PRACTICE GUIDANCE ON ASSESSING GAY AND LESBIAN FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION APPLICANTS
Practice Guidance on Assessing Gay & Lesbian Foster Care & Adoption Applicants

This Guidance has been written by Stephen Hicks with Debbie Greaves, with contributions from Jill Hellings and Viv Lyons, on behalf of Manchester City Council Children’s Services © 2004. Updated 2007

Contents

SECTION A Acknowledgements. 2
SECTION B Introduction. 3
SECTION C Historical Context. 4
SECTION D Legal Framework:
- Fostering Regulations 8
- Adoption Regulations 9
SECTION E Links to other Policies and Procedures. 10
SECTION F Core Issues:
  i) Individual’s experience of their sexuality. 11
  ii) How confident applicants feel regarding their sexuality. 14
  iii) Applicants’ relationships to birth parents and other professionals. 16
  iv) How homophobia and heterosexism have impinged on applicants’ lives. 19
  v) Applicants’ present relationships. 21

Appendix 1-4 24
References 31
Useful Organisations 34
SECTION A

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Thanks also to Helen Cosis Brown on whose work the 5 ‘core issues’ are based.
SECTION B

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of national standards in fostering and adoption, new fostering regulations and adoption legislation has resulted in a renewed focus on the assessment of potential carers. In addition, practitioners are aware of the need to constantly review methods of assessment and look for improvements. Manchester Children’s Services (Family Placement Service) has historically worked closely with the Positive Parenting Campaign\(^1\) to review and provide appropriate services to gay men and lesbians interested in adoption and fostering. It was from this partnership that the idea of these practice guidelines for assessing lesbian and gay carers was first instigated.

These guidelines were written primarily for social workers carrying out assessments of lesbians or gay men who apply to foster or adopt. They should be seen as only part of a holistic ‘F Form’ and/or competency-based assessment, since a focus exclusively upon issues of sexuality would be wrong. They start from the premise that safeguarding children is a primary function of all assessments, but are also an attempt to offer applicants clear criteria. Research has shown that applicants feel suspicion and mistrust if there is no clarity or transparency in assessment (Cabinet Office 2000). This is particularly true for gay and lesbian carers who have a variable experience of assessment, ranging from an over-zealous focus on their sexuality to an approach which ignores it completely (Hicks 1996, 1997).

The working party was very aware that to specify a “checklist” of questions for lesbians and gay men would be wrong. Lesbians and gay men are a diverse group and the same set of questions would not be right for all. In addition, these guidelines were written to prompt social workers to think about what areas they ought to cover in assessments, they are not intended as a “one size fits all” template. Social workers have a complex job to do, and this complexity should be retained in their approach to assessing lesbians or gay men. Nevertheless, this guidance is based upon the suggestion that lesbian and gay applicants should be encouraged to talk about aspects of their lives that are specific to their sexuality (Brown 1991; Hicks 1997; Martin 1993). There would also be merit in using this guidance as an opportunity to train panel members and children’s social workers who, in their roles as decision-makers, have as much influence as the assessing social worker.

Hopefully these practice guidelines will encourage more gay men and lesbians to apply to care for looked after children, remove some of the mystery surrounding assessment, and achieve some consistency of approach.

**Note:** National support groups for lesbians and gay men interested in fostering or adoption (such as Lesbian & Gay Foster & Adoptive Parents Network or Northern Support Group) exist to help applicants at all stages of the process, from an initial interest in foster care or adoption, through application and assessment on to post-placement issues. Social workers should consider offer to refer lesbian or gay applicants to these groups, details of which are listed under ‘Useful Organisations’ at the end of this guidance.

\(^1\) The Positive Parenting Campaign was set up in Manchester in 1990 to campaign for, provide advice and training on all aspects of foster care and adoption by lesbians and gay men. www.positiveparentingcampaign.freeservers.com
SECTION C:

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LESBIAN AND GAY FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION:

Lesbians and gay men have been involved in the fostering or adoption of children for many years in the UK. An article that appeared in the magazine ‘Marie Claire’, for example, featured lesbian couples who had been fostering or adopting children for some time (McRobbie 1991) and a further piece in ‘Woman’ told the story of a lesbian couple who had cared for as many as 52 children over a lengthy period (Brennan 1994). Both articles were published in the 1990s, however, and it is fair to say that public openness about lesbian and gay fostering and adoption was rare in the UK before the 1980s. Some carers and indeed social workers maintained an ‘open silence’ about the issue of sexuality because of the discrimination and possible outright rejection faced by lesbians and gay men who applied.

Lesbian and gay parenting as a whole was a key area in which discrimination was rife and there is much evidence that lesbian mothers, for example, lost custody of their children during the 1970s just because of their sexuality (Hanscombe & Forster 1982; Harne & Rights of Women 1997). As lesbian and gay communities became more confident and active, as research evidence began to grow and as lesbian/gay parents also gained more experience, things began to change. During the 1980s in the U.K, lesbian and gay parenting fully emerged as a political issue, discrimination was challenged and more and more parents began to be open about their sexuality. It was during this period that fostering and adoption by lesbians and gay men emerged into the public arena through activism, research and experience.

