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ABSTRACT

This paper presents personal thoughts about addressing a seventh-grade civics class on the gay civil rights movement, a subject generally considered an adult issue. The situation manifests the dilemma as to whether talking to young adolescents about gay issues is in fact recruiting them, or planting dangerous thoughts in their minds. In investigating whether to write a book for children about gays, the author encountered many preconceived ideas in young people that pointed to the need to have honest conversations on the topic. He suggests that until the day comes when gay and lesbian people and issues are talked about in elementary and middle schools as a matter of course, the silence and secrecy surrounding gays may allow another generation of young people to grow up either hating gays or hating themselves. The paper questions whether taking a direct and open approach will free the next generation of students from that burden of hate. (JDM)

Mommy, Do You Think I'm Gay? When Children Ask Questions

Eric Marcus

"Mommy, Do You Think I'm Gay? When Children Ask Questions."
Delivered by Eric Marcus
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION
SATURDAY, AUGUST 5, 2000

Thank you Esther. And thank you for inviting me to be your speaker today. When Esther first invited me several months ago, I had to give a title for my talk. But that was before I really had time to think about it, so I hope you'll forgive me for adjusting the title of my talk today, which I'm now calling: Is it crossing the line when you talk to children about gay and lesbian people.

Today marks the start of my thirteenth year talking publicly about gay and lesbian issues. I began in 1988 with an interview on a television call-in show late one night on CNN. I was on a media tour for my first book, *The Male Couple's Guide*, and I quickly learned that despite my belief that my book was pretty conservative and innocuous, not everyone felt the same way.

One of the callers threatened to chain me to his truck and drag me down the highway and another one told me that, sure, I had rights, and then added I had the right to serve as target practice in his backyard with his AK-47 assault rifle.

In the years since then, I've been on just about every major television news and talk show, more than one hundred radio interview and call-in shows, and I've spoken at scores of colleges and universities across

the country and addressed many gay and lesbian organizations as well. Generally, people have been far kinder than those two callers on CNN. But I have to admit that even with the crazies and anti-gay zealots, I've loved almost every minute of it. Almost!

Over the years, I've been asked many times if I'm ever nervous speaking on television or radio or before a live audience. But with only one recent exception, nerves have never been a problem for me. Some people would rather die than speak before an audience, especially given the subject I talk about. I couldn't be happier.

Then a few months ago, my niece, Rachel, called and asked me to come to her seventh grade civics class in Annapolis, Maryland, to talk about the gay civil rights movement. That's when I started to really sweat for the first time. It was one thing to face off with Pat Buchanan, which I did a couple of times on his radio show, but the thought of talking to a roomful of twelve year olds about gay issues left me feeling very unsure of myself.

I wasn't afraid of the kids and how they might react. I had already talked with Rachel's teacher and felt confident that the students would be respectful and that they were already pretty well-informed on the subject—which I thought was remarkable given how virtually nothing is taught in middle schools about gay and lesbian people and issues. That wasn't it.

What made me nervous was the idea of talking to children about anything gay. I'd already been working for a few months on my new question and answer book on gay issues, which is specifically for kids. So my nervousness about talking to kids—in print or in person—was already a familiar feeling. It's just that this would be the first time when I would come face to face with a group of live youngsters and I was afraid. I was afraid of being accused of recruiting, of planting dangerous thoughts in impressionable minds, of corrupting innocent youth. This was an adults-only subject and I had no business talking to children about it.

It's not that I really believe any of this. But growing up in our society, where one of the prevailing myths about gay men is that we're child molesters, I've always avoided circumstances where anyone could accuse me of doing anything that would reinforce the negative myths and stereotypes.

Despite my nervousness, I was hardly oblivious to the need young people have for information and advice.

For a number of years now I've been getting e-mails from younger and younger teenagers who have read my gay question and answer book, *Is It A Choice?* The book was originally meant for adults, but in recent years it's been read by gay and lesbian kids as young as thirteen and fourteen. They've written to me with all kinds of questions and concerns, from how to deal with a crush on a best friend and how to

figure out whether their parents will accept them to questions on religion, sex, and just about any other topic you can imagine.

Last week, I had an e-mail from a fourteen year old who I'll call "Lilly." She wrote: Dear Mr. Marcus, I am from Vietnam, where homosexuality is still a taboo subject and where myths about it abound. Even here in the U.S., among the Vietnamese community, there are a lot of misconceptions about homosexuality. A friend of my father once said: "Why are there so many gay people here? Back in Vietnam we don't have gay people. We don't even have a name for them." (I guess he never opened a dictionary, or he would find the name for homosexuality in Vietnamese.) I would like to tell my parents that I am gay, but I'm not sure it's a good idea. I have no one else to talk to about this. What do you think I should do?"

