

# **Bubble Five**

***Making sense of stories***

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*The King asked: "But what does this mean? How can I use this? What can we make of this?"*

## Bubble Five

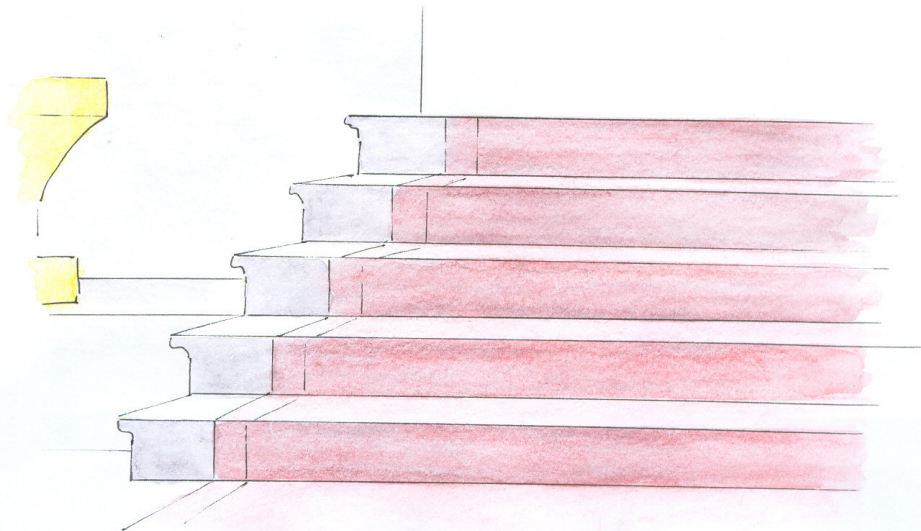
### Making sense of stories

Carien (*approaching the King*): Your Majesty: I would appreciate it if I could address this gathering now. I would like to unpack my interpretation of what the children's stories mean. (*The King nods his assent.*)

Carien: Thank you, your Majesty. (*Carien turns towards the people and begins to talk.*)

The only proper way to begin this address is by asking myself the question: "What have I learnt from these children? What do I know now that I did not know before?"

*Some of the people began to move closer to Carien so that they could hear her words. They formed a big but respectful circle around her and the King. All the others joined them and they sat down. Then she continued...*



From the experiences that these children reported to me and from what I have observed, I derive an overall sense that they are all in principle okay with growing up in a same-gendered family. I must however ask myself how much they really allowed me to see. Were they only giving me selective glimpses into their lives? Or were they telling me everything of importance (relevant to this topic) about their lives? During the process of member checking, some of the families asked me not to reveal certain aspects of their stories. They were therefore dictating to some extent (consistent with my research design) what I could present and influencing the way in which I co-constructed the truth with them.

In spite of my unanswerable question about selective self-revelation (asked in the paragraph above), I intuit that they are all fundamentally okay with their family structure. On the other hand, I must also ask: Would it have ever been possible for any of them to say that they were *not* okay? (One has to bear in mind that they are all in the position of parent-dependent minors.) What would the consequences of saying that they were not okay have been? A same-gendered family is all that most of them know, and it is the *de facto* family constellation in which they all now live. I also note that for most of them the quality of the relationships that they now experience is far better than they were before they settled into same-gendered families.

This present okayness with their same-gendered family structure does not mean that they will not in the future encounter people who hold conservative (negative) views about homosexuality, or that they will never be confronted by friends or peers who are pruriently curious or merely uncomfortable about their same-gender parents. Having openly same-gender parents is something new in this society, and people need time to adapt to the idea. As I observed their okayness with their same-gender parents, and having heard their stories about how they had to cope with prejudice and teasing, I realised that I would need to reflect on my own stance as to how I view same-gendered families in this research project. If I position myself in

terms of Victoria Clarke's analytical framework,<sup>1</sup> which uses four dimensions of difference to analyse perspectives of lesbian parenting and families, I find that I place myself mainly in the "difference only because of oppression" category. This position forms part of the "sameness" discourse that maintains that sexuality is but one small part of any person's personality and that gayness is therefore equivalent to straightness for all practical purposes. This position obviously encourages the acceptance of same-gender parents because they form part of the richness of humanity in all its variety. In spite of this, same-gender parents and thus also their families are often constructed as *different* because of prejudice and homophobia. An acknowledgement of the power and structural differences that still exist in society, even though they are changing, therefore placed this viewpoint of mine in the "difference only because of oppression" category (Clarke, 2002b:211-216).

When I scrutinised Clarke's "different and transformative" category more carefully, I realised that I also share some of those viewpoints. Thus, I honour and do not apologise for same-gendered families, and I do believe that same-gender parents can make an exceptional and unique contribution to the nurturing of a new generation of young people – but that holding such a view does not preclude me from having equally positive views about heterosexual parents. I acknowledge that some lesbian/gay couples choose to be different, and that positioning oneself on the margins of society confers its own benefits (Clarke, 2002b:215). Even so, when I am being true to myself and when I listen to my inner voice, I believe that we can transform difference to *diversity*; otherness to *uniqueness*, and sameness to *interconnectedness*.

As I worked through the children's stories and immersed myself once again in their reported experiences, I realised that there exists a tension between the "nothingness" of growing up in a same-gendered family, and the need that the children have

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<sup>1</sup> See Bubble Two for discussion of her framework. The four dimensions for analysing same-gender families according to her are (1) no difference, (2) different and transformative, (3) different only because of oppression,

to negotiate their position vis-à-vis the heteronormative discourse that still prevails in our society and cultures. It is obvious from their stories that the heteronormative discourse becomes visible through the thoughts and actions of their peers, close friends, other parents and teachers, and through the all-pervasiveness of mainstream (as opposed to countercultural or alternative) media. It is a challenge for children growing up in same-gendered families to legitimate their personal stories in such a way that they reach some kind of accommodation with the structural and social stories that function in society (Jenness & Richman, 2002; Kenyon & Randall, 1997).

But let me take a closer look at the narratives of the children and unpack the above statements. Let's call this section:



**Ribbon One**



**"Being okay with having two moms"**

In examining the okayness of children growing up in a same-gendered family, I cannot separate it from the interactions they have with others. In the way in which they talk to their friends, their class mates or to other significant people, their okayness is displayed. Being okay becomes visible in how they share the phenomenon of having two mothers, linking being okay with disclosure or "coming out". I view disclosure as the process of revealing intimate personal information to others and the social perceptions inherent in that act (Rotenberg, 1995:1).

Why is it necessary for me to scrutinise disclosure? Because even though someone's sexual orientation is but one small part of that person's life, societal processes has

marginalized people that prefer partners of the same gender. As I have already noted in Bubble Two, heterosexuality is assumed to be the accepted, largely unquestioned and “natural” sexual orientation of people in our Westernised culture, while homosexuality has been constructed through two millennia of normative religious, sexual and medical discourse as “unnatural”, deviant, and worse. Because of the power and persuasiveness of these discourses that have been embedded in society, and the consequent labelling of homosexual behaviour and relationships as “unnatural” and sinful, most people who possess a gay sexual orientation have been silenced and marginalized by fear of the judicial and social punishments for their gay sexual orientation.

Since the middle 1960s and 1970s, this silence has been increasingly challenged, and the liberation of gay and lesbian people has become increasingly familiar through “coming out” stories (Adam, 2002; Creith, 1996; Gevisser, 1994; Plummer, 1995; Sedgwick, 1990). But because heteronormativity has been so effectively embedded in Western societies and mass consciousness, there still exists a prevailing conviction among the masses that an ideal *family* should be heterosexual. This means that the children of same-gendered parents often run the risk of being “closeted” about their same-gender parents and effectively silenced because of the stigmatisation of their same-gender parents and the general prejudice against gay sexual orientation among most conservative people. Consequently, the children of same-gender parents feel a strong pressure not to be open and relaxed about the exact nature of their same-gender parental set-up. They therefore also feel a very real pressure to decide whether to “come out” about their families or to remain “closeted” about their same-gender parents. Paechter (2000:398) states that “coming out” (in this context) describes the process of moving from “silence or deception about the sexual orientation of one’s parents to being open and even declarative about it”.

I now have to ask myself whether being okay (okayness) is a state that is achieved or whether it is a process. I lean more towards the belief that it is a *process*, thereby agreeing with Shallenberger (1996:325) who says that “coming out is an iterative and drawn-out process, repeated with each new person”. Bozett (1987:20) also reminds us that coming out is a process that has to be repeatedly engaged in. Eve Sedgwick (1990:67,68) notes that:

*even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them..., and it is equally difficult for any interlocutor to guess whether the knowledge would seem important.*

Even though the statements of these three authors relate to the coming out process of gay individuals themselves (as I noted in Bubble One), the “coming out” process that children undergo with reference to disclosing that they have same-gender parents shares many similarities with the experience of how individuals “come out” (or are “outed” by others – often as a political measure taken by gay activists against virulent homophobes) in society. O’Connell (1999:261) also states that the children of lesbian mothers are, like their mothers, equally vulnerable to the pressures of the cultures in which they live and, because of this, often become caught up in a maze of similar negotiations with family and friends.

As I therefore contemplate the okayness of these children, it seems unlikely that I will find full openness and disclosure at all times, even though that would certainly be the ideal. What one is probably more likely to find is that there will be degrees of comfort of being okay with having same-gender parents – degrees that permit many permutations, complexities, nuances and contradictions. I shall now examine my data and extract from it what my research partners revealed to me during the researcher process.



For **Tom**, having two mothers is “nothing” (*line 80,S2<sup>2</sup>*) “and everything is all right” (*line 83,S2; narrative p.9<sup>3</sup>*). This gives a clear indication of his okayness. In addition, all his friends and class mates know about his same-gendered family because he disclosed the fact publicly in a class in the year previous to my meeting him. His statement that “half of my friends who come here think it’s...You know...That it’s suppose to be like that” (*line 22,S2; narrative p.2*), and that they think “it’s fine, it’s normal, it’s nothing” (*line 15,S2; narrative p.1*) may also be indicative of his peer group acceptance. The consequences of this public disclosure for Tom are that he experiences acceptance from his peers and that he himself can function in a relaxed and carefree way. For example, he invites friends over without ever thinking or worrying about what they may say or think. Tom’s okayness is wrapped up in the acceptance of his friends. In his conversations with me, he mentioned that one of his friends “knows that it is no big deal” (*narrative p.9*) and that “my friends from school – they are all totally in love with this new arrangement” (*line 27,S2; narrative p.3*). This indicates the level of spontaneity that exists between Tom and his friends. Tom clearly experiences the “no-thing-ness”, and thus the okayness of having parents of the same-gender.

According to Tom, his own acceptance happened almost immediately. “When I realised for the first time that my mom was like that, I didn’t mind” (*lines 263-264,S1; narrative p.17*). Perhaps this readiness to accept the situation as it is contributes to the fact that he has no qualms about sharing this information with his friends. What makes Tom’s story even more remarkable is that his process of reaching okayness was supported by other children he met in similar situations. This suggests that children growing up in same-gendered families are speaking out more and more.

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the original transcript that can be found on the CD-ROM (Addendum F), Tom’s session 2, line 80.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the original transcript that can be found on the CD-ROM (Addendum F), Tom’s session 2, line 83, as well as to the narratives included in Addendum E, also on the CD-ROM. This then refers to the narrative of Tom, page 10, which will also include citing the line number and session as part of footnotes in this narrative.

*Okay, one or two of my friends' dads are also, like, gay as well, and they would tell me about that... They just said that they prefer that to how it used to be before, and they love it... It's, like, their parents are gay, and they were trying to tell me how much easier life is for them because I was thinking that it would all be so much harder. I mean, they are really much happier now than they ever were before. They told me that having gay parents actually puts you in a better position. I could hear what they were saying but somehow it didn't make sense to me at that time. It was like 'you're trying to build your puzzle, you're trying to flip over the pieces and trying to put together your puzzle'. I couldn't quite get it. But now I do. (lines 237-249,S2; narrative p.21)*

These words indicate that Tom did go through a period during which he was confused and even though his friends highlighted positive qualities of living in a same-gendered family, thus projecting approval and acceptance of his situation, it took some time to work out where he stood in relation to his mother's "new" orientation. Findings from Patterson (1992:50) and Wright (2001:285) suggest that having contact with peers in similar situations is frequently supportive. Vanfraussen et al. (2002:249) mention that the children in their study felt that children in other same-gendered families would better understand their situation. Ray and Gregory (2001:30) reported similar findings. They reported that the children of same-gendered families felt more comfortable talking to other children with same-gender parents because they knew that they would not be rejected. For Tom, having friends who were growing up in households that were also run by same-gender parents assisted his understanding as he went through the process of coming to terms with what was happening to his mother. These friends played an active part in guiding him on his journey towards acceptance.

Through Tom's explanation of how his friends came to know, I sense his easiness and openness. Tom experiences that his friends are okay with his mothers as he says "they just seem to know". He is also of the opinion that his friends ask him just to confirm what they already know.

*I don't know, to be honest. I think that I told about half of them. The others, they just seemed to know. Some, like, just ask me. When they hear about the set-up, they're fine. They're cool with it. It's fine. It's normal. It's nothing. (lines 13-15,S2; narrative p.1)*

*I try to sum it up by saying, "So, if you do have to tell someone, it's just a once-off event. They confirm. They make sure, and then they..."*

*"Move on," Tom interjects, completing my sentence. (lines 38-39,S2; narrative p.5)*

It seems as though Tom and his friends do not feel that coming from a same-gendered family is a big issue at all. His friends may (and do) ask if they are unsure, and Tom discloses the truth to any friend who comes to visit his home for the first time and who notices the same-gender parents. After that, they "move on". They discuss it quickly, and then it becomes "old news" that is basically uninteresting, unsensational and free from any covert negative emotional charge. That is why Tom can probably say: "Well, it's not a problem if they need to ask. I really don't mind. It's normal" (line 43,S2; narrative p.5.) This indicates to me that Tom knows that some questions or comments from his friends are a necessary part of their process of adapting to his family structure.

*But of course, they don't have a problem, and they never react negatively. If I do happen to tell someone who hasn't been here before, he will just say something like 'Ja, I see. It's okay' – or something like that. But it's a matter of no real interest to them. We don't sit around and talk about it. It's just like something that happened a long time ago. (lines 32-37,S2; narrative p.5)*

In Tom's elaboration on how he discloses to someone new or who comes to visit for the first time, I sense that being okay also highlights the contrast when others are not okay. This shows the different nuances of being okay/ not okay, for example when new friends are uneasy or unfamiliar with being in a same-gender household. This also seems to be the condition for Tom when he would intervene and disclose. Tom displays an awareness and ability to anticipate any apprehension, anxiety or uneasiness in others.

*I would only mention it if someone were unfamiliar with the set-up in my house. When I invite my friends to my house, I want them to feel comfortable. So then, if they don't know about my two mothers, I tell them. It doesn't help if I keep secrets from them and then they have to wonder what is going on. But then they understand. I put them in the picture. My friends and I are all very straightforward with each other. It's our big thing... . (lines 45-48,S2; narrative p.6 )*

*"No. I would tell them if I see that they are uncomfortable. Sometimes, a new friend arrives. They see my two moms. I don't know what they are thinking, but it feels*

*funny. It is as though they suspect something. They're like, 'I'm not suppose to be here, it's not the right place to be'." He smiles, but continues. "When they look a bit suspicious, I just tell them quietly what the set-up is."*

*"So you might see that they are feeling awkward?"*

*"Yes. And then I just explain what is going on. As soon I detect that they are feeling uncomfortable and not acting normal, then I tell them. I ask them what is wrong and when they withdraw a little, I ask them gently if they have a problem, if it's OK for them, and if I can explain how it works. Basically, I want them to feel okay. So if they feel unable to explain how we live to their parents, I tell them that my mom could contact their parents and tell them about our household – if that's what they would prefer." (lines 52-57,S2 & lines 319-322,S2; narrative p.6,7)*

I would unpack this example in the following way. Tom displays a sensitivity in observing his friends and picking up on their non-verbal language, especially their facial expressions and general demeanour. He shows foresight and sensitivity in anticipating what they might be thinking. This enables him to take appropriate action that will help, guide and support his friends (and indirectly his same-gender parents). The way in which he discloses, and the times at which he chooses to disclose, show that even though he shares easily and without shame or fear, he does not share the fact that his mother is gay spontaneously or without a good reason. His disclosures are therefore actions that are preceded by careful consideration of the circumstances. When Tom discloses that he has same-gender parents to his friends, his purpose in doing so is to make his friends feel comfortable by resolving their uncertainty. When he observes indications of uncertainty, or discomfort, he takes these as cues to intervene and disclose. But he does not blurt out his disclosure in one set-piece speech. He gently questions his friend and waits for their response(s). He then deals in a kindly way with the reactions that follow and he also offers them support – even to the extent of being willing to obtain the cooperation of his mother(s) in presenting this knowledge to the outside world, represented in this case by his friends' parents. Disclosure in such cases serves to ease levels of discomfort and to enhance mutual understanding, honesty and openness. Tom is proud of the openness that exists among himself and his friends and he emphasises this by saying that they keep no "secrets" from each other. Disclosure in such circumstances serves Tom's interests because it safeguards and

maintains his friendships. Tom has realised that his friends might be averse to visiting him at home were they to feel uncomfortable in his domestic situation, and so his openness and having no “secrets” serves to secure his personal friendships.

Tom displays a certain degree of confidence (and perhaps even youthful naïveté) by believing that his friends’ parents will be as accepting and relaxed as their children are about a same-gendered family. His openness is really a kind of gamble with necessity, and, in his case, it is one that has paid off.

*“But what about your other friends’ parents? Do you know how they react or feel?”  
“Oh, I don’t know. I suppose that they don’t even talk about it or know anything about it. My friends wouldn’t tell them because it’s certainly not important to them. They know everything is all right... We know everything about each other.” (lines 75-85,S2; narrative p.9)*

His explanation of how he tells his friends in a straightforward and direct manner, and how he invites them to make comments, indicates his confidence in his strategy:

*I just say that my mom lives with another woman – and if they have a problem with that, then they must just tell me. My mothers won’t do anything, like anything funny, they are just normal people. (lines 32-34,S2; narrative p.5).*

However, this last remark (“my mothers won’t do anything funny”) may reflect the stereotyped thinking of numerous people when they project their fantasy that gay people always harm or molest children, that they are perverse, and that they are not safe to be around (Clunis & Green, 2000:61). I wonder whether this remark indicates Tom’s own perceptions, or whether he has been asked questions like this in the past. It might simply be the case that Tom was merely trying to establish that his parental home is a safe place to be in, a place that – contrary to ignorant fantasies and projections – is both safe and secure. He might also be trying to assure his friends that the atmosphere in his home *now* is different from what it was when his own father (now divorced from his mother) was still living with them.

Another aspect that assists him to share easily and to invite friends home is that

*it's no problem because my mom told me that she would behave normally – and she does. (line 312,S2; narrative p.3).*

This is the second time that Tom mentions that his mothers will behave “normally”, and perhaps it represents his attempt to legitimise his current same-gender parents “normality” and therefore align them more nearly with the standards of a society in which parents never harm or molest children, are never perverse, and are always safe to be around. The patent untruth of this statement shows how sordid (even gothic) are the projections of people who entertain irrational prejudices against gay people in general, and gay parents in particular. I do not think that Tom makes this attempt consciously. But on a subconscious level at least he may be aware of how immersed significant sectors of our society are in simplistic binary thinking and how most of us passively consent to the labels with which gay people are dismissed and diminished (Greene, 2000:8). This fragment also serves to warn us of the extent to which the dichotomous prejudices of historical Western culture are burnt into our minds at the deepest levels and how even children use binary modes of thought to structure their experience while remaining unaware that “sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren’t well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all” (Sedgwick, 1990:35).

Tom’s answer on my probe as to what “behave normally” means, may indicate an attempt from Tom’s side to establish what Bozett (1987:34) has called “boundary control”. This could mean that Tom has asked his parents not to express their gayness either verbally or behaviourally in front of his friends – however harmless, innocent and even delightful such behaviour (such as holding hands) might be in itself. Or perhaps his mother assured him that she and her partner would behave “like friends” in front of *his* friends because they appreciated Tom’s need for restraint and discretion so that he would find it easier to maintain *his* social balance in an uncertain situation.

*“What does ‘behave normally’ mean to you, Tom?”  
He smiles. “It’s, like, they’re friends.” (lines 313-314,S2; narrative p.4)*

Tom is aware of the visible indicators of being gay, such as, for example, holding hands. He personally has no problem with his parents holding hands and this serves to emphasise his own sense of being okay in both their public and private spheres. This phrase therefore does not support my previous conclusion that he might have asked his parents not to express their gayness. He does however realise that any visible or auditory evidence of his mothers' sexual orientation (however mild) might cause feelings of uneasiness in friends to whom he has not yet disclosed, and he therefore feels the need to disclose to them in order to maintain the equilibrium of his inner group of friends. He knows that his disclosure will serve to protect them against any "weird" (i.e. awkward) feelings. But Tom's disclosure also serves the purpose of maintaining coherence, loyalty and group solidarity among his most valued friends who all pride themselves in "having no secrets". Tom's disclosure therefore also serves to emphasise his loyalty to this group's ethic. In exchange for this, they feel "comfortable" and continue to associate with Tom and stay over at his house for "sleepovers".

*"What do you think makes them feel awkward?" I ask.*

*"Well, it's an unusual situation. Let's say they are staying over here," Tom continues. "They might be staying here with me. And during the weekend, they might go round a corner and see my moms, like, holding hands. And then, because they're not used to it, they might think, 'Wow! That's weird! Two women holding hands...'*

*"...Okay. So have you asked your moms not to hold hands?"*

*"No!" Tom seems astounded that I should even ask such a question. But he explains nevertheless... "After I explain to them what the family structure is, we all just carry on living our lives and enjoying ourselves like we always do. We relax, and go on playing – just like other kids do. We're not any different from other kids. We go into each others cupboards and stuff like that." (lines 319-328 & 56-58,S2; narrative p.7-8)*

The apparent discontinuity between "behaving normally like friends" and Tom's acceptance of his mothers' holding hands might make sense because even though his mothers have agreed to behave "like friends" in front of his friends, the friends might wander through the house and "go round a corner". If people are staying over in their house, there is really no way in which his parents can make allowance for this kind of unexpected event and make concessions to Tom without being

thoroughly untrue to themselves in their own house. Tom deals with this possibility and respects the limits of his parents' willing concealment by being proactive in disclosing to his friends. The converse of this seemingly ingenious solution is that what Tom understands as "normal" might be somewhat different from what his friends might regard as normal. Although children in general are not usually comfortable with public displays of affection on the part of their parents in our culture, some kinds of public display are more acceptable to them than other forms. Thus while children might feel comfortable with their parents discreetly holding hands in public, they would probably feel uncomfortable were their parents to engage in a prolonged and very intimate public kiss. It might just be that Tom associates holding hands with friendship, and that he feels comfortable with his two mothers' holding hands as a couple because holding hands (in our culture at least) is not necessarily a sexual or pre-sexual act. It could just as easily be construed as a friendly act between two people who are merely friends. I will not pursue the interesting point here that while *women* holding hands in our Westernised society may be construed merely as a sign of friendship, it is less likely that two *men* holding hands would be so easily dismissed or rationalised (unless it were to take place in some structured group such as a political protest or a prayer meeting where the holding of hands by men could be construed as non-erotic or even non-affectionate).