A number of key events during the 1980s were crucial to this process of emergence. The then Conservative Government enacted Section 28 of the 1987/88 Local Government Act, which specifically referred to lesbian and gay parenting, stating that a local authority “shall not promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship” (Wise 2000c). Many lesbian, gay, civil rights and child care organisations opposed Section 28. In Manchester for example, the North West Campaign for Lesbian & Gay Equality (NWCLGE) organised a 20,000-strong public demonstration. Many lesbian and gay parents were involved and opposed the idea that their families were ‘just pretend’.

1988 also saw the publication of the first British study of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption (Skeates & Jabri 1988). This had been organised and funded by a small group of lesbians and gay men in London and the study considered the issues facing lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters in the capital at that time. Just three male couples, two female couples, a single man and two single women took part in the Skeates & Jabri study, but the authors also approached a small number of London boroughs to elicit their stance on the issue. The picture that emerged was very patchy, and the lesbian and gay carers reported that being open with social services departments about their sexuality often resulted in rejection or less favourable treatment. The study also reported a process of ‘double discrimination’ for black lesbian or gay applicants. Respondents felt that their sexuality was poorly handled in assessments and there was an over-emphasis on whether lesbians and gay men could provide acceptable gender role models for children. Finally the study questioned the tradition of placing only disabled children, and those who were particularly ‘hard-to-place’ due to special needs, with lesbian and gay carers (Skeates & Jabri 1988).
Following publication of the Skeates & Jabri study in the U.K., the lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters who had been involved held a conference in London in 1989 to launch a national support group, the Lesbian & Gay Foster & Adoptive Parents Network (LAGFAPN). In addition, Pratibha Parmar’s pioneering short film on lesbian and gay fostering and adoption was commissioned and shown by the Channel 4 ‘Out on Tuesday’ programme. This film featured the authors of the Skeates & Jabri study, as well as lesbian and gay carers talking about their experiences (Parmar 1989). The late 1980s also saw the publication of Wendell Ricketts’ work on lesbian and gay fostering and adoption in the U.S. (Ricketts 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg 1987). This work reported the hidden numbers of lesbian and gay carers who were not open about their sexuality with social workers and crucially argued that those who were ‘out’ were “scrutinized more carefully and are held to a higher standard than...their heterosexual counterparts” (Ricketts & Achtenberg 1990:104).

During the 1990s, lesbian and gay fostering and adoption remained on the public agenda due to the reviews of child care law in the U.K. Following the 1989 Children Act, a consultation paper on foster care argued “...it would be wrong arbitrarily to exclude any particular groups of people from consideration. But the chosen way of life of some adults may mean that they would not be able to provide a suitable environment for the care and nurture of a child. No one has a 'right' to be a foster parent. 'Equal rights' and 'gay rights' policies have no place in fostering services” (DoH, 1990:para. 16). Many groups protested against the “gay rights” aspect of this paragraph and the Positive Parenting Campaign was set up in Manchester at this time to provide education and training on all aspects of fostering and adoption by lesbians and gay men.

The “gay rights” sentence was removed from what eventually became the guidance on family placements in fostering (DoH 1991), but the “chosen way of life” phrase remains. Essentially this means that foster care guidance was equivocal on issues of sexuality and that, although many local authorities operate equal opportunities statements, it was still possible to reject potential foster carers on that basis. Further, this has also tended to encourage the use of lesbian and gay carers as a “last resort” only (Hicks 1996). This position adopts a tacit or even grudging acceptance of lesbian and gay foster carers for only the most needy or disabled children, and only when all other options have failed.

The Adoption Act of 1976 did not rule out adoptions by gay or single people, but did state that only married couples were able to adopt jointly. This was reviewed in the early 1990s, but both the review of adoption law (DoH/Welsh Office 1992) and adoption white paper (DoH et al. 1993) proposed no changes to the law in this respect. Further, the adoption white paper and the later Labour Government green paper on the family (Home Office 1998) favoured married couples as the best of homes for all children. This meant that adoption by lesbians and gay men was also patchy and subject to discriminatory practices. However, lesbians and gay men were able to adopt, either singly or in a couple. For a lesbian or gay couple, only one adult could be the named adopter in law, but many sought a joint Residence Order under the Children Act 1989 to give both adults parental responsibility (see Hicks & McDermott 1999). In 2002 the Adoption & Children Bill was debated in the Houses of Commons and Lords and a specific amendment allowing joint adoption by non-married couples, including lesbians and gay men, was passed.

The 1990s also witnessed a much greater openness about the topics of lesbian and gay foster care and adoption and the likelihood that potential carers would approach agencies as openly gay or lesbian (Hicks & McDermott 1999). Whilst this was not universally true, lesbians and gay men who were considering adoption or foster care were more likely to be open about their sexuality from the start, in part inspired by the growing numbers of gay carers. In 1994, LAGFAPN expanded when the Northern Support Group (covering
Greater Manchester, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Merseyside and around) was established. Following a national conference held in Manchester in 1994, the London and Northern groups came together to initiate a project which resulted in the publication of the first British book to deal with the topic of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption (Hicks & McDermott 1999). This book allowed some 17 different households to tell their stories of successfully managing to get through the social work assessment and approval process in order to care for children. Growing confidence also came from the publication of outcome studies of the children of lesbian and gay parents and, although not specifically focused on fostered or adopted children, these studies showed that parental sexuality in itself is no indicator of poor outcomes for children. In fact, the children of lesbians and gay men are as emotionally, physically and psychologically healthy as any others (Golombok 2000; McCann & Tasker 2000; Tasker & Golombok 1997).

