

**The Inclusion of Non-Traditional Families in Early Childhood Education Programs**

Sanaya Kateli

Loyola Maryland University

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Dr. Victoria Elasic

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to outline a comprehensive understanding of the inclusion of non-traditional families in early childhood settings, while addressing the question of how early childhood education programs can create a more inclusive environment for young children that come from LGBT families. This review brings together prior research on the subject of the inclusion and presence of LGBT families within early childhood education environments. Through an examination of three research reports, it is shown that most early childhood classrooms are environments in which heteronormative practices are the dominant ideology presented to children. Research indicates that school wide training programs that prepare teachers to have a proper skillset of inclusive practices helps create more welcoming, accepting early childhood environments. These teacher trainings can help educators and administrators uncover personal biases that should not play a role in determining a school's culture towards inclusion of LGBT families. In order to establish welcoming and inclusive early childhood education programs, schools must support teachers in incorporating inclusive language, literature, and policies within the classroom setting. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates the importance for early childhood settings to foster environments that are inclusive of and actively acknowledges all family structures.

## **The Inclusion of Non-Traditional Families in Early Childhood Education Programs**

When a child is born, their emerging presence invokes strong emotions and expressions of love and generosity within their family. The young child stands as the promise and hope for the future, as their unconscious absorbent mind urges them to explore and connect to their environment. The First Plane of Development (ages 0-6) is considered to hold the greatest importance in regards to the formation of a child's perception of the world. Within a child's first 3 years of life, they acquire everything while beginning with nothing. The child becomes very active and with their absorbent mind, begins seeking purposeful activities through mindful experiences. These are some of the many reasons that there is a strong urge for parents to send their youngest children to attend high quality early childhood education programs. Educators of young children must be intentional with creating an inclusive environment that supports and appreciates a diverse range of families, including non-traditional families. The main objective of this work is to answer the question of how early childhood education programs can create a more inclusive environment for young children that come from LGBT families. This is an especially relevant topic in our present-day culture because of the heteronormative practices that are subconsciously enforced on children throughout their education, beginning in preschool. The three pieces of literature discussed will focus on how family equity should be incorporated to promote inclusive, welcoming communities to children that come from gay and lesbian headed families.

### **Research on Early Childhood Education Inclusion**

There is an extensive amount of research that indicates early childhood educators foster environments in which heteronormative practices are the dominant ideology presented to children. In the article *Early childhood educators working with children who have lesbian, gay,*

*bisexual and transgender parents: what does the literature tell us?* co-authors Cloughessy & Waniganayake analyze 32 research reports published between 2000 and 2012. These research publications sought to identify and understand the most effective intervention strategies that help educators address LGBT concepts in early childhood environments. Many young children who come from LGBT families never see their family dynamics acknowledged or reflected positively within their classroom, and “if these patterns of micro-engagement between educators and children continue as every day practice, over time, they have the potential to reinforce a particular perspective on family which undermines diversity” (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2013). This research reflected the idea that when educators personally have a positive attitude towards homosexuality, they are more likely to incorporate more non-heteronormative visibility in a welcoming and inclusive environment for children in LGBT families.

To continue, there has been research conducted on the beliefs about inclusion of gay and lesbian families with early childhood administrators. Often the practices and beliefs of administrators are transformed into a school-wide culture, and their beliefs and practices are reflected in early childhood programs. In the article *Early childhood administrator’s use of and beliefs about inclusive practices for gay and lesbian families*, the research analyzed demonstrates that the continued marginalization and invisibility of the needs and concerns of LGBT families is something that administrators (and school systems) can perpetuate. The suggested strategies for anti-discriminatory practices have “implications [that] include the need to increase training availability, increase LGBT content in early childhood preparation programs, and creation of policies that are inclusive to lesbian and gay headed families in early childhood settings” (Averett et al., 2021). In this study, the results show that some early childhood administrators

view homosexuality as a sin (due to religious beliefs), and yet self-identify that they are not discriminatory while holding this strong belief.

It is apparent that gay and lesbian families seek high-quality education programs for their youngest children, just as many heteronormative families do. In the article *The Changers and the Changed: Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families*, we see how some schools design programs to prepare early childhood educators to provide inclusive, welcoming learning environments for the children of LGBT families. Teachers were surveyed on their awareness of privilege based on sexual orientation, and the issues faced by children and parents in LGBT families. The authors discuss the “findings from quantitative and qualitative data [that] are presented, as is a discussion on how courses on family equity can and should be incorporated into teacher education programs” (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012). The results demonstrated that adequate teacher preparation to have the proper skillset, tools, and knowledge that would serve them to create a more welcoming, accepting environment in their early childhood classrooms is key to greater inclusion. Furthermore, this study demonstrates the many ways that teachers can incorporate opportunities to learn about LGBTQ families, while concurrently validating all students’ experiences and perspectives on family structures. Altogether, this study demonstrates the importance of helping young children through their individual processes of unlearning heteronormative biases and stereotypes to promote a more inclusive and welcoming classroom environment.

### **Goals and Interventions**

When looking at the future of the inclusion of non-traditional families in early childhood education settings, there are many goals and interventions that can be in place at a school wide level. To begin, it is believed that implementing mandatory staff and teacher trainings on

diversity and acceptance of entire families would be a positive step towards a more inclusive school wide community. Educators cannot allow their personal or religious beliefs to stifle the acceptance and appreciation of non-traditional family dynamics. Additionally, it is shown that having open discussions about varying family dynamics with young children is key to integrating inclusion in a natural, conversational manner. Normalizing the idea of having two moms or two dads is something that can happen through daily conversations about family, support systems, and loving caregiving relationships. A teacher could invite a parent from a gay or lesbian headed family to come and read a book about an inclusive family on a traditionally heteronormative holiday, like Mothers or Father's Day. Similarly, a project for Mother's Day may allow a child with two moms to make two separate crafts for each parent; this would be an example of a great opportunity to thoughtfully explain to the class that some children have two moms, or two dads, and that every family can look different.

Within A-I and primary prepared environments, Montessori guides should have an array of inclusive books about many different family dynamics accessible to young children. LGBT children's books should be easily found and displayed in a classroom alongside more traditional books, so that young children can firsthand see the legitimacy and validation of LGBT families within our society. Furthermore, all Montessori schools should modify any paperwork that parents are sent to include gender-neutral pronouns, incorporating inclusive language so that all caregivers feel accepted and acknowledged in the school wide community. Within the Montessori pedagogy, practices of inclusion, acceptance, and equal representation are implemented with every child – these principles must extend further to include every child's parents, regardless of their family structure. This knowledge should be applied within every

young children's community to foster an environment that is inclusive of and actively acknowledges all family structures.

## References

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