Making sense of **Luanne's** story unfolds for me into a story of a child who has grown up with two mothers and who has had a circle of friends who are so accustomed to her same-gender parents arrangement that "they don't actually talk about" her parents anymore because it does not "bother them". She has lived in "total" disclosure with her friends she had since they were in nursery school together and has never been under pressure to answer "awkward" questions or deal with hostile or critical comments.

*"Do the kids around here sometimes talk about your two moms? Or perhaps ask you any searching questions?"*

*"No, never," Luanne replies brightly.*



*I find Luanne's response slightly incredible, and so I say, "Really? Nothing at all? Not even any spontaneous comments?"*

*Luanne seems slightly bemused. "Hmm. Sometimes they might say, 'Where are your two moms?' or something like that. But, no. They don't actually talk about my two moms." (lines 94-103,S1; narrative p.2).*

*My friends are used to the set-up. (line 31,S5; narrative p.5).*

*"Please tell me something about your nursery school or primary school days. Did the children ever say anything unkind to you about your mothers? Were they perhaps curious? Did they ask you questions of any kind?"*

*Luanne answers firmly. "No, the children just carried on as usual. It wouldn't have bothered me if they had."*

*"But do you think that it might bother them?"*

*"Who? My friends? No, one of my friend's mom is also gay. But her partner died recently, and they had anyway been separated for a long time. Now, she and her mom live alone together. So, you see, I'm not the only one." (lines 164-177,S3; narrative p.4,5).*

The consequence of all this for Luanne is that she has never had to disclose or "come out" about her same-gender parents to others. There was never any need for her to do so, and since she has stayed with her close circle of friends, there is no need today. Patterson (1992:50) explains the dynamics of this situation. She asserts that the *younger* children are when a same-gendered family is formed, the easier it is for them to reach acceptance and to view their family as just another one of many possible diverse family constellations. Tasker and Golombok (1997:90) also support this by saying that children in same-gendered families may be less likely to experience teasing if they have close friends and these friends are accepting of the family.

As with Tom, Luanne finds solace in knowing that there are other same-gendered families. As stated before, the research of Ray and Gregory (2001:30) revealed that children from same-gendered families valued knowing other children with gay or lesbian parents and enjoyed being with other children who lived in similar family arrangements. Luanne's intimate circle of friends comprises seven members. Another one of these seven girls is growing up in a same-gendered family as well. This led me to wonder about the views and perceptions of the other five friends in

this group. Did having two friends from same-gendered families help them to come to understand that same-gendered families are nothing extraordinary or reprehensible? Or could one ascribe this relaxed acceptance to a process of parental coaching of their perceptions – or perhaps to their own personality styles? Providing an answer is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis, but may be explored in follow-up studies.

As far as Luanne can recall, she has never encountered any teasing specifically aimed at her. Only once a friend was not allowed to come to their house for a while (lines 18-19:1, Reflection notes Jan - March 2004), but apart from that, everyone around her has accepted it. The openness of her parents, in being upfront with the various schools might have enabled her to escape incidents of teasing.

*I recall her parents saying that they had approached the principal of the primary school and had asked him whether their sexual orientation as co-parents would be a problem for the school, and he had firmly said "No."*

*..."Hannah sometimes goes to school functions," says Luanne, "and on parents' evening, they go together as my two moms." (lines 23-34,S6; narrative p.6)*

Since the atmosphere of okayness and openness in which Luanne lives is supported by a close circle of friends, my question would be: "How will she react when she is confronted with a question, or a remark, by some or other curious or hostile person?" An incident that happened with a little girl who lives close to their home, reveals some aspects of a possible answer:

*"She went and said to her mother that she also wants two mothers like me, and she asked Hannah, 'Are you Luanne's second mom? Or her other mom?' But Hannah said, 'No, I am Luanne's aunt'. But the little girl refused to believe her, and she insisted, 'No! You are Luanne's other mommy' until Hannah eventually had to say, 'Okay, okay, I am her other mom.' Then this little kid said, 'Oh, that's so cool!'" (lines 4-13,S7; narrative p.16)*

The reaction of her mother (Hannah) suggests that it was difficult for her to perceive what the "best" way might be to answer questions like this, especially coming from a little girl. Luanne provides an answer:

*When we meet someone that we don't know and whose attitudes are unknown to us, we just say that Hannah is my aunt, so no one actually knows. (lines 18-26,S5; narrative p.13)*

She also explains it in terms of new people she might meet at school:

*I am not going to say that my mother has a girlfriend. I just keep quiet... I would just tell them that she is my aunt because I never know whether they will reject me or not because of that, or perhaps become judgemental or unpleasant. It is not necessary for everyone to know these details. But if they ask me directly, I will tell them. (lines 20-21, 65,S6 & footnote 18, narrative p.14)*

Luanne has therefore somehow acquired a practical and thoughtful awareness of how and why people may judge and reject *her* because of her same-gender parents. Because of this, she constructs her co-mother as her “aunt” when she meets new people. This phenomenon is quite frequently referred to in the literature (although most researchers refer back to Bozett’s strategies of disclosure that were conceived in 1980). What happens is that either the children or the parents themselves will refer to the social mother as an “aunt” or a “friend” in order to discourage other people from asking probing or potentially controversial questions (Bozett, 1980; Johnson & O’Connor, 2001; Paechter, 2001; Pennington, 1987; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Vanfraussen et al., 2002). I call this strategy “masked disclosure”. Masked disclosure means that children change significant details during disclosure either in order to protect themselves or their mothers against possible prejudice, or to protect and shield the other person who might feel uncomfortable about the concept and reality of same-gender parents.

Luanne’s revelation that “no one actually knows” is an ironic explanation for her sense of *apparently* total okayness. I say “apparently” because a few other statements that Luanne made (see below) puzzle me, and I would like to examine them even though I do not want to burden a few remarks of hers with too heavy a load of interpretation. What they suggest however is that she *does* in fact encounter situations that are in strong contrast to the freedom and openness that she enjoys in her intimate and private circles. The fact that she also keeps quiet and expects *other* people to confront or question her seems to me an indication that she is taking

practical steps to protect herself. She rationalises her behaviour in this regard in the following manner:

*We just don't want to advertise that my parents are gay. We all just want to get on with our everyday lives, and we hardly ever bring up questions like this when we are alone... Not everyone is open and okay with this kind of situation. (footnote 22, narrative p.17)*

The silence that Luanne prefers to exercise outside the safety of her intimate circles and the fact that she does not deliberately disclose except if someone asks her directly, and the fact that they construct her co-mom as an "aunt", signifies that she is protecting herself, her mothers, and even the other people who are involved with her and their domestic situation. But why should she feel this need to protect? Her observation that "not everyone is open and okay" reveals that she is quite aware of prejudice and discrimination and has therefore resolved to protect herself and those she cares for against the possibility of being ridiculed or worse. Another explanation might be that because different people have different moral standards, discretion acts an effective strategy to protect effective relationships and promote peace and harmony in her situation. In spite of these strategies, Luanne does not necessarily deny who or what her parents are. On the contrary, her effective use of what is a sensible strategy in a largely hostile or indifferent world means that she possesses an intelligent and well-informed understanding of her parents' sexual orientation and of how this might be disturbing to people in the "outside" world.

What is even more revealing and in stronger contrast to her apparent sense of being okay is a fundamental concern that troubles her:

*But it is actually wrong to be gay. The Bible says so. (lines 178-180,S3; narrative p.7)*

Her statement highlights the "link between religion and sexuality" (Evans, 2002:108) that has defined homosexuality since this term was invented in the late 1800s. Bozett (1987:48) observes that homonegative reactions like these indicate the diverse range of reactions a child may have to homosexuality and to having a gay mother

(or father). While this reflects the attitudes and feelings of various sectors of society towards homosexuality in general, it also reveals to us something of Luanne's inner struggle, and suggests the possibility of being okay on different levels. I have no doubt that she feels okay in the safety of her intimate friends, but feeling and experiencing the hostility expressed by others in situations in the world outside her inner circles, especially when confronted by homophobic discourses in society at large (such as the fundamentalist interpretation of homosexuality as a sin), causes her to feel less okay even though she may have reached a successful accommodation with society and people in general.

Despite this, Luanne lives her daily life without being confronted by people who view her same-gendered family negatively. Because her intimate and private circle of friends have come to know and love her family, she is able to live and work without having to think about her family structure except on rare occasions. But when these occasions arise, she has a successful way of dealing with negativity. This implies a certain vigilance on her part, even though it may not be apparent in her manner or her lifestyle. Luanne says:

*Everyone that knows us, knows. (footnote 22, narrative p.17)*

**Kashni** and her brother, Erid are growing up with parents who are both open and out. The manner in which they introduced me at our first meeting showed me how their parents' sexuality is a natural and accepted part of their lives. Thus, for example, the use of the word "lesbian" is a natural part of any given conversation. Anriëtte, one of the mothers, introduced me to the children and said: "Carien is here to look at gay families, gay parents with children, and mothers who are lesbians" (lines 15-17, Kashni Erid Parents S1; narrative p.1). Other studies have shown how a positive sense of well-being and an unqualified acceptance of the parents' own sexual orientation as a gay or lesbian person is an essential precondition for supporting one's children and for teaching them how to deal effectively with the outside world (Dunne, 2000; Patterson, 1992; Patterson, 1997). This openness displayed by her parents forms the backdrop against which I will

look at Kashni's story. Johnson and O'Connor (2001:177) comment that the level of a parent's *comfort* with their family configuration helps all concerned to be "out" as a family. They have found that if lesbian mothers are open and unconcerned about their same-gendered family, people respond to them in a mostly positive way.

Kashni does not express her own sense of being okay directly, but filters it through her observations of her peers and her friend's reactions.

*I can feel it sometimes when I talk about my parents. Or, if I invite them to my house and then sense that my invitation has made them feel uncomfortable. Or sometimes I invite them and I can see that they would prefer not to come... . (lines 74-76,S1; narrative p.6 )*

Since she spontaneously talks about her parents' sexual orientation in the company of her friends, I may be justified in assuming that she is okay with having same-gendered parents. She does not hide information from her friends or feel the need to change significant details about her situation. At the same time, Kashni's sense of being okay with her situation and her same-gender parents' sexuality is qualified by her apprehension of other people's reactions. She is aware of the feelings and reactions of others and possesses a finely developed sense (as does Tom) of whether or not other people may be feeling uneasy or uncomfortable. An analysis of her ability to sense the perceptions of others of her family situation reveals the complexity of the disclosure process and how difficult it sometimes is to decide who to tell and when to raise the topic in conversation. Sometimes she gets a "feeling" (intuition). At other times, she "reads" other people's non-verbal cues. Sometimes she directly notices their uneasiness and this confirms her own intuition that all is not well. Kashni seems able to perceive very quickly how "open" a person may be, and she displays a remarkable ability to reflect on what is happening in any given situation and to assess alternative explanations for someone else's behavioural or non-verbal cues.

*Some people are just uncomfortable with it, and, yes, that can sometimes create a difficult situation. (lines 64-65,S1; narrative p.5).*

*I could just sense it. She always had excuses. There was always some or other reason why she couldn't come. Then I knew. You suddenly realise what is happening. (lines 231-232,S1; narrative p.9)*

These difficult situations are even more sensitive when an important relationship is at stake and therefore needs to be carefully negotiated. With regard to friendships she says:

*Especially, you know, when the people who are feeling awkward or embarrassed are your friends. Then I have to make a decision about my friendship with them because obviously it's not going to work out if I have friends who are not on the same wavelength as I am. (lines 64-67,S1; narrative p.5)*

Kashni indicates with the above statement that she knows that she cannot continue or build a relationship with a friend if the other person does not understand her family's structure or, knowing about it, is not comfortable with all that it implies. She realises this before entering into a relationship and consciously acknowledges that there would not be much of a future for such relationship from her point of view. By doing this, she both protects and cares for herself and for the other person involved.

Kashni distinguishes between more ordinary day-to-day acquaintances with whom she is friendly, but with whom she does not form intimate friendships, and others (close friends) with whom she is friendly and who visit her in her home. Understandably she focuses more on her close friends rather than other class mates, and is therefore more concerned about disclosing to them in person. She is not concerned even when her other friends find out about her parent's sexuality. What probably reinforces her sense of being okay with her other friends is her realisation that they will probably also react positively to her family.

*But then I have other friends, certain friends I'm not really close to. I mean, I am friendly with them, but I don't talk to them the whole day and they don't come to my home. Which doesn't bother me... If they hear about my parents it's fine. They're usually fine with it as well. But in the case of my best friends, those friends I talk to every day, then I must tell them. (lines 183-189,S1; narrative p.11, 12)*

She elaborates on this "must tell" by saying:

*...otherwise I just feel uncomfortable. If they come to my home and they don't understand the situation before the time, then it could be very uncomfortable for them, especially if they have come for a sleep-over. (lines 191-193,S1; narrative p.12)*

This remark indicates that disclosing for Kashni is a prerequisite for being okay. This correlates with what Buhrmester and Prager (1995: 30) have established: that self-disclosure addresses some very basic concerns of the discloser and serves the function of enhancing relationship development. According to Bozett (1988:558), the preparation of friends *before* they become the recipients of a possible full disclosure is also a common feature of the disclosure process among children. Kashni's sensitivity towards others, and especially towards her friends, enables her to help and guide them by giving them information beforehand so that they will not be surprised or overwhelmed. I also discern a caring and protective attitude in Kashni in wanting to disclose to her friends before they hear about her same-gender parents and in caring about how they will handle any (possible) unforeseen circumstances. She therefore assumes the role of an active agent in helping her friends to understand and adjust. This makes her an active agent in negotiating the construction of her situation with the outside world. Kashni also uses a distinctively straightforward manner when she discloses. "I just say to them upfront: 'Listen, I have two mothers, okay?' " (lines 78-79,S1; narrative p.6).

Disclosure also becomes an important factor for Kashni in the relationship when she meets someone (a boy) to whom she feels attracted. Disclosure becomes once again a prerequisite for her being okay, and she expresses this most eloquently in the following quotation:

*I liked this one guy... We got on very well, but I didn't know how he felt about me. So I decided there and then that I just had to tell him because it simply couldn't work if he didn't know and accept it. I knew that if I were straightforward with him and told him the truth, then it would be okay. I was very worried... But he was fine with it. (lines 90-93,S1; narrative p.10)*

From this statement I conclude that it is fundamentally important to her that if she likes someone and wants to be in a relationship with him, he has to accept her



family situation, be okay with it, and not reject her or any of her family in any way. The maturity of her approach to this fact of her family life is revealed by her realisation that she cannot hide this information. She realises that she *needs* to disclose the truth and be totally straightforward and open while knowing all the while that by making such a disclosure, she may very well lose the love and acceptance of someone for whom she cares – someone with whom she might otherwise have had an intimate relationship.

In the following section I will demonstrate how Kashni reveals how difficult and complex the process of disclosure is. Even though she knows that disclosing is a necessary precondition if relationships are to develop, the actual process of deciding when to disclose and under what circumstances, and foreseeing any possible reactions, is more difficult to decide with any clarity and confidence. In her narrative, Kashni describes three possible scenarios she had encountered. Sometimes she says that she can share easily. This is when the recipient is open, tolerant and shows no signs of hostility or disapproval. In such circumstances, she finds that she is able to disclose in a straightforward and relaxed manner. In other cases something may happen that she identifies as an opportunity that gives her a pretext for disclosure. And at yet other times, she is perplexed about how to approach another person. She has difficulty in ascertaining what might happen as a result of her disclosure to such people, and she therefore gives herself time to get to know such a person better as she tries to determine the most beneficial moment for disclosure. In these cases, she becomes extremely sensitive to whether that person is open-minded and non-judgemental, or not.

*Sometimes one just doesn't know. Sometimes an opportunity comes up and then you can tell them about the situation. And sometimes you can just tell another person about it all immediately. (lines 95-96,S1; narrative p.10)*

*If a friend of yours is, like, very open and tolerant... then you can speak out without any problems at all. Or if you can see where a person is coming from, and they are not hostile, you can talk to them openly. But some people are not easy to "read", especially (for me) if it's a boy and I don't know him very well. I first have to take some time to get to know him and to understand him – what he is like and what kind*

*of person he is – before I can explain our family situation... If he is, like, heavy conservative... then I don't tell him because it simply won't work out. So then I have to leave him. But in other cases, where they are open, you just tell him or her straight away. (lines 99-106,S1; narrative p.10,11).*

She has possibly obtained her clear understanding of the difference between how more liberal and open-minded people will react and how more conservative and fundamentalist people will react to her family structure from her exposure to different schools in which these polar opposite attitudes were prevalent in the collective culture of the schools concerned. While I will explore this in more detail in Ribbon Three, her description of the following event shows the influence that more conservative and/or judgemental remarks have on her openness and willingness to disclose, as well as on her friendships.

*Like, on this one particular day we were all standing at the bus stop, and a guy comes walking past, with his arm around a girl. One could see that they were, like, together. Maybe even married or something like that. Then some of the girls started making spiteful comments and noises. Why? Because the guy was black and the girl was white. Then I remembered my previous school where we white girls dated black guys and it didn't matter at all... So I stood there thinking to myself, 'If race is such a big issue for you guys, and you can't handle that, then how on earth will I be able to tell you that my parents are gay?' I looked at them... and I thought to myself: 'Do I really want to be friends with any of you?' So I pick my friends very carefully, and I don't hang out with children who are like that. If I have to be with them, I just keep quiet and I say nothing. (lines 18-32,S2; narrative p.6,7)*

Kashni seems to know when silence is the best strategy to cope with stereotypical perceptions. She would also try, whenever possible, to avoid the company of children who are prejudiced. The anecdote above reflects her sensitivity to other forms of discrimination. She realises this by means of syllogistic reasoning and deduces the possible consequences of this knowledge for her own family as well.

The supportive environment provided by her friends sustains Kashni. Their acceptance and approval give her positive feedback and reinforce her sense of being okay.

*[To] ... a question of mine, "What do your friends say when they come to sleep over?" she replies, "Nothing. They're just fine with it. They just call my moms*

*'Aunty Anriëtte' and 'Aunty Zané'. No, they're quite happy with it.'* (lines 121-123,S1; narrative p.12)

*Some people say it's cool, it's just got to be cool – having two mothers as parents.* (lines 126-127,S1; narrative p.12)

*'... I have two mothers, okay.' And then, it's like, 'Oh, alright then.' And then there're no problems after that.* (lines 78-79,S1; narrative p.6)

Kashni also highlights another significant aspect of the social discourse that surrounds disclosure and acceptance or rejection, and this is that prejudice often emanates from her friends' *parents* rather than from her friends themselves.

*But, um, yes, I mean, I think the children are okay about it. But their parents.... Like there was one friend of mine who – at first – was fine with everything. Then she went and told her parents about my parents. And suddenly she couldn't come for sleepovers anymore.* (lines 226-229,S1; narrative p.9)

The following remark suggests that she experiences that *most people* accept her family structure, although the phrase itself indicates that not everyone does.

*But most of them are quite okay with it. If they know about my family and it's not a problem for them, then there's no problem at all.* (lines 67-69,S1; narrative p.5)

This might explain the caution with which she approaches encounters with new people in her life. It also underlies her stance that even though she is okay with having same-gendered parents, she needs the other person to know about it and be open and comfortable with it. If they are not comfortable with it, she knows that fundamental problems will arise. It seems that she experiences mostly acceptance in her encounters and this must no doubt serve to reinforce her sense of being okay.

I personally wonder how much of her own disclosure has to do with the fact that both her *parents* are so open and out. Would it have been easier for her if they had been more closeted?

When I examine **Carl's** story, my answer to the above question might be, "Not necessarily." His parents, one could say, "play it safe". They act to protect themselves and their son against possible prejudice. Here are some of their remarks:

*But we try not to give anyone any reason to tease Carl.* (line 271,S3; narrative p.5)

*We are very careful in front of other people, especially when Carl's friends come to visit. (lines 82-83,S1; narrative p.4)*

*We would never dream of holding each other affectionately in public places such as his school or shopping centres. We understand boundaries and the limits of public toleration. We never get involved in confrontations. No, there is never anything like that. (lines 48-50,55-56,S1; narrative p.4)*

Lott-Whitehead and Tully (1993:265), as well as Tasker and Golombok (1997:85) found in their studies that gay parents were careful to protect their children from the impact of homophobia and to maintain their family's integrity. This aspect of protection highlights the denial versus discretion argument that I see in Luanne's story, but it can also be seen as a form of support from his parents, in helping him to feel safe and protected.

In order not to embarrass Carl or to evoke any confrontations with other people, his parents "keep to the rules" (line 353,S1; narrative p.6) and "behave" (line 445,S2; narrative p.8) out of "respect" for others (line 365,S1; narrative p.6). These actions might be motivated by a desire to disprove the cruel and spiteful prediction that emerged in a deeply unpleasant and wounding encounter that Penny had with one of her close relatives:

*Just after Susan and I had got together, someone close to me said that my child would be a disaster – just because I am a lesbian (lines 40-41,S4; narrative p.19).*

Other relatives reinforced this belief of being discreet by "thanking" them:

*My brother and his wife privately thanked us for not holding one another affectionately, especially in front of their grandchildren, although they totally support our relationship (lines 48-50&53,S1; narrative p.4).*

Despite this, some of Carl's school peers became curious when they saw his two moms together, and confronted him directly, forcing him to come out. Therefore, even though his parents might be less open than Kashni's, he encountered what I call a "forced disclosure".<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Ribbon Two: "Critical incidents" for a full description of this event.

Carl however is undeterred by these events. He is seemingly at ease with his parents' sexuality.

*Why should I lie to them? If someone doesn't want to accept me because my parents are gay, then that's okay. I've got lots of friends. I don't need people like that. (lines 449-454,S2; narrative p.9)*

*It doesn't bother me anymore. (line 120,S3; narrative p.16)*

These comments emphasise his own acceptance of his parents and the position he takes with his peers. Provided that his parents "behave" and "play safe" (which they do), he is brave and principled enough to take the stance that he will not forsake his parents just to be accepted by his peers.

But Carl is only open with those whom he feels he can trust. This reveals another dimension of his disclosure, as the following comment shows:

*I only tell people that I can trust. I'm certainly not going to shout about it from the rooftops. But I'll tell my friends. (line 115,S3; narrative p.15)*

This is similar to Luanne's conviction that she should not reveal her parent's gayness or talk about it in an open way, and Kashni's awareness that she should be thoughtful about selecting the people to whom she will disclose her parents' sexual orientation. All three of them therefore have developed an understanding that not everyone will sympathetically receive this information. Their dilemma brings Paechter's words (2000:402) to mind. She asserts that children are "torn" between a desire not to make a "big deal" of the situation and a realisation that if one is going to tell people, one needs to do it selectively, carefully and thoughtfully.

As I review Carl's comments about whom he tells and whom he refrains from telling, the manner in which he tells and the kind of people about whom he is prepared to share spontaneously, I detect a certain happy-go-lucky, carefree quality in his accommodation. It seems as though he feels that if *he* accepts his same-

gendered parents for what they are, why would it bother anyone else? He appears also to refrain from feeling personally responsible for the attitudes of anyone else who is unable to accept his same-gendered family.