Social work has had a patchy response to the issue of lesbian and gay fostering and adoption throughout this time. There have been agencies that have assessed and approved gay carers and in some a positive response has been established. Manchester City Council, for example, has worked in conjunction with the Positive Parenting Campaign to develop this aspect of practice and was the first local authority to produce a leaflet welcoming applications by lesbians and gay men. However, other agencies have not been so positive and there are many examples of outright rejection and of a patchy service within agencies (Hicks 1996, 1997).

Papers published during the 1990s began to consider social work’s response to lesbian and gay applicants (Brown 1991, 1992; Hicks 1996, 1997). Applicants felt that social workers were generally ignorant about lesbian and gay lives, or that some preferred to ignore the issue of sexuality altogether (Hicks 1996). There was also an overemphasis on whether lesbians or gay men were able to provide balanced gender role models to children, with social workers assuming that children require such role models, that they only derive ideas about gender from parents and that heterosexual homes automatically provide balanced gender role models while lesbians and gay men cannot (Hicks 1996). Others reported rejection by agencies when they came out as gay, or a lack of ability to discuss this issue on the part of social workers (Hicks 1996). Hicks (1997) also pointed out that other applicants felt their assessment had focused almost exclusively on the issue of their sexuality, to the exclusion of all else including the ability to provide adequate child care:

*I felt cheated...I wanted to talk about child care and I wanted to prove to them that I could be a good parent, that I had experience of kids, that I knew about child development...All they wanted to do was talk about me being a lesbian...* (Hicks 1997:33).

Hicks (1997) noted a range of social work responses to the assessment of lesbians and gay men, ranging from discriminatory outright rejection, through a focus exclusively on sexuality and/or haphazard approaches, towards better practice that combines questions of sexuality with all the other vital aspects of any fostering or adoption assessment. A more radical approach, for example, would recognise that lesbians and gay men are already disadvantaged within a system that tends to favour heterosexual applicants and would attempt to minimise discriminatory practices throughout. However, what counts as ‘discriminatory’ is not self-evident. Further, a concern not to discriminate on the basis of sexuality should never be used as an excuse not to carry out a thorough assessment of all applicants.
Much of this is a debate within social work about whether lesbian and gay applicants should be treated ‘the same’ as everyone else for the purposes of assessment. Earlier writers argued that lesbians and gay men should be given the same right to be considered and assessed like anyone else (Skeates & Jabri 1988; Ricketts 1991). However, later work has pointed out that attempting to treat lesbians and gay men ‘the same’ as heterosexuals within an assessment is not helpful because “sameness” has been critiqued as a model of equality for some time (Brown 1991; Hicks 1997). Many lesbian and gay applicants report that there are areas of their lives, specific to being lesbian or gay, that they would like to talk through in an assessment (Hicks 1997; Hicks & McDermott 1999). Various writers have therefore argued that it is legitimate to ask lesbians and gay men about particular areas of their lives in order to complete an adequate assessment (Brown 1991; Hicks 1997; Martin 1993).

This should in no way detract from the need to cover all areas detailed in the standard format used for assessing carers, much of which will raise issues of sexuality for lesbian and gay applicants anyway. In fact Helen Cosis Brown comments that “the subjects of gender, sex and sexuality need to be firmly and permanently placed within the assessment process for all applicants” (Brown 1992:30).
SECTION D: LEGAL FRAMEWORK

FOSTERING REGULATIONS

The Fostering Services Regulations (DoH 2002) came into force on the 1st April 2002. Working alongside the regulations are the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (DoH 2002) which were introduced in March 2002. Together the regulations and standards provide the regulatory framework under the Care Standards Act 2000 (CSA) for the conduct of fostering services. The CSA created the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC), an independent, non-governmental public body to regulate social and health care services. The role of inspecting local authority fostering services, has been given to Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, (OFSTED). The Children Act 1989 continues to be applicable.

How regulations and standards work together:

The Regulations are mandatory and must be complied with. The National Minimum Standards must be taken into account by the NCSC when making decisions about a breach of regulations.

The U.K. National Standards for Foster Care (NFCA/UK Joint Working Party on Foster Care 1999b) along with the Code of Practice on the recruitment, assessment, approval, training, management and support of foster carers (NFCA/UKJWP 1999a) remain applicable to fostering services. They have no formal legal status but represent best practice and as such should be complied with by fostering service providers.

Fostering Service Regulations 2001:

Part IV, ‘Approval’, deals with the issues of assessment and approval, review and termination of approvals that are most relevant to these guidelines, although none are specific to gay and lesbian carers.

National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services:

The standards are more detailed regarding practice. Standard 7 ‘Valuing diversity’ states each child should have access to a foster care service which recognizes and addresses their needs in terms of their sexuality. Standard 17 examines recruiting a range of carers to meet the needs of a range of children. It states there should be a clearly defined assessment process (17.6) and identifies 15 areas to be addressed when assessing qualities, competencies and aptitudes for fostering, many of which are covered in these guidelines.

