

Discussion Guide



daddy & papa



Loving fathers Waiting children

Another kind of American family

DADDY & PAPA is a one-hour documentary about gay fathers who face both the routine and revolutionary challenges of becoming parents. As they change the landscape of the American family, these fathers wrestle with complicated issues—from legal barriers to transracial adoption, co-parenting to prejudice, gay divorce to surrogacy.

Purpose of the guide

This guide is a valuable tool for using DADDY & PAPA to understand gay adoption, empower prospective fathers and match hard-to-place foster children with loving, highly-qualified new families. But most of all, we hope you will use this guide to create dialogue—whether you're a social worker, prospective parent, student, teacher or anyone else touched by the issues raised in the film. This guide will help you:

- Facilitate forums and round table discussions
- Understand the history of gay adoption and gay parenting in the United States
- Debunk myths about the children of gay parents
- Address the unique strategies and support that gay fathers need to raise their children
- View gay fathers as an untapped resource for adoption advocates
- Educate yourself and others about the challenges and possibilities of transracial adoption

I see gay families adopting as an untapped resource and I think a lot of gay people don't really realize that more and more... agencies are opening their doors wide open to people who want to explore this as a family option.

— **Sharon Anderson**,
social worker and adoption specialist, in DADDY & PAPA



From the filmmaker

I hope the film will demystify some of the misinformation and stereotypes about gay families, and show that parenthood is parenthood, regardless of sexual orientation—the same diapers, sleep-deprivation, lunch boxes and moments of intense joy and pride.

At the same time the film shows that our families are different too—that our rarity makes us the subjects of intense curiosity, that we have to search for community and that as parents we need to work especially hard to make the world a safe and understanding place for our kids. I hope the film will inspire more gay men to become parents and encourage more social workers, judges and politicians to use their positions of power to make this possible.

The legal landscape of gay adoption

Adoption laws vary from state to state. The following types of legal adoption are available to gay and lesbian parents:

- **Individual adoption:** adoption by a single unmarried person
- **Second parent adoption:** adoption by a second parent (who is the partner but not the legal spouse of the primary parent), granting a shared, legally recognized parental relationship to the child
- **Joint adoption:** simultaneous adoption by a couple, married or unmarried

The “best interest of the child” standard continues to guide case-by-case decisions in state courts, where judges’ reactions to homosexual adoptive parents have ranged from supportive to hostile. While individual adoption is legal in all 50 states, as of April 2003 Florida state law still explicitly barred gay individuals from adopting, and there is no indication that judges in several other states permit openly gay individuals to adopt. Second parent adoption is not legal in all states, but in many states the courts continue to approve second parent adoptions by gay applicants. Finally, a few states have permitted joint adoptions by gay and lesbian couples, with courts granting case-by-case permission at the lower court level.

How does gay adoption impact you?

As parents, social workers, citizens and leaders, we all participate in defining “family” and shaping the future of gay adoption. Many people have differing ideas about homosexuality, based both on their belief system and their understanding of the facts. Be aware and prepared that a discussion of DADDY & PAPA may invoke strong feelings and spark differences between participants.



Can gay men adopt in my state?

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation at www.hrc.org/familynet/adoption_laws.asp is a good place to start for state-by-state information. State laws continue to change rapidly as lawsuits both championing and challenging gay adoption continue to be brought before courts across the country.

As of April 2003, there are approximately 15 states which allow some form of joint adoption, second parent adoption or stepparent adoption; 20 states that permit single parent adoption; and only three states with laws that specifically forbid adoption to gay or same sex parents. However, just because a state doesn't have a law that says NO doesn't mean they will say YES. Another important factor is the county in which the adoption court proceedings are being heard.



Discussion questions

An experienced facilitator will begin by laying down ground rules for respecting each other's opinions and each other's privacy. The facilitator should establish a safe and welcoming environment, and keep the discussion on track. The following questions will help groups explore specific themes, scenes and issues raised by the film.

1. One poll revealed that that 6 out of 10 Americans have had a personal experience with adoption⁷, meaning that they themselves, a family member or a close friend was adopted, had adopted a child or had placed a child for adoption. What is your personal experience with adoption? Drawing on your personal experience, what are the similarities and differences between adoptive and non-adoptive families?
2. In 1988, the Child Welfare League of America issued its Standards for Adoption Service, stating, "Gay/lesbian adoptive applicants should be assessed the same as any other adoptive applicant. It should be recognized that sexual orientation and the capacity to nurture a child are separate issues." Do you agree or disagree? What parts of the film support or do not support this idea?
3. In the film, Johnny Symons says, "As we swapped daycare and car seat stories with the other dads...were we mimicking straight people, trying to prove that we could be good parents, too? Or was this just the life of a parent, gay or straight, doing our best for our kids?" What experiences do gay parents share with other parents? What experiences are unique?
4. For the children in the film, what seems to be different about growing up as the child of gay parents? How does it affect their everyday lives? How will it affect them as they grow older? What do you think they will be like when they grow up? If you grew up with heterosexual parents, how would things have been different for you growing up as the child of gay parents? Would you be different? How?