*Most of my friends never even raise the question. If any of them have a problem with my mothers' orientation, then it is their problem. Not mine. (lines 586; 590-591,S2; narrative p.12)*

*I suppose they must have had questions that they wanted to ask me. But they never asked! Except this one friend who asked a few questions. They obviously all know the set-up by now, but they don't ask me. They are too scared! (lines 447-449,S2; narrative p.8)*

*I think he had his suspicions about the situation. But he said nothing to me about them. (lines 375-376,S1; narrative p.9)*

He assumes that his friends know, and that any struggle they might have in coming to terms with his family constellation is not his problem. In this his attitude is unlike that of Kashni and Tom who are sensitive about how their friends might react and who go to some lengths to help their friends to reach a sympathetic accommodation after their disclosures. Carl's attitude is the same as that of Luanne: if friends have a problem or want more information, they should ask him:

*But if they want to know, they must ask me the questions – if they have any – and then I will answer them. (line 350,S2; narrative p.8)*

Remaining silent can be a beneficial strategy for coping with awkward or unpleasant situations. It can significantly reduce (or even prevent) one's exposure to negative, tactless and ill-informed reactions on the part of other people. This in turn means that one will not have to cope with the disagreeable situations that might arise as a result of their negativity. It is highly unlikely that a friend will ask a *direct* question pertaining to the sexual orientation of one's own mother. But the downside of not disclosing is that one may live in fear of a possible disclosure at a time when one may not be ready for it. But Carl is seemingly not bothered by this possibility. He seems largely indifferent to whether people know or not.

Carl disclosed spontaneously to one of his close friends and confirmed that he is happy to have two lesbian mothers as his parents. He also answered his friend's questions and explained the intricacies of the situation as best he could, he even ended up convincing his friend of the reality of his two mothers' sexual orientation.

*We were here one day and Tiaan asked me whether my moms were still attending that church because they attended the same church for a while, and I said, "No, they are going to a gay church now." He looked at me in amazement, and said, "To a gay church?" So I said "Didn't you know that my moms were gay?"*

*And he said, "Oh, don't talk nonsense!" And he kept on denying that it was possible until I went and got some family photographs to show him.*

*[Carl's mother interjected:] "One would think that Tiaan would have realised long ago that Penny and I are in a relationship."*

*"Yes. Even I was quite surprised by his reaction. But, in the end, he just said, "Okay", and that was that." (lines 77-96,S3; narrative p.14)*

One observes the same spontaneity in Carl when he disclosed to a girlfriend. In her case, however, he constructed it to her as "his biggest secret".

*We were lying on the bed chatting, and I told her that I wanted to share my biggest secret with her. Then I told her and all she said was, "Oh." She didn't have a problem with it. (lines 405-410,S1; narrative p.11)*

Constructing the gayness of his mothers as his "biggest secret" suggests that Carl is well aware that homosexual people are often stigmatised in our culture, that a significant number of people are prejudiced against homosexuals, and that this sensitive information cannot therefore be disclosed to just anyone. O'Connell (1999:275) notes that "secrecy, remaining silent or lying" are perceived by many children of gay parents to be a vital strategy for maintaining relationships. Carl, on the other hand, felt that disclosing would enhance his relationships, and he felt the need to share his "secret". This might indicate his personal sense of being okay, and his belief in honesty and openness as personal values.

Carl is fortunate to have connected with another peer who has same-gender parents. He receives from this friend the kind of support that Tom and Luanne received from others in similar circumstances:

*I also have a friend who lives near here. Her parents are also gay. They recently broke up, but I've heard that they're back together again. We used to visit each other quite*

*a lot... But one day I asked her: "Are your mothers gay?" and she replied "Yes." Then she asked me whether my parents were gay, and I said "Yes." This created a strong bond between us and we were able to go to the gay church together with our parents (lines 561-565, 592-596,S2; narrative p.11).*

**Erid's** story, on a first reading, does not give the impression that he feels comfortable or okay with having two mothers as same-gender parents. He answers are framed in short and direct remarks, and he does not willingly share anything other than what he has been asked. There may be two contradictory explanations for his self-presentation. The first is that he does not feel okay because he has been teased about his home situation in the past. An alternative explanation may be that he feels *so* okay with having same-gender parents that he cannot understand why some people make such a fuss about what he feels is really an "insignificant" piece of information about his life context. If the latter scenario explains Erid's self-presentation (short and direct remarks and an unwillingness to share anything other than what he has been asked), I assume that Erid feels totally at ease with his situation.

I feel that it is important to reflect on my interaction with Erid so that I do not place an excessive weight of interpretation on what he has shared with me. As I mentioned in Bubble Three, Erid was a member of the first family that I interviewed. Because this family moved within four weeks of my initial meeting with them, I did not have the opportunity of spending an extended amount of time with him. It also became clear to me that firstly, he is a child that does not say much, secondly, his actions speak louder than his words, and thirdly, it would take a long time to really get to know him well. My reservation about the possibility of extracting too much interpretation from Erid's data is based on my uncertainty about whether I was ever allowed to penetrate deeper levels of Erid's story – especially since he shared so little. But if I merely focus on the data in front of me, I have to come to the conclusion that Erid feels okay, especially because he is a straightforward and a "no fuss" kind of child.



Where he *does* show his sense of being okay very clearly is when I asked him what advice he would give a friend if that friend were to disclose to him (Erid) that he was gay. Erid's response was:

*I would tell them just to be normal kids. (line 148,S2; narrative p. 11)*

*I would just let him know that I am there for him because it's okay. (line 198,S2; narrative p.10)*

In this answer he clearly demonstrates that he regards being gay as nothing out of the ordinary. While an awareness of what society or others might regard as "normal" and "abnormal" is implicit in his advice to his hypothetical friend (as it was with Tom), I do not believe that Erid consciously thinks about it too much, if at all.

But he is strongly averse to anyone prying into his family constellation, as the following excerpt illustrates:<sup>5</sup>

*"Okay, if someone asks about your family... If they ask you how many brothers and sisters you have..."*

*Erid quickly cuts me off. "I just tell them," he answers in his characteristically straightforward way.*

*"People usually ask questions," I continue, "like, 'What does your mom do? What does your dad do?' How do you answer those questions?"*

*"I just say 'I don't know.' "*

*...And so I ask, "Do some children ask more questions or comments...?"*

*Erid answers: "Yes. I don't always answer questions like that. But sometimes they do ask me, and I just say to them, 'I don't feel like telling you now.' " (lines 156-157, 173-176,S2; narrative p.12 )*

This shows me that Erid is essentially a very private person and that he does not like people to inquire into his private life. Ray and Gregory (2001:29) also found that some of the children they interviewed about their school experiences sometimes felt misunderstood by their peers and that their peers would ask difficult or annoying questions like "How were you born then?" or make gratuitous comments like: "One [of the same-gender parents] must be an aunt." They observed

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<sup>5</sup> See Erid's narrative, pp. 11 & 12, for a full description of the context (Addenda E: CD-Rom).

that children in younger grades would become more reserved about answering questions that were posed to them. This may also be applicable to Erid. It also seemed to me that Erid was trying to forestall questions of a kind that would force him into a category in which he could be labelled in terms of some rigid stereotype or in which he could become a representative of something “Other” or different, as a “type” that would deny his individuality (Evans, 2002:87).

Although I will explore the social issues that impact on the children’s experience in a subsequent Ribbon, it is necessary to include some information about Erid’s background at this stage. It is possible that Erid may experience difference and otherness in three different ways: in terms of race, of being adopted, and of being a child of same-gender parents. I conclude from some of Erid’s remarks that he is aware of the kind of cruel and spiteful labels and stereotypes that are used to exclude, humiliate and degrade others (Hudak & Kihn, 2001:xvi). Since his personal circumstances have changed dramatically for the better since he was adopted, I must deduce that Erid in no way regrets being in the circumstances in which he currently finds himself with his same-gender parents.<sup>6</sup>

Erid’s repeated comments like “I wouldn’t say much” (*line 82,S1; narrative p.6*), “I wouldn’t say anything” (*line 179,S2; narrative p.8*), or “I just don’t tell them” (*line 162,S2; narrative p.13*) clearly indicate his reluctance to share the intimate details of his life – and perhaps also his irritation that other people should ask in the first place. Even though Erid does not remain completely silent about these issues, he feels (as do Carl and Luanne) that *others* must first ask *him* before he will disclose relevant information. This indicates that he retains a sense of control over what is happening.

*If they want to know, I will tell them. (line 96,S1; narrative p.7)*

*They have to find out if they want to know. (line 141,S2; narrative p.7)*

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<sup>6</sup> See the following pages for full details: lines 38-40:1, 48-52:1, 54-57:2, 75-77:2; Kashni Erid Parents Session 1 (Addenda F: CD-Rom).

The precondition that he insists upon before he shares with anyone is that he must first know that person well.

*I don't talk much. But if I get to know somebody well, then, yes, I will tell them. (lines 128-130,S2; narrative p.8).*

It is of interest to note that the people he knows best (his friends) are people who do not ask him prying questions.

*That is why they are my friends. They don't ask me questions. (line 182,S2; narrative p.9)*  
*They're my friends, they don't mind (line 86,S1; narrative p.10).*

What then might I conclude from Erid's desire that his friends should not ask him questions? Erid said that if he gets to know someone well, he will disclose. But his friends, whom he now obviously knows very well, do not ask questions. This may simply mean that their need to ask questions about Erid's same-gender parents has become redundant because having got to know them well, Erid would have already disclosed the facts to them – should any such disclosure have been necessary. But it also seems as though he does not need to disclose to them any further information because “they don't mind”. Although I might be overstating my case here, it seems as though there exists an openness and an acceptance between friends that transcend the cultural “boundaries” that are dictated by heteronormative society. This was indeed the dominant impression that I received from Erid and his friends when I visited them. Although Erid was indeed rather domineering in dictating to his friends the toys with which they should play, I observed that the atmosphere that prevailed among them was relaxed, easy-going, and characterised by a sense of fun and playfulness (lines 10-11:1 & 213-214,S2; lines 21-23, Kashni session 1; line 86,S1; narrative p.10).

Erid illuminates for us the various reactions to homosexuality that exist in the outside world in which he lives. When I probe him to tell me how other children react when he tells them that he has two mothers, Erid answers:

*Most people act normally. Some are nice. Others are not. They are the bad ones... they tease you.*<sup>7</sup> (lines 169-170,S2; narrative p. 13)

For Erid, to “act normally” might mean to be civil and tolerant, and to refrain from teasing. Erid has been the target of some incidents of teasing in his past.

*“How many times has this (the teasing) happened?”  
“Only a few times in this school. But lots of times in the other school.”* (lines 91-92,S2; narrative p.3).

Sometimes Erid reacts physically and aggressively to the teasing. (I will describe this in more detail in Ribbon Two.) He says:

*They would have stopped, or else I would have kept on hitting them until they did stop.* (lines 109-113,S2; narrative p.4)

Ray and Gregory (2001:31) report that some of the boys with same-gender parents believed that fighting would help them. Erid only resorted to fighting after he had been aroused to anger by provocative comments that had been aimed at his mother. Apart from these (few) incidents, Erid had learned non-physical ways of negotiating resolutions to homophobic reactions (such as teasing). These effective self-protection solutions involved not saying too much and never revealing too much. I call this kind of protective behaviour a strategy of “minimal disclosure”. It helped to prevent incidents of teasing to which he could react physically. He does not need to use these strategies when he knows someone well and trusts them because then he can relax his self-protective boundaries and excessive vigilance.

**Danielle** is also aware that teasing could occur although it has not yet happened to her personally – as it has with Erid.

*I’m not going to tell anybody... It’s a secret.* (line 418,S1; narrative p.9)

*They will tease me... It is difficult. There are not many people that are like that. And it’s just... They will do something to me, like kill me or something. Or they would say, ‘At least my parents are better than yours’.* (lines 262–266,S2; narrative p.10)

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<sup>7</sup> See Ribbon Two: “Critical incidents” for a full description of this event.

*I don't actually know what they're going to do. I just get a bad feeling that they're going to do something. (lines 279–280,S2; narrative p.11)*

Her story relates more to the incidence of prejudice and discrimination as perceived risks rather than actual events that take place in her life. Even so, the way in which she frames her fear (especially her use of words like “killing me or something”) suggests to me at least that her fear may sometimes border on extreme anxiety. A fear of being “killed” (whatever that may mean) suggests *prima facie* that a child feels extremely insecure. The non-specific but extreme way in which she expresses herself indicates that even though her fear is only perceived, for her it *feels* very real. As therapists/ educational psychologists we respect another person’s fears in terms of their own perception and understanding of reality because it is axiomatic that what “feels” real *is* real for most people. Danielle’s fears could not therefore but exert a decisively negative effect on how she negotiates her outside world.

When Danielle talks about her closer, more intimate friends, she expresses the need to *prepare* them for disclosure of her same-gender parents’ domestic situation. Kashni also prepares her friends, primarily to prevent embarrassment or uneasiness in her friends. In contrast to Kashni, Danielle’s aim in preparing her friends is to allow for a more authentic relationship to develop. She does not want to hide anything from her friends and she desires to be open with them. Disclosure for her therefore serves to enhance and support authentic relationships. For Tubbs and Moss (1994:222), self-disclosure represents an attempt to permit the values of authenticity to permeate our social relationships, and secondly, to enhance the intimacy, depth and breadth of our relationships.

As I relate Danielle’s need to be open, to the fear that she experiences, I wonder whether she distinguishes between closer friends and ordinary school mates, or whether her fear concerns a painful loss of control – of her not being able to control the time and place of her disclosures and the identity of the recipients to whom she will disclose. It raises the theme of private disclosure versus public disclosure.

Another significant aspect is that Danielle (like Carl) constructs her same-gender parent situation as a secret. This emphasises Danielle's awareness that she (like Carl) cannot disclose to just anybody. Another significant aspect that she reveals is her concern and attentiveness to the possible effect that her disclosure(s) might have on her mother's relationships. This indicates that she *chooses* to be silent to protect her mother.

*I don't actually share my secret. I only share that secret with my best friends... (lines 207-208,S2; narrative p.17)*

*But when Alicia, one of my best friends, came to stay for a visit, I felt, like, I had to tell her. When someone's my best friend, then I always share my secrets with them. Only my best friends know. Only my best friends. They are allowed to know everything about me. But I was also scared that she would tell her mom. Then I thought, 'What will happen if her mom doesn't ever talk to my mom again?' That is scary. (lines 176-179 & 283-285,S2; narrative p.11,12)*

Another statement of Danielle's that suggests that she is more comfortable when disclosing personally rather than publicly, is the following:

*When you write that book that you are writing, could we please read it? And I want to know who will be reading that book as well because I am scared that some children might read that book and find out who my parents are. But I do really want to be in your magazine. (lines 401-409,S1; narrative p.24)*

At times Danielle feels the need to protect herself and her mom by disguising her second mother as a "friend" of her own biological mother. This is a utilisation of the strategy of masked disclosure.

*I say she is a friend. I say she actually lives with my mom because they are best friends. (lines 295-296,S2; narrative p.13)*

But Danielle's friends are not satisfied with this patently false explanation. Their natural curiosity and interest are aroused. Because the "closet" that Danielle tries to construct around her same-gender parents is made of "glass", it becomes an "open secret" (Sedgwick, 1990:80) – in other words, no secret at all. The visible indicators that other people observe, such as her same-gender parents sleeping together in the same bed, invalidate the "secret" and expose the obvious truth to others.

*Oh yes, like, Alicia asked me, 'Are they together? Do they sleep together?' Then I was, like, 'Umm, yes. Where else would she sleep?' Alicia really caught me with that question. (lines 298-299,S2; narrative p.13)*

Because Danielle inevitably ended up in situations where she was forced to “confess”, I regard this kind of situation as constituting a “forced disclosure”.

*I'm sorry that I'm a liar. It's just that this stuff is very personal for me, and I can't share all my personal things. If I could tell her, and she could understand, then I would be very happy. (lines 167-184,277-304,S2 & 75-98,S3; narrative p.13)*

The discourse of confession ties into the historical-religious dogmatic construction of homosexuality as (primarily) a sexual sin. Her friend's referral to the fact that her two mothers sleep together, focuses attention on the purely sexual component of gay identity. Foucault (quoted in Evans, 2002:88) states that such confessions point to the pathologised history of gay people.

Danielle also demonstrates how she sometimes takes trouble to think very carefully about what she will say, which reveals her attempt to prepare and construct answers that she hopes will satisfy her listeners.

*I was thinking that I would have to explain to her that my mom... That if I tell her, if I'll tell her that they are together, and just keep explaining all those things, like they sleep together and just... (lines 303-304,S2; narrative p.13 ).*

In other situations (by contrast) she does not elaborate, she does not allow any conversation to “flow” or any more questions to be asked. By doing this, she tries to regain some control over her situation. This is characteristic of a minimal disclosure.

*My friend said, 'So you don't have a dad. Instead, you have like three mothers.' And I answered: 'Yes! It's, like, hey, cool, but that's all I'm saying!' (lines 95-96,S3; narrative p.14)*

The following quotation describes Danielle's poignantly grateful reaction to the support received by a close friend after her (Danielle's) disclosure of the full facts.

*Then I told her, 'My mommy and Auntie Sandy are together, is that fine with you?' And she just said, 'Yeah, and you are still my best friend.' She said such sweet things that I began to cry. When I told her the truth, I began to feel so heartsore. (lines 182-187,S2; narrative p.14)*

The emotional depth of Danielle's reaction suggests that *some* children of same-gender parents do indeed experience their situation in same-gendered families as emotionally burdensome and sometimes intellectually problematic (they may feel, for example, that homosexuality is a "sin" or something "other" because of the constant societal pressure to which they have been subjected).

Another meaningful aspect of Danielle's story is that she relates her new family constellation to how it was when her mother and father were together. Stevens et al. (2003:354) also mention that a child that they interviewed commented on how much happier she was with her same-gendered family than she had been when they had lived with her father. In Danielle's case, there has been an improvement in her home situation, and this helps to advance her process of acceptance and being okay. This reminds us yet again of the influence that social issues have on these children's experiences. I shall discuss this in more detail in Ribbon Three.

*When the new lady – my mother's friend – moved in, my mother said that they're "together". Then we all talked about it in a nice and soft way, and I said, 'I understand, mommy! It really is much better now than it was when you were with dad.' I think that made her very happy, and we all cried a little. But we were crying with happiness. (lines 253-259,S1; narrative p.2)*

Her ability to integrate her mother and father's new partners into her life and value system, and her construction of these events as "having three mothers" (line 347,S1; narrative p.3) signals her acceptance and therefore her sense of being okay.

**Kim's** story contains an interesting twist. She expresses her sense of being okay with her mother in the following words:

*I... would not choose to have my mother in any other way. (line 32,S1; narrative p.1)*

*It is just the way my mother is (line 417,S2; narrative p.23)*

In spite of her being okay, she shows resistance to the proposition that *all* gay people in general should (or could) be fully open and "out" in *every* situation. Even



though Kim clearly respects and admires gay people, she recognizes the limitations of being open.

*I actually admire gay people. They say, 'F\*\*\* you' to the unwritten laws of society... I have great respect for people who have enough courage to walk on a road that is different from the road that everyone else seems to be walking along... But the world has its own rules. And people should be aware of how those rules work. (line 428,S2; narrative p.25)*

She reflects on the way that she is “out” about her same-gendered family, and she reflects with remarkable acuity on the way in which societies operate.

*“I don't like it,” she says quietly, “when two women walk hand-in-hand down the road. I don't think that gay people should do things like that because society is not yet ready for that kind of freedom and openness. (lines 430-433,S2; narrative p.26)*

She elaborates on this when I ask her how she would feel if her mothers held hands in public.

*“I would just tell them not to do it,” Kim replies firmly. “Not now. That's just how life is,” Kim continues. “You have to have respect for other people's feelings and conventions. That's what this whole thing is about – respect for other people's expectations. And a shopping mall is a public place, you see. There are always limits on what we as individuals and groups can do. Take another example. Let's say that you were to place a photograph of a naked woman in a pharmacy in order to sell suntan lotion. You just wouldn't do it! One has to have some respect for what other people might be exposed to against their will. That is what it is all about. If there are people around, you have to use your judgement and common sense. It might be something that they don't want to see. Not necessarily because it is wrong, but because people are just accustomed to certain public standards of behaviour. They have certain expectations, and we all abide by them. In any shopping centre, there will always certainly be people who will not want to see two women holding hands. So, then, we should just not do it. It's about respect for others. So, yes, rather don't do it in public until the society has reached that point where it will be something that will not offend anyone. Until we reach that stage, it is better to be discreet... They should do whatever they want to do – but at the right time and in the right place.” (lines 730-741,754-755,S2; narrative p.27 & 29)*

May I assume that Kim's views reflect experience of homonegative remarks (Bozett, 1987:48) – or is she merely observing that it is only prudent (common sense) not to confront “ordinary” people with something “other” than the consensual norms of society, thereby precipitating confrontations that may be extremely disagreeable? Discretion in her mind means showing respect and abiding by public standards of

behaviour and living according to the customs and expectations of heterosexual society. This view implicitly supports the view that heterosexuality should be the dominant norm in society, and Kim's view that homosexual people should refrain from "offending" the heterosexual majority implies that everyone should give uncritical assent to heteronormativity. Since Kim relates this view to the example of nudity, I yet once again realise how fixated most people are by the purely *sexual* aspect of homosexuality (as though it were the *only* component of a gay person's life). Kim distinguishes between public and private spaces. She opines that the visibility of gay couples should occur "at the right time and the right place". Kim certainly does not feel that homosexuality is "wrong" and she feels that gay people can "do whatever they want to do" except if doing what they want exposes them to a generalised public scrutiny. She appeals for gay people to use their common sense, judgement, respect and discretion before they expose their sexual orientation to general public scrutiny.

Kim offers her own recollections about how society has changed between the time when her same-gender parents' lives were viciously exposed to public hostility by a newspaper – and what the social climate is like nowadays:

*Things were very different in those days. It was like, 'Do such people exist? Stone them to death!' It wasn't like it is today. It was terrible. (lines 155-156,S2; narrative p.18)*

She contrasts this with how people are now.

*People begin slowly, slowly to accept it because they become so used to it. I mean, gay people are simply everywhere. You see them on television, in magazines, in clubs, everywhere. People are far more relaxed about this whole topic nowadays. They realise that gay people are real – and that they will not be going away. Take, for example, that article about my mom’s relationship that was printed in the newspaper. Such an article will never make the headlines today. (lines 716-718,750-752,S2; narrative p.28)*

Her awareness of different points of view in society influences her own disclosure process. She will disclose on the basis of what she concludes about the views of the person to whom she is considering whether or not to disclose. Her disclosures are therefore limited to a few friends who are gay themselves or to heterosexual friends who already have valued gay friends. Her openness and sense of being okay are based on this criterion.

