



CASE STUDY

Julie and Marg, Noah and Georgia: Talking with teenagers

Julie and Marg met at work in the early 1980s and have been together for 30 years. They have two children, Georgia, 17 and Noah, 15. The teenagers have the same dad who is a gay friend of Julie and Marg's. The family lives in an inner Melbourne suburb and both mums work in education.

For five years, early on in their relationship, they lived with Julie's lesbian sister, Pam. Together, they co-parented Pam's daughter, who is now twenty-five and, although she lives overseas, she is still a very important part of their lives. It was only after Julie's sister and niece moved out of their shared home that Julie and Marg started discussing the possibility of having children of their own. At the time (early 1990s) there was very little visibility of rainbow families in Melbourne and no internet. They relied on a couple of American

books from a gay bookshop to answer their many questions on same-sex parenting. In the following interview, Julie shares some of her family's journey since those early days.

How was the kids' transition to high school?

I think the transition from primary to high school is a strange one for families, and particularly for

parents who have had a fair amount of contact with the school. All of a sudden, you are a bit more invisible, and the kids don't expect you to be part of their lives in the same way.

Noah goes to a local state high school and Georgia goes to a Catholic school. The transition for both of them was easy. We're a family that is certainly out, and I think that's one thing you learn pretty quickly when you have kids: they out you all the time. So we're certainly a very out family, but not necessarily a rainbow-flag-waving family if you like; that's who we are and how we are.

They are two very different schools – a Catholic girls' school was certainly an interesting choice and there have been a few raised eyebrows from some of our friends. It wasn't a choice we made lightly. Both Marg and I had single-sex schooling ourselves – me in the government system and Marg through the Catholic system – and both had really good experiences. Georgia is quite sporty – the school has a really good sports program and it seemed like the right match. She's heading into her final year as school captain so something has been right for her.

Can you tell me a little more about how you came to that decision?

It's interesting because, as I said, Marg had the Catholic education and I didn't. I went kicking and screaming to the information night when Georgia was in grade five. I really didn't want to entertain the thought, but I came away incredibly impressed with what I'd seen. Confident young women took us on the tour and, without any adult supervision, were answering questions really well, and clearly had a passion for their school. The pastoral care there really impressed me and I liked the social justice foundation which runs through the school. And the fact that, from teenage girls, there was a lot of talk about 'us' and 'community' rather than 'me, me, me' was a great thing.

And how did the school respond to you as two mums, as a lesbian couple?

They were fine with that. Again, you don't have a lot to do with school and luckily our kids haven't had any major problems, but we have been more involved in the last six months around some of the activities Georgia has been doing as school captain. So we've been to a few school functions and I've had a few conversations with the principal, but never had any sense that it's not totally cool. In fact, I would even go further than that and say I think there is definitely a small cohort of teachers who have celebrated the fact that there is a rainbow family in their midst.

Noah's school has been terrific. We chose it because of the vicinity and for some of the programs, but it also had a rainbow alliance which I think is a really nice, affirming thing. It's got diversity policies and it's just got a good feel about it.

Both schools know that there are two mums at home and are happy to talk to either of us. And little things have been important, like letters home have always been addressed to both of us.

Do Noah and Georgia have a supportive group of friends?

They've got heaps of friends, some that they've had since kindergarten. One of Noah's best friends is a friend he's had since kinder and primary school. They went off to separate high schools, but they still hang out a lot. And Georgia's got a whole lot of friends at her school, too.

And we still maintain really close links with our lesbian parent playgroup, and that's great. When I was talking with the kids, they said they feel the playgroup really helped them over the years. There's about ten or twelve families and last weekend we had a picnic in the local

gardens. The kids are starting to socialise without us, which is sort of strange, but really nice. There's a real kinship there, I guess, and a tribe sort of feeling between all the families; it's very special.

Last night I asked the kids, 'What makes it hard for you being part of a gay family, and what helps?' One of the things they said was the fear of friends with heterosexual parents not accepting them, but they went on to say that hardly ever happens. But the thought that it might can be tricky.

Georgia said that explaining the situation to people can sometimes be hard and they often assume that her parents were together and then separated and then her mum came out as gay. That's often what you see in the media.

They both talked about choosing who to tell and that you don't tell people, particularly in high school, until you've built up some sort of trust with them. Noah said that if you do tell them and they don't accept it, then obviously they are not very good friends.

They said being honest about their story helped them, including the story of how they were conceived. That was just part of their story growing up and they've known forever about having two mums and a gay dad.

Georgia said she thought that being in a gay family helps her have more understanding of other people and acceptance of diversity, which I am sure is true. She said we've taught her to stand up for what she believes and she talked about going to the Pride March when she was little. She said it was really fun and made her realise she was part of a big community.

They both talked about not being too out and letting them decide who they tell about our family. They said it's really good to be able to joke about having two mums with the kids from playgroup who just get it. There's no groundwork to be done there – they've grown up together and they know what it's like. I'm

sure there are lots of raised eyebrows between the kids now about their doting parents. Let's be honest, none of the kids have been born by accident; we're all doting parents and very involved in their lives. I think it's nice they can have that outlet.

Have you had any problems with teasing or bullying?

No. As an educator, I think it is unfortunately one of the biggest fears of parents generally. And unnecessarily so, really. I think that all the early years of parenting we do (and gay parenting is good parenting in my view), helping kids to have good self-esteem, have a bit of a sense of humour, not take themselves too seriously, and become quite resilient – hopefully does make them into pretty resilient kids.

I think we have to step back. We have to let kids fall and get up, dust themselves off and learn to navigate their way in the world. We're actually not doing them any favours by getting in and trying to ease the bumps of life because life's not like that.

Noah's school certainly has a well-documented diversity policy. It was one of a small group that piloted the policy and it's about making sure that diversity is celebrated and supported, and the rainbow alliance is part of that.

You get all this media about cyberbullying and we talk about that stuff a lot. If they are telling me the truth, it has never been something they've experienced to any degree that has caused them concern.

What would you say to parents with kids heading into the teenage years?

I have often said I think teenagers get a really bad rap. I've enjoyed every stage of my kids. Certainly, when they are little, it's physically really hard. Someone said to me once, 'Little kids, little problems. Big kids, big problems',

and that's true up to a point. You're dealing with some fairly big and messy issues when you're talking about young people trying to navigate their world, but it's also exciting.

For people with kids in the teenage years, I would say just go with the flow and you'll grow with your kids. When you've got a newborn, you can't imagine having a toddler and when you've got a toddler you can't imagine having a ten-year-old, but they do grow and this is a great age; we're really enjoying it.

Nobody told me how funny teenagers are and how they keep you very grounded. They're fun and we laugh a lot. We fight, too, and it can be quite loud, but they're at a very passionate age and it's wonderful to see all that work you've put in for all those years come to fruition.

I guess the other thing is that it's lovely to watch the sibling relationship develop and to know at some point in the future, when we're presumably not in the picture, there's still a really lovely bond there that will continue.

There's been enormous joy in raising a family together. The huge support – sometimes from unexpected quarters – has been one of the delights for us. Being a parent is the thing that binds you to other parents. The fact that you are two women is really secondary – in our experience, anyway. I'd say, don't expect bad stuff. It might happen and you will deal with it, but go with the flow and enjoy it. It's a crazy ride, but most of it is pretty good.



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