

## **'Gay Dads Support'**

*Talk for Yorkshire MESMAC AGM 2005*

Good evening and thanks for asking me to speak to this meeting about gay fathers and the Yorkshire Gay Dads Support Group, supported by MESMAC who provide office space, publicity and worker support. The group is open to men who are attracted to other men and so is open to, for example, bisexual men, or gay men co-parenting another man's children - although in practice most 'gay dads' are men who see themselves as gay and have children of their own. I spoke about my experiences at last years AGM, so to give some flavour to what we are about I thought I'd talk about the stories of other gay dads. Since the meetings of our local group are absolutely confidential I will use extracts of some stories from other gay men who are fathers which are in the public media.

First, a story from a man I've named 'Jeff', who touches on some of the issues older gay dads face as they come out.

*I was born in 1946, and have been with the same woman for thirty years, married to her for something like eighteen of them.*

*At school I had an affair with a friend, and a crush on someone else in my class. I've always felt I was an alien in my own family, and - since then - in the family I've made. My mother knew I was gay, but she never referred to it except indirectly, with an expression that showed she had trodden on a white-hot horse-brush. I did not, then, overcome the guilt of being a let-down to her: no grandchildren to brighten her late years as a reward to her for having survived the war. Still, we had our own kids in the end, so she did get something out of it. Was it all a sham? Well, we've got two nice kids,*

*How did it last? After all, I never really faced up to two things: the fact that I knew in my heart I was gay all along; and the fact that I truly loved her, the only woman I could have loved, and the only woman I still do. But I have this nagging feeling that perhaps life would have turned out different if I'd simply been allowed to be gay. ...*

*For me, I have realized, the main issue is almost certainly not the "gay identity" as such at all: it is one of self-esteem and acceptance. I'm waiting for [my wife] to say she accepts me as such. But perhaps I'm just digging my own grave. Time will tell. My two sons, when I came out to them, said "That's all right, Dad, and I still love you". That... sustains me in the dark moments when it appears that I've given up a comfortable life-style in which prickly questions were avoided and everything was just dandy. For about a year and a half I've been peering, with the aid of my therapist, into the void: a heart of darkness thundering like a volcano and capable of being soothed and stilled only by a man's voice, a man's touch.*

'Colin' is a gay dad, born in a later and perhaps more tolerant time and culture, who is in now a relationship but grappling with the aftermath of divorce, especially concerning his young daughter.

*I guess I always found men more attractive than women, but I never thought this made me any different from anyone else.*

*I fell in love with my ex when I was 19 and she was just turned 17, we went out for a few years, got engaged, moved into a flat together...then onto her parents, by that time we knew we wanted a baby, and had my daughter in 1991. Then we got our own house.....It all happened very quickly after that, we were very broke, I worked days, She worked evenings, and we saw less and less of each other.*

*To cut a long (and painful) story short, I met my boyfriend and had to leave my home, and went to live with him. That was about 7 years ago now and we are still very much in love with each other. I get on OK (ish) with my ex, mainly because I hardly see her now, only when I have to.... I see my daughter (aged 9) whenever I want to, which means every weekend from Friday afternoon 'til Sunday evening, and as we are only 20 minutes. drive away from each other its no big problem.... apart from me being constantly working or having my daughter, which can leave me with no time for myself, sometimes it gets a bit hard for her too, as she is at school all week, then her away from her friends and stuff when she has any proper time to do what she wants.*

*My ex and I bring her up in completely different ways and... well that's another story, but one that loads of single fathers have no doubt. My daughter knows I am gay, she knows most of my friends too are gay, and she knows that I live with my boyfriend and that we sleep together all the time, not just when she is here, and is ok with it all. I bring her up to see loads of different lifestyles and viewpoints, and the gay one is just one out of any number that I point out and explain at any time.*

You may have seen the recent ITV1 'Real Families' programme about gay married men, which showed the wide range of situations there can be for gay dads and their families, from formerly married parents sharing the family home but openly dating, through to divorce but still a great deal of co-parenting, and then to a man who went through divorce but staying closeted until the children grew up but in the end finding acceptance and support of their gay identity

In my own situation, I used to think that somehow I was so odd that few others would be able to understand what was going on. One helpful side effect of coming out has been that in being open to my own truths I've seen a little more of other peoples. It is also true that 'gay dads' are far from all being the same, as those brief life stories show.

