

# Gay Information

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# Gay Information

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# Boiled Lollies And Band- aids: 34 Gay Men And Kids

Gay Men relate to children as parents and teachers, friends and lovers. What are the political, as well as emotional dimensions of these relationships? Do they need to be radically transformed?

## 'YOU MEN, PUT YOUR NAMES DOWN

for child care over here!' That demand greeted me at the door of the First National Homosexual Conference all those years ago. Well, I didn't. At the time I was a high-school teacher, and so I answered that I spent five days a week looking after other people's children, and I wasn't volunteering. Quite a game response when I think about it. It was, after all, the heyday of effeminism and one didn't refuse such a request from a lesbian — especially a Melbourne one.

Recently, while having lunch with a feminist colleague, and discussing this article, I copped: 'You...you hate kids!'. A curious notion that isn't true, although I have suggested several inhumane practices in some cinemas and late at night in my block of flats at the sound of a wailing child.

What these anecdotes illustrate is an issue that is still a grey and confusing one — the relationship between gay men and kids. I doubt that we are much further ahead in understanding it than we were in 1975. And it is not surprising that with the paedophilia debate hotting up, we've seen increased attention to the issue, in *Gay Community News*, magazines from overseas, and now *Gay Information*. What I want to do here is open up the issue, outlining some parts and introducing others that should be on the agenda of the gay movement. And, in writing this, I hope not to become some kind of de facto movement commentator on child/adult relations. For we often deal harshly with our commentators, demanding both rigor and perspicuity. I don't intend to analyze the various ideologies and social structures which form the historical context of the relations between gay men and kids. Others are more adept at and inclined towards that kind of analysis. I want to urge the development of a politics which grows from practice, a recognition of the strength of our collective creativity. So before we ask questions such as: what *should* be the relations between gay men and kids (and it is assumed in the debate at present that gay men *should* have something to do with kids), it is more important to ask: what *are* the relations between gay men and kids. Here too anecdote may be useful.

An old friend from my student days came to stay recently, en route from Melbourne to Brisbane. At our last meeting he wasn't gay, but his friendly

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fondling of my bum on arrival was as clear a sign as a clone's moustache. I should have guessed, because he now lives with two gay male friends of mine in Melbourne. His lover, who arrived as well, recently came out and, after leaving his wife of twenty years, is constructing a new life for himself. That struggle has included telling his three adolescent sons he is gay, and fortunately he was warmly received by them. When he said he was a father, I felt my eyes widen. I am always surprised when a gay man tells me he is a father. Lesbian mothers seem more commonplace nowadays, but we do forget about poofter pops.

The two friends in Melbourne who live with my friend of student days, also spend much of their time around kids. They are part of a theatre-in-education troupe, acting in schools, parks, during festivals and the like. Each has been doing this kind of work for years and really loves it, and has a developed political perspective about what he does. Other gay men I know, old lovers and friends, do similar work in Adelaide and Sydney.

Many of my gay male friends are teachers working in perilous positions in secondary and primary schools. They do so as politically-committed teachers, recognizing clearly the active part schools play in the construction of class, gender, and sexuality. And again, my flat mate is a child-care helper in a kindergarten. Watching these mini-persons crowd around his knees with glee on their faces is as good as watching his face light up when he's with them. Yet another friend was nursing at the children's hospital recently, and in spite of his pseudo-cynical disclaimer, I know he was good with the kids, recognizing their powerlessness in the hospital. And I also have a friend, a paedophile, who is working very hard on making sense out of his relations with boys. These relations consist of, among other things, a large amount of nurture and support for these boys, a real caring for their welfare and growth.

Finally, I remembered that I have nine nieces and nephews, three of whom are my 'god' children (oh, we *do* need a new word!) and we all have a good time together. But I am also one of three legal guardians of a child of a lesbian friend - this last arrangement is the newest and the most developed in my thinking about my relations with kids.

So here I am wondering what the theoretical and political components to an argument on gay men and kids might look like. The pen stops, the mind craves a distraction, a record, a cup of tea, a put-off 'phone call...

