

Not Your Basic Family Unit

**GAY PARENTING: A Complete
Guide for Gay Men and Lesbians
with Children**

By Joy Schulenberg
Anchor Press/Doubleday, 177 pages,
\$9.95

REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

The past five years in the gay community have not been characterized only by the tragedy of AIDS but also more optimistically by the burgeoning phenomenon of gay parenting.

When Joy Schulenberg, author of "Gay Parenting," became pregnant six years ago, she thought she was something of a "freak" — the only lesbian she knew "who had deliberately chosen to have a child."

In some ways, times have changed: Today, gay men and women all over the country (if not the world) are continuing to raise the children they had in previous relationships, and also are consciously choosing to become parents in a variety of ways — from artificial insemination to adoption — and in a variety of family situa-

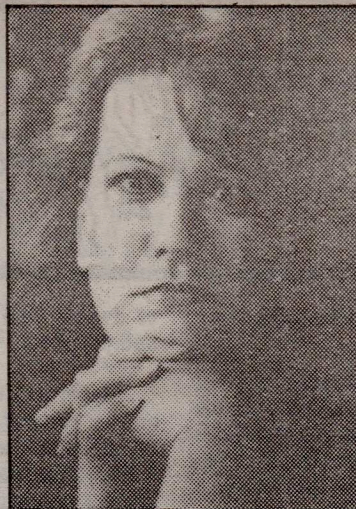
tions. The author herself lives with two gay male co-parents and "their" daughter as a family unit.

In another respect, the lack of childbirth and child-care literature that reflects this social change is as appalling today as it was when Schulenberg first became motivated to write "Gay Parenting." "Every one (childbirth and child-care book) I picked up was based on the premise that the parents would be one heterosexual woman and her heterosexual husband. All the prenatal and postpartum advice, all the child-development material was centered around the traditional model." With little exception, the same could be said today.

"Gay Parenting" provides a general overview of issues and concerns facing gay people who are considering having children, and those who already live with kids. It deals with such social and emotional concerns as coming out to your children, integrating lovers into the family unit, the impact of AIDS and community attitudes, as well as legal concerns (custody contests with blood families, adoption and artificial insemination).

Unlike Cheri Pies' "Considering Parenthood: A Workbook for Lesbians," "Gay Parenting" is not a how-to manual. It is, rather, the result of Schulenberg's interviews in person and by mail with gay and lesbian parents around the country.

Not surprisingly, it was adoptive gay parents who, as a group,



LYNN MEADOWS

Joy Schulenberg

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were the most reluctant to be interviewed by the author. Although the National Association of Social Workers encourages "full adoption rights for gays," in actual practice some states remove foster children from gay homes in favor of placement in a more "traditional environment." This is especially unfortunate because, as Schulenberg points out, there are many gay teenagers (often runaways) in

need of accepting and supportive foster homes.

What might be surprising to many — especially gays who are estranged from their families — are recent studies Schulenberg cites comparing lesbian and single heterosexual mothers. Both groups tend to rely on their families equally insofar as child care is concerned. In a number of ways, Schulenberg shows how children help the gay family become more integrated in mainstream society. Raising children forces the urban gay parent "to function in a heterosexual environment (schools, friends' parents, etc.) that we might otherwise choose to avoid."

Much of the richness of this book lies in its validation of gay parents and, more importantly, the terminology Schulenberg provides for previously ignored alternative familial and parenting arrangements. For example, she writes that "to be a 'co-parent' is to be a parent by choice . . . Co-parents share responsibility for rearing a child with the emphasis on the offspring rather than the relationship between the adults involved." A "co-sexual" unit she explains, is a gay man and lesbian woman parenting together. "Supplemental nurturing" is the involvement with and commitment to a child you do not parent.

Another valuable aspect of "Gay Parenting" is that it includes the comments of the children of gays and lesbians. Rather than see-

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ing their parents' homosexuality as a problem, many such youngsters benefit from "the legacy of strength and pride" that can come from seeing a parent struggle valiantly with "whatever vexation may be caused to their spirit by

the community." They may, in fact, as a New Jersey judge suggested in 1979, "emerge better equipped to search out their own standards of right and wrong, better able to perceive that the majority is not always correct in its moral judgments and better able to understand the importance of conforming their beliefs to the requirements of reason and tested

knowledge."

An excellent and extensive bibliography and resource directory are appended to this book which, despite a few shortcomings, is an important work that will help bring gay and lesbian families into mainstream consciousness. ■

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