Implications for lesbians and gay men:

The National Minimum Standards and the UK National Standards both adopt an ‘equality’ position in relation to the recruitment and assessment of potential foster carers. This means that foster care applicants should be given equal treatment and ought not to be turned down on the basis of their sexuality.
ADOPTION REGULATIONS

Adoption and Children Act 2002:

The Adoption & Children Act 2002 received Royal Assent on 7th November 2002 but only came into force on 30 December 2005. The Act overhauled the 1976 Adoption Act and modernised the legal framework for domestic and inter-country adoption. It implements the proposals in the white paper, 'Adoption: A New Approach' (DoH 2000), which required primary legislation and underpins the Government's drive to improve the performance of the adoption service and promote greater use of adoption. The Act aims to:

• put the needs of the child at the centre of the adoption process by aligning adoption law with the Children Act 1989, and making the child's welfare the paramount consideration in all decisions.
• encourage more people to adopt looked after children by helping to ensure that the support they need is available. There is a new, clear duty on local authorities to provide an adoption support service and a new right for people affected by adoption to request and receive an assessment of their needs for adoption support services.
• support the Government's efforts to build confidence in the adoption process and encourage more people to come forward to adopt. As a result, the Secretary of State has established a new independent review mechanism for prospective adopters who feel they have been turned down unfairly.
• enable unmarried couples to apply to adopt jointly, thereby widening the pool of potential adoptive parents. It will be for adoption agencies and, ultimately, the courts to decide whether a couple is suitable to adopt. In order to be approved as adoptive parents, a couple would need to prove that they have a stable and lasting relationship and that they can provide a loving family environment for a child.

The National Adoption Standards were produced in August 2001 (DoH 2001b). Many of the standards were already required by primary legislation, regulatory or statutory guidance. The remaining standards are seen as good practice.

Implications for lesbians and gay men:

The National Standards adopt an equality position that suggests that all adoption applicants should be fairly treated and that sexuality ought not to be a reason to reject anyone. The Adoption & Children Act 2002 for the first time, allows joint adoption applications by lesbian or gay couples.
SECTION E

LINKS TO OTHER POLICIES AND PROCEDURES AND PRACTICE

The practice Guidance is written within the context of Manchester City Councils Placement Service Recruitment Policy. A copy is available from your Family Placement worker. Of particular relevance is Section 5. “Applicants to the Service.” Section 5.1 states; “All applicants will be treated equally, irrespective of age, race, gender, disability or sexuality consistent with the needs of children requiring alternative family placement.”

The following policies and procedures may also be useful to refer to for both assessor and applicants. Family placement workers will have access to copies and will provide them for applicants when requested:

- ‘Review of panel decision’ procedure. Procedure to use once the assessment is completed if the applicant is unhappy with the social worker or panel’s recommendation.
- Complaints procedure.
- Permanency policy.
- Protective strategy.
- Same race placement.
- Equal opportunity policy.
- Foster carer handbook.
- Statement of purpose.
- National Adoption Standards for England (DoH 2001b).
- Draft Practice Guidance to support the Adoption Standards in England (DoH 2001a).
- Code of Practice on the recruitment, assessment, approval, training, management and support of foster carers (NFCA/UKJWP 1999a).
- Green Paper Care Matters (DoH 2007).
SECTION F: CORE ISSUES

These core issues for lesbians and gay men are derived from published work (Brown 1991, 1992; Hicks 1997), research (Hicks 1998) and from discussions between Manchester City Council Social Services representatives and the Positive Parenting Campaign. They are intended as suggested areas for social workers to raise with lesbian or gay foster care or adoption applicants. Each core issue is introduced, and is then followed by a ‘tool box’ of suggested techniques and links to the ‘Form F’ assessment and competencies. The 5 core issues are:

- Individual’s experience of their sexuality; their own response and that of family and friends.
- How confident/comfortable applicants feel about their sexuality.
- How applicants have thought about relating to birth parents, and how they will deal with schools, playgroups, childminders and other professionals.
- How homophobia and heterosexism have impinged on applicants’ lives, how they have dealt with this, and what coping devices they use.
- Applicants’ present relationships – sexual, emotional, supportive, friends, family – and how they negotiate homophobia within close relationships.

(i) Individual’s experience of their sexuality; their own response and that of family/friends:

Lesbian and gay applicants should be encouraged to talk about their sexuality within the context of their lives and their application to care for children. Social workers can situate much of this work within the standard individual profile of carers, and lesbian and gay applicants should be helped to discuss what their sexuality means to them. Few lesbians and gay men actually understand themselves to be lesbian or gay as children, but they may have experienced themselves as ‘different’ and this may have been reinforced by the views of others, sometimes including teasing by peers. It is helpful for applicants to talk through how and when they understood that they might be ‘different’ and how they discovered an attraction to members of the same sex. Social workers should remember, however, that this is not universal, as some people discover a same-sex attraction much later in adult life. The point here is to encourage applicants to talk about how and when they understood themselves to be lesbian or gay. This is a long and complex process and social workers should note that people explain their sexuality in many different ways.

Brown (1991) also recommends that applicants should be asked about their own response to their sexuality - How did they cope with feeling ‘different’? How did they cope with any teasing? How did they learn about what being lesbian or gay means? Who did they choose to tell? Brown also suggests applicants talk about the responses of family and friends. Remember that lesbians and gay men tell certain people about their sexuality for good reasons, and this may not include all immediate family members. Some may tell friends first and some only tell certain family members but not others.