*I have seen so many different situations. Like, one of my friends, he’s straight. But he hangs out with a group of guys who are gay. I mean, one of those guys is much more of a woman than I am. Obviously, he and his friends all know. But my friend, Jane, for example. She doesn’t know, and I don’t discuss it with her. Different people have different attitudes, and you can never be sure.... (lines 679-682,691-694,S2; narrative p.38)*

In the company of other gay people, she feels safe to share details of her domestic situation (her same-gendered family). Even though she reaches out and assists her friend to feel more comfortable with disclosure, her message is coloured by stereotypical comments that connect religious considerations and sexuality. One could however argue that her advice to her friend that she will not tell others or “the church” may be precisely what her friend, as a young person who is just coming out, *needs* to hear. In saying that she is just “a little bit used to it”, Kim minimises her role in being a *de facto* member of the gay community because of her situation as a young person with same-gender parents.

*It’s like in the case of Jo, one of my friends at the Technikon. I can see that it’s incredibly difficult for him to come out to others as a gay man. But the weird thing is that anyone can see at a glance that he is gay... So, just to give him an opportunity of disclosure and to help him to feel more at ease, I said to him, ‘Listen, Jo, my own mother is gay. And I just want you to know that I won’t ever betray you or tell people in the church.’*

*So I told him, and there were also two other friends I told. But the telling always took place naturally and in the context of friendly conversations...*

*We were all sitting in Barchello's... and we were all just talking about families. One of the guys is gay, and so is his sister, so we were all listening to their stories about family visits, and we were also discussing the whole issue in a more general way. Then, at one point in the conversation, I said to all of them, 'I am also a little bit used to that situation.' (lines 98-117,S1; narrative p.9,10)*

Where she feels that disclosure cannot harm or substantially affect her or her family, she tends to be less circumspect and discloses (if necessary) with some aplomb and self-assurance, as the extract below demonstrates. But once again, she feels (as do Luanne, Carl and Erid) that someone must specifically *ask* before she will disclose.

*"If people come to me in an open and straightforward way and say, 'Listen here. Is your mother gay?' "*

*Kim pauses for a while, silent. Then, in a quiet voice, she says: "You know, if people attack me in that kind of way, first, I will smack them, and then I will say, 'Yes.'... I don't mind if people that I don't care about know or not. If some crazy stranger came up to me in the street and asked, 'Is your mom gay?', then, yes, I might say, 'Yes. Now go away.' " (lines 119-124,S1; narrative p.11)*

Kim gives the impression that she does not welcome these kinds of questions. It seems as though she has experienced questions like these as a personal attack, and she accordingly reacts in an aggressive way ("I will smack them" and "Now go away"). The narrative records how she spoke these words with a great deal of anger – no doubt an indicator that she does not welcome people who try to pry into her private life and domestic situation. I find it significant that she says that she "might" say "yes" (i.e. disclose) *before* she chases the inquiring person away (presumably so as to pre-empt any further prying or questioning).

Kim has firm convictions on how to deal with her intimate private circle and her family and close friends, all people who "matter" to her:

*But people in our closest circle, those people who matter to us, our friends and family – not all these people need to know because this is a personal matter. It's our own small world – and they must just accept it or lump it. (lines 124-127,S1; narrative p.11)*

Kim implies here that she wants to retain her right to *choose* whom she will tell (“not all of these people need to know”), perhaps because sexual orientation is such a personal matter. Despite her general unwillingness to disclose, Kim accepts that what they possess in common is her family’s reality (“our own small world”) and that its configuration is therefore non-negotiable. Like Danielle, Kim expresses an awareness of and sensitivity towards her mother’s position and she will simply not disclose intimate information if it might harm her mother. This reflects the view of Casper, Schultz and Wickens (1992:123) that “the very act of disclosure is a shared responsibility”. In such situations, Kim would refer to her co-mother as her mother’s “friend”. By doing this, she is making skilful use of the strategy of masked disclosure in cases where awkward or hostile questions arise. She also does not require sympathy from her friends because she feels that this would be using her mother’s gayness to get attention.

*I still wouldn't tell just anyone. Let's say that Mary comes for a visit. Mary is my mom's partner, and while Mary is here, Ann comes to pick me up. If Ann then asks me who Mary is, I would not tell her that Mary is my moms' girlfriend. I would just say, 'She's a friend of my mother's.' You see, I don't know how my mother feels about the situation – whether or not she wants everyone to know. Quite frankly, I do not want everyone to know. Because then it's like, 'Oh, now this is happening to me.' No. As far as I am concerned, disclosure is a personal matter – and should be dealt with by the person concerned. (lines 91-97,S1; narrative p.9)*

Kim’s need to protect herself, and her sensitivity about whom she will tell or not might be attributable to the fact that she has also had to endure incidents of teasing, some of them quite severe. This teasing started when the story of her mother’s relationship appeared without warning in a newspaper.<sup>8</sup> The teasing was not only aimed at her mother, but also focused spitefully on the question of Kim’s own sexuality.

*When that newspaper story became public, I got one hell of a lot of negative feedback. (lines 76-78,S1; narrative p.4)*

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<sup>8</sup> See Bubble IV for details of this incident in Kim’s narrative; or Ribbon Two for a discussion of Kim’s critical incident.

*But there was this one occasion that I want to tell you about. As I was walking past one of my brother's best friends, he said: 'Look! She's a lesbian'. I thought that they were talking about me, and, obviously, that was a topic about which I was most sensitive. I was so hurt that I started to cry. (lines 618-622,S2; narrative p.35)*

*... Lilly said, 'Because, you know, Kim's mother is like that.' (lines 80-82,S1; narrative p.4)*

*... He said to me: 'Your mother is gay, and she is like this and does this-and-that and so on, you are going to become like your mother...'. (lines 149-150,S1; narrative p.7)*

After these initial incidents of teasing, Kim's capacity to form new friendships seems to have remained fragile if I examine her reported experience. Kim felt scared that she would once again lose friends – as had happened before. This becomes evident in her conversation about events in a Christian camp which she attended. (For a full discussion of this event, see Ribbon Two.)

*I became very frightened because I began to think to myself that the people here at the camp would also begin to treat me in the same way like the people back home. (lines 299-300,S2; narrative p.33)*

*I made some really great friends on that camp, people with whom I am still friendly today. But I was also scared that they would also begin to react oddly towards me. So I never told the people that I knew really well. I told them nothing! But when strangers came walking past – people I didn't know at all – I would grab them by their coats, even if they just greeted me, and would say, 'Come here, please. You must listen to me! I'm not giving you a choice.' (lines 303-309,S2; narrative p.33)*

*They could go and repeat it to someone else, but the person they told wouldn't know me, and so it would make no difference. But I couldn't go to my school friends and just pour my heart out to them because I would never know who they would tell. (lines 259-261,S2; narrative p.31)*

What Kim reveals here is how betrayed and hurt she felt at school when most of her friends gossiped about her, and how she therefore became acutely aware of how she should not disclose to people because of her fear of repeated rejection and discrimination. And even though five years had elapsed since the traumatising exposure of her same-gender parents, Kim was still frightened and anxious about possible reactions from her new friends at the camp. This self-consciousness on her part might have restricted her interactions with new friends and might indicate that

she had become much more calculating about the formation of new friendships. Before making liaisons, Kim would therefore try beforehand to estimate how potential friends might behave to her after disclosure. But the making of new friendships usually entails a degree of tentativeness and sensitivity in approaching the other person. The tentativeness with which Kim approached possible new friends at the camp may also just indicate her need for uncomplicated relationships and for some measure of discretion and trustworthiness so that she could protect both herself and her family. It might also just indicate her conviction that some matters (like the sexuality of one's parents) are more private than others.

I can now understand why she feels more comfortable with disclosing to a stranger than to people for whom she really cares, as people with whom she wants to form an intimate bond with may reject her if they get to know about her mother's sexual orientation. But Kim also makes the following comment that reveals that she can cope no matter who knows, even though she would prefer to make her own decisions about those to whom she would like to disclose. But if disclosure happens "by accident", the following extract shows that Kim can cope with it without undue disruption of her life or happiness – or even regret.

*Not everyone needs to know. And even if they do get to know, then it is, like, 'So what's the big deal?'* (lines 122-123,S1; narrative p.9)

One would think that the prejudice and teasing that she had endured would have made her extremely sensitive to the sometimes blatant inequities of heteronormative language and conduct. But there are times when it seems as though she is unaware of her own behaviour – times when she herself displays heterosexist attitudes. These passages seem to reveal Kim's own unconscious internalisation of homophobic attitudes:

*In Witbank, there was this one guy in our group that everyone thought was gay. We used to say to him, 'Everyone thinks that you're gay. When are you going to get a girlfriend?' But it was really just a joke, and there was nothing nasty about it.* (lines 712-713,S2; narrative p.36)

*There were a few girls who were like that, you know, gay, and I was very careful not to get involved with them. Like, if someone wanted to give me a hug when they were greeting me, I would move away. It's not that there's anything wrong with hugs. It's not wrong. But I just wanted them to stay away from me. (lines 702-705,S2; narrative p.37)*

What Ray and Gregory (2001:31) suggest is that fear of the consequences of the disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation is so great and the desire of children to belong is so strong that some children actually resort to homophobic bullying themselves as a way of distancing themselves from the feared outcome. This may well be what Kim was experiencing because these incidents occurred while she was in high school. Certainly, Kim's behaviour could hardly be regarded as "bullying" in these incidents. But she defensively indicates that there is nothing "wrong" with the girls in question. She only says that she merely does not want to have any physical contact with these gay girls. One can understand Kim's feelings and appreciate that she wants to draw her boundaries. But I detect a great deal of defensive fear underneath her desire not to be associated with these gay girls.

**Ryland's** story is in stark contrast to the other stories. He is uncompromising about his need for privacy and silence, and does not even consider disclosing this part of his life to others. Bozett (1987:42; 1988:558) refers to this situation (in which children avoid telling other children) as *a strategy of nondisclosure*.

*I haven't told anyone. Only my teacher knows about my other mother [who is his father's fiancée]. (lines 14 & 20,S2; narrative p.3)*

*No one talks about it because no one knows about it. It's only my family that knows about it, and a few other close people... It's not wrong! There is nothing wrong with it. We don't tell the children at school – and that's how I want to keep it. Now if Danielle (for example) goes and tells everyone, 'I've got two mothers at home', then we will have big problems to deal with. (lines 342-346,S1; narrative p.3)*

If he has to give any information about his family, he describes the divorce of his biological parents. But he remains silent about the new partners of his mother and father. It is as though he feels that these circumstances have been imposed on him. Gerschon et al. (1999:443) state that children of same-gender parents sometimes felt



a need for secrecy and experience a sense of isolation because they are bearers of a “dangerous” secret that has been imposed upon them. This serves to separate and isolate them from their peers.

*I don't talk about it. If I say anything. I talk only about my mom and dad because it is none of their business! It's like, if other children ask questions, I just keep quiet, or I say 'I don't want to talk about it'. (lines 77-80,S2; narrative p.4)*

There is one exception to his coping strategies that Ryland shared. He told one of his friends after this friend had posed a question that related to his co-mother. But Ryland used a strategy of masked disclosure in this situation and described his co-mother as his “aunt”. This might indicate that he used masked disclosure to protect himself against the possibility of being rejected by his friend, or that he was “protecting” his friend by being discreet, and perhaps even that he was attempting to protect their friendship (or any combination of the above reasons).

*I just say – if they ask – that Sandy is my auntie. I remember once, my friend asked, the friend who gets the asthma attack... They think that it is true. (lines 91-99,S2; narrative p.7,8)*

Ryland’s statement (“They think it is true”) indicates the heavy burden of guilt that he feels even as he lies and does not tell the truth about his same-gender parents. I also had a sense that Ryland wished that he did not need to keep the “secret” of his mothers’ sexual orientation, which is corroborated in the literature (Ray & Gregory, 2001:30). Other authors are also of the opinion that children who are struggling to accept their mothers’ sexual orientation will often (because of a fear that their mothers’ sexual orientation might be discovered) become anxious, withdrawn, hypervigilant and secretive (Clunis & Green, 2000; John, 1994; O’Connell, 1999; Pennington, 1987).

There seems to be an apparent contradiction in what Ryland says, even though I do not want to discount the sincerity of the content of the following two sentences without considering the wavering sense of loyalty that many people feel under extreme pressure. Since most of us do experience ambivalence in our lives and

sometimes alternate between opposites for various reasons, it might happen that we will occasionally contradict ourselves in conversation without even realising it. This is not an indication of insincerity, but of other underlying dynamics. Thus, while Ryland says:

*There is nothing wrong with it. I don't worry about it. (line 336,S1; narrative p.2,3)*

he also says:

*I worry about it everyday. (lines 59-63,S2; narrative p.6)*

Making sense of this incongruency leads me to think that while Ryland feels that it is really okay to be gay or have gay parents on a deeply personal level, he cannot cope with the possible consequences of disclosure in the day-to-day management of his life. He therefore truly suffers in case he should be “found out” and consequently ostracised and isolated were his mothers’ sexual orientation ever to become widely known (Pennington, 1987:62). Or perhaps he genuinely finds it not-okay to have two same-gender parents. This may be a dilemma for him and cause worrying problems for him in the day-to-day management of his life. In his case, he finds the need to hide extremely difficult and distressing.

Ryland therefore inevitably experiences his school context as an unfriendly and unsafe space. He has seen how others in similar circumstances are teased, and he therefore hides, keeps his “secret” with great care and does not disclose. He shows that he is aware that teasing, mocking and prejudice of this kind can be exceedingly painful and he does not want to experience that. The consequences that follow on disclosure in these circumstances have reduced Ryland to a vigilant and unhappy silence – a silence that is caused by fear.

*I have seen it happen to other kids at our school! Like, we were talking about stuff. Then some other kid would hear. Then he would go and tell the others, and then everyone would tell everyone else.<sup>9</sup> That's why I have to keep it a secret, so that people don't tease me. (lines 51-52,S2 & 61-64,S3; narrative p.5,6)*

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<sup>9</sup> Lines 60-62:2, S3.

C: Okay. Do you feel that you have to keep it a secret? How do you keep it a secret?

R: Agh no. So that people don't tease me.

This indeed explains why Ryland does not want to disclose his family background at school and why his life is dominated by fear. Even the activities of his co-mother are restricted by his fear.

*The lady also asked me about other situations, like when there are activities at school. Like, in the beginning of the year, there is a parent's evening. She asked me if Auntie Sandy goes with my mom. I nearly went into a frenzy when she asked that! I said, "Oh no! No! Only one of them goes to those school meetings. I definitely don't want both of them to go. If Auntie Sandy decides to go with my mom, I will run away from that school." (lines 59-74,S2; narrative p.6,7)*

Ryland's fear borders on disabling anxiety and panic. This last statement signals his desperation. He mentions in another extract as well:

*If anyone finds out, I will run away! (line 31,S2; narrative p.6).*

Ryland explains why he feels he needs to hide:

*They will push me around and tease me. They will laugh at me and never stop saying what a little wimp I am, and stuff like that. (lines 30-52,S2; narrative p.5)*

*I don't want to tell the other kids because they will come and wara-wara me with questions like, 'Ryland, tell us about your two mothers.' I know that if I told them about my mothers, they would just keep on pestering me and talking about it all the time, and I wouldn't even be able to go and play, like, rugby with my friends. If I told them, they would never stop saying, like, Ryland, this, and Ryland, that. No! They, I know, would never stop asking me stupid questions – and teasing me. You don't know what those kids are like! I know that it would be very, very bad for us if the kids at that school ever found out because they would never stop hassling me – just like they do with other kids at the school. (lines 348-352,S1 & 51-52,S2; narrative p.4).*

Ryland's words signal for me his need to be carefree so that he can do ordinary things like play rugby, get on with his work, and not to be bothered by emotional and relationship issues. Ryland's attitude to disclosure can be summed up in his words that I quoted earlier: "It's none of their business."

*I don't even want to think about it... When I start to think about it, I just go out running or something like that. We also all play rugby in the square. And I've got other stuff to keep me busy. I've also got my work to think about. And other stuff. Yes, that helps me to forget. (lines 59-74,S2; narrative p.6)*

This need of his to live in a relatively carefree and uncomplicated environment suggests that he may even choose to stay silent so as to ensure (as far as possible) that he will not be continuously bothered by probing questions or mocking insults – as opposed to remaining silent because of fear. In the absence of further evidence, I hypothesise that it is his fear of being ridiculed that keeps him silent at school and, to a lesser degree, at home.

Your Majesty, King Heterosexuality, and my esteemed fellow listeners: I feel that now might be a suitable time for me to share some of my thoughts about what I have just been exploring with you. While I have been looking at the sense of being okay of the children whom I have been studying, I have constantly had to ask myself where this material is coming from. Are my interpretations really evident in

the data, or is it me speaking even though I have been extremely careful not to influence my interpretation with my own quest. At one stage I framed the children's sense of being okay or not okay in terms of *protection*. And, yes, some children need to be protected as they negotiate the processes between their inner and outer lives. But why should I feel a need to protect them? I felt this need especially strongly as I worked with Ryland's narrative. Every time I look at his story, I am overwhelmed by the need to "mother" him – to *protect* him (so to speak). Although he is coping well under the circumstances, this feeling arose in me as I focused on the minute details of his life and the problems with which he is struggling. However, his parents are supporting him, they *are* aware of his journey and his process, and they walk alongside him every step of the way. But let me return to my original question. Why am I focusing on protection? I feel a great need to protect him and all the other children in this study from the insults, the derogatory remarks, the mindless ignorance and the naïveté that all gay people, their parents, and I have had to endure in our lives. I feel a deep need to frame "being gay" as nothing more than a preference. We are all human beings, and there is so much more to being human than simply identity (of which sexual identity is but a limited part).

Let me now tie up (summarise) this Ribbon by looking at the points that emerged in Ribbon One.

From this study it is evident that children growing up in same-gendered families experience varied degrees of *being okay* and/or *being not okay* because they have same-gender parents. Being okay/ being not okay becomes visible in how they share the phenomenon of having two mothers with others, and how they link this to their feelings about disclosure and non-disclosure. At times they are willing to disclose. At other times they will not disclose. Thus, there are two ways in which being okay manifests. The first is being okay with the sexuality of one's parents.

The second is being okay in terms of disclosing or not disclosing. Non-disclosure and being not okay, on the other hand, can therefore be associated with each other.

I cannot separate the children's sense of being okay from the interaction that these children have with others. Thus there are many factors that will enhance a child's conviction of being okay. These include a supportive environment that will consist of (among other factors) friends who react favourably to disclosure, friends who "just seem to know", and friends who give positive feedback that is reinforced by statements like "It's nothing" or "It does not bother me". Such attitudes sustain and enhance the children's sense of being okay. Another source of support for some of the children is contact with other children who are growing up in same-gendered families (as was the case with Tom, Luanne and Carl). They either receive support directly from these other children, or they are reassured by just knowing that they are not the only same-gendered family in the universe!

The degree of openness on the part of the children's parents also serves as a support. Thus parents may be actively supportive *before* the child's enrolment at a school (as in the case of Luanne). Or else they may actively challenge the school and demand that justice be done when incidents of mocking occur (as in the case of Kashni and Carl). Or they may provide more indirect forms of emotional support (as in the case of Erid). The children's sense of being okay is inseparable from the support that they receive from their parents.

I now come to ask myself how and when children from same-gendered families disclose from a position of being okay.

Most of the children in my study realise *that they cannot hide* the fact that they have same-gender parents (two mothers) from the world. They therefore resort to being as straightforward as prudence, circumstances and common sense allow, and they utilise truth, honesty and openness to good effect when their significant

relationships are at stake. They feel that the other (significant) people who cross their life path should know about their situation and that they should feel open and comfortable with it. If this doesn't happen, they feel that problems will inevitably arise. They are all fully aware that by disclosing they risk losing someone's acceptance and the possibility of an intimate relationship. But if a more authentic relationship is to develop, they know that full disclosure and openness are necessary. Disclosure then serves both to enhance and support authentic relationships and to safeguard friendships. They thus use indications of uncertainty and/or discomfort as signals that warn them that the time has come to intervene and disclose. Disclosure then serves to dispel feelings of awkwardness and uncertainty. It also serves to clarify existing situations in a way that enhances mutual understanding, honesty and openness. These children also realise that visible signs of their mothers' sexual orientation (actions such as holding hands or calling each other by special names) might cause uneasiness in their friends. They also know that disclosure will either prevent or minimise such uneasiness in their friends.

Some of the children (Kashni, Danielle) take great care to prepare their friends beforehand so that they will be at ease with their family's structure. They want to disclose to their friends *before* their friends hear it from someone else, and they want to be in a position to handle any possible but unforeseen consequences themselves. Others (Tom, Kim) disclose whenever an opportunity arises, for example, they will disclose if they notice a change in their friends' behaviour. Sometimes a disclosure will happen spontaneously as when a friend inadvertently asks a leading question (Carl). Most of the children are sensitive about how their friends might react, and they take care of their concerns or feelings after disclosing. Even though all these children know that disclosure is necessary if relationships are to develop and thrive, the actual process of deciding when to disclose and the possibility of foreseeing all possible reactions is more difficult to negotiate. Kashni describes three possible scenarios that she has encountered. All of these relate to the experiences that the

other children in this study had. At times, she can share easily. The person is open, tolerant and not hostile, and she can disclose in a straightforward and fluent manner. Sometimes an event will occur that she will identify as an opportunity in which to disclose. At other times, she is at a loss about how to approach another person. She finds it difficult to know what to expect, and she therefore feels that she needs to get to know that person better before she can continue the process. In such cases, she becomes extremely sensitive to whether that person is open-minded and non-judgemental or not. Carl also requires this precondition to be operative before he will disclose. He first needs to know someone and need to trust them completely.

Some disclose in a straightforward manner (Tom, Kashni), and invite questions or commentary (Tom, Carl). Others will wait until their friends ask them the leading question (Danielle, Luanne). Tom is of the opinion that his friends ask him just to confirm what they already know. Most of the time it is a one-off event that happens when a friend comes to visit them for the first time. After that "it is like old news."<sup>10</sup> But this explains why disclosure can be a continuous process: new people are crossing their paths all the time.

Disclosure may also happen differently in public and private spheres. Some of the children find disclosing to a more intimate circle of friends or one's immediate family is easier (Luanne, Kashni), while for others (Kim), the more distant the person to whom they wish to disclose, and the less they know of the "secret", the easier they find it to disclose.

Being okay also highlights the contrast with those who do not feel okay with the reality of same-gender parenthood, either because they know no same-gendered families or because of other reasons such as their moral or religious values. While the children of same-gendered families' sense of being okay is not always directly



stated, it filters through their observations of their peers' and their friends' reactions. Their sense of being okay may also be shaken by the hostility or ignorance of other people's reactions. Children who grow up in same-gendered families therefore know that it is perfectly okay *not* to disclose in some situations.

Some of the children of same-gendered families have an ability to anticipate apprehension, anxiety or uneasiness in others (Tom, Kashni). They have the ability to read and interpret social cues and therefore to respond proactively. While they might be okay in the safety of their circles of intimate friends, they may be less okay when exposed to the hostility of others. This may disrupt and destabilise their sense of being okay. This happened, for example, to Luanne, and to Kim and Kashni, who were teased in front of other children. Alternately, they might speak out, as Carl did when he was asked about his parents, or as Tom did when he told his whole class at school that he has two same-gender parents (mothers).