Still, gay dads tend to have, issues which are both common to them and also shared with others groups.

For example, as for all persons of minority sexualities we can have problems around coming out, which will be familiar to many here. That includes issues of self image and confidence, as well as the effects of other's prejudice. You could say gay dads have denied their nature much more deeply, or at least deeply enough to get into an opposite sex relationship and to fatherhood. This also means gay dads tend to be older than other gay men when they come out, in other words that process may last many years, often decades, with some of the delay through concerns about the effects on others in the family.

Gay dads usually have issues in the break up, or maintenance, of their opposite sex relationship – and, of course, there are many impacts and issues for the straight spouse. All this can add to the sense of guilt and regret that many gay people can carry as they deal with come out of their 'straight acting' life. Of course, sometimes the parenting relationship may have broken up for many reasons, of which sexuality was but one or maybe not a major factor at all.

Coming out to children – the part of coming out I and other gay dads often have often feared the most – is something that cannot, even in these times – be anything less than a major step for all concerned, but is far from always disastrous.

Not all gay dads do come out, or do so in a very limited way which may not lead to any form of same sex activity. Such men, of course, are much less known of but may have at least as many issues around health and well being as their more 'out' peers.

In the main, 'gay dads' who have contact with others and who join internet or 'real world' groups, such as the MESMAC support group, tend to be in times of transition, often in the coming out process but sometimes at others, such as relationship breakdown and addressing the needs the children.

There are also the stresses, perhaps little different to dealing with the fall out of any parental relationship breakdown, over access, or single parenthood. And, of course, the 'usual' stresses of parenthood that are faced by all parents and which can be harder in divided families. For gay dads the assumptions and prejudices around sexuality and gender roles can cause trouble in sorting out the parental role – not just to the gay man, but to all in the family.

There are many other aspects that I do not have enough time to detail now. But in going through the various problems gay dads and those close to them face, it's also important to stress the very positive – wonderful – aspects of being a gay dad. Parenthood is a gift that I know through my gay friends is something to be cherished. And, for all the regrets, many of us have had a close and loving opposite sex relationship, albeit it not the right one for us in a full sense. And turbulent though it is, coming and out living life as a the gay person we are is a life enhancing step that many gay dads rank as one of

their best ever decisions – ironically perhaps, alongside the decision to have children.

I should stress that as well as the common themes gay dads are all individuals with our own unique histories and situations: there really is a vast range, in dimensions of how 'out' each gay dad is, what the parenting relationship is, the degree and types of acceptance by the children and so on. So what may seem obvious or right to one may be quite different for another.

In our meetings, we give space to each member to say as much or as little as they want, within the time available. Sometimes men say what they've never said to anyone before; sometimes we can hear echoes of our own lives and can share what happened, what seemed to go well and not so well. Advice may be given, but with awareness that we each have our own lives.

I had heard of similar gay dad support groups through an internet email site (GayDad support) and MESMEC kindly agreed to support the group which started up this September. So these are still early days for the group, but we have plans for some meetings to include a more formal element – information on safer sex for example, or the experiences of children of gay dads.

The group meets every second and fourth Monday of the month (public holidays excepted) and anyone interested can contact Steve Crewe through the Leeds MESMAC office – Steve is the worker who facilitates the group with myself (he does most of that work for which I'm grateful)

Well, thank you for listening, I hope you have found some things of interest and once again thanks to MESMAC for supporting us.