Activities

DADDY & PAPA Role Play

Use this activity to explore the decision-making process for both parents and social workers, or to introduce prospective parents to the adoption home study.

Step 1: Designate two people to play the role of a straight couple and one person to play the role of a social worker (You may want to have the facilitator play the role of the social worker).

Step 2: Bring the "straight couple" in front of the group, and prepare them to play the role of prospective parents preparing to go through the adoption home study. Give them (or allow them to create) a profile that includes class, race, circumstance, reasons for adopting and future plans. (For example: "You are a middle class white couple who lives in the suburbs. There are medical reasons why you can't have children biologically. You both plan to work after the adoption.")

Step 3: Start the conversation by having the two parents discuss the following questions about whether they are ready to start a family and go through the adoption process. Invite them to add other questions they think are important to preparing themselves.

Prospective Parents Questions

- What kind of community, family or support system do we have to offer a child?
- Are we willing to adopt a child who is a different race from us? Has health problems? Special needs?
- Are we prepared to go through a thorough evaluation that may seem intrusive and involve very personal questions?
- If we adopt a special needs child, what kind of changes might we need to make in order to accommodate our child's needs? How will that impact our lifestyle?
- What's going to be the biggest challenge for each of us about adopting a child? As a couple?

Step 4: Once the couple has evaluated their own preparedness, the social worker evaluates the couple as a prospective adoptive family. Use the following questions to challenge the couple's assumptions about their adoption qualifications, lifestyle and readiness to have a family.

- How do your individual strengths and weaknesses complement a child's needs?
- When did you first realize that you were straight, and did you get the support that you were looking for from friends, family and co-workers?
- How does being straight affect your self-image, family and community support, relationships, sensitivity and personal responsibility?
- How are you going to explain your family structure?
- What will you say to your child if they encounter prejudice because you are straight?

Step 5: Discuss your initial reaction to the social worker's questions. How did this make you feel? Did it challenge your notions about how straight people might be treated differently than gay people in the adoption process?

DADDY & PAPA discussion

Use the facts and statements below to explore the various issues about gay adoption. Use scenes from the film to support or rebut arguments.

- **Should openly gay men and women be able to legally adopt?** *Fact:* Adoption is regulated by state law. In many states, gay men can adopt either as single parents or same-sex couples. A number of states, however, do ban or limit gay men from adopting.
- **Should social workers consider gay men good candidates for adoptive parents?** *Fact:* Many adoption advocates acknowledge an unspoken ranking that favors married couples over gay men and lesbians (as well as over unmarried couples, single individuals and older applicants, to varying degrees). Other social workers note that in a climate where thousands of hard-to-place children go unadopted every year, gay people have traditionally been more willing to consider adopting these children.
- **Does having a gay parent have an impact on a child?** *Fact:* Adoptive children of gay parents report facing prejudice and teasing from their peers because of their parents' sexual orientation, although research points to no significant developmental or socialization effects. Studies have also suggested that gay parents and their children may have more open dialogue and better communication about gender roles and sexuality than other parents and children.



Can they ask that?

All adoption applicants go through a "home study" that evaluates the prospective parents. The questions concern many personal aspects of each applicant's life. In states that permit gay adoption, adoption advocates advise gay applicants to:

- Tell the truth about your sexuality and be prepared to answer direct questions about coming out, your family, your self-image, your partner, your relationships and your friends.
- Request another social worker if you feel that your social worker is not comfortable working with a gay applicant.
- Try another agency if your application is denied. Seek out a local gay parenting organization to ask for agency recommendations.

I think that a lot of these men believe that they can just raise African American kids in a color-blind way, so that they don't really have to deal with race—and as long as there is love, it shouldn't matter. Well, that's bullshit.

— William Rogers,
adoptive father in
DADDY & PAPA

Debunking the three great myths of gay parenting and how to deal with opposition⁸

When you two daddies came, I thought, “My God, not two daddies.” I went through all kinds of things in my mind and I didn't want that for him. Because you know I heard a lot of stuff.

—Dora Dean Bradley, Zach's foster mother in DADDY & PAPA

When you come across people who don't agree with gay parenting, these are some of the things that you may hear.

Myth #1: Gay men and lesbians sexually abuse their children. *Fact:* Every study on sexual abuse, by diverse organizations that range from the Child Welfare League of America to the Connecticut Correctional Institute, reports that homosexuals are no more likely to abuse children than heterosexuals. An estimated 90% of all pedophiles are heterosexual.

Myth #2: Children of gay men and lesbians will turn out gay. *Fact:* In the few studies conducted on this topic, there has been no evidence to suggest that the sexual orientation of adoptive or birth parents affects the sexuality of their children.

Myth #3: Children of gay men and lesbians will have problems from growing up in an abnormal family. *Fact:* Again, no existing study suggests that these children are psychologically or developmentally different from their counterparts. In fact, some psychologists suggest that gay parents are more likely to talk to their children about “difficult” issues, including discrimination, traditional gender roles and sexuality.

