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| Speak Up- KōrerotiaSame-Sex Parents20 November 2019 |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s community access radio station Plains FM, 96.9 and was made with the assistance of NZ on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” human rights radio show and podcast with Sally Carlton. Today we’re talking about same-sex parents. We’ve got three guests with us, Sara Epperson, Chris Hunter, and Nicola Surtees. I’d like you all to introduce yourselves please and tell us a little bit about yourself and why you are coming onto this radio show today. Nicola, perhaps we’ll start with you.   |
| Nicola | Kia ora koutou, thanks for having us here, Sally. It’s great to be here. My interest in same-sex parenting stemmed from coming out many, many years ago and having a diverse family of my own, parenting my niece with my partner who actually moved across two lesbian households. And that was partly the start of my interest which I then furthered with my university research work, so I’ve relatively recently completed my doctorate looking at same-sex parenting in relation to how lesbians are working with known sperm donors to have children and how they figure out who might be related and who might not be and what kinds of roles and relationships the men, usually gay men, have with the kids that they went on and conceived together.  |
| Sally | Fascinating stuff and I think we’ll probably talk quite a lot more about that as we progress. Chris, how about you? |
| Chris | Thank you for having me here, it’s a real privilege. My name is Chris, I am married to my husband Mark and I was really interested to take part in this and any other opportunity around this flavour that comes my way, based on my own experience of coming out and always wanting to have a family and all the angst that went along with that during adolescence and then finally coming to this stage of my life where I do have a son with my husband Mark, through traditional surrogacy, and thankfully we are 20 weeks pregnant with another. I always said that if we were lucky enough to be in this position that I would take up any opportunity to put the word out there and hopefully give other people a bit of hope. If this is what they want, there are ways.  |
| Sally | Is that why you wanted to get involved? Just to show people it can be done? |
| Chris | Absolutely and to talk about it, and to normalise these types of discussions.  |
| Sally | Perfect. And Sara, we’ve had you on another show in a couple of other capacities.  |
| Sara | Kia ora, yes. Well it’s nice to be in a guest seat this time around so thanks for having me. I’m here today because I fit into the category of same-sex parent. My partner Beth and I have two children, a four-year-old and a one-year-old and when I was still living in California, I volunteered on the ‘No on eight’ campaign which is the campaign to protect same-sex marriage in California, and I got to see first-hand -more than I’d expected - how much interest others took in my relationship and relationships like mine and it turned me into a bit of an activist. So an opportunity to speak on this topic was something I didn’t want to pass up. In my professional role in Community and Public Health I’ve had a tiny bit of involvement with the Allright? campaigns recent research into the queer community in Christchurch, so I thought if there was anything interesting I could share there that that would be great.  |
| Sally | And has this research touched on same-sex parenting specifically?  |
| Sara | It was a topic that research participants had the opportunity to speak on. It didn’t become an especially prominent topic but there was still some interesting things.  |
| Sally | Great thank you very much and thank you all for coming in and being part of this discussion which is I think going to be very honest. Nicola, I guess this question might be one that could kick us off: ‘Same-sex parents’ encompasses a lot of different types of couples, perhaps if we could run through the list just to get a sense of just how broad we are speaking here.  |
| Nicola | Sure. In many, many ways for lesbians and gay men to go about having children. So once upon a time the primary way that either lesbians or gay men had kids as the result of previous heterosexual relationships but that picture has really changed. I mean, I guess that there will be of course always some people who choose heterosexual relationships in which they’ve had kids and then go on to parent those kids in new lesbian or gay relationships, but perhaps because of our reasonably progressive legislation more and more lesbians and gay men are choosing to have children in the context of their same-sex relationships. So adoption is a possibility - quite problematic given there are fewer children available to adopt and most relinquishing parents prefer a straight couple - but it is still one possible pathway. Two women can use a known donor - someone they know - or an identity release donor - someone who can become known to them and their child in the future. They can both be named on a child’s birth certificate now.  |
| Sally | Both the mothers?  |
| Nicola | Yes both mothers can be and that’s been the case since 2005. Surrogacy, traditional gestation that has already been introduced and there can be challenges around that in terms of legalities, in terms of who gets to be on the birth certificate. Sometimes lesbians choose to both have a connection with the child through one woman providing the egg and the other woman, her womb, so IVF which means both have a genetic connection with the child.  |
| Sara | I was thinking about some of the sole-parent families as well, where a parent might be gay or lesbian or even some of the blended families these days where a child might have four mums.  |
