

firm co-parenting arrangements during the first year can be unrealistic, as flexibility and sensitivity are required in order to work out what is best for the child and the primary caregivers.

Co-parenting Contracts

Many people choose to draw up a co-parenting contract outlining the key elements of their co-parenting agreement. It can be helpful to have key discussions and then get the help of a lawyer to draw up the contract. Co-parenting contracts are not legally binding. If you end up in a legal battle over parenting issues, the courts will use "the best interests of the child" as the basis of decisions. However, drawing up a contract can be invaluable in helping you to clarify your intentions about roles, responsibilities, values and conflict resolution. In times of conflict, it can be very helpful to be reminded of your original intentions when you set out to create a family.

Conflict Resolution

Every relationship involves conflict and it is inevitable that at some point you will disagree about a parenting decision. Having agreed in advance on a process to handle conflict can help ease the tension when this happens. Often times people agree on a friend, group of friends, counselor or mediator from whom they will seek help in resolving conflicts. Many agree also to seek counseling, mediation and/or arbitration, but to avoid the court system (where often nobody wins).

The Unexpected

As much as you work things out in advance, life and parenting are unpredictable and you will be faced with unanticipated changes and challenges. These might include people entering into or ending relationships, job and financial changes, illness, etc., and it is impossible to predict the particular needs and challenges your child(ren) will present. Co-parenting, like all parenting, requires flexibility, communication, trust and a willingness and ability to deal with the unexpected.

RESOURCES

LGBT Parenting Network, Sherbourne Health Centre
416-324 4100, ext. 5219 www.sherbourne.on.ca

Queer Parenting Programmes
The 519 Church St. Community Centre
416-392-6878, ext. 109 www.the519.org

FSA Toronto
www.fsatoronto.com (LGBT Parents)

T.O. Parent: Ontario LGBT Parent Matchmaker
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/to-parent/>

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)
Toronto 416-985-3749 www.colage.org

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)
Toronto: 416-406-6378 www.pflag.ca

Gay Fathers of Toronto
416-925-9872 x 2124
www.gayfathers-toronto.com

Rainbow Families (U.S.)
www.rainbowfamilies.org

Families Like Mine (U.S.)
www.familieslikemine.com

GQTGParenting - Trans & GenderQueer Parenting
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/GQTGParenting/>

TransParentcy www.transparentcy.org

Brill, S. (2006) *The New Essential Guide to Lesbian Conception, Pregnancy and Birth*. Alyson Books: L.A./New York. (Chapter 2: Co-parenting)

Mistysyn, K. (2000) *Brave New Family* in J. Wells (ed.) *Home Fronts: Controversies in Nontraditional Parenting*. Alyson Books: L.A./New York.

See also *Queer Parenting Brochure on Insemination Procedures*.

Resources provided for information only. We cannot recommend or endorse specific organizations, services or websites.

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What is Co-Parenting?

Although co-parenting can refer to any arrangement where people are sharing parenting responsibilities, in lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (LGBT) communities the term "co-parent" is often used to refer to two or more people who choose to parent together outside of romantic or sexual relationships. In co-parenting arrangements the connection between parents is based on shared responsibility for children, not on romantic involvement. Co-parenting arrangements can include any combination of individuals and/or couples who choose to parent together.

Co-parenting can be the basis of many creative parenting opportunities and innovative family structures. However, it almost always takes more work, communication and lifelong commitment than most people initially expect. It is essential to realize that no matter how smooth or rocky the relationship, choosing to co-parent means choosing people with whom you will have a lifelong connection and commitment. Co-parenting is a complex relationship that requires trust, mutual respect, some level of shared values and the ability to creatively work through the unexpected.

Why Co-Parent?

For many LGBT people, co-parenting provides the opportunity to conceive biological children and to share the responsibilities and costs of child-raising. Some people choose co-parenting because they are single and do not want to depend on a romantic relationship in order to become parents. For some, parenting together is an expression of love and trust between close friends. Others choose a co-parent of the opposite sex because they feel that it is important for their children to have parents of both conventional genders. There are also situations in which a group of close friends and/or extended family members may team up to share parenting responsibilities with an LGBT parent facing disability, illness or poverty.

An advantage of co-parenting is that your parenting arrangements are not affected by changes or

endings in romantic relationships. A disadvantage can be that you may not know the person (people) as well as you might know an intimate partner, and you may not have experience with them in making important decisions about very intimate topics.

Finding a Co-Parent

Many people look to existing relationships when seeking co-parents. Often long-time friends discover that there is a level of trust and a mutual desire to parent that lead them to consider parenting together. Others have met co-parents through advertisements in community papers or through organized groups.

If you don't already know the person (people) you are considering parenting with, it is important to take some time to get to know them and to share your desires and values around parenting. Even if you have known the person for a long time, there are important discussions you need to have about the shared parenting you are considering.

Discussions with Potential Co-Parents

In your early discussions with potential co-parents it is important not to compromise on any of your fundamental needs, desires and values. Although your desire to be a parent may be huge, it is critical that everyone involved be as honest with themselves and each other as possible, even if it means having to face disagreements, conflict or a decision that your needs are not compatible. The discussions you have with potential co-parents before you actually become parents can lay the ground-work for the countless discussions you will have as you parent together over the years. You may want to consider having a third party involved in these discussions - a close friend, a mediator or a counsellor.

Once you have established that your visions of co-parenting are well-matched, there are some key issues you will want to talk about:

- Parenting roles and time with children
- Legal relationships to child and parenting model - shared parenting, joint custody, custody/access model. Currently up to two people can be fully recognized as legal parents at the time of a child's birth or adoption. As the result of a 2007 Ontario case known as AA/BB/CC it is possible in some cases for more than two parents to be legally recognized. (See www.fsatoronto.com - LGBT Parents for more info).
- Living arrangements
- Relationships and time spent with families of origin
- Vacations and holidays
- Finances
- Work-related issues, i.e. work requirements, job relocation, etc.
- New romantic or lover relationships
- Naming of the child/of the parenting relationships
- Parenting styles and attitudes toward issues such as health care, schooling, discipline, diet, social activities, religion, holidays, etc.
- Decision-making processes
- Conflict resolution



The First Year

The first year of co-parenting requires particular flexibility as the needs of a baby differ from those of an older child, and are highly unpredictable. During the first year (or longer), the birth parent will likely be breastfeeding and may find it difficult for the child to be away from them until the child is eating quite a bit of solid food. This time of early bonding is often very intense for the birth parent and other primary parents, and people often feel a need to protect what is experienced as a very precious (and demanding) time. Setting up very