Lesbian families take many forms. There is no typical lesbian family and there is really no way to describe all the various arrangements that lesbians have come up with over the years.

In this chapter, I will cover some of the broader topics that come up most frequently in my groups on the topic of building a family. The ones discussed are not all that you will have to consider, but they do provide you with a place to start. Be sure to read the chapters “Co-Parenting,” “Single Parenting,” and “Being a Non-biological Mother” as well. These contain exercises to do and issues to consider that are also part of the process of building a family.

With few role models to identify with and learn from, lesbians are faced with a unique challenge and exciting opportunity when it comes to building families. We can create the family style that suits our needs and those of the individual family members best. We can take on aspects of other families that we have liked and aspects of our past experiences in forming families that will work well. Without models, however, we are often groping for a family form that will work on both a long- and short-term basis, one that will provide each family member with the support, love, and nurturance needed and one that embodies all the qualities of a healthy and warm family for adults and children alike.

As lesbians we are constantly confronted with the public scrutiny of our families and the watchful eyes of those waiting to see where our families will fail, where our children will “act out” (presumably as a result of our lesbianism), and where our relationships will fall apart in our attempts to maintain an alternative family in the midst of a changing culture. Observers fail to remember that heterosexual families also fall apart, and that children in heterosexual households are often put through an equally tremendous amount of change when parents separate. Lesbians are under a good deal of pressure to build healthy families. Our
own expectations of wanting to have a close and nurturing family which provides a good place for a child to grow are often challenged by societal expectations that our families will produce sexually and emotionally unstable children at best and a myriad of unknown problems at worst.

Sometimes I feel as though I must be the perfect mother with the perfect child. If Brady misbehaves, my family instantly points to my lesbianism as the problem and the fact that he doesn't have a man around. Brady is only six. All kids misbehave — it has nothing to do with my lesbianism.

"We have a few other lesbian friends with children. We have an on-going conversation about how each of our families work. It's pretty exciting to be building a family out of our own ideas of what we think would be great, and it's scary at the same time.

Your Idea of Family

Many lesbians considering parenthood have clear ideas about the kind of family unit they hope to create; others are not as sure and need to consider all the possibilities. In the exercise below, I list a few of the wide range of possible family configurations. If I have not included one you are considering, add it to the list.

INSTRUCTIONS

Do this exercise on your own and then again if there are others with whom you are planning to parent. Notice where your reasons are similar and different. Identify points where you have differences and may have difficulties.

For each possibility listed below, identify your reasons for choosing or not choosing that particular family form. Clarify your thoughts on both sides of the question. Even if you think you would never choose a particular option, fantasize about it anyway. You never know when your family configuration may change and you may find yourself in a situation that you never expected or would not have actively chosen for yourself.

- single parent with one child (or more)
- two women who are lovers with one child (or more)
- two people who are not lovers with one child (or more)
  (this could be the biological mother and a male or female parenting partner)
- cooperative family — two or more families living in close proximity and parenting one another's children
- extended family — single lesbian or lesbian couple with one child (or more) and other identified people actively involved on a regular basis with child and family
- three or more adults who are primary parents to one child (or more)
- extended biological family

Each possibility lends itself to a number of variations. Be sure to modify each of the suggested family forms to fit your lifestyle or particular situation. For example, suppose you want to have a child but your lover does not, and you decide to go ahead and have a baby anyway. How will that affect your family form? Or, your cooperative family may consist of other lesbian families, gay families, or straight families. Your extended family might be made up of any number of people — describe who they are. If there are two or more adults parenting, you might want to specify how much time each will be committed to the child(ren).

You may end up with an elaborate combination of some of the above. For now, identify what you like and don't like about each possibility. This will give you a chance to explore all the choices and your feelings about them. If there are reasons you absolutely could not live with one or more of the possibilities, elaborate on those.

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Which family configuration appeals to you the most? Why?
2. Were there any surprises for you in your reasons for liking or disliking a particular form? What were they?
3. Which is your first choice of a family configuration? Is it the same as the one that appeals to you the most? Why is this your first choice?
4. How will you cope with the things you identified as "not liking" about your first choice?
5. Which family configuration appeals to you the least? Why?
6. Imagine how you might cope if you found yourself in your least appealing family situation.
7. If you do this exercise with others you plan to parent with, go through each possibility and compare your reasons for liking or not liking that particular choice.

Where I Come From

All of us are products of our families. No matter how critical you have felt of your own upbringing, there will be tendencies to do some of the same things, and you may be surprised at how much you truly value
and do not want to change. Here you will be asked to describe your family of origin. Be as explicit as possible. You want to uncover all the areas that will be of importance to you as you consider parenthood and think about building your own family. Be sure to discuss this exercise with anyone you plan to parent with. It is a great way to begin identifying how parenting styles develop and to understand the charge each person has about different aspects of the parenting experience.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Describe your family of origin. Include everyone who was in this family, even if they came in and out at different times during your life. You might also want to include descriptions of how decisions were made, by whom and how they were enforced, what meal times were like, what you did on weekends and vacations. What happened when there were arguments between parents and child, and between adults? How were children treated in your family?