Transracial adoption

As the film and this discussion guide have suggested, adoptive gay dads are often matched with children that social workers have a more difficult time placing in adoptive homes. This match often results in white gay men raising children of color. The majority of all foster children are children of color, including over 56,000 African American children awaiting adoption.¹²

Recent figures suggest that only 15% of adopted foster children are matched with parents of a different race¹³, but this rate is anecdotally known to be much higher for openly gay parents who adopt. The debate over the effects and legitimacy of transracial adoption is fierce, with opinions ranging from categorical rejection to the treatment of race as simply one of many factors in the adoption process. All agree, however, that transracial adoptions create unique challenges and require certain special parenting strategies.



Race and child development¹⁴

A rough guideline for development trends in children adopted by parents of different races.

0–3 years

- Aware of differences.
- Little comprehension of labels.
- Recite but don't understand adoption story.
- *Parental note:* most societal reactions directed at parents

4–6 years

- Identify their racial group.
- Associate positive and negative values.
- May express desire to be same race as parent.
- Peers question them about ethnicity.
- *Parental note:* talk about societal messages

7–11 years

- May explore what it means to be part of a group.
- Look for same race role models.
- Adoption as loss.
- Peers determine value of race.
- *Parental note:* seek out positive cultural group activities

12–18 years

- Search for identity.
- Model media images.
- Increased embarrassment about parents.

Starting the conversation

The following are special strategies recommended to parents who transracially adopt.¹⁴ Do you agree or disagree with them? How do they link to the problems and families in the film? Which seem like the most useful or effective?

- Prior to adopting children of a different race, parents must educate and evaluate themselves. They must assess their resources and community to figure out what steps they can take to connect their children to their "birth" culture.
- Providing positive images of a child's heritage is not enough. Parents need to go beyond their own comfort zone to form intercultural relationships that reach into their home. Parents may need to seek out a bridge person to introduce them to group intercultural activities.
- A parent must work with the child to directly address issues of race, creating conversations and activities that help the child feel good about his or her own racial and ethnic group.

Discussion questions

Open a larger discussion of transracial adoption using the following questions and scenes from the film:

1. As an African American adoptive father, William criticizes some white gay men's approach to parenting black children as ignoring the barrier of race, while Doug, a white father, explains, "Trying to raise a black child in a white home, I have to raise him in the culture that I'm familiar with and that I'm comfortable with." How does race affect the relationship of the parents and children in the film?
2. "He's white and I'm black," nine-year old Oscar says when asked how Doug is different from other fathers. How does the importance of this difference change according to the age of the child?
3. Thinking about raising two children of color in a largely white community, Kelly says, "I thought it was important for them to always be able to look across the table and see someone who looked like them." Why might this be important? Who do you think children like Kelly's turn to as role models? How might that be the same or different from children of same-race families?

Activity: Transracial adoption quiz

Use this quiz to create dialogue and examine preconceived notions of transracial adoption.

1. In 2000, 43% of white children "waiting" for adoption were adopted. What percentage of "waiting" children of color were adopted?
 - a) 15%
 - b) 36%
 - c) 55%
 - d) 75%
2. What percentage of all foster children in 2000 were children of color?
 - a) 40%
 - b) 59%
 - c) 66%
 - d) 75%
3. Which of the following issues is least specific to transracial adoption?
 - a) adopted children losing their birth heritage
 - b) parents apologizing for their race
 - c) incorporating an unfamiliar culture into parents' lives
 - d) explaining why a child's birth parents put them up for adoption

ANSWERS: 1b¹², 2c¹², 3d.¹⁵

National partners and resources

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

The ACLU works to defend and preserve individuals' rights and liberties as guaranteed by the Constitution and laws of the United States.

www.aclu.org

Adoptions From The Heart

Adoptions From The Heart provides quality, comprehensive, on-going adoption services to all members of the adoption triad in private or agency adoption.

www.adoptionsfromtheheart.org

Children Of Lesbians And Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)

COLAGE engages, connects and empowers people to make the world a better place for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents and families.

www.colage.org

Families Like Ours

Families Like Ours provides adoptive and pre-adoptive families with a centralized free resource for information and support.

www.familieslikeours.org

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

GLSEN strives to assure that each member of every school community is valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

www.glsen.org

National Association of Social Workers (NASW)

NASW works to enhance the professional development of its members, to create and maintain professional standards and to advance sound social policies.

www.naswdc.org

National Adoption Information Clearinghouse (NAIC)

NAIC provides information on all aspects of adoption for professionals, policy makers and the general public.

www.calib.com/naic

Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)

A faith-based organization with historical roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the UUA actively supports the rights of bisexual, gay and lesbian people.

www.uua.org

For more educational resources, please visit

www.itvs.org/outreach/toolkits.



Acknowledgements

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To purchase a tape: New Day Films: 888-367-9154 or www.newday.com

An Independent Lens premiere, June 3, 2003 at 10:00 PM on PBS.

Check local listings at www.itvs.org.

For additional resources and to learn more about gay adoption, check out the website at www.pbs.org/daddyandpapa

For more information about ITVS's Community Connections Project, contact Jim Sommers, National Outreach Manager, 415-356-8383 ext 242, jim_sommers@itvs.org, www.itvs.org

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