The process of understanding oneself to be lesbian or gay and beginning to tell others is usually referred to as ‘coming out’. Applicants need to talk about this process and to discuss how and when they came out. In addition they will need to talk about who they are ‘out’ to. Most lesbians and gay men have some people in their lives that they may not be open with about their sexuality (and this can range from some family members to work colleagues).
The applicant's own responses may have been influenced by some of the following:

- when they first began to identify as lesbian or gay.
- their age at their first same-sex experience or relationship.
- whether experiences were positive or negative.
- who they first came out to, in what context, and the response.
- who they are out to now.
- whether they have any experiences of losing contact with anybody that they came out to.
- whether coming out changed people’s responses to them.
- whether conflict has arisen in relationships as a consequence of coming out and, if so, whether this has been resolved and how this was managed.
- whether people’s attitudes have changed over time.

Some lesbians and gay men will have had difficult early experiences where they may have been rejected by some people because of their sexuality. However, these experiences do not necessarily give cause for concern - they may indicate a level of emotional vulnerability but, equally, they may result in qualities of determination, resilience and insight. However, denial, dismissiveness or high levels of anger about these issues may indicate an applicant is not ready to parent an emotionally needy child. All carers need to feel confident about their own experiences and how they might handle discrimination in the future, either for themselves or for children.

Applicants may also wish to talk about how being lesbian or gay relates to their particular racial, ethnic or cultural heritage. Most lesbians and gay men have to negotiate forms of homophobia that exist within all religions and cultures and it may be important to talk through how they feel they have managed this process. It is possible, for example, that lesbians and gay men may practice a religion within which there are others who are homophobic. Social workers should guard against viewing certain racial or cultural groupings as 'more homophobic' than others - homophobia exists in all cultures (Hicks & McDermott 1999), but applicants may wish to talk about how they have negotiated coming out within particular racial communities in the U.K. Members of all racial communities and religions will face varying degrees and forms of homophobia.

Tool Box:

See ‘Life story flow chart’ (Appendix 1). Assessors often use this as a tool for charting personal histories. If so, the chart can be extended or revisited with the applicant to cover the issues raised above.
Appropriate Links to F Form Assessment:

1. Individual profile on each applicant

The individual’s experience of their sexuality as a lesbian or gay man, their own and their family’s response is pertinent when examining their individual profile, especially Section (A) looking at ‘background’. Here, the assessor is guided to the “applicant(s) view about their own up bringing and past family relationships, and the impact of upbringing on present functioning and relationships”. Some of the issues are also relevant to Section (E), “Personality, self presentation - how do applicants see and understand themselves?” Applicants may wish to talk or write about how they understood themselves to be lesbian or gay when growing up, how this affected them, how they handled it, and even what this means to them now. Remember there are many ways of thinking about what sexuality means, and applicants might want to discuss the ways in which their understanding of their sexuality has changed, or has been influenced by others, by reading, by groups and so on.

3. Support Networks

When completing this section and discussing significant and less significant support systems, many of the bullet points above will have relevance. Assessors should remember that lesbians and gay men often develop significant support networks amongst friends and not just family.

9. Within Parenting Capacity

The issue of “Use of own childhood experience” and how an applicant has been parented will no doubt be discussed in this Section. The applicant will have views relating to how they have experienced their sexuality as a lesbian or gay man and their family’s response. What they would repeat and what they would change will be significant for their proposed parenting styles. This will also help them to reflect upon how they will deal with children’s disclosures about sexuality issues.

Likewise applicants’ experiences of “Difference” and discrimination will give them a lot to draw from when examining the potential for parenting a child who too is different. Applicants might wish to talk about how they have handled discrimination, what they learned from this, and how this would help them to help a child deal with difficult experiences.

Links to F Form Assessment Part 4, Competencies
(See appendix 2 for list of competencies)

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(ii) **How confident/comfortable applicants feel about their sexuality:**

Lesbian and gay applicants should be asked how confident and comfortable they feel about their sexuality. Talking about coming out and being out will help this area of questioning because it will give the social worker a picture of how confident applicants are with others about their sexuality. Social workers need to remember however that homophobia, including violence, is ever present in UK society (Mason & Palmer 1996) and so applicants may have very good reasons not to be open about their sexuality with everyone. Social workers nevertheless need to assess how comfortable applicants are with being lesbian or gay in order to ensure that they do have a positive sense of self, a good support network and can handle being open about their sexuality with parents, children and other professionals. Looking after a child will require a degree of self-confidence and resilience about sexuality, and so the assessment will need to comment on the applicants’ ability to deal confidently with prejudice and discrimination.

Applicants will also be helped by talking about how they handle their sexuality outside of the immediate home context. Some lesbians and gay men are very open about their sexuality at work but others are not and so discussion of this will be important. There are good reasons for lesbians and gay men not being out at work and social workers will need to be aware that homophobia in the workplace is a genuine concern.

It may also be useful to find out whether applicants have ever been involved in any lesbian or gay community groups or activism, as this can act as an extra source of support. However, many lesbians and gay men do not involve themselves in such groups and this should not be held against them. Finally, it is helpful to find out what contact lesbian and gay applicants have with other lesbians and gay men - some may belong to lesbian and gay parenting groups, for example, and this can indicate another level of support that will be important in the future:

- do they socialize with gay friends, or go to gay clubs?
- are they members of any social or political or community groups?
- could they rely on any of these people or groups to give them support if a child were placed?

**Tool Box:**

Ask the applicant(s) to complete a support network eco-map (which is already recommended with an example given in the F Form, Part 2 Section 3). A family tree would also serve a similar purpose. Use this to:

- explore with the applicant whom they are out to.
- ask whom they choose not to be out to.

