



Pregnancy and antenatal classes

Probably the biggest issue for lesbians in pregnancy is ensuring that they get quality, non-judgemental care and treatment from health care providers. Many lesbians have entirely positive experiences of pregnancy with health care workers who are supportive, include both partners equally and, in some cases, celebrate their patients' relationship and family.

The public health system involves contact with a larger number of health professionals, which inevitably involves having to come out and explain personal circumstances more often. This can sometimes be awkward or frustrating. It also means that when you see a supportive doctor or nurse for one appointment, there is no guarantee of seeing them again for your next appointment.

In the private system you only have to deal with one obstetrician who will be familiar with your personal circumstances, though you will likely still encounter a number of nurses and midwives when you come to give birth.

Some lesbians choose to engage an independent midwife to assist them throughout their pregnancy and manage the birth. There are, however, a range of factors to consider before choosing this option.

Choosing an obstetrician or independent midwife

One of the key things lesbians look for is an obstetrician or midwife who acknowledges and includes the non-pregnant partner or co-parents, and who doesn't ask intrusive questions. Bear in mind that health providers will often ask

questions that can seem inappropriate, but may also reflect a genuine desire to learn more about your family.

Doing some initial research and asking people in your social networks for a recommendation for a lesbian-friendly obstetrician or midwife can be very useful. A trusted local general practitioner may also be able to make an appropriate referral.

Having a support network of friends and family can be very helpful, especially in the final stages of pregnancy and when giving birth. However supportive everyone is, though, you may sometimes still feel a little awkward or uncomfortable because your family is different to other families and you don't fit neatly into the system.

Antenatal classes

Antenatal classes present some challenges for single lesbians and lesbian couples. Because classes are designed around the different roles ascribed to men and women – and activities are often run in gender groups – a female partner can find herself in a kind of limbo, wondering, *Do I go with the men or the women?* Some

partners choose to go with the men and some with the women, depending on the subject being discussed and on their own level of comfort.

It's not uncommon for the non-pregnant partner to feel excluded or just not sure of their role in the class. Experiences can range from mildly awkward to very uncomfortable, though couples often find ways of managing these potentially difficult situations. Some people try to make light of the situation or use humour to manage an awkward moment.

Antenatal classes can be difficult because of their gender focus and can require some thought and preparation beforehand to ensure the experience is as positive as it can be. Talking to the person running the class before it starts can be a useful way to break the ice and explore options. It may also be helpful to introduce yourselves to your group at the beginning to ensure the non-pregnant partner isn't mistaken for a friend or relative.

Your experience might just depend on the individual midwife running the class and how she deals with the situation.

Parents say ...

Obstetricians

We did some research about obstetricians. The first one I went to was a woman and that was partly why I picked her. She seemed to be good at listening and being encouraging, but also provided a lot of information and she gave us choices, which was really good. **Ruth**

I did a bit of research because I knew I was going into it on my own and I decided straight up that I would get myself an obstetrician who I trusted, so I went private. Instead of dealing with a hundred different obstetric nurses and doctors who I had to come out to over and over again, I thought it best if I just found myself someone who knew my whole story and was supportive of what I was doing. I didn't have to explain to someone over and over that I didn't have a partner and, if I did, it wouldn't have been a man. **Alison**

I think we were the first gay couple to go through with our obstetrician and it wasn't a major issue. We were treated pretty well and he welcomed Elizabeth into the consults the same as anyone else. It was a very positive experience. **Jenny**

For my pregnancy and birth I had a universally good experience. You do wonder if people are going to be accepting, but a number actively said, 'It's wonderful what you are doing'. **Mandy**

Our obstetrician was perfectly fine with the same-sex couple thing; he was really comfortable with it. With some other people it was hard to tell, but you never know whether that's just the person's nature. **Ruth**

Non-pregnant partner

Everybody was completely fine about the fact that there was another woman. We didn't have any trouble with any of the sonographers or anything and we went to a lot of appointments together. **Ruth**

The main thing was including Jo and talking to her like she had something to do with it. I think there's probably been a lot of exclusion, but at the same time when people are more comfortable, they just seem to include her in the conversation. **Pia**

Apart from one doctor, they were all, 'Yep, so you're partners' and that was fine. You got the impression that we were by no means the first they had encountered. **Patricia**

A couple of times we had experiences with doctors who just didn't cope and ignored my partner completely, or were just unable – or unwilling – to take it in and that was very difficult. **Bec**

Antenatal classes

The antenatal classes were through the hospital and I was the only single woman there, let alone lesbian. The woman I had was very warm – a sort of hippy type – and she was really lovely. **Alison**

We did go to a few antenatal classes and we were the only same-sex couple. The midwives barely blinked – they were great. **Bridget**

If there was a sort of a rainbow family network of expectant mothers who could form an antenatal class together, that would be amazing. It would be amazing to have that in place and not feel like you are doing it so very alone. **Alison**

Everyone was in quite late pregnancy and the woman running the class said, 'Now, every woman in this room right now is lactating', and everybody looked at Jo and laughed, including Jo, and it was fine. It was all in good humour and she just kept going. **Pia**

In the antenatal classes they didn't quite know how to manage my partner. She wasn't a dad and she wasn't pregnant, so they struggled a little with that. But mostly they were well-intentioned and asked questions about how we wanted it to be handled. **Nicola**

We did this antenatal breastfeeding class and we were the only same-sex couple there. The woman who was running the class was not old – probably thirty-something – and she was pregnant herself, but it was like she just could not deal with Jo being there. **Pia**

They asked a few questions about the father, but I didn't feel that that was discriminatory or intrusive; it was more that they wanted to educate themselves as health professionals. Sometimes they ask out of genuine interest and it's helpful for them in learning about same-sex families. **Mandy**

Separating the mums and dads

Going through the process of getting pregnant and having babies together is like a whole other wave of coming out. It reinforces that this is never going to end, this coming out stuff. **Michelle**

The antenatal classes were a big issue because it was, *Do you go with the fathers or do you go with the mothers?* I went with the mothers. I felt really uncomfortable going with a group of men who were talking in slightly derogatory terms about their wives. I remember having a debate with other same-sex couples and some went with the fathers and some went with the mothers. **Mandy**

It was a bit awkward when they separated into men and women because they didn't know what to do with us. As it happened, there was another lesbian in our group, but she was co-parenting with a gay man, so they just passed as a hetero couple. But I knew, and that was kind of nice. **Bec**

The antenatal classes were fine. We were the only same-sex couple and I'd say we didn't have any problems. I remember one class with the dads on one side of the room brainstorming something and the mums on the other and I was with the dads. If anything, I would say I probably knew more than most of the expecting dads. **Michelle**

There were those awkward moments all the way through pregnancy – and I imagine it'll be the same right through school – where you're fitting your family's structure into the norm. **Mandy**

We started antenatal class at the local hospital and it was a bit of a shocker. When we got divided off into mummies and daddies we decided this wasn't really going to cut it and we did antenatal classes privately in Melbourne. **Katrina**

It was funny because they would say, 'Men over here and the women over there', to talk about different things and my partner would go with the men and was pretty comfortable. She's pretty relaxed, so I think she handled that reasonably well, although it was certainly strange for everyone. She just made a joke out of it and it wasn't really a big deal. **Jenny**



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