| Nicola | That’s right, the families I primarily worked with for my research work were families who had four or five or six adults involved in some capacity. Sometimes as the result of separation and re-partnering - and that’s where the numbers were getting up there - but often it was a lesbian couple, for example, choosing to team up with a gay couple and have children and for those men to be known in some capacity. So there are a range of different pathways for women and men.  |
| Sally | And is it possible for gay or lesbian couples to foster in New Zealand?  |
| Chris | I think it is possible, yes. I think you still have to have to be chosen don’t you by the biological parents or current guardians as fit in their eyes in the first instance and then go through the Oranga Tamariki training and approval process for that as well. I thought about that when I wasn’t too aware of the possibility to go through surrogacy. It was certainly something that we would have pursued. It was something that I wasn’t entirely happy about if I could have a choice to be so bold - Home for Life seemed to be main way to do that - and for myself wanting to be a parent was more than just for me personally, to be a guardian of a child but to be able to raise them and make decisions with them. And I felt like maybe that Home for Life, there would be more emphasis than I would be happy about in myself for getting approval for various decision making through the child’s life from the biological parents. So that was something that always stuck with me and probably would have been prohibitive for me pursuing that.  |
| Sally | I’d like to really get into the legal issues a little bit more as we move on because I think those have got to be some of the biggest challenges. One thing, though, you mentioned, Nicola, lesbian couples being able to have a sperm donor they know or this identity release donor. But you can’t have an anonymous donor anymore?  |
| Nicola | Not through standard fertility clinic procedures. So back in the good old days, the ‘70s, lesbians sometimes chose to create a network of anonymity around donors so they did that personally. They’d have a runner, a go-between who would know who the donor was but the receiving woman wouldn’t. I think that probably happens infrequently now in this country. But fertility clinics no longer maintain a pool of anonymous donors because under the legislation, the status of Children Amendment Act back in 2004 which came into effect the year after that, only identity release donors are available through fertility clinics. Or you can shoulder tap your friend or someone you found online who is willing to be a known donor and take them along to the fertility clinic with you or do it yourself, self-inseminate at home.  |
| Sally | If you say identity release, I presume that means if the parent or the child at some point wants to, they can get in touch and the records will all be… |
| Nicola | That’s right, so there’s different levels of information available according to the age of the child and the information becomes fuller as the child gets older and the child’s guardians, legal parents, can have access to that too. Once the child is 18 they have full access, if they choose to take that up.  |
| Sally | And does that donor have any legal rights?  |
| Nicola | The donor has the right to know how many pregnancies there have been and how many children have resulted and what gender has been assigned to them at birth. That applies also for egg donors, not just for sperm donors.  |
| Sally | But they can’t decide at some point they want to be involved in a child’s life.  |
| Nicola | No it’s not a mechanism for them to look up that child, it’s subject to the child choosing that.  |
| Sally | Really interesting stuff. The legalities are multi-dimensional. Do we have a sense of how many people we’re talking at all?  |
| Chris | I think it’d be really hard to collect that information. I think there’s no real mechanism to identify these people through Census data or anything like that. I think a lot of this is really private information to a community that doesn’t want to be particularly exposed, a lot of members, I would say, in my opinion. So that information might be quite guarded or whatever data you might gather might not be representative.  |
| Nicola | There’s very much a sense, I think, that even with the Census, last Census began to collect information about people and same-sex relationships but the feeling is that that won’t be at all representative for the reasons you have identified. We represent communities that have been historically discriminated against and poorly served and so although our family legislation is more progressive now, that past hasn’t been forgotten, I guess, and so some people have some caution. So we don’t know. But we do know that I think same-sex parented families are more evident in the public eye now. We see more of these families coming through the education system, through the health systems, and I think the legislation we do have is helping people feel more confident about being out and open about their family.  |
| Sally | I’m just thinking, as you were talking as well, even if the Census were to capture any of this, it would be incredibly difficult given the complexity of what we’ve just been talking about.  |
| Nicola | That’s right.  |
| Sally | It’s not just a simple tick the box.  |
| Nicola | No it’s not. So the minute you have more than a heterosexual couple involved in conception, a whole pile of complexities come in and particularly in a context like ours where donors are either known or knowable - identity release, in other words - because people have to make decisions about who those known donors are and how to make sense of this identity release donor who can in the future become known. How do you make sense of who they are in the lives of children? How do we make sense of it? How do teachers make sense of it? How do health professionals make sense of it? It’s very complex.  |