It is an incontrovertible assertion that negative and/or judgemental remarks motivated by conservative ideologies, ignorance or even unadulterated spite and cruelty, will reduce any person's willingness to be open and to disclose. The children's awareness that different viewpoints do exist in society influences the viability of their disclosure processes. Kim for example will disclose on the basis of what she intuits another person's opinions and attitudes to be. She therefore limits her disclosure to a few friends who are either gay themselves or who have gay friends. Kashni keeps quiet when she encounters biases in others. Carl, whose classmates "forced" him (in a certain sense) to disclose, did not remain silent. He decided to share fully. An awareness that people may judge and reject them, causes some children to change significant details when they meet new people. Thus, for example, they might describe the co-mom as an "aunt" or "friend" of their mother. This kind of masked disclosure permits them to protect themselves and their parents, and it usually discourages (sensitive) people from asking any further

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<sup>10</sup> Tom's narrative, p.16 (Addenda E: CD-Rom).

probing questions. Kim states that she prefers to choose those whom she will tell (“Not all of these people need to know”<sup>11</sup>) because sexual orientation is such a deeply personal (and frequently controversial) component of one’s life. Like Kim, Danielle is aware of her mother’s position. Her love for – and loyalty to – her mother dictates that she will not disclose intimate information if she feels that it might harm her mother or have a negative impact on her mother’s relationships.

It seems as if these children are aware of the difference between denial and discretion. Some of the children verbalised that different people have different beliefs about what is moral and what is not. Most of them regard discretion as an effective strategy for protecting relationships and for respecting the opinions and values of others (although they might not agree with them). In an important sense, they are preserving the stability of the social and family order by appearing to pay homage to a set of societal values with which they might privately disagree.

Sometimes they will remain silent and wait until someone confronts or asks them. This indicates caution (and possible even fear or suppressed panic, as in the case of Ryland), and a need to protect the self and one’s family from negative consequences. They are aware that one has to be intelligently selective about the people to whom one will disclose. They all know that not everyone is sympathetic to the concept of same-gender parents. Some of them therefore construct the gayness of their mothers as a secret and regard it as sensitive information that they should not disclose to anyone.

At times the children of same-gender parents experience such a strong sense of being okay in spite of having same-gender parents that they cannot understand why this should bother anyone else. It is as though they refrain from accepting responsibility for anyone else’s *inability* to feel that having same-gender parents and same-gendered families is an acceptable alternative to having the more usual

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<sup>11</sup> Kim’s narrative, p.11 (Addenda E: CD-Rom).

opposite-gender parents. Carl and Luanne, for example, assume that their friends know what their domestic situation entails, and that any struggle that they might have in coming to terms with their family constellation is not their problem. If also feel that the onus is on their friends to ask questions if they either do not know or else suspect – and therefore feel uneasy and uncomfortable. Kim takes the position that having same-gender parents is an undeniable part of her family's reality ("It is our own small world"<sup>12</sup>) – that it is a "given" and therefore non-negotiable. These more outgoing children are also not bothered by the possibility that someone might find out, because having same-gender parents are not an issue for them. They therefore do not fear "public opinion" and I surmise that they seldom even think about it. For them, their families are "ordinary". Because their family structure is not an issue for them, they do not feel a need to disclose. They obviously also feel that if anyone else were to find out, the outcome for them and their families would not be disturbing or anxiety-provoking. "Exposure" does not disturb their sense of being okay because, as far as they are concerned, "It's nothing", it is ordinary.

In spite of this, there are times when even they are reluctant to disclose and they become irritated if they are pushed to share the intimate details of their lives. In some cases, they do not like prying into their family constellation and try to prevent or cut short expository analyses or questions (Danielle, Kim). They connect a sense of being okay on this level with an absence of "talking" or "asking", and so they attempt to silence or cut short explanations, worries, concerns or awkward questions (Kashni, Ryland, Erid, Danielle).

I propose that children growing up in same-gendered families experience different levels of being okay and that because of this, they express different levels of disclosure. I indicated earlier in the discussion that these children are sometimes willing to disclose and sometimes not, but that even this "non- disclosure" arises out of a sense of being okay. The sensitivity they reveal in recognising other

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<sup>12</sup> Kim's narrative, p.11 (Addenda E: CD-Rom).

people's behaviours and perceptions makes them aware of the possibility of teasing, mocking and prejudice. The possibility of a negative outcome in a certain situation might cause them to opt for silence rather than disclosure as a preventative measure in awkward circumstances. Most frequently, it is the perceived risk of arousing prejudice and discrimination, rather than the actual event itself that makes them decide in favour of silence. In addition, most of them at one time or another have been teased, mocked and ridiculed about their parents' sexuality, and this makes them wary about the possibility of that it could happen again. Staying silent confers significant benefits. Remaining silent means that they are not exposed to the negative reactions of others, and this relieves them of the necessity of having to process their own or their friends' negative emotions or discomfort. I therefore regard silence (not disclosing) as an effective strategy for dealing with stereotypical perceptions. As a matter of course, they also deliberately try to avoid other children who are likely to vent prejudice about same-gender parents. In other words, they have learned to be practical and proactive in the organisation of their daily lives. These qualities significantly enhance their ability to live productive and rational lives.

There are however instances where non-disclosure suggests to me that the child involved is *not being okay* because he or she has same-gender parents. Although this is especially evident in Ryland's story, this surfaced with some of the other children as well. The disadvantage of *not* disclosing when non-disclosure stems from fear is that they continue to live with the fear that someone might find out (Ryland), and that they continue to feel that they might be ostracised, isolated or worse if their mothers' sexual orientation should become known. For such children, forming new friendships becomes an anxiety-provoking and fragile trade-off between trying to get to know someone and allowing them to get to know oneself while at the same time remaining scared of what might happen if the "secret" should slip out. These children frame their attempts to make friends against the hurt and humiliation they remember when previous attempts produced uncomfortable consequences and

hurtful incidents and reactions. One of them (Ryland) feels guilty about lying and not telling the truth, while another (Kim) refrains from disclosing so that she will be spared unwanted sympathy from her friends. Not being okay when others know about their parents' sexual orientation creates a need for privacy and silence, and such privacy can sometimes be maintained by non-disclosure.

My investigation of the interaction between these children and others, between their personal stories and the landscape beyond their homes, leads me to conclude that these children negotiate their position with the outside world from these three different positions: (1) a sense of being okay when one discloses, (2) a sense of being okay not to disclose, and (3) complete non-disclosure and an accompanying sense of being not okay.

I would now like to share with you some incidents and observations that will help co-construct even more detailed analyses of these children and their unique situations. As I examined the stories of these children who grow up in same-gendered families, I became aware of a specific and unique incident (or incidents) in each child's life that made a distinctive and crucial impact on them. I shall refer to these events or incidents that serve an important purpose as "critical incidents". I shall therefore call the following section:



**Ribbon Two**



**"Critical incidents"**

Critical incidents serve different purposes in the lives of the children. Because of the nature of the data creation process in this study and my focus on the experiences of children who have same-gender parents, these critical incidents relate mostly to disclosure or non-disclosure, or to confrontations engendered by heterosexist remarks. I am making the assumption that these critical incidents have changed the way in which these children would usually negotiate challenging situations. For

some, the critical incident became the deciding factor that led them to decide whether to tell or not to tell, to disclose or not to disclose. When they disclose, these children will also have had to decide whether they intend to tell the “whole truth” or whether they will only disclose in some minimal way. In the case of others, their private lives have already been made public through some agency, and as a consequence they have no control over whether to disclose or not. For others, incessant daily confrontations with the heterosexist discourses that dominate the minds, thoughts and behaviour of their peers, close friends, other (non-domestic) parents and teachers challenges them either to react or to choose the strategy of silence. I call these incidents “critical” because they precipitate a crucial change in the lives of these children. Because such critical incidents are not the same for each child, I once again feel the distinctiveness and uniqueness that characterises the stories of each of these children.

**Carl’s** critical incident was the occasion when he “came out” about his two same-gender parents to his class mates. As Susan says: “Carl himself was the one who came out about our relationship” (*line 85,S1; narrative p.6*). Although a few of Carl’s friends and his (ex)-girlfriend knew about his domestic situation, he himself made the crucial decision to be “out” and open about his same-gender parents in a more public way.

*It happened last year, at our inauguration as school prefects for the new year. Susan was standing quietly there near the door because she didn’t want to be part of the group photograph. Penny, my birth mother, was already standing in the group for the photograph. So I called over to Susan, and said, “Come on, Susan!” So she came over.*

*After the photos had been taken, a few of us were standing around in a group. Then one of the guys (they were not exactly afraid, but you could see the apprehension in their eyes), asked me “Do you have two mothers, Carl? Or is the one lady your mother and the other lady your step-mother?” Something like that. I can’t really remember their exact words...*

...

*When they had recovered from that shock, they said, “But she’s a woman!”*

*And so I said, “So?”*

*And after that, they never again asked me any other questions about my parents. (lines 431-448,S2; narrative p.7,8)*

Since Carl had not decided beforehand about whether or not he wanted to disclose this information, he was in a sense “forced” to decide whether he would tell the “whole truth”, or whether he would minimise the disclosure by framing Susan as an “aunt” or “friend” of his mother. From the way in which Carl describes the manner in which the question was put to him, I suspect that there might have been some element of mockery from the other school leaders. But Carl chose not to focus on that. Instead he chose to “come out” with such honesty and directness in disclosing the special relationship that he has with Susan (whom he regards as his “dad”) that his critics must have been totally disarmed. The relationship between Susan and Carl transcends all conventional gender boundaries and therefore subverts all conventional constructions of so-called masculine and feminine characteristics. Although it would be both fruitful and rewarding to explore the various ways in which Carl constructs Susan as his “dad”, a detailed examination would be beyond the scope of this thesis. But the phenomenon itself is so fascinating that I would like to make a few observations before moving on.

I wonder whether Carl is deliberately subverting and parodying the symbolism and structure of heterosexual families, or whether the situation arose because Carl and Susan’s personalities and ways of coping with challenges are so similar that they just naturally slipped into these roles? Did Carl react by trying to shock his class mates because they had tried to shock (or undermine) him by posing such a direct question? Did Carl use this direct manner of disclosure to minimise or prevent further questions from ever arising again in the future? Or did Carl simply speak spontaneously from his heart, oblivious to these undercurrents? The data seems to indicate that Susan consciously creates and plays this “dad” role in the family. She herself says:

*Well, I mean, since I’m the “butch” partner in this relationship, I naturally tend to think of myself as the father figure – as “dad”. I certainly try to be! (lines 171-172,S3; narrative p.26)*

*Perhaps because I play the father role? I suppose that when a straight father and son walk together down a street, the father would say things like, “Look at that girl!” or*

*“Isn’t that a pretty girl?” Things like that. I guess I just saw that as my role. (lines 81-86,S4; narrative p.29)*

Carl defines what he understands by an ideal father figure.

*Let me see. A “father figure” is someone with whom you can share everything. So, because I’m the son, I share everything with Susan. Of course, I talk to my mom as well. But mostly, I talk to Susan. (lines 177-178,S3; narrative p.27)*

This brings me to wonder about the kind of power that women might appropriate if – as woman – they were to engage in traditionally “male” activities and be allowed to live out various masculine roles in society. As Susan tells in the interviews,<sup>13</sup> Penny’s (deceased) father used to introduce her to his friends as his son-in-law, and she used to sit with the men and drink beer while the women were in the kitchen. Susan therefore transcends the stereotypical view of gender roles that bind women to female activities like being responsible for the “work in the kitchen”. Susan “fathers” Carl – although her gender is not in doubt. She instinctively performs the role of father in Carl’s life with such conspicuous success that her “fatherly” role is even explicitly acknowledged on extended family occasions such as family “braais” (barbecues). Susan simply discounts conventional stereotypes and conspicuously lives out masculine roles in her daily life.

Dunne (2000:24) argues that ideas about singularity and the exclusivity of the identity of “Mum” are so powerful that parenting is polarised along lines of gender in a social world that is structured by heterosexual norms. She claims in her research that a lot of parents were confronted with other people’s “confusions” or curiosity about the status of the mothers, of who the birth-mother is, and what the social mother’s role is. Muzio (1999:203) gives her own valuable gloss on this view. She asserts that it is the *differentiation between women*, and not the different-ness

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<sup>13</sup> Lines 71-72:2, S3.

Her father-in-law used to introduce her as his “son-in-law”, and then she had to sit with the men and drink beer while the women were in the kitchen.

*Original Afrikaans:*

Haar skoonpa het haar aan al sy pelle voorgestel as sy skoonseun, en dat sy dan by mans moet sit en bier drink, terwyl die vrouens in die kombuis is.



between stereotypical masculine and feminine relational patterns, that needs clarification. The point that Carl and his co-mother and “dad”, Susan, raise here by implication is that parenting is a product of more than just the gender of a person concerned. It is also about the social and practical role that that a person fulfils in the child’s life (Malone & Cleary, 2002:275).

One might sum up by saying that Carl’s critical incident was a way for him to disclose his family constellation in a more public manner and forum than he had ever done before. Although it was a disclosure made under almost irresistible pressure in a public place, Carl responded to the question with a full and valuable admission about Susan’s extremely nurturing (even though unorthodox) role in his life. He could have responded in others ways by, for example, denying the truth or by framing Susan, his co-mother, as an “aunt” or “friend” of his mother. But he chose instead to frame her in a much more powerful and decisive way. He depicted Susan proudly as his “dad”. By doing this, he demonstrated his own strength of character and moral fibre in a potentially compromising situation. Even though he and his family had been inadvertently exposed, Carl quickly regained control of the situation and made the process of disclosure his own. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this was a defining moment in Carl’s life, and that he established the honour and humanity of his family and his same-gender mothers by exercising his courage, integrity, intelligence and valour in a moment of crisis.

Sadly, exposure does not necessarily lead to regaining control. **Kashni**’s critical incident was significantly influenced by her mother’s involvement. I regard this particular incident as critical for Kashni when I examine it in the context of the whole of Kashni’s story as I know it. In all our conversations *except this one*, Kashni described and explained to me how she sensed other people’s reactions and behaviours, how she acted on these intuitions, and how she managed the uneasiness that arose in her on those occasions. It was only in this instance that

Kashni admitted to herself and to me that she also had problems. “I have had a few problems,” she said (line 127,S1; narrative p.12).

*One day these boys were having a go at me and they just went too far and they said things like ‘You are a lesbian’ and ‘There’s something funny about your mother.’ So I told my mother, and – can you believe it? – she (it was mom Anriëtte), went to school and she talked first to the principal, and then to my teacher, and then she came and spoke to the whole class. And then she called these boys to the front of the class and said, ‘Okay, if I ever hear that you have called my daughter a lesbian, I will phone your parents, and then I will lay charges against you for libel. And your parents will have to pay all the legal fees of the court action...’. And then she said, ‘And – by the way – it’s not Kashni who is a lesbian. It’s us! If you ever have a problem with that, then you come and tell us.’ And of course it never was a problem again. (lines 127-141,S1; narrative p.13)*

What happened in this incident is in enormous contrast to the way in which Kashni usually controls situations by initially observing the behaviour and reactions of others and then intervening on her own terms. But in this incident I observe first that Kashni is teased and supposedly insulted by remarks that are intended to be derogatory. Significantly, the boys try to insult Kashni by saying, “You are a lesbian” – which Kashni is not. It is interesting to note that in the ignorance of these boys, merely *being* a lesbian would constitute an insult. Their undoing then (so graphically portrayed in the passage above) is that they go on to say that there is something “funny” about Kashni’s mother. Kashni’s mother, Anriëtte, then decided to step in and take control of the situation and by so doing, removed responsibility for the resolving of the situation from Kashni (her minor dependent). Anriëtte’s decisively threatening action in the classroom served to create an awareness in the school that same-gender parenting is a responsible and legitimate form of parenting. Her powerful mothering and nurturing action in this case caused her to regain control of the situation by shifting the balance of power between the children and the adults, and to create a memorable and significant incident in the history of the school. It also served as an object lesson in the need to respect the boundaries between the private and personal sphere and the public sphere of interest and action. However awkward and embarrassing it must have been for Kashni, it defined the need for *respect* on the part of the public (represented in this case by the

boys and school) for alternative identities – in this case, sexual orientations and same-gendered families. Anriëtte acted in a powerful way that Kashni herself could never have done. Of course Kashni felt uncomfortable, but my guess is that Kashni felt secretly proud of her mother. Perhaps her feeling “tearful” and “very quiet and silent inside” indicated *relief* that the matter had been taken out of her hands?

*So I ask Kashni how she felt when one of her moms walked into that room. Kashni's facial expression tells it all. But she answers and says, "It was 'heavy' embarrassing. I had my arms over my head during the whole thing. I felt very uncomfortable. I don't really know how to explain it. I felt kind of sad. Tearful, and emotional. But I also felt very quiet and silent inside. Now I'm definitely not a quiet person. I'm actually a very loud person. I talk a lot in classes and give my opinions and sometimes the teachers don't like it. I interrupt their classes with jokes and all that kind of thing. But I'm always the first one they get to know. But when that happened, I was just very quiet, and I didn't say anything to anybody. (lines 145-161,S1; narrative p.14)*

I propose that this was Kashni's critical incident because of her behavioural changes in this specific situation and because of how much this experience meant to her. What did Kashni's silence mean in this situation? Obviously she felt exposed (powerful parental intervention). For once, she was not in control (her favoured mode), and for once she was not able to take responsibility for choosing those to whom she would disclose. In this case someone else was managing Kashni's disclosure for her. Possibly Kashni chose silence as an effective strategy to manage *this* particular situation. This would suggest that Kashni's behaviour in this situation was situation-specific: even though Kashni might have been silenced here, I infer that she would not easily be silenced in other situations that involved her own heterosexual orientation or that of her same-gender parents. According to Kashni herself, this incident might have marked the dividing line between her more carefree years when she was younger and the period after this incident when she became increasingly sensitive to other people's attitudes to same-gendered families. After this incident, she was always more careful and aware of other people's reactions, and she made it her business to prevent difficulties connected to her same-gendered family from arising.

*"Did any of them ever risk saying anything like that to you afterwards?"*

*"Oh, no."*

*"So that was probably the first time that something so serious happened?"*

*"Yes, and the last. In Grades Three and Four, nothing happened. It was fine. You just tell the whole class and they have no problems with it. I had lots of parties and everyone was at my home and both my moms were always there. And so of course there were no problems. But as they get older, things begin to change." (lines 175-180 & 196-205,S1; narrative p.14,15)*

Luanne's critical incident was of a completely different kind. It did not involve a question that had been directed to her in person, but a seemingly innocent comment – probably delivered in good faith – by one of her teachers. Nevertheless, if I deconstruct the remark made by this teacher, I become aware of just how prevalent ignorance about sexual orientations and same-gendered families is, and how "invisible" gayness is in schools. Even though her parents had been proactive in their arrangements and had visited the school in order to "clear" their sexual orientation with the principal and (by implication) the staff, this did not protect Luanne from ignorance and prejudice directed at the homosexual community in general. This confirms Bozett's (1987:5) finding while gays tend to be *collectively* rejected, individually they are not. In addition, because of the relative novelty and "invisibility" of same-gendered families in the community, the curriculum in schools does not make provision for educating children about same-gendered families and alternative sexual orientations. This, in turn, means that most teachers are ignorant about the need in both school and community for taking same-gendered families and children from such families into account. Without officially sanctioned education about same-gendered families and alternative sexual orientations, it can be problematic for children from same-gendered families to live in a way that integrates the interests of both home and school (Paechter, 2000:406). An atmosphere hostile to gay sexual orientation can become a reason why a child might prefer to remain in the closet about his or her parents' same-gender orientation. Koepke, Hare and Moran (1992:227) emphasise that ignorance about the true facts about homosexuality and same-gendered families is caused by the propagation of the same hostile stereotypical myths and prejudices that have been prevalent for years (centuries) in Western society. Even if a teacher does not regard

derogatory opinions about homosexuality as an example of stereotypical thinking, she or he exposes children to only one viewpoint out of a multitude of possible viewpoints if she or he does not state “the other side” (or different arguments) specifically and clearly.

*[Luanne says]: “I think it’s in Romans, chapter 1. A teacher once told us that if you ever do ‘it’, even once, the Lord will never forgive you because He did not create women for women or men for men. He made man and woman so that they could be together. That’s why it is supposed to be a very big sin.*

*“I actually find that very confusing,” she continues, “because – what if two people really love each other? Look at this new law that parliament has passed, it makes it legal for gay people to marry. And if one takes into account what the church said the other day.... Sometimes I just don’t understand what’s going on.” (lines 178-185,S3 & footnote 10; narrative p.7,8)*

Even though Luanne’s story informs us that she and her family carry on with their everyday activities and that they are seldom forced to disclose or explain their constellation, the statement that the teacher made brought up some very real difficulties for Luanne. Luanne was torn between accommodating the Bible verses as they have been currently translated and interpreted and propagated by some churches for nearly two millennia and the very real love that she has for her two mothers. Even the church that she belongs to (the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa) has officially altered its position about gay sexual orientation in the months prior to the writing of this text, Luanne is confused about where she herself fits into all of this. I felt personally aware of how difficult it must have been (and probably still is) for Luanne to interact with her mothers after she had heard and reflected on the teacher’s opinions. Luanne must have struggled intensely to come to terms with this. How in fact does she reconcile these heteronormative statements with her own personal life situation?

From what I could gather from Luanne, she merely continues as best she can with the routines of her daily life: “I just get on with my life” (*narrative p.9*). She does not think about her dilemma or mentions it to anyone – be they parent, friend, another teacher, a minister or a school counsellor. So to whom can she turn for help? Who

will offer her a balanced view that will allow her to make up her *own* mind? Or is the whole subject of homosexuality so charged with negative emotions and antiquated prejudice that it becomes impossible to discuss in a calm, balanced and rational way how homosexuality in all its manifestations has a valuable contribution to make to morality, values, religion, spirituality, love, sex, families, society and caring for our children? Will children simply be left to judge that which they do not understand? My views apart, this teacher's statement certainly introduced a strong homophobic influence and atmosphere into the school environment. Luanne opted for silence,<sup>14</sup> and not even she and her intimate friends discussed the incident. She remained silent because she probably experienced the homophobic statement of this teacher as a severe emotional and intellectual shock, and there was no precedent for discussing parental attitudes in this class. She therefore protected herself by silence.

*Oh no. But it was quite a shock. (line 186,S3; narrative p.8)*

*No one talks about their moms and dads at school. (line 201,S3; narrative p.5)*

However, her silence in the school and at home, is also silencing her parents, as they remain unaware of these incidents. And even if they did know or suspected that homophobic remarks would be made during Luanne's life, how would they manage it, or prevent it? But again, my focus is on the experiences of the children, and how they negotiate situations like these.

In **Erid's** case, he neither opted for silence – nor was he silenced.

*I look into Erid's large brown eyes and pursue a lead that he gave me at dinner. It involved an incident in which he hit another boy.*

*"So tell me about that boy that you hit. Why did you hit him?"*

*"He said things about my mom, and so I became angry," Erid says defiantly.*

*"Did he tease you?", I ask.*

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<sup>14</sup> Lines 197-199:4, S3.