I've always been extremely cautious in answering the e-mails I get from kids like Lilly, for two reasons: I never want to put anyone in any kind of danger by accidentally exposing the secret of their sexual orientation and I never want to be accused of saying anything or offering advice that someone might deem inappropriate.

So when I got a call late last year, from a children's book editor asking me if I could write a children's version of *Is It A Choice?*, my initial thought was to say no. I told myself that I'd already written all the books about gay issues that I wanted to. I had nothing left to say. Nonetheless, I told the editor I would get back to her.

I suspect that what was really going on in my mind had everything to do with my nervousness over the idea of talking to kids about this subject. A heterosexual person should write this book, I told myself. They wouldn't be as vulnerable a target when it came to accusations of corrupting youthful minds. And I knew already from what happened to the authors of *Heather Has Two Mommies*, that I'd be the target of people who think that giving children information about homosexuality is a criminal act.

On the other hand, I'm a New Yorker and I like a good fight, and I'd had years of experience answering questions about gay and lesbian issues. I had plenty of worries about my ability to write for children, but I knew I could call on any number of experts for their advice.

So, with some reluctance and despite some lingering doubts about how smart a move this was, I said yes to the project.

It was only when I started conducting interviews with kids that I set aside my doubts and began to feel a sense of passion for what I was doing.

I started with the kid I knew best, my niece Rachel. I wanted to find out if she had any questions that she thought I should include in the book. I was also interested in finding out what she knew about gay people and what kinds of things she heard about gay people at school.

Rachel was eight when she attended the commitment ceremony my partner, Barney, and I had four years ago, so I felt confident that this was a familiar subject. We'd never talked about gay people directly, but I knew that she and her mother had. When my sister first explained to Rachel that Uncle Barney and I were going to have a ceremony a lot like her mother and father's wedding, Rachel said, "Just tell Uncle Eric that I'm glad he's finally found a nice husband." Her only question was, "Can I be the flower girl?"

So I called my sister and asked her if it was okay to talk with Rachel about the book. She gave me the go-ahead and put Rachel on the phone.

I told Rachel about the book and asked her if she had any questions that she wanted me to include. Without hesitating, she said that she had two. First she asked: Do you and Uncle Barney sleep together? She had apparently been thinking about this for some time. I told her that, yes, we do. She said, "I thought so!" She seemed very proud of herself for having guessed correctly. Then I asked her what her second question was and she said, "Do gay people try to have sex?"

I can't say that I had anticipated this question, so I had to think quickly. I figured that Rachel was asking this question because based on what she knew from her fourth grade sex education class, which focused on reproduction, she couldn't figure out how the different parts might fit together. So I asked her if this were the case. She said, "Exactly!" and asked, "So, how do gay people have sex?"

I took a deep breath and told Rachel that gay and lesbian people do pretty much what everybody else does, with some exceptions, but that if she wanted more details, she'd have to talk to her parents. I had no idea how much her parents had already told her and I didn't want to cross any lines that they didn't want crossed.

My conversation with Rachel turned out to be just the beginning of the family discussions on this topic.

A couple of days later my brother called to tell me that Ryan, his ten-year-old son, had been asking questions. It turned out that Rachel, who lives around the corner from Ryan, asked Ryan if he knew that Uncle Barney was gay. She didn't ask him about me, figuring that it was safer to ask first about Uncle Barney, who is not the blood relation. Ryan, who also attended our commitment ceremony, told Rachel that he did not know that Uncle Barney was gay. He then went home and asked his father, who told him that, yes, Uncle Barney was gay. In turn, he asked, "Well, if Uncle Barney is gay, then what does that mean about Uncle Eric?" My brother, sweating profusely, told Ryan that Uncle Eric was gay, too. Ryan then asked, "How can they be gay? I thought gay was something nasty?"

I should not have been shocked, but I was. It hadn't occurred to me that my own nephew could come to believe that gay was something nasty. I'm an expert on this subject. I've written books. I've even been on Oprah. And Barney and I have never hidden the fact that we're

a couple. Still, my own nephew had already absorbed the anti-gay bias of the world around him and now found himself in the position of reconciling his love for his uncles with the hateful things he had already learned. That made me very sad—and angry.

I asked my brother if he ever heard kids in the neighborhood use anti-gay language or heard anyone say, "That's so gay," which I've discovered is the put-down of choice among kids today. He said that just the night before, he had his neighbors and their six-year-old daughter and ten-year-old son over for dinner. At the dinner table, the ten-year-old did something the six-year-old didn't like and she said, "Don't be so gay!" I asked my brother if anyone said anything to her, and he said that none of the parents knew what to say, so they said nothing.