| Sara | It invites a lot of questions that are really interesting to engage with philosophically about what is a parent or who is a parent or what is a family and the Allright? campaign that did some research into the queer community found that a really unique strength in this community is the ability to build kinship networks. So we have been able to answer questions about family and parenthood really beautifully and creatively but that’s very different than the legal answers that you get. Legally answering these questions, we’re using pretty blunt instruments a lot of the time.  |
| Sally | I think I’d also say one of the strengths of the queer community is the ability to look beyond a single label and I think that’s what Census data tends to do, they want to have you in a label.  |
| Nicola | And actually ironically, so does some of our more progressive legislation. So same-sex marriage has been heavily critiqued and I’m one of the people who have critiqued that. My partner and I have been together for 23 years and we will not marry for political reasons and likewise for two women being able to be named on a birth certificate, these are complex issues and we’re applying heterosexual relationships as the gold standard. I don’t think that’s necessarily helpful in a world that’s becoming ever increasingly complex.  |
| Chris | It’s that ongoing heteronormative influence on social policy, it’s just hard to shake.  |
| Nicola | That’s right, it’s very hard to shake, yes.  |
| Chris | Even for people in the community like myself, just being raised in that manner.  |
| Nicola | Well we’ve all been raised in it. We’re all touched by it.  |
| Chris | That’s right, yes. Interestingly on the birth certificate for our son we’re both named father on it now and I think that was a change since the first lesbian couple were able to have mother and mother based on theirs. So for me it was a great that I was just able to call Births, Deaths and Marriages and they issued out a new birth certificate.  |
| Sally | Can I ask does, it have the surrogate/name of the mother in there as well?  |
| Chris | Initially when we registered the birth we had to register his birth mother which, if I put my opinions onto it, I think that’s great because she is his mum and that’s the role she has in his life. What I did take exception to is that the law requires her partner who she was with at the time of conception, to be placed as the biological father on the birth certificate rather than the known biological father which was my husband.  |
| Sally | So it wasn’t her partner’s sperm.  |
| Chris | No not at all.  |
| Sally | That is weird.  |
| Nicola | I’ve worked with another gay couple who used gestational surrogacy - so somebody else’s egg, not the surrogate’s egg - the partner in the gay couple who donated in law was classified as a sperm donor and sperm donor’s in our current law, their legal parenthood is extinguished which meant that he had to adopt his young son even though the son was biologically his because although the surrogate had a husband and a child, the law recognised that the conception had occurred through donor insemination not through heterosexual conception with the surrogate’s husband and so that meant there was only one legal parent, which meant that there was only one possibility for when you adopt the relinquishing parent, their parenthood can be passed on to the new parent but because there wasn’t a second legal parent, there wasn’t a second parenthood to pass on. Am I making sense? So the partner of the gay man, once the adoption was finalised, all he could do to protect his interests was apply for additional guardianship - which he got, but guardianship isn’t the same as legal parenthood.  |
| Sara | Wow. |
| Chris | We were advised by all of our lawyers that at no point, please do not put my husband’s name on the birth certificate. It will make the Family Court process for adoption much more difficult and I’ve seen that in practice with some friends who did stick to their sense of moral fibre around that and they did put the biological father on the birth certificate and that went through the Family Court for a good year - which prolongs the cost of everything as well. But for us, yes that’s what we were told to do and so both my husband and I had to adopt our child and we’re both seen as full adoptive fathers of our son.  |
| Nicola | That is why the partner of the surrogate would have had to have been listed as the legal parent initially because that meant there were two legal parenthoods available to give to you and your partner. Whereas in the other case I’ve described that wasn’t so, so you can see that these things… These are both recent examples obviously, these things are still being treated differently in different parts of the country and aren’t straightforward at all. I imagine there’s a lack of clarity around what the best pathway is to manage these things are.  |
| Sara | Sometimes there is just weird things personally. So I honestly can’t remember on the birth certificate if I’m listed as ‘other mother’ or ‘other parent.’ I mean the word ‘other’ can be kind of uncomfortable anyway but whether through my own personal anxieties or internalised homophobia or whatever it is, sometimes I wonder if I’m mother enough to be ‘other mother.’ My partner carried our children and went through birth and sometimes I think that she’s more worthy of that distinction or that title than I have any claim to. It’s a complex relationship with word even for people personally at different points of time.  |
| Sally | I just want to say, Sara, that I think you are just as much a mother.  |
| Sara | I definitely say that I’m a mother and things.  |
| Sally | But also you think about… There are so many mothers who didn’t give birth to children, you don’t have to be in a lesbian relationship for that to be the case. |
| Sara | Yup. Thanks.  |