C: (laughter) That is probably the best. Hmm. And did you all discussed it at school or...

L: No, we don't actually talk about it... We don't talk about it.

*Original Afrikaans:*

C: [lag] Dit is maar die beste... Imm, en het julle toe al by die skool daaroor gechat of...

L: Nee, ons praat nie eintlik daaroor nie... Ons praat nie daaroor nie

*Erid reacts strongly. "No. He didn't tease me. He said things about my mom."  
"Oh", I reply. "He said things about your mom." I reflect his words back to him.  
"How is that different from teasing you? Or is it the same?"  
Erid looks thoughtful. "It's the same. And it is different," he replies.  
"Okay, that makes sense. It wasn't about you, but about someone who belongs to  
you. How many times has this happened?"  
"Only a few times in this school. But lots of times in the other school."  
(lines 54:1-61:2,S1; 86-93:2,S2; narrative p.3-4)*

*After dinner, while Erid was taking his bath, one of his moms, Zané, had told me  
about the incident. She said: "A few weeks ago a boy in school said to him, 'Your  
mother wants to be a man,' and so he beat the boy up. As soon as he got into the car  
when we picked him up after school, he confessed to us what he had done because he  
knows that I don't approve of him doing that kind of thing. But Anriette [Erid's  
other mom] contradicted what I said by saying that, in her opinion, it is indeed  
necessary to act in that way under certain circumstances. Erid then told us that he  
couldn't have let such a situation pass without doing something. He said that he had  
to defend his mom's honour. (lines 59-63:2, K&E Parents S1; narrative p.4-5)*

Erid is motivated by a taunt aimed at his mother. He therefore, in the words of his mother, sprang into action to "defend his mom's honour". Because he was so angered by this insult (as he perceived it), he reacted with punitive violence. Interestingly, Erid's narrative and the discussion in Ribbon One show that he is a lad that goes quietly about his daily routine. He is not obsessively silent, but he avoids saying a lot or sharing much detail about himself. Erid's critical incident described above therefore describes a mode of behaviour which is an exception to his usual behaviour. Even though his mother (Zané) would prefer him not to handle these challenging situations in a violent manner, exposure elicits violent retribution from him.

As I discuss Tom, Danielle and Ryland, it is helpful to bear in mind that they are part of one family. Tom's critical incident centres around the divorce of his (their) parents, and the subsequent chain of events in which he learned about his mother's sexual orientation.

**Tom's** life changed when his parents divorced. Before the divorce of his parents (while they still lived together), he had almost no friends. This changed

dramatically after the divorce because he then found that he had the freedom to make new friends and to invite them to his home.

*Yes. Because most of my friends never knew me when my dad lived here. My dad just wouldn't allow anyone to come and visit us. So, when my mom and my dad still lived here together, I just never had any friends at all because, well, no-one came over, and we never did anything that involved other people. (lines 24-25,S2; narrative p.2-3)*

*When my mom eventually divorced my dad, that was another big event. But then I also started to get more friends because I was more upset and so I ended up talking to more people. (lines 129-131,S2; narrative p.13)*

*I felt so dead lonely at that time. So, kind of, rejected. More lost than anyone here. But then I started making great new friends... (lines 135-136,S2; narrative p.14)*

His feelings of desolation after the break up of his parents' marriage forced him to talk to other children, and this helped him to move on with his life. He then found many new congenial friends. Tom's critical incident therefore was precipitated by the divorce of his parents. Other events immediately *after* the divorce are also important for our understanding. It is essential to take these into account because they shed light on our understanding of how Tom came to terms with his mother's "new" sexual orientation. O'Connell's (1999:274) conclusion is similar to my own because she reports that some of her participants told her that it was the "dissolution of the original family" that was a far more significant event in their lives than their mother's apparent "change" in sexual orientation. In spite of this, the mother's coming out remained pivotal because it signalled and/or confirmed the end of the parents' marriage. This is basically what Tom relates in the following extract:

*Even when they were splitting, I still thought, hoped, that they might get back together again. But then my mom ended up with somebody else, with this other lady. And my new friends were coming round a lot. (lines 136-140,S2; narrative p.14,15)*

His newly found friendships remain a common theme throughout his story, emphasising its importance to him. His discussion of what happened after the divorce reveals the changing circumstances in their home and his relationship with his mother.



*And my mom didn't even tell me! Nothing. For the whole year I had my private suspicions about what was really going on behind the scenes, and I kept trying to figure it all out... I was looking on cell phones. I would get hold of my mom's cell phone and read her text messages. And sometimes I would creep silently around so that I could spy on them when they were alone together. It was wrong of me, I suppose. But I was trying to put all the pieces together... Well, basically, I found out that my mother was having an affair with this other woman... I use to get all nervous and feel all like... like, I needed to know what was going on... I just wanted to know for myself. But, it's strange, the moment I knew what was going on, my mom told me. But, by then, it was, like, old news. (lines 138-174,S2; narrative p.15-16)*

Because Tom was lonely and did not know what was going on, he felt a desperate need to know. The secrecy that surrounded these events made him feel left out, alone and disempowered. He became angry with his mother for being disempowered and this led him to take action in various ways. He therefore began to “investigate” what she was doing until he felt properly informed. Tom only felt in control, so to speak, once he had gathered the necessary information, confirmed his mother’s “new” sexual orientation, and knew who her new partner was. But his comment (below) may indicate that he was not primarily focused on his mother’s sexual orientation, but that the secrecy between his mother and her new partner acted as a hindrance to his continued relationship with his mother. (He was also dissatisfied with the amount of attention that they as children received from his mother.)

*“How did you feel about your mom falling in love with another lady?”  
“I didn't mind that. I just wanted her to tell me what was happening. Then I wouldn't have felt so... so... like, lost. You must understand that my mom was not giving us enough attention. She was always out there.” (lines 177-181,S2; narrative p.16)*

Once his need for accurate knowledge had been satisfied, he felt more empowered. Once this happened, his anger subsided and he focused on what brought him real personal pleasure: his new found friendships.

*“You were obviously deeply aware that your mother was no longer together with your dad, but that she had moved on to being with Theresa. How did you feel about that? And what did you think about your mother at that time?”*

*"To be honest, I was trying very hard not to think of anything at all and I just concentrated on hanging out with these new friends of mine. That was such a pleasure." (lines 227-231,S2; narrative p.20,21)*

Tom found adapting to his mother's new partner was a real challenge. But this challenge might have had more to do with Theresa's personality and his relationship with her than with the divorce and his mother's sexual orientation. His statement also reveals some of the problems of adapting to new siblings in a blended family because Theresa also had children of her own that were incorporated into the new family.

*Then Aunt Theresa, she was mom's first partner, she came over and began to live here. Then we all moved in. I've never liked Aunt Theresa, not ever, not from the very first moment that I met her. When I realised for the first time that my mother was like that, I didn't mind. But when I met her... that shocked me, and then I became very angry... I felt like running away and never coming back... I've just never liked her [Theresa] at any stage in my life. She never made any effort whatsoever to be pleasant to me. She always... I never... I didn't expect anything from her, and I have never.... But she always tried to make me do stupid things – things that I hate. Things like looking after her children, and all that stuff. And her twins! ... I also never had any privacy. I couldn't go to the bathroom. I couldn't do anything. It simply wasn't my house anymore... Just the things she did. I don't know. She was always trying to challenge me in some way or another... Or she'll occasionally do something nice – just to get my mom on her side... She will push in between us, and then back out again." (lines 201-212,214-252,258-262,295-302 & 319-323,S2; narrative p.17-20)*

Even though Tom was not primarily concerned with his mother's sexual orientation, there were aspects of it that he was concerned about.

*I was wondering how they are going to do everything, like, divide the household tasks. But my mother, she never used to work in the house. She just never did anything. Certainly no heavy housework. She wasn't used to anything like that. It was my dad who did everything in and about the house. (lines 262-265,S2; narrative p.23)*

Tom thus pondered the practicalities of everyday life, as well as more intimate and personal details.

*My mom and dad, at a later stage, they used to get me alone and tell me about marriage, and what marriage is all about. They would tell me that marriage must be between a man and a woman. So, of course, that made me wonder how they would ever get married... But I've gradually figured it out. Like my mom told me that gay*

*people never get married, but that they will make promises to each other if they are really serious. (lines 281-283,S2; narrative p.23,24)*

*(And Danielle) used to tell me everything. I was amazed at how much she knew... That just like a boyfriend and girlfriend can hold hands, so a girlfriend and a girlfriend can also hold hands. They hug, you know... Just little things like that. (lines 341-342,S2; narrative p.25)*

As opposed to the previous four instances (Carl, Luanne, Erid, Kashni), Tom's critical incident does not stem from his mother's sexual orientation as such. His life changed because of his parents' divorce and the resulting new friendships that came into his life. Furthermore, these friendships, especially with children who have same-gender parents like Tom, helped him in his process of coming to terms with his mother's new lifestyle (as is shown in Ribbon One).

**Danielle's** critical incident is more difficult to identify. Because she was only 11 years old and because she felt relief when her parents divorced (see Ribbon Three), she seems to have made a fairly good adjustment to her new family constellation. As I read her story over and over again, I struggled to find *the* critical incident that made a profound impact on her life.

One possibility is the teasing that she experienced because she likes "boy-things". This may signal the existence of gender role tension in her life.

*I am a girl. But I don't like wearing girl dresses. But I do sometimes because it makes my mom happy. I also make them happy when I wear a girl's T-shirt and a boy's pants ... I feel comfortable in boy clothes... When you are a girl, you can't do much. So I do boy and girl things. Like, I have my boy moments, and I have my girl moments. (lines 62-64,70-73 & 77-78,S2; narrative p.4,6)*

*And she (Danielle's friend) looked at me and said 'You look like a boy.' And so I said, 'I am sorry. I have these boyish moments, thank you very much.' And then she teased me and then I began to cry because... then she turns around and looks at me in this funny way and says, 'I am not going to play with you anymore.' Then I say, 'Why?' And she says, 'Because you, like, wear boy's clothes, and I can't hang out with a boy.' Then I begin to cry and say, 'Why do you say that, Anel? Don't you also have boy moments? Do you have a problem with that?' Then she says, 'I thought that... I thought you... I thought that you knew that I thought you look nice.' (lines 152-164,S2; narrative p.8,9)*

Then there was the occasion when Danielle's friend, Alicia, challenged Danielle directly with confrontational questions because she did not accept her attempt to get by with a masked disclosure.

*Oh yes, like, Alicia asked me, 'Are they together? Do they sleep together?' Then I was, like, 'Umm, yes. Where else would she sleep?' Alicia really caught me with that question. (lines 298-299,S2; narrative p.13)*

Another possible incident might be when her other friend, Shirley, who knew before her, encouraged her to confront her mother.

*"No, she didn't tell me", Danielle replies. "She only said: 'I know a secret that you have to ask your mom'. I thought about this, and then I said, "What must I ask my mom?"*

*And Shirley replied, "Just ask your mom whatever comes into your mind...". And so I did that. I asked my mom about what was on my mind. And my mother listened, and then she said "Yes. It is all true." (lines 211-214,S2; narrative p.17)*

Or could Danielle's critical incident be her disclosure to Karen, the daughter of her mom's first partner, whom she promised not to tell.

*Danielle looks slightly embarrassed. "Because I did tell her," she confesses. Then she bursts out laughing. "I couldn't hold it back! I just had to tell her!" ...*

*Danielle whispers. "I said to her, 'Karen, do you know that our mothers and all of them are, like... together?' Danielle mimics Karen's expression of shock and surprise. Then Karen said, like, 'Ooo-ooh!' Then I told her, "But listen, Karen. I am not supposed to tell you what I have just said, now. Remember that. You have not heard what I have said.'" (lines 163,172-174,S3; narrative p.21)*

But what changed her life dramatically? I must conclude after having examined her story that there is no single event that can be said to be the exception. Perhaps all the small incidents cumulatively changed her and her life's course, although she seems always to accept whatever life throws at her.

Because of the role that exposure, silence and secrecy seemed to play in some of the other children's lives, I decided to reread Danielle's story and apply these constructs to her story.

*I am not going to tell them, ... I'm not going to tell anybody... It's a secret. (line 149,S2; narrative p.9)*

*They will tease me, ... It is difficult. There are not many people that are like that. And it's just... They will do something to me, like kill me or something. Or they would say, 'At least my parents are better than yours.' (lines 262-266,S2; narrative p.10)*

*I don't actually know what they're going to do. I just get a bad feeling that they're going to do something. (lines 279-280,S2; narrative p.11)*

*Only my best friends know. Only my best friends. They are allowed to know everything about me. (lines 309-310,S2; narrative p.12)*

*I don't actually share my secret. I only share that secret with my best friends... (line 207,S2; narrative p.17)*

Danielle experiences trust and openness with her friends because they represent the more private and personal sphere of her life. This description of Danielle reveals her perceived fear of disclosure and of letting her secret be exposed in public view. She chooses silence in order to protect herself from the ridicule that she predicts will be the consequence. But because such ridicule has never happened, it can probably not be regarded as a critical incident in her life's journey. But, as with Ryland, the *perceived* fear may well constitute the critical incident that Danielle experiences. Because these two children are the youngest of my research partners and because enough time has not yet elapsed in which they can reflect (as in the case of Carl or Kim), they might not yet have encountered a critical incident in their lives. With luck, they may never do so.

As I noted, **Ryland's** awareness of the *possibility* of being ridiculed at any time may constitutes the critical incident through which he is currently living.

*That's why I have to keep it a secret, so that people don't tease me... If anyone finds out, I'll run away from school! (lines 31,74,S2 & 61-63,S3; narrative p.6)*

Ryland feels dangerously exposed – even though his very close friends and his family do not know this. Because he is silent in the public sphere, he lives in fear

that he might be exposed. Ryland also chooses the strategy of silence to protect himself.

*No one talks about it because no one knows about it. It's only my family that knows about it, and a few other close people like Anna. It's not wrong! There is nothing wrong with it. We don't tell the children at school – and that's how I want to keep it. Now if Danielle (for example) goes and tells everyone, 'I've got two mothers at home', then we will have big problems to deal with. (lines 342-346,S1; narrative p.3)*

**Kim's** describes her critical incident in intense details. It centres around her mother's coming out and how she experienced this as having a profound and significant influence on her life. For me, Kim's story is characterised by *silences*. Kim has used this strategy for a long time to negotiate her personal narrative in relation to the outside world. Even now, although she has enrolled in a tertiary educational institution and made some good new friends, she only occasionally breaks her silence and shares some of her experiences in a limited way with these friends.

I deduce from what she has shared with me that her difficulties began mostly after her parents divorce and when she and her brother sensed that something new was happening in their family.

*Of course it was something completely new to us, and neither of us really understood completely what it all meant. But what we did know was that it was not the same as it used to be between my parents... We knew of course what was happening, but we never put it into words. Never. I just couldn't find it in myself to say to him, 'You know what? This is actually what is happening.' (lines 52-54,79 & 81,S2; narrative p.14 & 16)*

Kim reports that at times silence reigned between her and her brother, and between them and their mother. The consequence of this secrecy and silence was that Kim became extremely frustrated with her mother and with “not knowing” what was really happening. It seems as though Kim was annoyed with the confusion she felt as a result of not her knowing and of the disempowerment she felt as she tried to come to terms with her mother's “new” sexual orientation without understanding the details of her mother's varied social and sexual life.

*“It was so damned confusing,” Kim says, “because my mom had two or three boyfriends. And then they would go and eat out, and not take us along. Or if we were visiting friends, then they would go out. But after Linda arrived, we never had*

*my mother to ourselves again. Never! Linda got all the attention...". (lines 37-38, 104-105 & 115-117,S2; narrative p.15)*

*My mom was very low-key about it. But she never explained anything to us until it reached the newspapers. (line 185,S2; narrative p.16)*

Even today, Kim's words reflect her anger and frustration. It is as though she *needs* her mother to recognise that she felt hurt and confused.

*Last time when you were here, I heard my mother say that we did not know anything before that story got into the newspapers. Can you believe it? As if we didn't know! (lines 45-47,S2; narrative p.14)*

*Mom, I remember you once overhearing you say that we children didn't know anything about you before the matter became public. But I can tell you that children know almost everything about their parents. (lines 58-59,S1; narrative p.3)*

Kim's experience of the frustration and confusion escalated into rage and embarrassment when the privacy and intimacy of their home life were publicly and crudely displayed in a Sunday newspaper's front-page story.

*"I was very angry with you," Kim tells her mother, "when that newspaper story came out." (line 64,S1; narrative p.3)*

In one way at least, breaking the news in this way, devastating though it may be, can act as a catalyst because it at least broke the cast-iron silence between Kim and her mother. At least then she was "informed" and her mother was "forced" to disclose to her. But the possibility of a more open and honest communication ensuing was once again overwhelmed by silence and denial as Kim pretended not to know.

*I just acted as though it was the first time we were finding out anything that we had not known before. (lines 157-159,S2; narrative p.19)*

Perhaps if Kim had confessed at that moment that she already knew far more than her mother realised, it might have worsened the already difficult circumstances (being exposed by means of the public media and adapting to a 'new' family structure) with which the family were attempting to cope. Perhaps it was just easier to pretend that she did not know. Or perhaps her priority at that time was simply

privately to review all the events that had contributed to her suspicion that her mother had a new partner. Whatever the reason, Kim never got the recognition that information was withheld from her, information that she, at a stage, so desperately needed.

At that stage of the process, Kim did not make much of a fuss about the newspaper story. But that soon changed.

*I honestly didn't think that it would attract so much attention. But you know what young kids are like! There's nothing they love more than something sensational to gossip and snigger about. And I was, of course, still in primary school. But, yes, some of the children were saying things like 'You are going to become like your mother' and 'This girl is a sinful child of Satan.' But that's OK. I survived. (lines 140-144,S1; narrative p.6)*

Kim says that the mockery and blatant teasing that she endured during that period and subsequently made a significant negative impact on her. Some of her classmates abandoned and isolated her.

*"Everything was in the newspapers," she repeats, "everything! And everyone... There was poor Alene. She's my best friend, Carien, and she is the most honest person I know. And even two months after the story broke, she still didn't know that anything out of the ordinary had happened. Then, two months after the newspaper reports, Lilly, another girl who was in our class, came to her and said, 'Listen, aren't you scared to visit Kim's home?' Then Alene asked, 'Why should I be?' And Lilly said, 'Because, you know, Kim's mother is like that.' And Alene said, 'You are lying.' And then Alene came and asked me what was going on. And I said, 'I am not going to lie to you. What Lilly says is true.' (lines 78-85,S1; narrative p.4,5)*

It was a great solace to Kim that this particular friend (Alene) did not abandon her. Alene's reaction also indicates how differently people reacted to the "news" of their mothers' sexual orientation.

*Then do you know what? Alene didn't change at all, not one bit. She is one of the most endearing people I know. She knows everything about me – absolutely everything. (lines 84-86,S2; narrative p.5)*

Despite these reassuring incidents, Kim became angry at the other children's questions and observations:



*All I can really remember clearly is this one guy in the history class. He said to me: 'Your mother is gay, and she is like this and does this-and-that and so on, and you are going to become like your mother, and maybe you should not talk to other people because you will make friends... I can't remember exactly what I said to him. But I picked up a chair with great force and was about to hit him with it. But then I stopped myself with the chair in mid-air. Instead, I just kicked him on the leg, and screamed at him: 'Leave me alone! Leave me alone!' (lines 148-154,S1; narrative p.7)*

These incidents of teasing and being rejected, isolated Kim and left her in fear of what other people's reactions might be should they ever find out about her mother's sexual orientation. I deduce that that is why Kim only discloses her same-gendered family structure when she feels safe. She only discloses to people who are either gay themselves or in situations in which she can deduce from the conversation that they are (at least) open-minded and non-judgemental. (I have discussed this in some detail in Ribbon One.)

*One of the guys is gay, and so is his sister, and so we were all listening to their stories about family visits, and we were also discussing the whole issue in a more general way. Then, at one point in the conversation, I said to all of them, 'I am also a little bit used to that situation.' (lines 112-117,S1; narrative p.10)*

*I have seen so many different situations. Like, one of my friends, he's straight. But he hangs out with a group of guys who are gay... But my friend, Jane, for example. She doesn't know. And I don't discuss it with her. Different people have different attitudes. And you can never be sure... (lines 679-694,S2; narrative p.38)*

Her anger intensified against her mom during this period when she was being ridiculed. But once again she used silence as a defensive strategy. Kim reports that she kept her anger with her mother hidden inside her.

*I was extremely angry with you, mom, for a long time. But, Carien, I never let her see my anger. No! That's not the way I am. Certainly not with my close family. (lines 158-160,S1; narrative p.7)*

*"Look," she says, "I have always been pleasant to my mother. As I said last time, I simply cannot be unkind to my closest family. And so my mother never knew that I was angry with her. Never. Never. Never." (lines 215-218,S2; narrative p.19,20)*

Kim shared that the silence and hidden anger that she experienced at this time caused her to become hateful to everyone around her. Laird (1994:135) states that

typical first reactions of children learning about their mother's sexual orientation for the first time are anger and a sense of betrayal.

*It was, like, I couldn't even look my mother straight in the eye because, you know, every time I made a real connection with my mother, I would just crack up. I would think, 'This is my mother and I hate her.' And that was what was tearing me apart. The fact of the matter is that, at heart, I am deeply Christian in my attitudes. So I continued to attend Sunday school, and I would sit there listening to the sermon, and think to myself, 'Mr Minister, everything you are saying is a lie. I mean, how can a person as wonderful as my mother do that to me? You are lying.' I got into the habit of being cynical about everything that I came into contact with. I was a terrible... I was so incredibly mad at the world. (lines 231-240,S2; narrative p.21)*

She also went through a period when she reflected on her mother's decision to marry – and she expresses her bitterness and disbelief about this. These feelings and thoughts signal an existential crisis for Kim because her very life is a direct consequence of her mother's decision to marry.

*I was very, very angry with my mother because then everybody knew. I said things to her like, 'How could you do that to me? How could you? You've always had boyfriends. You married dad! If you're gay you should not have had children.' (lines 156-157,S1; narrative p.7)*

*Just the other day my mom told me that my father knew that she was gay even before they got married. From what I can gather, she had a sexual experience [with a woman] – and then promised herself in remorse that she would never ever become involved in such evil and satanic things again. Then she married my dad. I think that's just terrible... My mother knew that she was never attracted to men... (lines 388-402,S2; narrative p.12).*

I wonder why Kim judges her mother's decision to marry more harshly than her mom's gayness? Is it because it has already happened? Because it is an historical fact that cannot be changed, or because is it easier to focus on her mother's marriage rather than on her mother's gayness? Or is Kim perhaps trying to signal that if the marriage had happened, she would not now have been in such distressing circumstances?

This existential crisis also impacted on Kim's spiritual life. She was not only angry with herself, with the other children and with her mother. She was also angry with God.

