

Commentary



My Two Sense

By Lori Hicks

Summer with Two Aunties

Gays and lesbians can teach the next generation by just being themselves

MOST CHILDREN WILL HEAR about same-sex relationships on TV, from friends or in school. But there is no reason why kids should be introduced to homosexuality through the mass media or taunting tweens if there is a gay man or lesbian in the family.

My sisters both have daughters, and my nieces have each spent a part of summer vacations over the years with their "Aunties." When the girls met the airline age restriction, they were flown from Albuquerque to Phoenix. This was not only an adventure for the kids, but for me — a lesbian, with no children — made easier by the fact that I had help.

My partner, known to my nieces as "Auntie Toni," has been a huge part of their lives, contributing to their maturity and emotional development. Toni was fairly strict, yet motherly. She would cook great meals, take them shopping, buy them pretty things, play beauty parlor and paint their fingernails.

On the other hand, I ("Auntie Lori") would play in the pool, bike ride and take them to the zoo, the park, the lake and do anything else that would be considered fun.

I believe each year my nieces came for a visit much more than relationship building was accomplished. They learned about culture, differences and acceptance. We lived our lives. We socialized, went water skiing, camping and fishing with our gay and lesbian friends, just as we would any other time. We attended dinners with friends, went to the movies, plays, concerts, and cheered at the Mercury games. Being a lesbian was never the issue, but being a loving aunt was.

A good aunt or uncle isn't about disclosing to children that you are gay; it is about exposing your loving, accepting lifestyle in small bites in a way that they understand. If children are taught about

gays and lesbians from people they don't know and love, the topic of homosexual relationships often can be discussed in a negative manner. According to things I've read, disclosing our gay identities to children is easier if they are shown rather than told.

Children who grow up learning different family structures adapt. According to Janet Gonzales-Mena and Dora Pulido-Tobiasen, authors of *A Place to Begin: Working with Parents on Issues of Diversity*, kids are influenced by our beliefs and our values — how we talk, act and interact with them and others is key to their development. Over time, children learn who they are, how to conduct themselves, and what to do through these experiences.

Even though adjusting comes pretty naturally to kids, it is important to leave the door open to discussion, especially if they have questions. Age-appropriate dialogue is relevant whether you're hetero or homosexual. By being myself, I found that awkward moments and curious questions were rare. Children respond to respect, attention and love. Straight relationships are taught by nothing more than actions and communications between individuals. Queer relationships should be taught the same way.

Allowing nieces and nephews to know who we really are gives us a better chance that they will accept us when they become adults. Young people grow up. They become community leaders, teachers, spiritual advisers and voters. Make an impact while you have the opportunity. It is important that we teach kids to be accepting of all people, including queer ones.

Fast forward to another generation in our family and the tradition of the visits continues. After spending time with her two aunties, my great-niece recently went home. I took her to visit friends.

Each of them reminded her of the times her mother, years ago, had on her visits to Phoenix.

The fascinating thing was that my great-niece already knew. Her mother's memories as a child with her two aunties and all their eccentric, fun-loving, imaginative, endearing friends had already been shared with her. The wonderful childhood reminiscences had carried over to the next generation.

The fact that I have continued to build healthy family relationships isn't about my sexuality, and it isn't about obligation, it's about love. Even young children can easily understand the concept of friendship and love. If compelled to explain your sexuality you can simply say, "Some girls fall in love with boys — and some girls fall in love with girls." I'd merely state, "Me, I fell in love with your Aunt Toni."

After 27 years, we have been a pretty good influence on all the nieces and nephews we share. The willingness to be open about our identity helps to foster a positive sense of self in children.

So, this summer spend some time with the little ones in your life. We gays can make an enormous difference in affirming the rich diversity of our human community by merely helping our youth cross the bridge of understanding.

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