| Sally | Anyway, we’re going to have our first song now and you guys have chosen ‘I’m Coming Out’ by Diana Ross which is obviously very appropriate for this kind of topic.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY DIANA ROSS – I’M COMING OUT** |
| Sally  | This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” and we’re discussing ‘Same-sex parents’ with Chris Hunter, Nicola Surtees, and Sara Epperson. We’ve already touched on a huge range of issues and we’ve already touched on just how unbelievably massive this topic is and how complex it is, and your examples have already shown that there is no one pathway and in fact, it sounds like multiple pathways are being taken within the same legislation. What I’d really like to focus on now are the challenges that you have faced and that couples in a similar situation would be facing. Starting right at the start, with the conception. You can’t conceive like a heterosexual couple would so you have to find some other way of doing it. That might be a sperm donor, that might be an egg donor, that might be a surrogate. How did you go about kick starting that whole process? |
| Chris | I can start. For my husband and I, we both knew we wanted to have children, we were really unsure about how that would even occur. I guess I started by doing a lot of personal research which didn’t come to much fruition - Google can’t solve everything unfortunately - but I did get in contact with Fertility Associates and they put me through to their counsellor via email, and she laid out some clear information around you would need to have an egg donor and surrogate or potentially a surrogate who would be willing to be the egg donor which would negate the process with Fertility Associates itself potentially. Also she suggested a website, a forum of people in New Zealand called [New Zealand Surrogacy](http://www.nz-surrogacy.com/). That’s a forum you can join or apply to join, explaining your reasoning as to why you want to be there, and it’s a forum that provides a lot of emotional support for one another. The goal is that someone might be on there who would be willing to help you either by sperm or egg donation or through traditional or gestational surrogacy. So we were fortunate enough to join that and after a period of time we were approached by a wonderful woman who was willing to help us. So we formed this relationship over about a year and finally were in a position where we could give that a go. So for us, we were lucky and happy with traditional surrogacy as the route to have a child.  |
| Sally | Just to interrupt, so that’s her egg?  |
| Chris | Yes it is. So to get down to the grittiness of it really, we tracked ovulation and her cycle and did our own at-home job with self-insemination and we were really fortunate that that worked the first time. It was quite amazing. We were almost not quite ready for it! So that was fantastic. And from there we started our process of contacting Oranga Tamariki to get the initial assessments underway for adoption, knowing that we would both have to adopt this child and contacting lawyers to start getting that side of the legal situation understood and sorted out.  |
| Sally | Lawyers is a really good idea.  |
| Chris | Absolutely but it comes at quite a great cost.  |
| Nicola | Can’t help but just adding, of course, heterosexual men don’t have to have the lawyer and they don’t have to adopt their own child, their own biological child, which is what your partner had to do. So lawyers are important but you can see there are some issues about how gay men are treated in relation to their own biological children.  |
| Sally | As the surrogate used her own egg, does she have any rights to the child? |
| Chris | She has all rights to the child.  |
| Sally | Even now you have both adopted him?  |
| Chris | No. After 12 days after the birth she can sign an affidavit for us to take full custody of our child and go through the Family Court using that affidavit as well with any other documents to make ourselves formally the legal parents.  |
| Sally | So both of you are legal parents of your two-year-old, but she is still the mother of your unborn child.  |
| Chris | That’s correct and if at any stage after the birth, in those 12 days, that she decided she didn’t want to go through with it, then she has all legal right to keep the child. So you live with a lot of ambiguity around that and you would hope that you have built up a lot of trust and understanding before you even get to the point of creating a child together, which is what we did.  |
| Sally | That’s pretty amazing from all of your perspectives I imagine, what a strong relationship that that must be, that you go through all of that together.  |
| Chris | Absolutely, essentially you’ve got another partner in your life now, just like a marriage and that you’re dating to begin with until you come to this point and I certainly would agree with that. It’s quite a profound relationship in the moment and thereafter for the rest of our lives.  |
| Sally | And Sara? Would you mind sharing a little bit about your journey?  |
| Sara | Sure. So we needed sperm and we looked at some of the different avenues that you could take with known or unknown donors in New Zealand or trying to get sperm from overseas which started to seem quite complicated. We decided to approach some friends. We approached a gay couple that we were quite close with and - it might even be the first episode of the L Word, there’s a couple and they end up bringing home a guy from the bar and then trying to get him to not use a condom and he storms out and he’s like, “You’re lesbian sperm hunters” or something like that - I remember going into this conversation with our friend and my hands were shaking and I thought is he going to think that I’m a lesbian sperm hunter. It was completely the opposite, he said that he hadn’t been so moved since he’d been proposed to and he was so honoured. I think that’s really continued through our relationship with them and our children’s relationship with them, is this honour and privilege to have such special people in our lives. We were able to go through the artificial insemination process with our first child and then that was not successful with our second child, so IVF became a bit more of a protracted and expensive process and that’s the short of it.  |
