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## Family Pride

Despite political pressures, some still believe tolerance is worth teaching

BY JACQUELINE WHITE

**R**IGHT WING moralists seem to believe they're operating in a cartoon universe where rendering people invisible can be done with a magic wand. At the very least, that seems to be their strategy when it comes to removing gays and lesbians from actual kid cartoons.

In January, PBS dropped an episode of *Postcards From Buster* after Education Secretary Margaret Spellings complained that the show's animated bunny, created to teach literary skills to real-live kids, had hopped over to see a Vermont girl with two gay moms. Also in early 2005, James Dobson, founder and chairman of the conservative group Focus on the Family, scolded Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob SquarePants* for embracing the Southern Poverty Law Center's Declaration of Tolerance, which preaches respect for people whose sexual orientation is "different from my own."

*Kids listen to a Families All Matter Book Project parent volunteer*

While these alarmists work overtime to convey the impression that merely telling kids about homosexuality is radioactive, the fact remains that queer folk are here to stay. As Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker Debra Chasnoff wrote in a February op-ed piece in *The Washington Post*: "Even if we keep Buster the bunny from visiting children whose parents are gay, we can't put the rabbit back in the hat."

In fact, what those swayed by Dobson and Spellings ignore is that open-minded educators and activists were working to include sexual orientation within the range of "acceptable" diversity long before *SpongeBob* dared to hold hands with Patrick the Starfish. Chasnoff, for one, has braved the political minefield with her educational children's films, which are screened at children's museums nationwide through the Respect

GIRL: MICHAEL AUSTIN

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For All Project ([www.womedia.org](http://www.womedia.org)). *That's a Family!* treats same-sex parents as a healthy and normal part of the family tree. *Let's Get Real* looks at various forms of bullying, including what Chasnoff calls “the slur of choice”—anti-gay name-calling.

The Families All Matter Book Project ([www.amazeworks.org](http://www.amazeworks.org)) has created teaching materials used in hundreds of elementary school classrooms, including a list of some 60 storybooks that portray a range of family formations. “What we’re *promoting* is tolerance, pluralism, respect, and unity—what used to be thought of as common American values,” says Lyn Mitchell, the project’s outreach coordinator.

Appealing to those core values is what wins over critics, Mitchell observes, as does maintaining an open process, which includes a standing invitation for wary parents to review any possibly objectionable books or curriculum guides. (Unfortunately, this often means repeated assurances that gay and lesbian partners won’t be shown in bed.)

An issue that brings parents together, regardless of their political persuasion, is bullying—no matter who the target is. That students who are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender face harassment has opened the door for advocates like Chasnoff. It’s “an easier sell,” she says. “It’s universally recognized that bullying needs to be stopped.”

To combat the harsh treatment students endure from their peers in school hallways, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) developed No Name-Calling Week ([www.nonamecallingweek.org](http://www.nonamecallingweek.org)). The event, which participating schools now hold annually, has earned the respect and support of many educators, including the national associations of elementary school principals, secondary school principals, school nurses, school psychologists, and school counselors.

Even with this prestigious (not to mention practical) support, No Name-Calling Week has endured attacks from naysayers on the right, who object to gay content in the GLSEN’s curriculum guide. Josh Lamont, com-

munications director for GLSEN, isn’t surprised, pointing out that religiously based opponents are persistent and highly motivated: “They’re devoted to this work. After all, if they don’t condemn us, they’re going to hell.”

Eventually, mythical promises of fire and brimstone may be all the right wing has left. It turns out that the sort of intolerance that feeds the flames of homophobia is often as indiscriminate as it is cruel. As Lamont points out, parents of all stripes may feel more urgency about ending that gay bashing once it becomes more widely known that “most victims of anti-LGBT harassment are straight.”

Of course, enlightened self-interest notwithstanding, folks might simply stand up for diversity because it’s the right thing to do.

*Minneapolis writer Jacqueline White is also an advocate for queer youth issues.*