So what is the problem? Or more succinctly, what is the problem we are facing that warrants the construction of an issue about the relations between gay men and kids? Why is there an assumption that there are answers to be found, facts to be sifted, made 'sense' of, the theoretical water tested (by the elbow I'm told), and then meaning created, generalizations expounded, cases argued; and each of us to be asked to adjust her/his practice to the new and better paradigm. For, anecdotes aside, one thing should be

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quite clear: gay men do have a wide range of relationships with kids, their own, their friends', in 'families' and other social institutions. That is the starting point of the debate, and it is from this point, our practices, that a political position can be built.

And a new political position is needed for there are significant political struggles at stake. First, we have three legal/social questions to win: custody rights for gay men and lesbians; the legal right of paedophiles and their young lovers; and finally the sexual rights of children as a whole. Second, we have three issues within the homosexual movement and community: the support gay men provide the women's movement and in our alternative child-rearing practices and arrangements; the way we have set up the debate at present; and last the real meaning of childlessness. What I'd like to do is comment on these issues, to tease them out a little in the hope of stimulating debate among gay men specifically, but also in the movement generally.

**WE HAVE A HISTORY OF DRAMATIC** wins in the area of custody rights to the credit of the women (mainly) and men who fought through these cases. But, those precedents are by no means safe, especially while the Family Law Act and other social legislation refuse to recognize homosexuals, and more specifically homosexuals. Also, gay men fighting for custody rights are still disadvantaged by the criminality of gay male sex. And in our own politics, all gay parents are disadvantaged by the marginality of parenting from mainstream movement concerns. However the recent publication of the Gay Fathers of

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36 Toronto<sup>1</sup> and the articles in *Gay Community News*<sup>2</sup> hopefully signify a new impetus for tackling the issue.

But there is a new problem emerging — what do we do in the case of a lesbian mother and a gay father each fighting the other for custody of a child, an occurrence which is increasing and which tends to generate some pretty fierce line-drawing along gender lines. And I do mean gender lines, not sex lines. For if a poofster is denied access to his children on the grounds of his sexual preference, we must defend his rights, as we would those of lesbians. However, custody fights between male homosexuals and lesbians *may or may not* mean that it is patriarchal rights which are being claimed. Where do gay men stand then? Lined up against lesbians, unless both lesbians and male homosexuals attempt to circumvent the structures which arbitrate such cases, and then construct our own procedures. The latter should engage our political energies, I suspect. One uncomfortable consideration is: what do we do if a gay parent is a lousy parent? Whose rights are we to defend then?

How we win these kinds of fights is just as important as winning, and it is crucial that we don't win by hiving off the issue of child/adult sexual relations from child/adult relations generally. Processes of sexual definition and delineation aren't always in our own interests. So, to win custody rights, gay teachers'

rights or kids' rights by doing in the paedophiles would be a pyrrhic victory. Yet that has been the position we've followed for quite a while, often denying that sex has anything to do with issues about kids.

Many mothers and some fathers will agree that children are sexual and generate sexual responses in their parents. Cuddling, breast feeding, bathing together, playing, kissing and fondling kids are immensely pleasurable activities for them and for us. And it is not uncommon to feel sexually aroused by that closeness, that touch and that love. How different then is that gentle, tentative sexuality between parent and child from the love of a paedophile and his/her lover? From all their accounts and from many academic studies (some worse than others), that kind of love, warmth, support and nurture is an important part of the paedophilic relationship.

I'm not saying that mothering/fathering is paedophilic; but I am saying that they are not mutually exclusive. Nor is the social parent so different from the child-lover. A perfect example of the ambiguities and discontinuities of such a relationship is that of J.M. Barrie — the author of *Peter Pan* — and the boys he loved. To argue that such a relationship is paedophilic or non-paedophilic is irrelevant. The presence or absence of sex as a criterion is specious for it relies on a definition of sex as 'fucking', and it acts again to constitute sexuality as separate, a reactionary definition we should argue against strongly. We should argue for the re-introduction of sex, its re-integration into social life rather than its privatization. The current paedophilia debate then is crucial to the political processes of the gay movement: paedophiles need our support, and we need to construct the child/adult sex issue on our terms.