The applicant may need to re-evaluate choices not to be out if a child is placed. If they are not out at work for example, there will be a focus on their personal relationships if they apply for adoption leave or need time-off to care for a child from work colleagues. It is important for an assessor to know how confident an applicant feels about these relationships in order to assess how they could be re-negotiated in the future, if needed, when a child is placed.
**Personal References**

Assessors need to check out with applicants if they are out to personal referees. We do not recommend applicants using personal referees who do not know that they are lesbian or gay, but understand that employers, for example, may not need to know this. Social workers should check out whether referees do know about the applicants' sexuality to ensure confidentiality is not breached if the assessor needs to check out issues such as the stability of a personal relationship, or connectedness/isolation from the local community for example.

**Appropriate Links to F Form Assessment**

1. **Individual profile on each applicant**

   These issues may be relevant to section (d) “interests”. Also to (e) “personality and self-presentation - how do applicants see and understand themselves?”

2. **Support networks**

   It would be relevant to include social, political or community groups which the applicant identifies with which will be supportive.

**Links to F Form Assessment Part 4, Competencies:**

(See appendix 2 for list of competencies)

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(iii) How have applicants thought about relating to birth parents and how will they deal with schools, playgroups, childminders and other professionals?

Applicants will need to think about how they are going to handle being out with children, birth parents and the many other professionals (teachers, social workers, health visitors, doctors and so on) involved. There may be some situations where it is not important to be out about sexuality, but in others it will be. Some carers who have tried to remain quiet about being lesbian or gay have reported the unfortunate experience of being ‘outed’ by their children at school, for example (Hicks & McDermott 1999). This can have the effect of burdening children with secrets and also suggesting that being lesbian or gay is wrong. These are complex areas and applicants need to talk them through in an assessment so that they are encouraged to think about how they might handle such issues (see also Section v).

Birth parents are likely to have a range of reactions to the idea of their children being placed with lesbian or gay carers. There are situations in which the views of birth parents are relevant and must be taken into account, but there are others in which their views will be over-ridden. Social workers will need to convey the positive skills of gay or lesbian carers to birth parents and not present their sexuality in a negative light. Part of this process must therefore also involve assessors talking with applicants about how they will handle relating to birth parents, especially as contact is likely to occur in a number of placements. Applicants will need to think about how they will work with birth parents and how they would prefer their sexuality to be raised with them, especially if parents’ wishes are going to be a key factor in making a placement decision.

In addition, assessment ought to consider how applicants intend to handle the question of their sexuality with other professionals involved in their children’s lives. Most lesbian and gay carers, for example, find it helpful to liaise with their children’s school and teachers about the fact that they are gay, so that teachers can be sensitive to particular issues that this might raise in class. Parents evenings, ‘Mother’s Day’ and work on families can all raise particular issues for children who live with lesbians or gay men, as much as they can do for all fostered or adopted children as a whole. In addition, carers will need to be sensitive to the possibility of potential teasing of their children at school and will need to work with teachers on this issue. Children are sometimes teased because they are fostered or adopted, and they may also be teased if they have gay or lesbian parents, and so carers will need to discuss in an assessment how they intend to help children deal with this. It is important not to blame lesbian and gay carers for such teasing but instead to see it for the homophobia that it is, but carers will nevertheless need to be sure that they have thought about this as a possibility. In addition, homophobia is an everyday event in most school playgrounds - not that about gay parents, but homophobic comments made by children about each other. Children who live with gay parents will also need help to understand and deal with this.

Finally children will need help to make decisions for themselves about who they choose to tell that they have gay or lesbian parents. Most children of lesbians and gay men do not tell everyone about their parents, but instead choose to tell certain people that they trust. Fostered or adopted children may not understand this and may tell everyone that they come across everything about their experiences, which can create problems. Assessors might like to talk to lesbians and gay men about how they will encourage children to make sensible decisions about who they choose to tell about their parents, without suggesting that being lesbian or gay is a bad thing. In fact, the same issue can apply here in terms of children choosing who to tell that they are fostered or adopted and who to tell about past difficult experiences such as abuse.
The applicants may not have considered these issues before, and may need support to explore and reflect on the impact and consequences for themselves and a child in their family:

- for example, if a child is placed, how will applicants feel about a far wider circle of people knowing about their sexuality (GPs, teachers, health visitors)?
- it is not always possible or desirable to ensure privacy. In addition, children or young people may innocently or maliciously ‘out’ their carers.

**Tool Box:**

See ‘Case Study’ - Appendix 3 Using the ecomap of Toni, explore and identify with the applicants the positives and potential difficulties of being out, or not out, to the people in the ecomap, for example, to health visitors, birth parents or teachers.

**Tool Box:**

**Case scenario:**
You have just arrived in the playground to pick your child up from school. They have asked if their new friend can come home for tea. Unfortunately it is in front of the friend and his dad, so you are put on the spot. They do not know you have a same-sex relationship and you have no way of knowing how they will react.

How do you handle the situation?
How would you explain to a child’s friends about your home situation?
How would you help your child to do this?
How would you cope with being ‘outed’ by a child in your care?