*In those four years after I first found out –from between Grade Six and Grade Ten – I didn't once pray, I didn't once read the Bible because I was talking to God in my heart and saying, 'You have harmed me! Why are you doing this to me? Why me? Why me?'*

*My heart goes out to her. The shock and denial that culminated in her anger is so painfully evident. And so I say, "And so you were not only angry you're your mother, but also with God?"*

*"Oh yes," Kim agrees, "extremely angry. Bitterly angry. And then I decided to go on this camp." (lines 218-224,S2; narrative p.20).*

*Until Grade Ten. Then I went to this seminar [the Christian camp]. Before that I just thought, 'Why me? Why? Why? Why? It's my mother! Why did it happen to me?' But then I resolved it. (lines 167-172,S1; narrative p.8)*

These comments, and the following ones, signal Kim's isolation, her hurt, her overwhelming feelings of anger and resentment, her bitterness and disbelief and her futile attempts to try to make sense of the events until she reached a certain critical point when she could no longer cope effectively with her denial any longer. It was at this point that Kim's second critical event occurred: she decided to go on a Christian camp.

*I really was very destructive. I had so much hatred inside. And then one day I took some time off to be alone and think about the situation. And I spoke to myself in more or less these words: 'Now listen here, Kim. You just have to stop this because your mother is going to be with you forever, and you cannot go on hating Linda for the rest of your life. In any case, she is out of your life now. It's just high time that you made a change in your life. Forget and forgive. Forgive that woman. Just let it go. That is all in the past. And once you've done all that, you should straighten out your relationship with the Lord. Okay? So now, get ready to go on this camp.' (lines 242-249,S2; narrative p.22)*

Kim explanation of why she wanted to go on this camp and her desperation at being unable to forgive indicate how exhausted she must have been with her dilemma. She was exhausted by all the negative publicity, the teasing and her own anger. Perhaps, most importantly of all, she was exhausted and depleted by her

own constant (silent) interrogation of her own life and her relationship with her mother on the deepest personal level.

*I went the first time [to the camp] because I wanted to be able to forgive these people. I was in a mess! I just wanted to get to a place where I would be able to forgive God, to forgive Linda, and to forgive my mother – because it was all just getting too much for me. And it was there that I found someone to whom I could talk and with whom I could work through all this stuff. (lines 227-230,S2; narrative p.20)*

It was on this camp that a breakthrough event happened for Kim. She found that she could, for the first time, talk about the painful events of her life without any fear of being ridiculed. And because she could then disclose safely in public by talking to and telling others in a safe and containing (regulated) space, she managed to break her soul-festering silence and she found that she was able to forgive and be forgiven.

*“You know, the first day of the seminar’s programme was devoted to the topic of forgiveness. When I heard that, I just went up to people at random and told them the story about my mother. And do you know how much that helped me?”*

*She starts to giggle and imitate a certain kind of voice. “ ‘Come here please! Did you know that my mother is so-and-so...?’ , and ‘Hi, please listen to me! My name is Kim, and do you know what...?’ . I did it, I suppose, just to get it off my chest. I suppose, also, that I realised that I would never see any of them again.”*

*“It was also a safe thing to do in that particular context?” I suggest.*

*She nods. “They could go and repeat it to someone else, but the person they told wouldn’t know me, and so it would make no difference. But I couldn’t go to my school friends and just pour my heart out to them because I would never know who they would tell. Do you see what I was doing? So that was really great. I had opportunities to talk to ministers and others, and eventually everything started to fall into place. Eventually I got to the place where I could forgive. And so I did forgive my mother and others. And I did it sincerely – because I wanted to... We received little cards on the camp with sayings on, and all of my little cards basically carried a message of, ‘Just accept it, you are not going to get answers, live with it, everything is okay’. (lines 249-265& 320-325,S2; narrative p.30,31)*

*That camp was really great! It just helped me so much – in a way that I didn’t dream was possible. I can still remember that when I got back from the seminar, I immediately ‘phoned my mom. I started crying and said to her, ‘Mom, I have forgiven Linda!’ And she said to me, ‘What?’ ‘Mom, I said that I have forgiven Linda! It is just so amazing.’ (lines 334-338,S2; narrative p.22)*

*From that time on, I can tell you, it was as though a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Now I can actually talk to my mother when I want to and I don’t have to hide anything. (lines 177-179,S2; narrative p.8)*

At the most desperate point in her life, Kim was indeed fortunate to go on that camp because it gave her the space and the opportunity to disclose to anyone who came near her. And disclose she did! Almost at random. But in that way she managed to get her mother's "new" sexual orientation "off her chest" in a safe context because she knew that she would never see the people on that camp again and that they could gossip as much as they liked (if they cared to do so) without any ill consequences for her. Kim felt safe in these circumstances because she could disclose without any fear of unpleasant repercussions. This state of affairs contrasts strongly to the situation that prevailed among her close friends back home – friends who she felt had betrayed and hurt her.

Kim's experience was that as she was able to forgive, she was simultaneously released from her corrosive anger and bitterness. People who knew her commented on the positive effects of the changes that they noted in her life:

*But the best thing of all was that, since I went on that camp, all kinds of people began to say to me, 'You know, Kim, since you went on that camp, you have become a much friendlier person.'* (lines 338-339,S2; narrative p.23)

In Kim's case, it seems as though acceptance eventually followed forgiveness.

*"I can remember one night... It was after that seminar. We were just sitting and talking about this and that. And as she spoke, I realised that my mom still behaves in exactly the same way towards me now as she did when she was still married to my father. My mom even looks exactly the same, and she still dresses in the same way." Kim smiles. "She is still an incredibly efficient and well organised person. It was then that I came to the conclusion: My mother is my mother. Why shouldn't I continue to love her in exactly the same way that I always used to do when she and my dad were still together?*

*"It was such a strong realisation. My mother is my mother..."* (lines 437-450,S2; narrative p.24)

Because Kim is much older than Ryland, for example, her story is characterised by much more in-depth reflections and graphic expositions of her experience. I am able therefore to trace her experiences as a more coherent trajectory that moves from shock, frustration and anger to letting go, forgiveness and acceptance. I hypothesise

that a person's coming to terms with a mother's sexual orientation or preference follows a cyclical process that is almost similar to what can be called a "cycle of acceptance" which has been conceptualised by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1986:59). Van Voorhis and McClain (1996:644) reported similar trends in their study of how children came to accept a lesbian mother. This however falls outside the parameters of this research. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that when children have just learnt about their mother's sexual orientation, their reactions are very different to what they will be after some years have elapsed. Thus, for example, Kim (as Ryland does now) lived for quite some time in a state of anguished fear.

In tying up this ribbon, I take note of the fact that that there seems to be no correlation between the age of a child when her or his parents formed a family and the critical incident they experienced when either they or other people learned about their mothers' sexual orientation. Because Kashni and Erid were adopted at young age, their friends got to know them when they already had two mothers (same-gender parents). Because Carl and Kashni's parents had both been together for 15 years and longer, their friends therefore also got to know them when they already had two mothers (same-gender parents). But in the cases of Kim, Ryland, Tom and Danielle, their critical incidents were precipitated by their biological mother's coming out for the first time. Their friends and class mates had known their families when a father had been present, or else they had known the mother as a single parent after she had already divorced.

*My fellow listeners*, I cannot share my lessons learned without extraditing the importance of certain contextual factors that these children raised whilst sharing their stories. So let me introduce to you:



**Ribbon Three**



**Contextual factors**

While there is much more to these children's experiences than only having two mothers (same-gender parents), I framed and focused my study on what these children experienced as they grew up in same-gendered families. Although I could just as well have examined other aspects of the children's experiences, it was not the main purpose of my study to do so. What I have discussed in Ribbon Three arose out of the spontaneous sharing of the children who were my research partners. While I will now examine certain background factors and the way in which these influenced the experiences of the children, I will consider these against a background of how these factors influenced the children's disclosure, their interaction or negotiation with the outside world and consequently, their okayness with growing up in this particular kind of family. For me it is significant to see how their backgrounds and the landscape in which they functioned affected and influenced their experiences, and how these also provide a commentary on some of the social issues implicit in their situations.

The first background factors that I propose to examine entail the social issues of **divorce and adoption**. Because I spontaneously included these two elements as criteria in the selection and sampling of my research partners, it comes as no surprise that they feature as some of the contextual factors. I decided to include them because they reveal a lot about what the children themselves make of these social issues.

While six of the eight children in my sample were born into the context of heterosexual marriages, two others were adopted. Kashni never elaborated on her **adoption**. She just mentioned it briefly while sharing a humorous incident that related to one of her nieces who confused the words "adoption" ("aangeneem"<sup>15</sup>)

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<sup>15</sup> In Afrikaans these two words are only different in terms of the last vowels "ee" and "aa". Unfortunately this is not so in English.

Lines 58-59:2, S2:

Talks about friend who pronounced "aangenaam" as "aangeneem" and the confusion that it created.

*Original Afrikaans:*

with being “pleasant” (“aangenaam”), something that briefly confused her two mothers. I cannot really explain why we did not talk about the adoption in any detail other than to say that it did not seem important to the two of us at the time of data creation. I do not deduce anything about our silence on this matter. I only remind myself that one of Kashni’s mothers mentioned that:

*...the real emotional issues – of separation from the mother – occurred between them and their biological mother, and those emotional scars are grounded in their biological mother’s rejection of them. A lot of the fights that occur between them arise out of what happened to them in that context. (lines 38-40, Erid Kashni Parents S1; narrative p.4)*

Erid, Kashni’s brother, describes his attitude to his adoption in the following extract:

*And so I [Carien] ask, “Do some children ask more questions or comments – like ‘How does it work?’ or ‘That’s impossible?’ “*  
*Erid answers: “Yes. I don’t always answer questions like that. But sometimes they do ask me, and I just say to them, ‘I don’t feel like telling you now.’ “*  
*“Okay. Do children sometimes ask you questions about your adoption? And about where you were before you were adopted?”*  
*Erid nods. “Yes.”*  
*“Does that sometimes bring up hurtful memories?”*  
*“Yes, sometimes. But it’s OK. I just don’t tell them.”*  
*(lines 156-162,S2; narrative p.12).*

I infer that Erid refrains from sharing more information with other children than is strictly necessary. I think that these questions or queries from other children (and from me too) might make him feel uneasy and insecure. On the other hand he may feel that this is an insignificant detail that others need not know about. Or perhaps he simply cannot understand what the fuss is all about. If that is the case, why would people want to anything more about it? Erid is anyway a very private person, and he does not readily or easily share his painful memories.

In my discussion of what the children shared about their parents’ **divorces**, I want to start by discussing the experiences of Tom, Ryland and Danielle because they form part of the same family unit. Tom, Ryland and Danielle all mentioned the



unpleasant events that preceded the divorce. Both Tom and Danielle told me how relieved they felt when the fighting stopped. Tom and Ryland make further disclosures by sharing some of the emotions that they felt at the time of the divorce.

As I have noted before, Ryland – in comparison with his brother and sister – did not elaborate extensively in the interviews. He only mentioned that he was angry about the break up, and sad about the fighting (lines 166-168, 182, 194, 219 TDR S1:4).<sup>16</sup>

*I also wanted to tell her about how I cried all the time after my dad left our house. I just couldn't understand how my sister could be so happy when my parents divorced. I told my sister: "You are not supposed to be happy!" (lines 224 & 232,S1; narrative p.2)*

These are characteristic emotions that a child experiencing a parental divorce may feel. O'Connell (1999:274) states that when the children of lesbian mothers who were divorced spoke about divorce, they evinced feelings of loyalty, sadness, anger, worry and vulnerability.

Tom also refers to the conflict that raged between their parents. He provides a more detailed description of the family dynamics and how they influenced his relationships with his friends and peers.

*"When my mom and my dad were together, they constantly fought and quarrelled. It was, like, hell... I just never had any friends at all because, well, no-one came over, and we never did anything that involved other people. I was friends with the next door neighbour's daughter," he says with a smile. "But I never even brought her around. I suppose I was what you might call your neighbourhood nerd." (lines 114-126,S2; narrative p. 2,3,10)*

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<sup>16</sup> Lines 166- 168, 182, 194, 219; Tom Danielle Ryland Session 1.

C: Tell me about the divorce. You said you were angry.

To: Ja, when I heard.

R: Me too.

...

R: I forgot

...

R: Now I remember it,

...

R: I was crying every time. It's like because my father, they always used to fight...

The change in his father, reportedly brought about by his father's new (female) partner, would certainly have helped Tom to process his parents' divorce. At the same time, Tom noted and was impressed by the change that his mother's partner reportedly brought about in his mother. It seems then that because Tom was finely attuned to the nuances of his parents' emotions and relationships, he realised that they were much happier and more fulfilled with their new partners than they had been in their heterosexual marriage.

*But after my dad left, his new fiancée brought about one a hell of a change in him. I don't know what she said to him, or how she did it, but he really changed quite radically... Now my dad is a very much nicer person. You wouldn't even believe that it's the same person. (line 128,S1; narrative p.11)*

*My mom has a completely different kind of personality – and I don't know where she gets it from. (lines 290-291,S2; narrative p.24)*

Danielle also confirms the change in her father:

*But my dad can be a very different person with Auntie Thea. It's like, an amazing difference. (lines 329-330,S2; narrative p.3)*

Because Tom has reached a stage of acceptance now, this does not mean that things were always so smooth. Tom also went through a phase of anger and he experienced the divorce as impacting negatively on his school life.

*When they got divorced, I was very angry. I was also having problems at school... Children would come to me and I would suddenly – without any warning – have an urge to kill them... Because somehow it seemed as though every kid in that school had found out about my parents' divorce. And then some kids started mocking me. Some in a subtle way. but others were not quite so subtle about it... It was those kids who had never liked me anyway. But I just hung loose. (lines 163,179-182,S1; narrative p.12)*

This indicates to me how Tom went through a major disclosure event even before he was faced with the problem of having to disclose his same-gender parent relationship. It is important to note his reflexivity in analysing his own behaviour and thoughts, even though he had no idea where this anger or urge was coming from. The overwhelming feeling that "everyone knows" indicates the

powerlessness that Tom felt at that time. This phrase suggests to me Tom's ability to rationalise such incidents in a way that comforts him and gives him closure. His experience demonstrated to him that the children who mocked him were in any case children with whom he did not have good relationships. Their negativity therefore bothered him less than it might otherwise have done. It is as though there was less at stake and therefore less to lose. In those cases, none of Tom's important relationships were in any danger. As the following extract shows, he also established important friendships during this period.

*When my mom eventually divorced my dad, that was another big event. But then I also started to get more friends because I was more upset and so I ended up talking to more people... I felt so dead lonely at that time. So, kind of, rejected. More lost than anyone here. But then I started making great new friends. (lines 135-136,S2; narrative p.14,15)*

Tom constructs divorce as a major "event" in his life. It is as though he assigns some degree of guilt or blame in the way that he frames the responsibility and culpability for "who divorced whom". Feelings of loneliness, rejection and being lost more or less compelled him to start talking to "more people". The positive outcome of this was that he made new and supportive friends (I have discussed this in some detail in Ribbon One and Two). In addition, this was the main strategy that Tom used to cope with the negativity generated by the divorce.

*I was trying very hard not to think of anything at all and I just concentrated on hanging out with these new friends of mine. (lines 129-131,S2; narrative p.20)*

Danielle also mentions her feeling of relief after their parents were divorced. But she frames her experience in a more positive way than either Tom or Ryland, and she shows her support for her mother by identifying more strongly with her than with her father's interests.

*I will be honest with you. I only found out that my father had moved out because suddenly all his things were gone! So I thought to myself, 'Wow! Now we are going to be much happier! No fights!' ... I said, 'I understand, mommy! It really is much better now than it was when you were with dad.' (lines 228-231 & 258-259,S1; narrative p.2)*

Danielle reflects some of the secrecy that she felt as she came to terms with the divorce. She noticed that her father's essential belongings were missing and she deduced from that that he had moved out. But it was purely a deduction. No one had told her. She does not report any feelings of loss. In contrast, she focuses on how much happier they will now all be because there will no longer be any fights and quarrels in the family home. From what she has reported, I note that she is very much focused on identifying her own feelings and also the atmosphere in the house as a whole. She does however share some of the strain that the others feel as they attempt to adjust to her mother's new partner.

*And when you get to know her, she's actually a very nice person. But it's very hard to get to know her. (lines 278-279,S1; narrative p.24)*

Despite this, it seems that Danielle is able to integrate her mother and father's new partners after the divorce. In fact, she refers to them as her three mothers.

*I now have three moms! (lines 347,S1 & 231,S2, narrative p.3).*

What I derive from the above brief examination of the experience of these three children are nuanced variations in the ways in which they share details about the divorce and the different ways in which they handled the actual event.

Kim has internalised a public discourse of marriage that is privileged, heterosexist and inflexible – and she feels strongly about the wrongness of gay people marrying into a heterosexual relationship:

*I am glad that my parents are divorced because everyday one hears stories about people who everyone knows is gay, but who remain married. These people are ruining their own lives! I mean, come on, just get divorced...You should not do it. It is just so unfair! It is unbelievably unfair – to the other person, and to the children. And what a dreadful example! Of course, the children know everything. Children always know everything about their parents. (lines 350-353,357-365,S2; narrative p.13)*

*People just stampede into marriage and other-sex relationships without even thinking. (line 423,S2; narrative p.25)*

Ruthellen Josselson (1992:184) states that when we marry, we not only marry a person, but we also become proponents and exemplars of the social institution of marriage. Because everything about marriage is shaped by socially defined roles, it expresses the expectations of the society we live in and an unspoken assumption that individuals will participate in and abide by the social forms that define marriage. Kim shows great insight when she is apprehensive about the prospect of someone entering a relationship that they cannot fulfil and that is therefore not meant for them. Because she foresees the consequences for all involved, Kim emphasises the impact that divorce will have on children, and she projects this hurt and anger onto her mother. Kim also justifies to herself the reasons why her mother should never have married at all, and she frames the justification of her views (which allow her to condemn her mother) in terms of her own conservative and heterosexist views about what marriage “must” be. (I have discussed this in Ribbon Two.)

With regard to Carl, the events of his mother’s divorce from his biological father were not easily disclosed to me. This is understandable because the divorce had taken place 16 years before, and because of the circumstances in which he and his biological mother subsequently found themselves. These circumstances were a source of unhappiness and were therefore not easily amenable to disclosure. Intense and painful personal information is always difficult to share. But it also seems to me from what they reported that the need to share and disclose fades with the passage of years. Penny (Carl’s biological mother) elaborated to some extent on how Carl’s biological father had abused him.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lines 273-275, 279-280:6, S3.

Penny talks about how her drunken husband burnt Carl with cigarettes while he was driving. He almost let Carl drown in the swimming pool. She could only feed Carl “marog” \* and corn-rice until he was three months old. Then her parents came to fetch him. She only spoke to her parents again after her divorce.

\* An indigenous African vegetable that tastes like a mild spinach.

*Original Afrikaans:*

Apart from this information, Penny describes how some children teased Carl when he was in Grade One.

*Yes, he seemed very sad that afternoon when he came home from school. He went to the bathroom to take his bath. When I asked him what the matter was, he started to cry. He was still very young at that stage. So I sat on the toilet seat next to the bath and began to talk to him very gently. Then he began to cry most bitterly, and said that the kids at school were teasing him. So I asked him, "What do they say to you?" And he replied, "They say that I don't have a father."*

*So then I said to him: "You might not have a dad, but you are very lucky because you have two mothers."*

*Then Susan and I went to visit his teacher. She was very nice and accommodating. I explained the circumstances and told her that Carl does have a father, but that we were divorced. And that, under the circumstances, the kids should please not tease him because it could have a negative impact on his life.*

*She must have told them to lay off because, after that, he never once again came home looking sad – from that day to this. (lines 75-80 & 219-231,S1; narrative p.18)*

Active intervention on the part of the mother at this young age proved to be extremely beneficial for Carl's future (as Penny attests). What is also significant is the way in which Penny constructed having two mothers as a *strength* and an advantage as she comforted him when he was so young.

Luanne does not experience divorce as such a critical issue. Her father lives in London, and her biological parents were divorced twelve years ago prior to my seeing her. Her carefree attitude to life seems to be enhanced what appears to be a tolerant atmosphere in the school environment:

*Children don't tease each other any more about their parents being divorced – because just about everybody comes from a divorced family. (lines 64-65,S6; narrative p.14)*

This brings me to a consideration of what I deem to be the most significant contextual factor and integral to each child's landscape: the **school context**. The children in this study supplied information about incidents that happened at their schools. They also appeared to judge the okayness or non-okayness of their school

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Penny praat oor hoe't haar man Carl met stompies gebrand as sy kar bestuur, want hy's te dronk. Hoe hy hom amper in swembad laat verdrink het. Carl net marog en mielierys geëet vir sy eerste 3 maande, toe het haar

environments positively or negatively in terms of how accommodating or otherwise they were about children who grow up in same-gendered families.

Because Kashni is very sensitive about the contexts in which she moves, she is quite clear about the difference that a particular kind of school environment can make when she is deciding to disclose or not disclose.

*Most times it's cool... It was really great in Rodcrest College because most of the people there are very open-minded and that was nice. But now, in Festive School, it's a bit more difficult, difficult because many of the people are more conservative. (lines 82-85,S1; narrative p.6)*

The feature that is most crucial for Kashni is whether the people in the situation (in this case, the school) are open-minded and enlightened or whether they are conservative in their views. She is very clear about how different schools influenced her experiences of openness and her acceptance or non-acceptance by others. Another crucial indicator that emerges from the narratives and the interviews is *religion* in schools and the views that people internalise from their particular brand or formulation of religion.

*In Rodcrest College everyone was, like, tolerant and open-minded because there were children from different religions like Islam, and there were also a lot of children from overseas. It is also a private school. It was really nice. But Festive School is more difficult. You know, I also believe in God and I think that I'm spiritual. But Festive School is, like, Christian. You have to be a Christian, pray three times a day and so on, and every morning the school opens with readings from the Bible. I don't mind that kind of thing, but they are, like, heavy about it and they are not tolerant about other religions. They only believe in Christian, um, values, and that's also what makes it so much more difficult there, because the Bible says that it's wrong and everything. (lines 210-222,S1; narrative p.8)*

Kashni defines what openness means to her:

*By 'open', ...I mean open-minded, tolerant. They are not judgemental about things and they are comfortable with most situations. (lines 110-111,S1; narrative p.11)*

Luanne also shared an incident from her school where religion played a defining role. Although the teacher presented his views, the children were never invited to discuss or analyse what the teacher had said:

*A teacher once told us that if you ever do 'it', even once, the Lord will never forgive you... (lines 178-179,S3; narrative p.7)*

Another factor (and its complications) that children encounter in schools and that Kashni brought strongly to the fore, is *race* and *racism*.

*This new school is so much more conservative. They're "freaking" conservative and religious. I don't mind all that stuff. But they're racist as well. Even when I'm with them, I sometimes find that I just can't keep quiet about their racism. So, one day, I just said to them: 'When I'm around you, don't say things like that'. But I think that it comes from the parents. Rodcrest College is not racist at all. There are Muslims there, and Jews and blacks. Schools really make a big difference. (lines 5-13, 29-30,34,S2; narrative p.7,8)*

Kashni describes the conservative attitudes that she observed in one particular school and how the behaviour of those children influenced her friendships. What has happened to Kashni and what she has learned from these events shows that she differentiates between religion as such – and the intolerance that some people display whether they are religious or not. This is a subtle and important distinction.