**THOSE GAINS MUST BE WON FOR KIDS** too. We need to protect the youthful partners in paedophilia against the legal and social management systems which treat them as delinquents. But for all kids there are rights to be won, and struggles to be waged against institutions which deny them power and their sexual rights viz, schools, reformatories, churches, scouts and guides; and struggles also against the individual who would do the same — the abusive parent, the authoritarian teacher, the Minister of Youth Affairs who would deny an abortion for a state ward, and the child rapist. These use their power as adults to confine and restrict children's lives.

On the other hand, other adults undoubtedly have skills and experience learnt while negotiating a complex world. And gay men and women have special insights into the way oppressive social forces operate in individual lives. This, we must offer kids, and we must protect them while they learn. But above all, we should demand of ourselves and the kids the same democracy in our relations as we expect in our movement politics. I wouldn't advocate for a moment the romantic and naive libertarianism of the early

1 Gay Fathers of Toronto. *Gay Fathers: Some of Their Stories, Experience And Advice*. P.O. Box 187, Station F, Toronto, Canada, M4Y 2L5, 1981.

2 *Gay Community News*, 4(2), March 1982.

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70's: it was unrealistic, and the parents and kids I know from that era don't seem to like each other very much. And we ought to do some research on the kids we know who have gay fathers, or who have many gay men in their lives. Let's find out what they think of us. For until now we have spent most of our time thinking about the adult gay male side of that relationship.

#### HOW SHOULD WE GO ABOUT

constructing our new kinds of 'family'; our support systems for gay parents, single and often restricted by the demands of parenting? How do you train your lover if you have kids, so that she/he understands the demands of kids? Undoubtedly our support for the demands of the women's movement for parenting assistance, adequate child-care provision and funding is crucial to answering those questions, and it is sad to note the shrinking of the gay male faithful at rallies and demonstrations. Still, the shrinking of our numbers is nothing compared with the shrinking numbers of straight men (and straight women too) participating in those struggles. So I suspect that this says something about the struggle rather than something about gay men specifically. While this kind of politics is essential and *may* be movement-building, it is at the level of our own alternative practices that we can best provide support for gay men and women with children. And as we have already seen many gay men are doing just that.

#### BUT THERE IS ANOTHER MORE

fundamental and pressing concern — and that is to do with the way we have been thinking about the question to date.

Notions about relationships between gay men and kids grow out of the debate about the role of men as parents. Feminist and socialist analyses of parenting, child care and the like in turn evolved from the sexual politics debate on the heterosexual nuclear family under capitalism and the sexual division of labour within it. That critique reflects the fact that most (between 80-90 per cent) adult males and females by the 1950s were married. This kind of family and parenting structure is very much a contemporary phenomenon, having been constructed over the last 50 or so years. At the turn of the century some figures quote only about 60 per cent of adults marrying and having kids. Consequently, in rural and early industrial England, for example, unmarried brothers and sisters remained with families as an extra-earner or a domestic pair of hands. They became significant social parents for children in such families. Childless and unmarried people have had quite intricate relationships with children over the centuries. Teachers as an example, were a group of notoriously 'single' people until recently. We don't really know how the 'homosexuals' of this period actually lived, but I bet if you had scratched an unmarried uncle or female school teacher, you'd find one of our 'ancestors'.

Second, we only need to look at anthropological evidence of other pre-capitalist cultures to see very

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diverse family structures, divisions of labour, different sets of gender relations and sexual politics. For example, in South Africa, one anthropologist<sup>3</sup> noted the relationship of the 'Joking Uncle' — a brother of the biological parent to whom was assigned specific tasks in the caring of the nephew.

Nowadays, estimates show that a minority of households are organized in conventional, heterosexual, two-generation nuclear families (although a majority of kids may still be raised in this structure). However, amongst our own subculture we can see the beginnings of new forms of biological parenting, exercises in shared social parenting, and various forms of commitment to the children of comrades and relatives.