**Appropriate Links to F Form Assessment:**

9. **Parenting capacity**

The final section covering “difference” is an appropriate place for the assessor’s views on the applicants’ abilities to anticipate what the issues and potential difficulties for the child would be, and whether there would need to be any changes in their lifestyle.
Links to F Form Assessment Part 4, Competencies:

(See appendix 2 for list of competencies)

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(iv) How homophobia and heterosexism have impinged on applicants’ lives, how they have dealt with this, what coping devices they now use:

Most lesbians and gay men will have had some experience of homophobia and heterosexism in their lives and it will be important to talk to them about how they have dealt with this. This is important because lesbians and gay men can draw upon their own experiences of prejudice and their own coping mechanisms, in order to help children deal with difficult events in their own lives and any teasing or bullying they may experience for whatever reason. However, there may be some lesbians and gay men who do not feel they have experienced any discrimination.

‘Homophobia’ was originally defined as an individual irrational hatred or phobia towards lesbians and gay men, but is now more commonly used to refer to the kinds of everyday prejudice that lesbians and gay men experience (Wise 2000b). ‘Heterosexism’ refers to the dominance of a world-view in which heterosexuality is used as the standard against which all people are measured (Wise 2000a:154). Applicants should talk about their own experiences of prejudice in order to discuss how they have coped with difficult situations, what coping mechanisms they employ and how they might use these to help children who have difficult situations to deal with. Looked after children, for example, are often teased because they have been fostered or adopted, and so carers will need to be able to help them deal with this in positive ways.

Social workers need to be careful not to blame the victim of homophobia, but try to understand how and why lesbian or gay applicants dealt with such situations in the way that they did. For example, a homophobic incident can be much more devastating to an adolescent, and so lesbians and gay men develop coping strategies and a surer sense of self as they mature. However, social workers will need to look for applicants who have not been totally crushed by experiences of prejudice (in whatever form) since they will need strong coping mechanisms to deal with the various issues that caring for a child will bring. Most lesbians and gay men are positively able to draw upon their own experiences of prejudice and “feeling different” and are able to use these in helping children deal with their own problems (Hicks & McDermott 1999). Helen Cosis Brown comments, “coping with stigma is often a strengthening, enriching process, as well as a harrowing one” (Brown 1991:16).
Tool Box:

Some of the questions below may elicit information. Not all will be relevant or answerable but are more a means of beginning the discussion.

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<td>• what was your most recent experience of prejudice or homophobia?</td>
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<td>• can you recall instances when you were discriminated against due to your sexuality in your adolescence/young adulthood? Or when you were in your first same sex relationship?</td>
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<td>• can you recall the most distressing experience?</td>
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<td>• have you experienced homophobia from a stranger/acquaintance?</td>
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<td>• have you experienced other prejudice because of your race, gender, age or disability?</td>
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<td>• can you recall how you felt? (See appendix 4 for examples of ‘emotions’. Applicant can pick those that are relevant and add their own if needed).</td>
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The applicant should reflect on how they dealt with the situation:

| • do they feel they coped effectively? |
| • what methods have worked and what methods haven't? |
| • would they deal with a similar situation in the same way now? |
| • would they deal with it differently with hindsight? |
| • what would be their ideal way of dealing with the situation? |

The assessor and the applicant need to make the connections between how the applicant has experienced prejudice and homophobia and developed coping strategies, and how a child placed may:

- experience homophobia and other forms of prejudice.
- need to develop coping mechanisms.

A crucial part of these coping strategies is for the applicant to develop knowledge and skills to help children and young people decide who is safe or appropriate to be open with regarding their carers’ gay or lesbian relationship and who it is not. This is a complex area and can only be fully explored once the carers are approved and know the individual child. However, in order to prepare the applicants, they need to have considered their own individual circumstances and how they may help a child resolve who to tell and who not to tell.

Tool Box:

| Ask the applicant to consider a situation where a child in their care |
may be subject to homophobia. The feeling cards (Appendix 4) can be used to identify how the child may feel. The applicants’ reflections on their own learnt methods of coping (as outlined in the previous exercise) are a good place to begin when looking at how they can help a child placed cope with potentially similar situations.

Tool Box:

Ask applicants to watch the video of Pratibha Parmar’s 1989 short film on lesbian and gay foster care and adoption: what do they think about the ways that the lesbians and gay men on the film have handled issues of their sexuality in relation to children and birth parents?

We recommend that all lesbian and gay applicants watch this film because it raises many points to think about.

Appropriate Links to F Form:

7. Description of Family Lifestyle

How applicants show affection is included in this section.

8. Valuing diversity

Whilst this section is focusing on race, culture and ethnicity, it also covers discrimination. It states, “What does this family understand about the impact upon children of discrimination?” The essential elements of how the applicant views and understands the impact of discrimination should be addressed here.

Links to F Form Assessment Part 4, Competencies
(See appendix 2 for list of competencies)

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(v) What are applicants’ present relationships - sexual, emotional, supportive, friends, family? How do they negotiate homophobia within close relationships?
Social workers usually spend time talking with applicants about their support networks and close relationships, often using an ecomap (BAAF 2000). This is done to assess how applicants get support in their everyday lives and how they would do this if a child were to be placed with them. This process should be investigated with lesbian and gay applicants, but there are three issues that should be borne in mind. Firstly, many lesbians and gay men derive as much, and sometimes more, support from friends than family. In fact many lesbians and gay men think of their friends as their family (Weston 1991) and social workers should not regard this as a lesser form of support than that provided by relatives.

