

Gay parents, straight kids

Coming out to your children

Searching for a silver lining during the dark days of my divorce, straight friends offered, "At least you didn't have children." Although my coming out and subsequent divorce were less complicated without kids, I had regrets.

When I first was married, I couldn't wait to have children. My bride was less enthusiastic, but I was confident I would win her over in time.

I gave up my dream of being a dad the day I admitted my homosexuality to myself. I knew it would be hard enough telling my wife I was gay; I couldn't imagine telling my child, too.

Having kids is one of the top reasons gay men marry, and coming out to them is one of the top fears fathers face. "Telling my wife I was gay was terrifying," a friend shared, "but it paled in comparison to telling my son his dad was a fag."

Between 6 million and 10 million kids in the United States have at least one parent who is gay, according to Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere. How they accept the news depends in part on how it is presented.

Children with a gay parent say the sooner they are told the better. Experts say kids are less likely to blame themselves for a divorce when coming out precedes the announcement of the split.

Therapists agree it's best if both parents are involved, even if it means waiting until the couple become more comfortable with homosexuality. The more assured the parent is of his or her sexual orientation, the easier it is for kids to accept it.

"Don't let your issues become your child's issues," one gay father counseled. He took time to address his own homophobia before talking to his son.

Waiting can be risky, cautioned another parent, whose son learned of his sexuality from a neighbor's child. "If the closet door is shut, make sure it is shut tight," he said. "Nothing is worse than for your child to hear the news from someone else."

One father bitterly shared, "I never even had a chance to talk to my kids." His ex-wife told his children without his involvement. Angry and hurt, she used the kids as a weapon against him.

The straight spouse's attitude plays an important role in how children accept the gay parent's sexuality. Even though they are separating, it's

important to maintain a united front. Although the straight spouse can help kids more quickly adjust, the gay parent must bear the biggest burden helping children cope.

Amity Pierce Buxton, author of *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming-Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families*, suggests: "Listen to their anger, tears and accusation without putting up walls to defend yourself. Wipe their tears and cry



with them. Show you understand their anger. Explain

with confidence your new identity; don't argue."

Above all, tell the children that they are loved and that their relationship with their gay father or mother will not change. Regardless of their age, kids crave safety and security. In fact, most experts agree that the actual divorce has more potential to harm a child than the disclosure of sexuality.

Methods of disclosure vary with circumstances and parents' communication styles. Some of my friends told their children with their spouses.

Others did not include their spouse, although they made sure he or she was aware of what was taking place. Some wrote a letter, then followed up with a face-to-face conversation.

Many kids are afraid to ask questions for fear of alienating their gay parent. Creating a relaxed, intimate atmosphere in which the child feels comfortable to ask questions helps open the lines of communication.

Reactions vary according to their age and subsequent concerns. Young kids might not totally understand the impact of such an announcement, while older schoolchildren might fear classmates' taunts.

Many worry about the gay parent. "Having a parent who is gay gets tougher once you begin to realize the word 'gay' no longer means 'happy,'" one son shared.

Most gay parents I talked with agreed patience is key. Regardless of how much a gay parent wants to be open, changes should be introduced slowly. Coming out, separation, divorce, dating and the introduction of a new partner can be overwhelming for the child if introduced too fast.

With each event, gentle, open and honest communication becomes key. "Telling your child you are gay is one step in a many-step process," a gay father emphasized.

Finally, I asked these fathers if they would have had kids if they could do it over again. None regretted

having children. Most said their kids were their greatest achievement and joy.

Hearing them, I couldn't help but look back at my marriage with some regret. As hard as leaving might have been, I would have been a great dad. []

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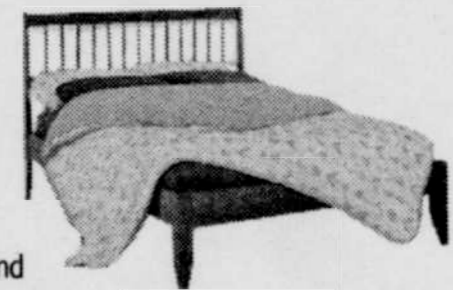
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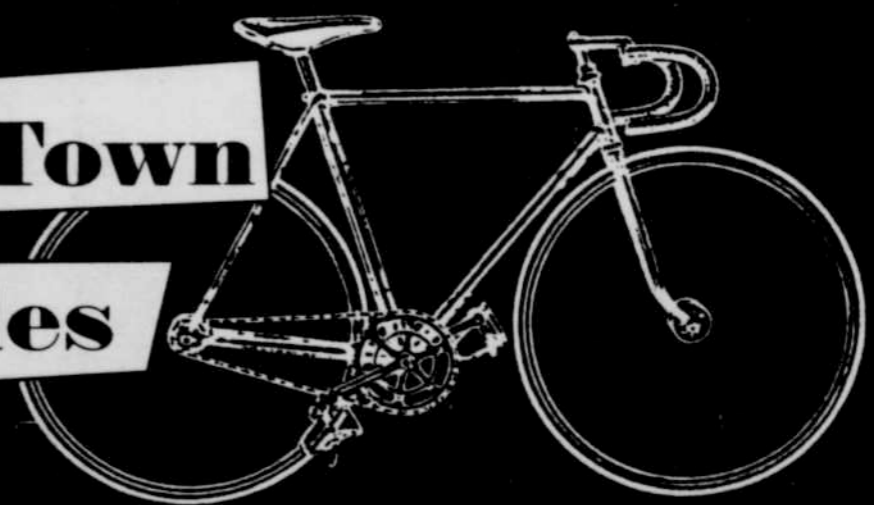
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