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**Tuesday**  
**April 27th, 1999**

**Hours: Noon - 8 pm**

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## Endangered species

What's a parent to do when junior starts hearing *gay* as an insult?

I am often amazed at how early heterosexism raises its ugly head in a person's life. Society's urge to dress baby boys in blue and baby girls in pink is step one to creating and supporting a dichotomy that says boys and girls are opposite, distinct, and therefore, as in the movies, bound to attract each other.

There is pressure, however, even in families like ours where we've tried to keep the stereotypes to a minimum—and to give ample evidence by our differing styles of “femaledom” that there is more than one way to skin a cat or act out a gender. There is pressure for our son to be a boy's boy, our daughter a girl with a capital G, and definitely for them both to turn out straight—not from us, mind you. They can do whatever they bloody well choose to do, so long as there are grandchildren involved. But I've been observing the external pressures heating up as they enter into all-day school and peers become the number one influence.

This comes up just now for several reasons. One is that I recently found out the word *gay* is being bandied around the first-grade classroom as a label in response to some same-sex kissing going on among the boys. I suppose I should be happy that they're using *gay* and not *faggot* or *queer*, but that could be a short-lived elation.

The second reason it comes up is that there is an ongoing war between the girls and the boys in the class. They are working at setting boundaries and demarcating their differences. If the boys could pee a boundary line across the classroom I'm sure they would. The electricity that accompanies this girl-boy battle leads me to believe that what I've read is true, that puberty actually begins at 6. Perhaps this explains the kissing as well.

All in all, I don't mind that our son is encamped with the boys and hooting in delight at the girls' failure to penetrate their fortress of masculinity. Or that he is, along with his brethren, crying with frustration when they are bested by the opposition. But I do mind being forced to explain to my son that *gay* (which he thought vaguely was “something about loving someone”), is not always viewed positively by other people. That was really a bummer.

There we were. The question finally raised, and the parents he's known and taken for granted all his life suddenly have a label, and now he knows that the word to describe our relationship is a word some people use derisively.

What can a parent say? Here's a label that shouldn't be bad, shouldn't lead to hurt feelings, but is being used to hurt. Telling our son that kissing in school is inappropriate no matter who's involved is a start, but a chicken way out. Telling him that we are gay and our friends are gay and so many people in our lives are gay, is another step. Giving him our take on being gay, being lesbian, and how that is A-OK is certainly called for. But this issue also brings us to the brink of telling him a more painful truth.

That I just read yet another article about someone getting killed, brutally, because of being—that word—*gay*. It's not something I particularly want to tell my son or daughter about. Soon after Matthew Shepard died, there was a vigil held downtown in protest of the killing and in honor of his lost life. Friends of ours were going and wanted to know if we were going too, the whole family. We didn't. It would have felt good to share that emotion with others in a group setting, but we didn't because of the children.



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Generally speaking, I'm so honest most parents would blanch at the topics we discuss: the Holocaust, slavery, capital punishment, suicide, AIDS. But to stand in a crowd grown cold from the murder of a young man, whose photo would be pasted on signs, to have this concrete example could lead them to the undeniable conclusion that their parents are part of an endangered species. And we didn't want to do that to them.

I'm left to explain, as lightly as I can, that *gay* is good and labeling bad, and that some families have strong feelings about how others live their lives. I can tell him what to do if words are used against him. I can check in with the teachers and hot-tail it down to the principal's office to make sure she's enforcing the rules about derisive remarks in the school, but mostly I have to take it as it comes and cross my fingers.

And try very hard to hide that secretly, I'm rooting for the girls.