fathers’ Day and other festivals, which can be painful to children from any kind of ‘minority’ family type if they are handled in a way that excludes them.

The Equality Act 2006 prohibits sexual orientation discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services, in education and in the execution of public functions. This means that settings must provide the same service for gay and lesbian parents as they do for heterosexual parents.

Discrimination in the workplace on grounds of sexuality has been illegal since 2003. However, in many work and social environments, including in early years settings, it is still not easy for people to ‘come out’ as gay or lesbian. An absence of openly gay and lesbian practitioners in settings, along with a lack of challenging anti-gay attitudes and behaviour, may play a part in perpetuating prejudice and discrimination in children (and adults) in this area.

A lesbian practitioner shares her experience

“As a lesbian play assistant working in an early years setting, I was asked by the father of a child that we looked after if the staff knew I was gay, as I shouldn’t be allowed to take the girls to the toilet or change their nappies. I should have been shocked by his comments but I was not. As it was, the staff already knew about my sexuality and, despite the comments, we were able to continue to stick together as a team.

I have a gay male friend who works in an early years setting. I am shocked by some of the things that people have said to him. It just makes me realise how difficult a decision it can be to be openly lesbian or gay in an early years setting.”