| Sally | And did you use your partner’s egg? Did she use her egg?  |
| Sara | Yes, I remember people telling us actually, it seemed like such a nice idea. What if one of us had the other one’s egg and it manages to sound quite picturesque but it also just felt impractical and expensive for us especially as people in our early to mid-20s, thinking about having a family. Like, resource wise, it didn’t seem like a good fit. So we used my partner’s egg the first time and then the second time, once IVF was on the table, then we found ourselves in this really significant discussion about how to proceed and with which egg and what kind of process was going to suit us best and it was a big decision.  |
| Sally | And you both have been lucky in that you’ve got the same sperm donor and same surrogate two times round.  |
| Sara | Yes. |
| Chris | Yes.  |
| Sally | So that the children will be full siblings, genetically full siblings, in that respect.  |
| Chris | For our son, my husband is the biological father and for our unborn child, I’ll be the biological father.  |
| Sally | Ah OK, you used different sperms.  |
| Chris | So they will be half siblings. But whole.  |
| Sara | And we were open to using the same sperm or different sperm. We always felt when we made the approach that we were approaching a couple rather than just an individual friend, but they were happy to use the same sperm each time and that’s what we did.  |
| Nicola | For a lot of the families I work with for my research - I worked with 60 different people across about 24 families using the term families pretty loosely because they wouldn’t have all called themselves families - practical considerations often drove the terms of conception. So I hear a little bit of that coming through for you, Sara, in terms of, “Oh crikey, we’re going to have to go to IVF now” and that opens up some new options but of course it’s expensive. You talked about the expense too, Chris. So often plans for lesbians and gay men depend on actual pragmatics at the time. You might begin with an ideal scenario in your mind - that this person will donate an egg and this person will carry the baby - but circumstances can change. You might lose the donor or surrogate you had and have to start the process again. So often those romantic pictures you might start off with, kind of shift and morph over time.  |
| Chris | If we weren’t lucky enough to have a woman willing to be the egg donor and be a traditional surrogate, we would not have a child right now. We wouldn’t be able to afford that process of gestational surrogacy and going through Fertility Associates and the counselling that goes with that. All that additional cost would be out of our reach to just have a family. Which isn’t a standard that heterosexual people always have to go through. There certainly are ones that have to go through that, just like us, but not everyone.  |
| Sally | And I guess one thing to add into the discussion about costs is in New Zealand, unlike other countries, you can’t pay for a surrogate, it’s got to be done voluntarily.  |
| Chris | It has to be altruistic surrogacy and only ‘reasonable’ pregnancy related costs are to be covered. So that’s a fairly loose term and I’m unsure of how it’s regulated so there’s a bit of ambiguity there and a bit of fearfulness around that as well. What can you cover legally?  |
| Sally | We’ve spoken a lot about legislation. New Zealand, I think, is doing relatively well internationally in terms of this sort of stuff. Any comment you’ve got, though, about that?  |
| Chris | The Adoption Act must be updated. 1955 is not a good standard to go by for modern families as they are right now and case in point, the birth certificate issue for us is part of that and that’s where that stems from.  |
| Sally | So sorry - even for me I’m finding this quite hard to follow - only two people can ever be listed on a birth certificate?  |
| Chris | I think, yes.  |
| Nicola | Currently that is the case in New Zealand. Recommendations have been made including from the New Zealand Law Commission, in the past; out of some of my own research work too. There are a few jurisdictions around the world where three legal parents have now been recognised, lesbian- and gay-parented families, where the intention from the outset was that the known donor would be known as a father and parent. But I suspect in New Zealand, because we have a small population, the numbers of people who are affected by this kind of legislation - the gay men who are affected in relation to adoption and surrogacy and so on - is probably fairly small, and so, so far no government has really wanted to step up and look at this. They’re going to have to at some point, I think, because families in general are becoming more diverse, not just lesbian- and gay-parented families.  |
| Sara | Some of the challenges I’ve experienced are - because you can probably tell from my accent, I’m from America - and when I was growing up we had always been taught that the children of an American were entitled to American citizenship and when I started to explore that for my own kids, I learnt that things were a little bit more complicated legally. So one of the things that US Immigration considers is whether the child was born out of wedlock - you probably haven’t heard that word this century! But the word ‘wedlock’ is also a really complicated, loaded word for same-sex couples. Another thing that US Immigration considers is your biological relationship with the child. Now, I’m not my kids’ genetic parent but I do consider myself a biological parent - *logi*, I think, is the study of and *bio* is life, the study of life; if you studied my kids lives, I think it would be pretty evident that I’m a parent - but a lot of the forms that I have to fill out, or the boxes I have to tick, want to know about an egg or the womb. And it’s incredibly limiting and it’s also discriminatory because I have to be prepared to give very convincing answers to these questions that people in different-sex relationships don’t get asked those questions at all, regardless of their fertility pathway. They get the protection of assumption.  |
