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Telling all of the kids: 'You belong'

by Debra Chasnoff

The school board in Evesham Township has decided to suspend temporarily the use of our film *That's a Family!* in its third-grade curriculum on different kinds of families. A special review committee will assess the appropriateness of the film over the coming months.

When I heard that news, my heart went out to all the children in the district whose parents are lesbian or gay, not to mention all of those who are adopted, being raised by guardians, or have parents who are single or divorced, or who come from mixed racial or religious backgrounds. Those are some of the kinds of family configurations of the children featured in *That's a Family!*

What kind of message is the school board and community sending to children whose family structure is perceived as "different" in some way? "You don't belong here"? "Your family is not normal"? Or - in the words of one parent who spoke out recently - your family is "disgusting"?

We made *That's a Family!* in response to requests from parents, teachers and school administrators who were convinced that having conversations in their elementary school classrooms about different kinds of families would help ensure that every student knows for sure that he or she belongs and is welcome in every school community - and to help lay the foundation for young people to respect differences of all kinds, which is crucial to reducing bullying.

We invited elementary school-age children from 50 diverse families to introduce us to their loved ones on camera. "What do you wish other kids would understand about your particular kind of family?" we asked.

"If your parents are divorced," third-grader Montana said, "it's not your fault. They just don't like each other any more. But it's not your fault."

Josh, a fourth grader, explained why he has two mothers: "Joan and Stacey are the main thing in each other's hearts, except for me and my sister. And I hope it stays that way... The only hard thing about having two moms," he added, is that "sometimes people use mean words for gays and lesbians, and that hurts my feelings."

I have seen the reactions in second- and third- and fourth-grade classrooms when Montana and Josh show up on the screen. Students with divorced parents breathe a huge sigh of relief that their family situation is finally being discussed at school. Hands shoot up from students who finally have a way to talk about the rampant antigay name-calling that goes on at their school, just as Josh describes.

That's a Family! has been viewed by hundreds of thousands of elementary school students all over the country. Hundreds of schools - like those in Evesham Township - have found that it works well in second or third grade, when students are already studying about families. Others choose to show it in fourth or fifth grade in conjunction with lessons on community and stereotypes. The most rewarding discussions happen when schools invite parents and guardians to see the film, too, and be part of the discussions in the classroom.

Some talk-show hosts and Evesham Township parents have argued that these issues should be addressed at home. Of course they should. But the reality is that teachers in elementary schools across the country report bullying and teasing based on individual and family differences - especially using homophobic slurs - as early as kindergarten.

Concrete dialogue in the classroom using accurate and age-appropriate vocabulary about differences of all kinds is a crucial strategy in turning that phenomenon around. That's why the New Jersey Department of Education encourages schools in the state to use *That's a Family!* as part of the third-grade curriculum.

In the coming months, let's hope that the Evesham Township school board and local community find the courage to help children have those conversations at school, as well as at home, so that all children in the district know for sure that their families, and those of their classmates, are safe and respected.

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