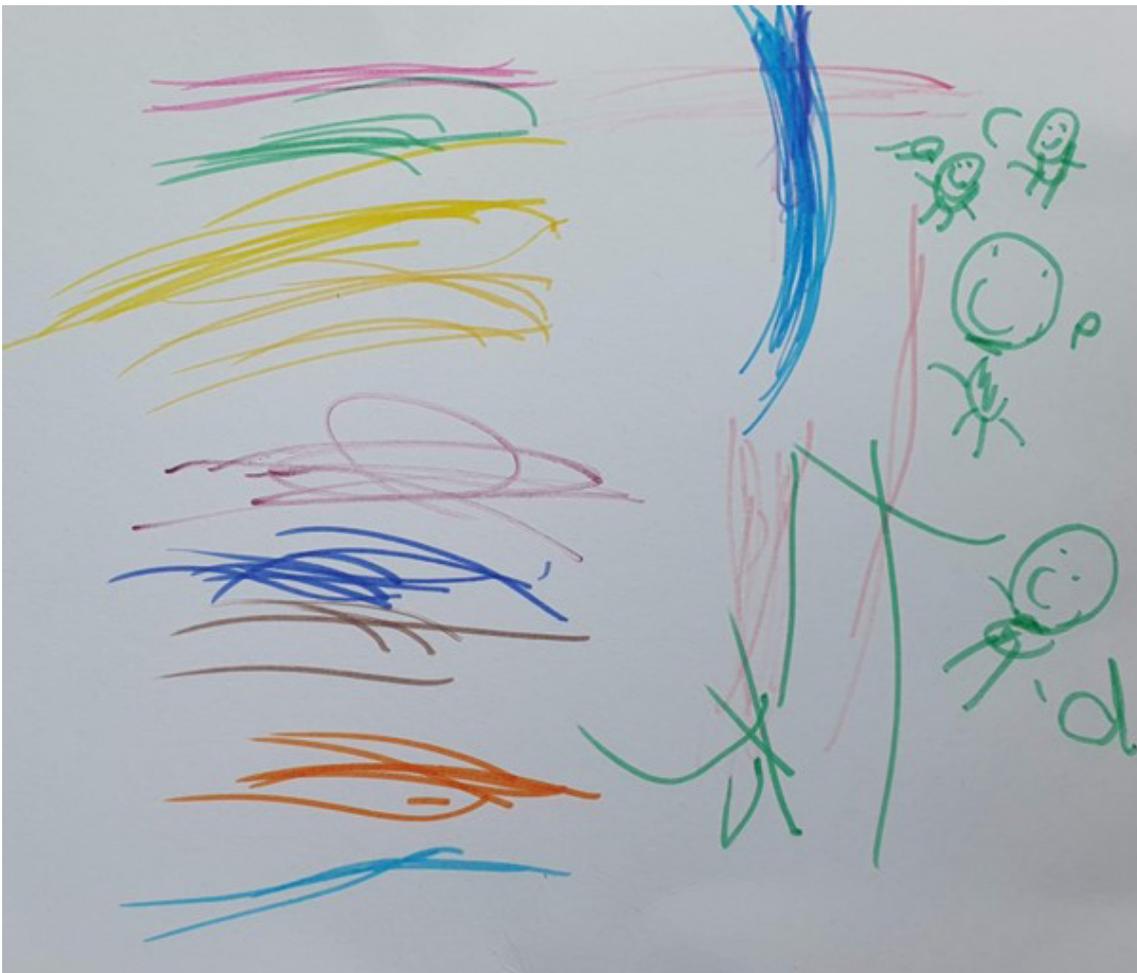


QUEERNESS AS A GIFT, LGBTQ+ PARENTING AND THE BENEFITS TO OUR CHILDREN

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With increased visibility, language and community, more trans people are coming out and making informed choices in regard to how to create their family. These factors mean more children will be raised in openly gender-diverse homes.

But the increased visibility of trans people has a darker side, and we live in turbulent times. We are seeing a large increase in transphobic rhetoric with a moral panic being framed around trans people which leaves trans rights under threat, and these changes both directly and indirectly impact the rights of our children.