| Nicola | And even if a heterosexual couple have re-partnered, and let’s say a new man has come on the scene, he is not going to be questioned in the same way; he’ll be treated as a social father of those children in a way that doesn’t happen for same-sex parents. It is still very discriminatory on many levels.  |
| Sally | That’s certainly an issue that I hadn’t thought about, is the international legality of it.  |
| Sara | Yes there’s actually a case for the Supreme Court at the moment trying to generate a little more clarity, and maybe we’ll get that and maybe it’ll be great or maybe it’ll stay complicated.  |
| Sally | In terms of other legal issues though, New Zealand, I think, is doing relatively well?  |
| Nicola | Well again it depends what frame you look at through. If you look through a heteronormative frame then we’re doing very well. If you look at it through a liberal frame, yes we are quite progressive in New Zealand. We have progressive family relationship law that gives protection to some lesbians and gay men and not others. Arguably it upholds some lesbians as good normal citizens worthy of having children and having legal protection because they’re in a relationship that fits with the heterosexual pattern. So I think it’s great that we do have this legislation, don’t get me wrong, but I’m trying to convey that it’s actually complex and it doesn’t do everybody a service. Because if you are a lesbian or gay man who doesn’t want to marry their partner or have children in some of the ways we’ve been talking about, you’re then measured against the ‘good lesbian’ and you become the ‘bad lesbian.’ Or the ‘good gay’ and the ‘bad gay. So there’s a lot of academic writing about this stuff and about the problems of how good legislation… I’m conflicted. I wouldn’t want that legislation not to be there but it does shut out some people. I think the whole system needs overhauling and that should be done in a way that would benefit everybody, not just lesbians and gay men but also heterosexual people.  |
| Sally | Wonderful, well my final challenge I’m wondering about is social challenges. Have you had comments from people about raising children in a same-sex relationship, for example?  |
| Chris | For me, nothing overtly horrific in person. My husband and I were part of a Spark campaign where they were supporting Pride month and OUTline New Zealand, which is a phone counselling service for LGBTQI people and that got a lot of backlash in terms of its forum on Facebook. People could write comments and you get that type of people that want to write comments, you know.  |
| Sally | Never read comments, I think is the bottom line.  |
| Chris | I read every one. Sucker for punishment! But it was interesting and there was more positive support than negative but the negative was quite horrible. So there is certainly that undertone of not accepting that we should be parents or can do it right. With family though - extremely positive. Friends - extremely positive. But I don’t surround myself with people who wouldn’t bring positivity to my life so that’s unsurprising. But questions from friends and family about “How will you do this?” “How will you do that?” “What will be the role of our traditional surrogate?” and we had answers to that, we sort of had prepared ourselves for that. Those sorts of questions are fine, people want to know, they legitimately just are interested. And in short, nothing direct, just underhand things by online forums.  |
| Sara | I echo that mostly, bar the online forum thing fortunately. I did have kind of a funny or uncomfortable experience with another child at preschool when I was dropping our eldest off and this little girl comes marching up to me looking smug as. She’s like, ‘Does she have two mums?” and she said it like she’d said a bad word or she’d told a secret. I was engaged in a power play with a four-year-old! And I tried to be really calm and I told her that there are different kinds of families and in our family we have a mum and a mama and it totally took the wind out of our sails. She actually looked a little deflated. I hope I gave her a lifelong opportunity to think about family more expansively. It made me wonder, “Is this going to happen when I’m not here, what is my kid going to say?” Why did that kid say that? Is she just being a kid, or has someone said something to her? So there are those wonderings. But fortunately it has been more wonderings than direct encounters.  |
| Chris | That’s a really good point as well, with our oldest son being two-and-a-half we have yet to face further challenges about their own social circles that we can’t control, so that might bring something different our way. I hope not but I think it would be inevitable.  |
| Sally | We might have our next song, then, and then we will talk more, I think, about society and how family structures really broadly are changing more and more anyway.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY SISTER SLEDGE – WE ARE FAMILY**  |