Secondly, lesbian and gay applicants are frequently asked whether they know other adults with children, but social workers often focus exclusively on heterosexual couples (Hicks 1998). It may be important to ask lesbian and gay applicants whether they know any other gay parents, since they can also provide a good source of support and it can be good for children to meet others who have gay carers. National and local support groups for gay parents can provide good sources of support here.

Thirdly, standard assessments are usually keen to ensure that applicants do not operate rigid gender roles either for themselves or for children (BAAF 2000), yet lesbians and gay men are often asked questions that seem to show a concern that they must provide traditional gender role models (Hicks 2000). Social workers sometimes assume that because a household may only include single-sex adults that children will suffer from a lack of ‘balanced gender role models’. Social workers need to remember that:

1. lesbians and gay men often provide less rigid gender roles at home (gay men, for example, do far more housework than most other men!)
2. children do not derive ideas about gender solely from parents nor do they simply learn gender from parents.
3. ideas about balanced gender role models in the home often betray quite traditional and conservative views of gender - the idea that a heterosexual couple automatically provides gender balance while lesbians and gay men do not. Questions from panels, such as whether gay men are ‘able to do the laundry’ (Hicks 2000) are in fact based on very traditional views about gender and about the tasks that men and women are able to perform. Social workers need to guard against expecting traditional ideas about gender from lesbian and gay applicants.

We recognise, however, that some social workers are expected to deal with the issue of gender role models for children, and so they may need to talk to lesbians and gay men about the range of men and women in their lives that their children will come into contact with.

Finally, social workers will need to talk to lesbians and gay men about their past and present sexual relationships or relationships with partners. These are areas that social workers should talk to all applicants about, but there is a need to guard against stereotypical views of lesbians and gay men as more promiscuous and less committed to long-term relationships than heterosexuals. There is a range of experience within lesbian and gay communities, but applicants to foster or adopt will need to consider the stability of their relationships just like anyone else. In addition, all applicants need to think about the role that sexual behaviour plays in their lives, partly because they will at some point have to talk to children and young people about sexual matters. Carers need a good sense of their own sexuality and sexual boundaries in order to help children who have been sexually abused in the past, or who may lack any conception of what is and is not appropriate sexual behaviour (Brown 1992; Hicks 1997).

For joint applications:
The assessor will also need to explore the applicants’ feelings about showing affection for each other. How comfortable or confident do they feel in showing each other affection in public, or in front of friends, or their respective families? Clearly some individuals are more private than others and assessors cannot draw hard conclusions from any preferred ways of applicants relating to each other. The assessor should focus on how secure, happy and comfortable both partners feel in their expressions of affection. Also the applicants’ ability to reflect on how their chosen style of relating to each other and showing affection may impact on a child placed, especially a newly placed child.

All assessments of potential carers will need to explore the dynamics, strengths and vulnerabilities in the carers’ primary relationships. This is especially true for couples who will have their relationship ‘tested to its limits’ when a child is placed. They thus need to be able to identify and strengthen their coping strategies. The assessment for gay men and lesbian applicants will be no different in this respect. Some couples may have chosen to undertake a civil partnership, however those who have not should not be assumed to have less commitment to the relationship. Some object politically.

Tool Box:

Assessor could refer back to the support network eco map completed for section 2 and focus on the quality of the relationships identified. The applicant will need to reflect on these relationships and the effect a placement may have on them:

- what makes these relationships supportive?
- what is the nature of the support - emotional, practical?
- will they continue to be supportive post-placement of a child or young person?
- will the nature or intensity of these relationships change on the applicant becoming a carer?

An alternative method could be to use index cards, where all significant people in the applicants’ support networks are named on individual cards. These are then arranged around the applicants’ card according to degrees of closeness and support. The exercise can be extended to look at types of support:

- applicants rearrange cards for different types of support, e.g. practical, emotional, and financial.
- relationships they have pre-placement and how they predict they will look post-placement.

Sex and sexuality:

This has to a large degree been considered in core issues i and ii. Applicants need to show they have an understanding of their sexuality and sexual boundaries. Views, expectations and patterns of how sex and sexuality are dealt with in the family will impact on any child or young person placed.

Vera Fahlberg suggests that a child’s gender identity and feelings about sexuality will have been affected or shaped by their early experiences with family members long before they enter school (Fahlberg 1994). This will be particularly true for children and young people...
who have been subject to sexual abuse. Applicants need to show an ability to handle confidently the establishment of sexual boundaries in the home (e.g. not walking around naked, not engaging in inappropriate sexual behaviour) but also how to talk sensitively to children about sexual issues as they arise (e.g. masturbation, talking about sexuality and relationships). How applicants have handled these issues for themselves, and their reflections on how they propose to handle these issues, will be an indicator of their potential abilities.

Appropriate Links to F Form Assessment

2. Relationships/Partnerships

For couples the quality, strengths and vulnerabilities of the applicants’ relationship should be assessed here.

3. Applicants’ support networks

This may have been covered in core issue ii. The main issues to cover here are support networks and applicants’ understanding of how these may change once a child is placed with them.

9. Parenting Capacity

The applicants’ attitudes, values and understanding of difference for the child would be best placed under the “difference” section.

10. Placement and post-placement considerations

How the applicants intend to guide and inform children and young people regarding sexuality/sexual development is dealt with under “Puberty/adolescence”.

Links to F Form Assessment Part 4, Competencies (See appendix 2)

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