As a trans parent, I want to give voice to my family and the children who are being raised in my community. In this article I share a personal reflection on my daily parenting. I will also reflect on how the effects of pervasive cisheteronormativity and active transphobia bring harm to us as individuals and families, but will also give visibility to the many unique gifts that trans parents bring to their children and their families.

I Grew in your Uterus, Papa

My five-year-old, R, holds Pink Teddy to her chest and looks down lovingly. “This is my baby,” she says, “I grew her in my uterus.” She bustles about with the importance of play, and I’m handed the little teddy, more grey than pink after years of love. I hold the bear gently, like a baby, and watch as my daughter continues playing at being a parent. It takes me back to myself at that age, lovingly pretending at looking after a baby, never questioning the certainty that one day I would be a parent myself. Putting a blanket over the teddy in my arms, my daughter picks her up again and says, “I grew in your uterus, Papa, and I have a uterus too.”

R talks as easily about having a trans dad as she talks about what she had for lunch at school. For her, it is mundane and normal that I, her Papa, gave birth to her.

She may remind me of myself, but so much of her experience is different. Not so much that she has a Papa who gave birth to her (in so many ways that is a very small thing in our household), but that she has the language to talk about her body, her experiences and her emotions in a way that I was never gifted. I have gone into parenting incredibly mindfully, and I truly feel that being a queer person in a cisheteronormative world has given me strengths and gifts that I bring to my parenting and, in turn, pass those gifts on to my children.

I’m trans and was assigned female at birth, which means I have a uterus and all the other physical attributes needed to do the everyday miracle of growing a human in my body. But to look at me, you would not assume that that’s the body parts I have. When I realized that not all girls wanted beards and maybe I might be something other than cisgender, I started the process of socially and then later medically transitioning. For me, that included taking testosterone, which has masculinized my features to the extent that I am often assumed to be a cis (not-trans) man.

When I started testosterone, I was told by multiple health professionals that it would make me infertile. In the run-up to starting hormone replacement therapy I sought out options for egg retrieval, but there was nothing available. I was incredibly poor at the time, living on benefits and I had been homeless only a year before after my family rejected me for being trans. This was 2009 and I was in my early 20s, at one of the most vulnerable times in my life and facing the choice between my fertility and a life-saving medication.

There was no choice, of course. I had to choose life and living authentically, but I grieved deeply for my perceived infertility. I had always known I wanted to be a parent, and I felt the loss of that like a wound.

I feel in many ways that my route to parenting is similar to couples who have successfully conceived after an infertility journey. I understand how it feels to grieve deeply for a child you think you'll never have, and how utterly miraculous it feels to finally have your baby in your arms.

And, of course, this is true for so many queer couples. Rarely do we have a simple route to parenting. Whether it's searching for donors, accessing fertility clinics, the mountainous climb that is the fostering and adoption process or, in my case, pausing my hormone therapy to get pregnant, we are often facing challenges before we even get to the complexities of raising children as queer parents in a cisheteronormative world.

I think the mainstream (read: cis and straight) narrative is that having an LGBTQ+ identity is something relevant only to your bedroom and that because of this it's inherently sordid. However, the reality of having a queer identity and being part of our community is expansive and beautiful and a lot of the ethos at the core of our community translates easily to parenting. The queer community celebrates love, yes. But beyond the "love is love" slogans on a pride march, in my experience we also celebrate authenticity, diversity, honesty, consent and autonomy.

As well as our community values, queerness comes as an experience of stepping outside of the mainstream, and this comes with personal growth. For me, this otherness brought resilience, perspective and compassion, and these are also values that positively impact my parenting.

In this article I'm going to focus on consent, acceptance of others and acceptance of self as examples of benefits that I bring to my parenting from being queer.

Thank You for Letting Me Know

One of the most important lessons I've learned in my life (and therefore key lessons I want to impart to my children) is consent. (With that in mind, I'm going to talk about sexual violence and if that feels like something you don't consent to reading about, skip ahead a paragraph.)

Like too many of us, I have experienced sexual violence. And honestly, my odds weren't great. As someone assigned female my odds of experiencing sexual abuse were around 1 in 4 and as a trans person they rocketed to almost 1 in 2. Without giving too much detail, I experienced sexual abuse both as a child and also as an adult. The majority was at the hands of cis men, however, the most recent of which was within a romantic relationship and my abuser was a cis woman.