| Sally  | That was ‘We Are Family’ by Sister Sledge which is a very appropriate song for our topic today. We’re talking about “Same-sex parents” and we’ve been talking about just how very, very complex it can be if a same-sex couple is looking to become parents. But one thing that, I guess for me hosting this radio show I’d like to get across is that society is not about nuclear family so much anymore. We don’t always see a mother married to a father with the 2.4 kids. We have blended families, we have step families, we have… I can’t even think of them, kids who are adopted, kids who are fostered. How many kids are being raised by a solo mum or a solo dad? That’s got to be a really big percentage of children these days. So I guess what I’d like to use this final segment to talk about is, if we’re looking really broadly and society is changing, how do same-sex couples, same-sex families fit into that tapestry? And the importance of normalising all kinds of family relationships.  |
| Nicola | I think the question we should be asking as a society is who are the people that are important in this kid’s life? How does this group of people understand their relationship? So that’s a lot of what my research work was unpacking, because not every lesbian couple will consider the gay couple who donates sperm to be fathers and parents. Some might - it sounded like the guys in your life, Sara, have a role to play with the children - but that role will look different for different people.  |
| Sara | We wanted a boundary there, if you will, so we don’t use the word ‘father’ and we’re clear about donor. We know that the relationship is special but one of the things that has been fortunate for us because these were friends of ours, is we knew it was going to be special but we weren’t always sure what that would look like. So we could revisit it, we could negotiate it depending on how people were feeling and what was going on in our lives. That fit that we were looking for, it’s dynamic.  |
| Nicola | Yes and I guess my point is, unless we actually stop and ask parents like Sara, “OK so who is important in your kids’ lives? Oh tell me about these guys, are they dads? Are they not dads? Who are they?” We need to ask those questions and we need to start doing that in early childhood - Sara has already talked about her child’s experiences in early childhood centres - through into school. We should be asking who matters, I think, instead of being wedded to this idea that “This is what a family must look like” and that “A family is X, Y and Z”. We should be thinking more expansively about how we might be related to others, or not.  |
| Chris | Absolutely. I think from our experience of preschool they are starting to do that which is really great and that’s been really supportive of my husband and I and Lucas knowing who is important in his life. I identify with what you’re saying, Sara, in terms of what will the relationship be with the extended family that helped us create him? For us, we made a conscious decision that we did want Lucas to know and be able to call someone a mother, that was our preference, and that was hers as well and that was part of our courting to begin with: Do we fit with one another and our aspirations for a child? For me that was really important that our son could identify who was in his life, who was important, and be able to identify with his peers as well and that perhaps was down to a fear of mine that he would be the kid with no mum. Sometimes I feel the prejudice of gay men is quite overt and I can’t say this from a lived experience of being a lesbian woman, but I feel like sometimes men are more targeted for their homosexuality and I worried for our son because of that and that probably added to that decision, that yes it’d be great if he could identify a special woman in his life as his mother.  |
| Sally | I wonder if that might come into the long, long, long tradition of the mother being the primary caregiver in many, many children’s lives.  |
| Chris | Yes certainly, for our son it will be very different but it’s a good different.  |
| Sally | So he calls her mum or mother? |
| Chris | Yes he does.  |
| Sally | Does she see him very much?  |
| Chris | Well she lives up north and we’re down here in Christchurch so we have quite planned visits logistically and usually that’s once a year or a couple of times a year. We do plan for them and like to have that ongoing contact and we use social media for that a well in terms of using WhatsApp groups and using photos and videos and encouraging a relationship with her children who are his half-siblings, also.  |
| Sally | With this idea of wanting your child to be able name someone as mother, do you think that might be because - you’ve been talking about this as well - perhaps homosexual men getting a bit more discrimination than lesbian women? Do you think it is because you are two men raising a boy? Do you think it’d be different if you were raising a girl? Do you think you’d get more comments one way or another? |
| Chris | That’s a good question. I’ve got to put out there of my own insecurities that guide a lot of my thinking around this and it’s my perceived fear of discrimination, perhaps, more than anything else. Now that you mention it, perhaps yes, maybe that’s maybe my feeling personally is that maybe even our son might be more at risk from other unaccepting parenting styles that flow to their children to a boy and whatever connotations that people want to put around that. I’ve not really had to think about that but now with the prospect of having a girl, maybe that does change things quite a bit. I really don’t want to downplay anyone else’s lived experience of homophobia either, it’s just my own.  |
| Sally | Another line of thinking - and Chris you’ve touched on it - is what schools might be able to do in terms of facilitating or normalising these sorts of relationships.  |
| Chris | Yes I guess discussion is key really and introducing all forms of life and living interwoven throughout education is probably something always to be aware of. That sexuality isn’t just something to discuss in Sex Education, and like you’ve said, Nicola, asking the questions of new enrolments perhaps and re-evaluating that at parent-teacher interviews or every year or however it may be. About who is important and what are the preferred titles for these important people and how they can best safeguard our children as well and support them to be involved as any other child would be. In preschool you’ve got Mother’s Day and Father’s Day and how do you navigate that with a child who might not have the other in their lives as well?  |