2. What constituted discipline? How did the adults spend their free time? How did the children spend free time? Describe a typical weekend and weekday.

3. What were your parents’ attitudes about school and educational achievement?

4. How did they feel about earning, managing, and spending money? Did your family practice any religious or cultural beliefs? If so, what were they and how were they practiced in your household?

Take as much time as you need to reconstruct this picture. If you can, check with family members about memories. Be as vivid as possible.

This is an essential exercise to share with anyone with whom you intend to parent. As I have mentioned before, our past plays a significant part in shaping our present, even if we feel reasonably free from that past. As with other parents, lesbians with children often find themselves doing exactly what their parents did, even if that isn’t always how they want things to be. I remember quite vividly a day when Bridgette was about seven and I got angry at her for something. My anger came out in a tone of voice I was sure was not my own. I almost turned around to see if my mother was standing behind me. That voice was the same voice — tone, inflection, and all — that she had used with me and my sisters in similar situations. I was startled.

Not only do our voices carry memories of our past, but also the subtle ways in which we do various family activities, such as at meal-
times, weekends, and leisure time, mirror some of our childhood experiences. Time spent reviewing all of this on your own or with your parenting partner(s) will be time well spent. If you are planning to parent with others, you do not necessarily have to resolve all your differences; chances are, in fact, that you won't be able to. Instead, the goal is to be able to recognize when things might get difficult between you and begin to plan how you will manage those situations so they don't get the better of you.

"On the weekend my family stayed home; Lynora's would go to the beach, the zoo, the movies, whatever. Needless to say, we are constantly trying to figure out how to spend the weekend. Over the years we've gotten better.

"I come from an alcoholic family. Every day my mom would get so smashed she couldn't take care of us. It's important to me that I not recreate that nightmare in some other way. I'm working on it.

"Everytime we sit down to a meal together as a family I think we are going to have a fight. That's how it was when I was growing up. Sometimes I even pick a fight. Now I can tell when I'm starting to do it and I talk about it right away.

My Ideal Family — How I'd Like It to Be

Now, I want you to describe the family you hope to create. In this exercise, you are asked to describe what you see as essential for your family and what you desire your family to be like. You may not be in a situation in which you will have the time to be so deliberate in planning your ideal family, or have the luxury of choosing the family form you would like. Nevertheless, you may want to do this exercise to explore ways in which to change and possibly improve the family you are already building.

INSTRUCTIONS

Describe what you see as essential elements of your "ideal" family. In other words, what would your ideal family look like, how would you spend time, how would your friends be involved, what kind of living situation would you like, etc. Go through the list and determine which of these elements are "essential" (you absolutely have to have them), and which are "desired" (you want them, but they are not essential to have a happy or fulfilling life).
Carefully review your lists. Discuss and compare your lists with others who are considering parenthood, or with your potential parenting partner(s). You might want to discuss each item, clearly stating what you had in mind. If you find there are areas in which there might be differences between you and your partner(s), don't feel compelled to remedy or resolve anything now. For the moment, simply identify where you may need to compromise or change your desires and acknowledge that together.

This is another exercise that may take you several days to complete. You may want to talk with others as you do it, remembering what you have liked about families you have known and giving yourself time to fantasize about the ideal family form for you. Most importantly, you will want to live with your ideal family picture for a few days, adding, modifying, and honestly assessing if it truly captures the kind of family you would like, and that would work for you.

These are hopes and plans. Though they may change, they give you a path to follow. Remember that family formation is a continuous process. What you create in the first year of life with a child may be different five years later. We all have intense feelings about family. Because of this, you will want to be prepared for unexpected storms of jealousy, possessiveness, feelings of exclusion, panic, rage—a range of unpredictable behaviors and feelings. Be honest with yourself about what you want and what would work for you, as well as for your partner(s) and child(ren). Be sensitive as well to what you will feel most comfortable with, regardless of whether it seems "right" in the eyes of other people.

"I didn't think I would want a nuclear family—you know, two parents and a child, but I do. I like how it feels. Maybe I'll change and want something different later, but I want this for now.

"I knew I didn't want to be the only parent, but I wasn't sure how I could make it different since I became pregnant as a single woman. Then I met Ellie and Jean. They are also single moms. We spend a lot of time together, eat meals together and share childcare. I never imagined I could have just what I wanted.

"I wanted a large extended family for me and Mike. We are close to another family. We take trips together, spend holidays together, and have a family dinner once a week. I wanted him to know about extended families and to learn that there were other families just like ours.