After that experience, I stopped being able to have physical contact, even platonic. I shut down totally and couldn't tolerate even a hug from close friends or family members. It was coincidental, but life-changing, that around this time I accessed a retreat for trans people called Trans Bare All. I went looking for community, but I found so much more. At this retreat, consent was built into the very core, from the ground rules in the space to the discussions and workshops. For the first time in my life I learned what consent truly meant. I learned how to say no, and, from this, I was finally able to say yes again.

The lessons I learned from this, and from other queer spaces, I have taken directly to my parenting. We have consent central to everything we do. From the minute they were born I listened to my children's cues about what they did and didn't want. When we tickle it is in small amounts, and I often pause and say "more or stop?". And just like I learned from my queer peers, stop means stop. No means no. Maybe means no. Anything other than an enthusiastic "yes" or "more" means no. I'm teaching both of my children, but especially my daughter, so they don't join me in the statistics. I'm teaching this to them both, but especially my son, so they don't cause statistics to happen.

Both of my children are incredibly affectionate and often want to snuggle on the knee of their beloved adults (which includes my husband and I as well as family, both chosen and biological). As they sit on me I'll often stroke their hair or arm. Sometimes they'll lean into this and really want more, other times they'll ask me to stop and whenever they say no or ask me to stop, I thank them. "Thank you for letting me know."

I use this phrase a lot, and it feels important. Saying "no" was a mountain for me to climb. It felt impossible to let someone else down,

even as I felt intense discomfort. But my children are thanked when they say no. I want them to say no. I want them to feel so safe with me that they never question saying no to touch they don't want.

In fact, I want to be that person for everyone in my life. You want to cancel plans because you don't feel up to it? I'm glad you told me, I'm glad you're looking after yourself.

In a world that tells us we should put up and shut up, I'm working hard to support those in my life to speak up and say no. I'm also trying to support my children to know that "no" is a good thing to hear, it means someone trusts you enough to let you know what they need.

Last week we had a family gathering with aunts and cousins and when it was time to leave I asked, "Would anyone like to give hugs goodbye?". My five-year-old was then offering hugs to her cousins and the youngest, age four, said he didn't want one. R said "ok" and moved on to offer a hug to someone else. It wasn't a big event, there were no hard feelings, no uncomfortable pause. It is so mundane for me that I didn't even think about it until my sister reflected to me how impressive it was that R took hearing "No" so well. We have built consent into the fabric of our lives to the extent that it feels strange to consider anything else to be the norm. I am so incredibly grateful for the trans and queer folk who helped me unlearn the lessons that the cisheteronormative world had taught me.

There is a delicate line when it comes to consent and parenting, and this has been something I've had to work hard at finding the nuance of. Children cannot consent to some things because they aren't developed enough to understand the consequences. When it comes to health, wellness, education, etc, it's our job as parents to make informed decisions for them. We create and hold boundaries so our children can feel safe to explore and to be fully themselves within them.

Most of the Time

"Most of the time people start as a boy or a girl and they stay the same all their life, but some of the time people realize that even though the world is telling them they're a boy or a girl that they're actually the other one." R is sitting on my knee as I tell her this. She's not quite four at this point and I know I need to keep things as simple as possible. She probably won't take it all in, and I'll repeat it again later if I need to. But it's important, because her aunty has just come out as trans and we need to let her know that her aunty is a girl, even though we might not have realized it before.

We started using her aunt's name regularly and deliberately talked about her a lot when she wasn't around to normalize her name change. It worked exactly the same as introducing R's new sibling to her. She accepted her aunt's new name in the same way that she accepted her new sibling's name. Because what are names other than what we call each other?

I feel that acceptance of difference and acceptance of change is another strength that I've honed through being part of the LGBTQ+ community. I am able to model acceptance for my children because I have practised it repeatedly with my peers and was given the gift of it from them when I went through my transition.

I'd even go so far as to say that it isn't even just acceptance but celebration that we experience. I celebrated that my sister could tell me about her transition and finally live authentically. I celebrate when my friends tell me of finally getting diagnoses for their neurodivergency. My daughter celebrates enthusiastically when we come across other families with structures outside of the norm.