| Nicola | I do lecture in Teacher Education, just thinking about early childhood settings and school settings, and there are lots and lots of things that can be done and in some cases are being done. So many early childhood centres have stopped having Mother’s and Father’s Day because they’ve come to realise that if you are a solo mother and you have Father’s Day or if you are a kid who had a parent die… We’re not just talking about same-sex parents here, we need to be thinking much more inclusively and using more diverse language. So some of the things you’ve commented on, Chris, in terms of asking about preferred titles, asking who is important, those sorts of things but it actually needs to go beyond that too. We need to be thinking about policy and we need to be thinking about Curriculum, what’s in the policy? In the enrolment policy and other policies. What resources are being used in curriculum? There’s no excuse to only have Mother’s and Father’s Days. What not have a Special Person’s Day or a Family Day? Mix it up. Do things that reflect the reality and complexity of today’s families rather than things that reflect a very idealised image of what a family is. Teachers do now receive education around these issues, at the University of Canterbury anyway but I’m sure that’s also happening in other universities.  |
| Sally | Are there any studies that show that children of same-sex parents or heterosexual parents do any better or any worse in terms of social outcomes or educational outcomes or any other kinds of outcomes we can think of?  |
| Sara | I was going to mention this study - although I think you’ll probably be better versed in it, Nicola - I think that there was a study that showed that children of same-sex couples faired slightly better than other kids.  |
| Nicola | That’s true, there have been studies that show that and they’ve done better in terms of measures of appreciation of diversity - and we only need to think about March 15 for example, I think, for us in Aotearoa New Zealand to really know it’s time we started thinking about how we raise kids who are able to manage diversity, accept and embrace diversity. So I think that’s a bonus, these kids are being more accepting on measures around diversity. And also because parents often very much proactively preparing them, as I’m sure Sara and Chris probably think about and do, for managing potential stigma or discrimination. So often our kids are better able to stand up for themselves. Equally there are many studies that show there are no major differences either way.  |
| Sally | I know there are also studies that show, regardless of someone’s sexuality, the more adults who are actively, proactively, positively engaged in a child’s life, the better the outcomes are going to be. So surely the more parents, who are involved in a child’s life, that’s got to be a good thing too. It only takes one adult to really get behind a child for them to do well, that’s what the study shows.  |
| Nicola | It’s about the quality of parenting, the quality of the relationship with the child, so more is not necessarily better if they are poor quality relationships. But if they are quality relationships then more can certainly add positively to a child’s life.  |
| Sally | True. Have we got any final thoughts before we wrap up this very wide-ranging discussion?  |
| Sara | I was thinking about some of the conversation around men raising boys or girls or women raising boys and girls. I think that’s something we thought a lot about and we found challenging, my partner and I. We have a son and a daughter and we want them to feel free to be themselves, as you do, but the consequences of gender nonconformity can be uncomfortable and I think that’s especially true for men and boys. Think about that Madonna song, girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short but for a boy to look like a girl is degrading because you think being a girl is degrading. I think what that means for us as parents is that if our son doesn’t fulfil the impossible stereotype of boyhood or manhood, then it could seem like having lesbian parents emasculated him and that’s something that we’re sensitive to.  |
| Nicola | Understandably.  |
| Sally | There are a lot of children, though, who are raised without a male figure in their lives or a female figure in their lives.  |
| Sara | True.  |
| Chris | It’s that fear of stigma, I think. That’s what I feel from those comments and identify with as well. Likewise, if our son were to have overt ‘feminine traits’, would people tend to reflect that’s because you’ve got a gay couple who are raising him and influencing that behaviour and why would that be negative.  |
| Sally | And I guess even further in that, if your son grows up to be gay.  |
| Nicola | I’d like to say both our parents here that these fears don’t arise out of social, cultural, historical vacuum. They are real fears. We have, as communities, as lesbian and gay communities, experienced very real discrimination and now thinking about gender nonconformity in trans communities, it’s downright dangerous in some cases for those people to be out about who they are. So they’re real fears. I don’t want listeners to think that you are paranoid. Things are changing but not fast enough in my opinion. I think we should all embrace diversity, that’s my final message. The world would be very boring if we were all the same. Diversity is the new normal.  |
| Sally | What a great quote. I’d like to say kia ora, thank you all so much for coming in and this has been a really fantastic discussion.  |
| All | Thank you.  |