Following these conversations, any doubts I'd had about doing my book for kids evaporated and I haven't looked back.

What I learned from my family and from subsequent conversations with gay and lesbian kids whom I interviewed for the new book, drove home to me how wrong I had been to think that I could leave kids out of the loop. When it comes to educating people about gay and lesbian issues, it isn't enough to talk to people over the age of eighteen.

Yes, it's important to educate adults, to help parents deal with their gay children, to help gay adults come out of the closet, to fight for the laws that will guarantee gay and lesbian people equality. But so much

of the effort involves helping young people and adults unlearn the terrible things they have come to believe about others or about themselves.

By reaching all kids at an early age, we can help save them the grief that comes from hating others or hating themselves. By the time they're eighteen, so much of the damage is already done. It's too late. So we have to start talking to kids about gay people when they're young. That's a line that has to be crossed.

I'm hardly the first person to say that we need to educate kids. That was the driving thought behind New York City's ill-fated Rainbow curriculum years ago. And GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network is very actively working to incorporate gay and lesbian issues into school curricula. And while that's still an uphill battle, there are already a few courageous teachers who on their own are including the topic in their lessons when appropriate. My niece's civics teacher maintains a bulletin board in class for news clips on gay issues and doesn't shy away from discussing the subject with his students.

But until the day comes when gay and lesbian people and issues are talked about in elementary and middle schools as a matter of course—and I believe that day is still a long way off—there's a lot we can do to make a difference for the children who are in our lives.

What I'm talking about is people like us—gay and non-gay—making an effort as individuals. That means responding to questions that children have with honest, age-appropriate answers. It means reprimanding them when they say, "that's so gay" or one kid calls another a "fag."

And for gay and lesbian folks, it means letting children see us as we are. If we remain hidden, it will be easy for children to believe the negative things they hear.

Before closing, I want to give you just one example of what I mean by this. My friend Leslie, who lives in Alaska, came to visit with us a few weeks ago along with Jack, her nine-year-old son, and Jane, her ten-year-old daughter. While they were visiting, my partner and I celebrated our fourth anniversary by spending the night at a hotel on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

Leslie brought the kids by to say hello and to see the amazing view from our terrace. Just before they got to the hotel, Jack insisted on stopping to get flowers for us. Leslie said that it was his idea, that he loved romantic stories, and was excited about helping us celebrate our anniversary.

To Jack and to Jane, celebrating our anniversary was the most normal thing in the world. And we didn't give them reason to think otherwise. But there turned out to be some things that weren't so easy to explain. Jane asked if we were married, which legally, we're not, so we

told her that we were married in our hearts, but that we weren't allowed to get married like her mother and father. Jack wanted to know why, and we did our best to explain, although he had a hard time understanding why two people who loved each other couldn't get married. I have a hard time understanding that, too.

Jane asked us about our commitment ceremony, which her mother attended on her own. Jane wanted to know which one of us got to wear the dress. She knew that neither of us had, but I think she was having a little trouble sorting out the whole thing and put the question out there to see how we would react. We explained that we didn't wear dresses, but chose complementary wedding vests, instead. Jane seemed satisfied with that answer and then asked to see our rings.

My niece's classmates in Annapolis, Maryland were equally curious about my wedding band and about all things gay. After my half-hour class on the history of the gay civil rights movement, I left about fifteen minutes for questions and answers. The boys and girls were shy for about ten seconds, but after the first question was asked, just about every hand was in the air for the rest of the class.

Most of the questions were personal, like, are you married to a boy or a girl? How do you know if you're gay? And how did your parents react when you told them. But they were all good questions. In fact, these kids were the most openly curious audience I had ever experienced in all my years of public speaking.

Despite my anticipatory nervousness about addressing Rachel's class, the experience proved to be an extremely positive one. I had a blast. It only confirmed for me that I'd made the right decision about the book. And with the publication of my new book this fall, I look forward to speaking with many seventh graders across the country.

I've learned an important lesson in the past few months, one that I feel I should have learned a long time ago and one that I hope I've conveyed today. And that lesson is this: we each have a choice and a responsibility. We have to decide if we will—by our silence or our secrecy—allow this new generation to grow up hating gay people or hating themselves. Or will we free them of that burden by stepping forward and speaking up.

The future is up to us. In this instance, at least, each and every one of us can choose to make a difference. I wish us all the courage to choose wisely. Thank you very much.

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