When we're looking at the incredible depths of human variation and experience, it can feel a little daunting to try and explain things to a child, especially when you don't have the benefit of society doing the heavy lifting for you. With this in mind, I find myself using the phrase "most of the time" a lot. It's a simple phrase that gives context within the societal norms and can turn complex conversations into age-appropriate one-liners ... most of the time.

We use it a lot, and I have heaps of examples that I use it in, but one that often comes up is when we're talking about our family structure. "Most of the time children have a mummy and a daddy, but we have a family with a daddy and a Papa." We often talk about other families we know at this point, especially families that also don't have a "mummy and daddy" as parents. This can be families with a single parent or other relationship dynamics.

We also use it when talking about the fact that I was pregnant with both R and her sibling. R was three when C was born, so she knew I was growing a baby in my uterus. I often found myself saying "Most of the time it's a mummy who is pregnant, but because I'm trans I'm a Papa who can be pregnant", not only to explain how and why I was pregnant, but also that not all dads can grow a baby!

It feels so important to me that my children grow up knowing from the get-go that not everyone fits into neat boxes. We can truly celebrate

others when we start with who they are and not who we expect them to be. I grew up in a world that told me that people must always be a certain way and anything that deviated from that was an abomination. But the leap to outside-of-the-box was a beautiful one, and I want to raise my children to know that the boxes are there but they don't limit us and that where people are in relation to them doesn't determine their worth.

The Reality of Who We Are

As a queer and trans person who has had to go through rejection, loss and grief to live authentically, I want to do everything in my power so that my children can be wholly and entirely themselves without having to go through heartache to get there. This comes in two parts, I want to embody accepting and loving myself so they see what that looks like and I want to make it so clear and obvious that I love all of who they are without them having to prove anything or live up to any expectations.

In its purest form this is unconditional love, and perhaps many people in cisheteronormative society get to experience this, but for so many LGBTQ+ people the act of coming out is a step too far and our families can no longer love the reality of who we are, and they reveal that they only loved a version of us that they created and that fitted their narrative.

I want to show unconditional love for my children but also show them that I have unconditional love for myself. The latter is a therapeutic form of reparenting, but is also an example. This is me showing my children what it looks like to love yourself and to know you're lovable even when you are the most honest version of yourself.

I hope that with this comes freedom, for my children to voice and express the truth of who they are without fearing loss. We will love them just as much when they conform as when they don't. The freedom to change, to evolve and to experiment is built into this. With this in mind we don't gender clothing, words or toys. We let our children play with what feels good and fun, and we follow their lead when it comes to self-expression.

My experiences as a queer child have framed this part of my parenting. What I needed back then was to be told that I was lovable no matter what, that I didn't need to fight against my truth to be accepted. I was just as queer when I was eight as I am at 38 and that childhood part of myself is still there and hurting from the trauma of relentless shame. As a child I was terrified of not projecting the correct version of myself. It is a human experience to fear rejection, and I remember the gut-wrenching shame and

guilt of knowing I wasn't what people, and especially the people raising me, wanted and needed me to be. That shame and guilt was foundational to my experiences, and I don't want my children, or anyone, to ever have to experience that.

Pride and Grief

I sit with my daughter while she pretends to give her teddy a bottle. She leans in to me and when I go to stroke her hair she shakes her head "no". I smile at her and she snuggles in with her teddy. It's a wordless exchange, but I feel a well of emotion from it. Pride and grief battle in me, and I have to allow them both their space. I feel pride for the hard won gifts that I'm giving to my children, for the tools I'm giving them to face the world and be versions of themselves that they feel loved and confident in. And with that I hold grief for the child version of myself that didn't have access to those tools.

I feel like I'm a dam holding back generational trauma, and so much of that trauma has nothing to do with being LGBTQ+, but the coping strategies and the perspectives I have that protect my children have come from the queer community and my experiences as a queer person in a cisheteronormative society.

I can't know who my children are going to grow up to be or what they're going to do. I can't predict how they're going to feel about my queerness or about growing up in a family with two dads, but what I can know is that I'm giving them the tools to tell me and the knowledge that I'll listen when they do.

About the author

Jacob Stokoe is the Founder of *Transparent Change*, a not-for-profit which provides LGBTQ+ inclusion training and consultancy to professionals.

But above and beyond his roles as Educator and Consultant, his most important job is being Papa to two little humans, both of whom he was pregnant with and gave birth to.

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