The point of this is not to dispute the incisiveness of feminist and socialist analyses nor its current reworking, but to confirm its accuracy *in a particular historical space* and in *broad terms* only. If we are to gain both an insight into the nature of the relationships between gay men and kids and propose some shape to future developments to that relationship, I suspect we will gain more by looking both socially and historically at the role of unmarried adults in child-rearing practices, both in our culture and others (something most socialist analyses, especially, neglect to do). We also need to start looking at groups of adults who have nothing to do with kids. Here we should find our continuities: here we should start investigating our relationship with kids.

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<sup>3</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure And Function In Primitive Societies*.

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**'We should support re-invigorated notions of biological fathering for gay men...But we do need to develop a better idea of what that might be rather than the current model of simply sharing the oppressive burdens women have borne for generations.'**

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38 I am not simply separating gay men from heterosexual men, but I do want to expose what has been, at best, a heterosexist analysis approached from a largely unreconstructed effeminist position by many gay men in the movement. Very often, that effeminist position (that gay men should construct relationships with kids) contains a kind of moral pressure on all gay men — intimations of treachery against the cause of women. We certainly don't need any of that kind of righteousness. Moreover that moral pressure often carries with it more than a hint of a popular critique of gay men — the image of the child-free, spouse-free, high-earning, high-living, bar-frequenting hedonist, sexually irresponsible and politically uncommitted. An image coming straight from the pages of the *National Times*, the inaccuracy of which is obvious. What is most disturbing is the similarity of their image to that used in arguments by some of us as to why we should all commit ourselves to social parenting, child care, etc. I suspect really that the cynical attitude of lots of gay men to the issue of kids is often a refusal to put 'kids' on a pedestal, a debunking as it were, and a healthy disrespect for 'parenting' as it is currently presented. There is also an unwillingness to accept the idea that having kids represents a 'real' maturity, a 'coming down to earth', and the shouldering of 'real' responsibility — it will keep your feet on the ground.

Well, I'd like to ask the question why should all gay men have something to do with kids? A choice to construct a life without kids doesn't automatically make one a *National Times* clone. Many men and women have decided not to have children in different

cultures, in different ways since time began. Some still construct valid social relationships with kids in a variety of ways: others decide to have nothing to do with kids. The choice to have nothing to do with kids becomes unique and suspect only when a society reaches the point where nearly all people marry and have kids, when heterosexual relations in nuclear, two-generation couples become so dominant that all else appears as aberration, as unclean. And now that homosexuals, among others, are being split off from capitalist family units, the opportunities to be a social parent in your own family are rapidly diminishing. So, while it is a good thing that the dominance of the nuclear family is waning, let's also be careful to avoid transferring issues generated in that oppressive structure onto one's being constructed in reaction to it. Let's avoid superimposing on ourselves the demands of analyses drawn from straightisms.

**WE SHOULD SUPPORT WOMEN'S** rights to bear and raise children if they wish. We should support re-invigorated notions of biological fathering for gay men (and straight men who want to have kids). But we do need to develop a better idea of what that might be, rather than the current model of simply *sharing* the oppressive burdens women have borne for generations. Is it really any better that both men and women are half oppressed equally by current child-raising practices? Here a movement commitment to construct new forms of social parenting can create real changes to the project of parenting. Our new kinds of arrangements collectively create a new politics of child/adult relations. Is this a bit of gay chauvinism, gay pride, a fond idealistic hope? Maybe, but since when have we too regarded pride as a sin?

For me, a recent visit from my ward, Joe — 8 months old — reminded me of the political and emotional commitment I have made to that child. The nappy changing and the midnight feeds sent my altruism packing and a realistic understanding of my guardianship is starting to emerge. I think many other childless gay men are constructing committed relationships with kids. A real appreciation of the diversity of these relations should be proclaimed loudly, for it is our best weapon against those claiming that we can only relate to kids sexually.

Whatever we do, we don't need a new orthodoxy. We should also support those men and women who decide to live their lives outside heterosexist models, and the new gay ones who decide not to have kids, and who decide not to be involved with kids. Theirs is not an easy choice to make but it is not an irresponsible one. Gays can take that choice because fertility is not a problem. While appreciating that it is a problem for straights and bisexuals, there is no need to feel guilty that it isn't one for us.

PS. I hope the guilt-motivated rush to the child care roster next conference will give way to a more relaxed and considered stroll.

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**Gary Dowsett**