Ryland is also aware of how racist factors in his environment make his life a whole lot less pleasant. The girls and older boys also bully him and his friends.

*The blacks are horrible to me and to my friends. The girls hurt us and tell us to carry their suitcases. The older boys... If you bring something like a tennis ball or anything like that to school, you have to hand it over and give it to them forever. (lines 41-43, 54-56,S2 & 23-30,S3; narrative p.4,5)*

*Then they said, "Ah, you caramel boy." (line 28,S3)*

*There's only three white children, people in our class. And it's me, this other guy and my teacher. (lines 119-120,S2)*

*That's what I said last time. Do you have a problem with my... that I'm a boerekind. And they said, "Yes, because you're white." The other guy, he's the racist in our class. (lines 134-136,S2)*



What this emphasises is how obsessed South Africans still are about race (and this includes children). What my research indicates is that children of same-gendered families experience these visible indicators of difference (such as race) as markers that other people can use to categorise people and make them the objects of prejudice, ridicule and hostility. The hostility that Ryland endures in his school is enormous because, apart from being teased and bullied by the girls and older boys, he is also subjected to racial prejudice.

Ryland also reveals that he is sensitive to how a school community reacts to other children's experiences when those children are already vulnerable in some way or another. More than anything, he wants to avoid having the other children gossiping about him personally.

*I have seen it happen to other kids at our school! Like, we were talking about stuff. Then some other kid would hear. Then he would go and tell the others, and then everyone would tell everyone else. (lines 46-52,S3; narrative p.5,6)*

In stark contrast to the above, Carl functions in a school environment that is even tolerant of children that are themselves gay. In the following comment he talks about a girl who has come out about her own "alternative" sexuality:

*Everyone knows about Michelle. The girls hug each other. Our school doesn't have a problem. (lines 480-508,S1; narrative p.35)*

Luanne also experiences her school context as a more pleasant environment because her peers neither discuss nor comment on the parents and family structures of other children.

*No, we don't actually talk about it. Well, we don't talk about that. No one talks about their moms and dads at school. We talk about things like Sewende Laan,<sup>18</sup> music, boys, and new movies. (lines 198-204,S3; narrative p.5)*

Her observation that the children at her school do not tease children who have divorced parents is also indicative of her experience that she is enrolled in a more

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<sup>18</sup> As mentioned in Bubble Four, one could translate this as "Seventh Avenue". Luanne is referring to a popular South African local television soap opera.

tolerant school (lines 64-65:2,S6, narrative p.13). Danielle also notes that parents and children are not a topic of discussion at her school.

*“Alright. Do the kids at school talk about women like that...?”  
Danielle interrupts me quickly, “They don’t even think about it. Because it’s very dumb.” (lines 130-131,S3; narrative p.16)*

A factor that influences the “coming out” experiences of children growing up in same-gendered families, and their sense of being okay, becomes visible when they **change schools**. A change of schools can either occur naturally as part of the transition between primary and secondary school, or because family circumstances such as moving to another town necessitate it.

Luanne’s natural progress from primary to secondary school was easy, and she has encountered no difficulties. This means that she does not have to “think about that a lot” (i.e. her family composition) (narrative p.10).

*Well, the teachers all know. I don’t know how they know. But the principal’s wife was my netball teacher in primary school. (lines 26-29,S6; narrative p.7)*

Kashni, apart from the contrasting impressions and perceptions about Festive School’s more conservative and judgmental orientation, and Rodcrest College’s more open-minded and tolerant attitudes, notes how she coped with her transition to high school.

*Um, well, you know what it’s like. It’s the whole Grade Eight scene! Everyone is new. So you get to know certain people and you make your own close friends. But then I have other friends, certain friends I’m not really close to. I mean, I am friendly with them, but I don’t talk to them the whole day and they don’t come to my home. Which doesn’t bother me... If they hear about my parents it’s fine. They’re usually fine with it as well. But in the case of my best friends, those friends I talk to every day, then I must tell them. (lines 183-189,S1; narrative p.11,12)*

In the conversation that I had with Erid, we discussed his willingness to disclose his family structure in a new school. For him, the main criterion is to get to know someone. “If I get to know somebody well, then, yes, I will tell them” (line 130,S2; narrative p.8). He will not share it immediately in the beginning, and therefore say

that he doesn't "talk much" (line 128,S2; narrative p.8), or that he would "just tell them that we have moved" (line 138,S2; narrative p.7). When it comes to sharing more about his family life, Erid mentions that he has changed the way in which he answers questions. Before then, he used to say that he didn't have a father, but this elicited more questions from the children, questions such as, "But how's it possible that you don't have a dad?" (lines 156-157,S2; narrative p.12). So then he shared with them the fact that he has been adopted by two mothers – and that resulted in even more questions. So nowadays he simply says, "I don't feel like telling you now" (line 176,S2; narrative p.12).

In Kim's case, most of her descriptions of the school context centres around her critical incident. When the newspaper story broke, her mother thought of moving her to another school. Kim's explanation of how she perceived the situation shows how even then she did not realise what would or could possibly happen.

*I thought about that for a moment, and then I thought to myself, It's the middle of the year, and I am really not prepared just to go and leave my own school now because of this whole drama. You see, I honestly didn't think that it would attract so much attention. But you know what young kids are like! There's nothing they love more than something sensational to gossip and snigger about. And I was, of course, still in primary school. But, yes, some of the children were saying things like 'You are going to become like your mother' and 'This girl is a sinful child of Satan.' But that's OK. I survived. (lines 137-144,S1; narrative p.6)*

The negativity of the experience in primary school, influenced her choice of schools for high school:

*"How did you experience the change from primary to high school? I mean, everyone in your primary school knew about your domestic situation. But then you had to face a whole new set of people in high school."*

*"Well, that's the reason why I went to Festive School. No one from my primary school was going there. I also went to stay in the hostel, and so I only saw the friends that I wanted to see on weekends. I didn't bump into people by accident." (lines 575-583,S2; narrative p.34)*

Kim reports that she nevertheless remained silent in those early years of high school, because it was a single-gender school, where she felt that the girls might

gossip more. The fear that she lived in those days is once again evident in the following extract.

*No one knew in Festive School either. Until today no one from that school knows the story. Because it is a single-gender school, I was scared that the children would gossip if they found out. But no one mentioned it. (lines 668-673,S2; narrative p.37)*

Kim, as seen above, describes Festive School as “conservative”. Because she also enrolled in other high schools, she is in a good position to compare the prevalent cultures of different schools. Kim also elaborates on the various changes that occurred as she grew older. This allows us to consider how **age** may function as another significant contextual factor for the children of same-gender parents in schools.

*I went to ABC High School for Grade 11 and then to Witbank for Grade12. But by then, I was no longer so bothered by my family background and I could cope without fear or shame with anything that arose. The people in ABC High School that I had known in primary school and that had caused trouble for me, were now all silent. None of them made any waves. In fact, my friends and I were the most respected pupils in the whole school and they all knew that. Alene and I used to talk openly about my situation and we did not regard it as weird in any way. In addition, all my friends in ABC were very open-minded about it, and no one thought anything about it. (lines 599-612,S2; narrative p.35)*

According to Kim, open-mindedness in the culture of a school permits its learners to live and function in a more carefree way (because “no one thought anything about it”). It also gives learners the opportunity to talk freely to their most intimate friends. This happened between Kim and Alene, who accepted Kim’s situation totally.<sup>19</sup>

Carl also explains how he himself changed as he grew older.

*When I was young, I was afraid of confrontations... That was in primary school. In Grade 3. But in Grades 4 and 5, I began to outgrow the other kids and became the tallest in the class. So they began to be a bit afraid of me, and they would back off. (lines 125-131,S3; narrative p.16)*

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<sup>19</sup> See Ribbon Two for Kim's critical incident.

*When I was younger, yes, they used to say these things to my face. My moms mentioned earlier that I used to come home crying a lot. But as I grew up, I don't know... I think maybe they became scared of me because I was the biggest boy in the primary school. Even now, I am still one of the biggest guys in high school. I suppose they're scared of me because of that. Yes, maybe they think that I will react violently and beat them or something like that. (lines 487-493,S2; narrative p.33)*

As Carl grew older, his awareness of his physical advantage over other children led him to believe that that was the reason why they never bothered him with snide questions or comments. An advantage of being one of the "biggest guys" is that he felt (probably rightly) that others were afraid of him. Because of this, he felt confident and safe in the knowledge that the others would not dare to bother him.

While Erid's situation was rather different from Carl's, it also refers to managing situations by physical means. This is what Erid says about teasing in schools.

*"How many times has this (teasing) happened?"*

*"Only a few times in this school. But lots of times in the other school."*

*"What do you think would have happened at that other school if you had stayed there?"*

*"They would have stopped. Or I would have kept on hitting them until they did stop." (lines 91-92,109-113,S2; narrative p.3,4)*

As I consider the role that age may play in ameliorating the lives of these children, I note that Erid (currently in Grade 6) believes that the older one becomes in school, the better it is. This seems to suggest that he might have been teased most in his earliest years in school. These then were probably the years during which he was probably most apprehensive about disclosing sensitive information and consequently the years in which he would have remained silent about having same-gender parents.

*"Do you think it will get worse as you get older? I mean the teasing. From those bad kids that you just mentioned?"*

*"It gets better... Maybe they will get more sense. Maybe they will not be so stupid when they get older." (lines 184-188,S2; narrative p.13,14)*

Ray and Gregory (2001:31) also found that some children disclosed at a later age, with rate of disclosure increasing between Grades 5 to 10. The children that they had interviewed attributed this to “the kids are more mature”.

Carl, who has almost completed his schooling (he is in Grade 12), also holds this view:

*When one's older, yes. When you're younger and children tease you because of it, that can really get to you. But now they wouldn't risk calling me names. And I think that I am now at the right age for “coming out” about my gay parents. Next year, in any case, you don't see them anymore. (lines 416-418,488-489,S2 & 355,S1; narrative p.31)*

Carl recommends high school as an appropriate time to “come out” – for him anyway.

*I would say about Grade 9. Not in Grade 8 because then one is still too young and inexperienced. About in Grade 9 or 10 is okay. (lines 426-427,S2; narrative p.31)*

Kim, who has completed her schooling, supports the views of Carl and Erid:

*But you know what young kids are like! There's nothing they love more than something sensational to gossip and snigger about. (lines 141-144,S1; narrative p.6)*

*When you reach Grade 11 and 12, everyone becomes much more relaxed about this topic. (lines 715-717,S2; narrative p.36)*

Kashni (Grade 9), in contrast, mentions that the children whom she encountered at a younger age were more accepting of her.

*In Grades Three and Four, nothing happened. It was fine. You just tell the whole class and they have no problems with it. I had lots of parties and everyone was at my home and both my moms were always there. So of course there were no problems. But as they get older, things begin to change. (lines 197-199,204-205,S1; narrative p.15)*

I have taken the uniqueness of each child's story into account in my attempt to find an explanation for the exception that Kashni provides. Because Kashni had been adopted and had had two mothers since an early school-going age, her classmates seem to have become used to her domestic same-gender parent situation. She did however experience a deeply unpleasant incidence of teasing in Grade 4 of primary

school. She therefore regards those earlier years as being more carefree than the years after this incident happened. It was as if she became more aware of prejudice after this incident and remained vigilant lest another such incident should happen.

Kim, on the other hand, was born into the context of a heterosexual relationship, and the coming out of her mother was made public while she was in Grade 6. She has no basis for comparison between her latter years at school and her years previous to that because her first family constellation was not same-gendered. She says that she experiences more openness in the latter years of her high school education.

Both Erid and Carl depend on their physical advantages for the confidence with which they can handle uneasy situations. I must remark that this quite surprised me because neither of them seemed in physical appearance to be anything out of the ordinary. On the contrary, Erid is quite slender, although he may be quite strong. Carl attributes his ability to manage negative situations to his physical maturity. Because he is older, he is able to stand up for himself. The negativity of other children also does not “get him down” because he finds solace in realising how transient his situation in the school is (“Next year in any case you don’t see them anymore”).

I identify another contextual factor in the **relationships inside** same-gendered families. The most important factor that emerges for me here is the **openness** (or lack thereof) between the parents and the children, and among the siblings themselves where there was more than one child in one family. Once again, although this was not the main focus of my study, these experiences emerged from what the children shared with me and seemed to me to be significant for a proper understanding of what children experience in same-gendered families. Apart from the openness that is required in order to disclose oneself so as to achieve honest and authentic relationships with one’s friends or other significant people, or the

realisation that some people are *not* so open-minded that one can confront them with the realities of a same-gendered family structure, openness also emerges in other ways as well.

The children in this study reported frankness and openness between them and their parents. Carl, for example, reports that he easily shares the events of his life with his mothers, but more particularly with Susan (the second mother whom he has proudly and lovingly constructed as his “dad”).

*I share everything with Susan. Of course, I talk to my mom as well. But mostly, I talk to Susan. (line 184 ,S3; narrative p.27)*

*So of course I started to worry. I tried to talk to my mom, but it just started a fight. So I said to her, “Okay then. Just leave it.” (lines 215-216,S2; narrative p.22)*

*[Penny says that] Carl can open up to Susan about anything. (line 578,S1; narrative p.22)*

His parents in turn mention that they can usually sense when something is bothering him. This suggests that they know him well.

*I could sense that something was wrong. He was moody the whole time. (lines 574,S1; narrative p.24)*

Their openness is also revealed by Penny when she says:

*We both just accept him exactly the way he is. I told him just the other day that each of us has the right to make our own choices in life, and that we will never put any kind of pressure on him. (lines 63-67,S4; narrative p.28)*

When Carl compares his mothers to some of his friends’ parents, his comments also reveal an openness between him and his mothers:

*Well, I don’t get hidings like they do. Their dads beat them with canes and with their fists, and so on. A lot of their dads also drink a lot. My moms don’t do that! And my moms allow me to do things that their dads don’t normally allow them to do. (lines 500-503,S2; narrative p.33)*

Penny’s advice to other same-gendered families also reveals the openness that they share as a family:



*Just be open with him or her, and when problems arise, sort them out in a reasonable and sensible way. But I also want to add that we should all face it, and be open with one another. We've all been through this. Hiding one's gayness may not affect the adult's relationship, but, in the end, it will tear the child apart. Hiding one's orientation will only damage the child in the end. We need to trust each other, and our child needs to trust us. He should be able to rely on us. (lines 512-520,S1; narrative p.37).*

As I mentioned above in Ribbon One, Kashni and Erid are raised in a home where gayness is openly named and discussed. After watching a movie one night,<sup>20</sup> the

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<sup>20</sup> Lines 13-38, 44-49:1, Erid Kashni parents: Session 2.

Z: We watched a movie about a young gay guy who was murdered in a conservative part of America. The movie was called the Laminer Project (the Matthew Shephard story). And so we watched it because Kashni likes to watch movies and she can quickly tell you whether a movie is worth watching or not, and most of the time her judgement is quite good.

A: She was very keen that we should watch it.

Z: Yes, because often she isn't very keen on gay movies. And then we thought, okay, this might be a good way to talk with the kids.

A: And usually I don't like murder cases, but then I thought, okay, and it was actually a nice movie.

Z: Very American, and obviously very emotional – and they do manage to push the buttons. So afterwards Erid and I were in tears.

A: Anyway, after the movie... the movie made me realise, especially with regard to Kashni's comment the other day, that even though we live open, carefree and responsible lives, we are always aware of the possibility that we might be unconsciously sending covert messages to our children that maybe it is better to be straight.

Z: And that is not OK.

A: And then I decided to rectify this.

C: It's a fine line.

A: And then I told them that they should come and sit with me so that we could talk about it. I was also a bit emotional and cried as well, but I told them that I didn't want them to believe for one second that I am not proud of who I am – whatever that is... I just don't want them to feel – even in some small place in their hearts – that we are wrong in any way... even though they will be free to make up their own minds about these issues later on in their lives, and even though they are sometimes compelled to hide these facts in front of other people or at school for the sake of peace or expediency. I never want them to feel like that at home and in their hearts – certainly not about their own mothers. They have to accept the reality of the situation as it is...

*Original Afrikaans:*

Z: 'n Jong gay outjie in een van die konserwatiewe dele van Amerika doodgemaak – The Laminer Project (Matthew Shephard story). En ons kyk dit toe, en kyk Kashni is baie keen op movies kyk en sy sal gou vir jou kan sê of dit 'n goeie of slegte een is, en baiekeer is haar oordeel van die ding nogal reg

A: Sy was nogal keen dat ons dit moet kyk

Z: Ja, want baie keer is sy nie keen op die gay movies nie. En toe, okay, dink ons dis 'n goeie manier om met die kiddies te praat

A: En ek hou gewoonlik nie daarvan nie, want dis 'n moordsaak en ek hou niks daarvan nie, maar toe sy nou sê toe dog ek, agh oraait. En dit was nogal 'n nice movie

Z: Ja, very American, maar dit was toe obviously baie emosioneel – and they do manage to push the buttons – en ek en Erid is toe in trane

A: Anyway, toe dit nou klaar is. Die flik het my tot die besef laat kom, na aanleiding van Kashni se reaksie nou die dag. Selfs ons wat so openlik is en wat so gewoond lewe asof dit niks is nie stuur sulke klein boodskappies na die kinders toe, dat dit tog beter is om straight te wees

Z: That it's not okay

A: Verstaan jy en ek het toe besluit dat ek net daai ding regstel

.../ next page; volgende bladsy

C: Dis 'n fyn ding

mothers talked to both Kashni and Erid about being gay. This indicates an openness between them. (Although a section of this conversation is used in the narrative of Kashni, a fuller version is provided in the footnote.)

*I don't want them to believe for one second that I am not proud of who I am – whatever that is... I just don't want them to feel – even in some small place in their hearts – that we are wrong in any way... Even though they will be free to make up their own minds about these issues later on in their lives, and even though they are sometimes compelled to hide these facts in front of other people or at school for the sake of peace or expediency, I never want them to feel like that at home and in their hearts – certainly not about their own mothers. They have to accept the reality of the situation as it is... (lines 33-48, Erid Kashni Parents S2, narrative p.3)*

Some openness seems to exist between Ryland and his mothers. One can deduce this from the fact that he felt free to tell them that he did *not* want the researcher to explore their lives:

*No, I don't like that. Mom and Auntie Sandy's lives are private, and what we as a family do, has nothing to do with anyone else. (lines 20-23, TDR Parents S1; narrative p.1)*

Experience has taught Luanne that openness is probably the best way to handle situations between her and her parents. She notes:

*The truth always gets out anyway in the long run. Sometimes I feel that they are handling some matter unfairly. Yes, they are both strict with me. But I can see that they are like that because they want to protect me and because they love me. (lines 101,117-123,S5; narrative p.12)*

There are however indications that there are degrees of openness in the family and that not everything is said or discussed immediately – and that some things never get discussed at all. Luanne, for example, never told her mothers about what her teacher had said about people with gay sexual orientations in school.

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A: En toe sê ek hulle tweetjies moet by my kom sit, dat ons daaroor praat, ek was nou bietjie emosioneel en het bietjie gehuil ook, maar ek het vir hulle gesê: hulle moenie vir een oomblik dink ek is nie trots op wat ek is nie, wat dit ook al is nie, want ek dink nie dis verkeerd nie en hulle moet nie, ek wil nie hê hulle moet êrens in hulle harte dink ons is verkeerd nie, en dis hulle eie morele oordeel later en ek sal dit ook later vir hulle sê, en hulle kan besluit is dit reg of verkeerd, maar ek wil nie hê hulle moet oordeel nie... en ek verstaan dat jy by die skool of voor ander mense moet wegstroom, maar in jou hart moet jy nie so voel nie, dat dit oor jou eie ma is nie, want dan gaan dit nie lekker wees vir jou eie ma nie en jou ma gee jou al daai baie liefde en goedjies and if you want to accept that you have to accept the reality of the situation en dit is, en en ons glo nie dat wat ons doen is nie verkeerd nie.

*“Did you tell her what happened?”*

*“No, I didn’t actually.” (lines 193-195,S3; narrative p.9)*

Despite this, Luanne also shares some of the more intimate experiences of her relationships with her mothers:

*“My moms always tease me by saying, ‘Love will be enough for Christmas!’ But then they always spoil me so much. I don’t think they always realise how much I appreciate it.”*

*At one stage, I specifically ask Luanne: “What do you like about having two mothers?”*

*“I like it because a mother is always protective, and because of that, I can see that it is not always easy for them to say “yes”. We are also so close. I think that the times I enjoy most are when we go out and have picnics together, and do fun things like that. (lines 135-139,S1 & 47-55,S5; narrative p.11)*

Indications of an open relationship also exist between Danielle and her mother. Indications of a lesser degrees of openness are also present even though Danielle felt free to ask her mother searching questions about her mother’s first (female) partner when she was trying to come to terms with her situation.

*When the new lady – my mother’s friend – moved in, my mother said that they’re “together”. Then we all talked about it in a nice and soft way... (lines 257-259,S1; narrative p.2)*

*I just asked her: ‘Are you together?’ So she replied, ‘Yes. How did you know?... “I just asked her everything. And she told me [about] all the women that she had been with before... (lines 220-221,S2; narrative p.18)*

It was during the period when his mother started to see her female friends that Tom experienced a lack of communication – and consequently a lack of openness – between his mother and himself.

*I just wanted her to tell me what was happening. Then I wouldn’t have felt so... so... like, lost. (lines 177-181,S2; narrative p.16)*

It seemed to him as though this lack of attention and communication affected his brother and sister as well.

*All three of us were so lost. So then we started doing our own things... (line 184,S2; narrative p.16)*

Even when his mother's first partner moved in with them, the situation did not improve. Tom felt that his mother did not understand him. This probably contributed to the lack of openness between them.

*"Were you able to talk to your mother about that?"*

*"Hmm. I did tell her, and all she said was some stuff like... 'They are still small, you know,' referring to the twins. She didn't even know what I was talking about. I think she thought I was a bit mad or something. It was really tough." (lines 303-307,S1; narrative p.18,19)*

Tom also shared with me some of the difficulties he encountered as he tried to establish a relationship with his mom's first partner (as described in Ribbon Two). He also describes how it is apparently easier for him to interact with his current co-mother (Sandy), although his explanation ("I wasn't used to it at that stage") might also indicate some of the difficulties that he is now experiencing as he tries to adapt to a new co-mother. In spite of this, Sandy's ability to share in and empathise with their youthful activities has created a real degree of openness and trust between them.

*You see, Aunt Sandy, my mom's partner, is more understanding... "Yes, but it's so great. When she comes over here, she always puts on this loud 'doef-doef' kind of music, and I think, 'Wow! What good music!' Of course, I wasn't used to it at that stage, but I really liked it, and when she came, it was, like, 'Wow! There's that music again!'... And then she dances with us and goes crazy. She joins in! She is so much fun." (lines 290,294-295 & 304-305,S2; narrative p.24)*

Danielle agrees that she and her brothers are having some success in adapting to their mother's new partner. Danielle tells me that there is more and more openness between her and her co-mother she has got to know her:

*"Did you and your brothers ever discuss what was happening with Auntie Theresa or Auntie Sandy?" I ask.*

*"Well, we did agree that Auntie Sandy is much better than Auntie Theresa... . But Auntie Sandy... I like her a lot. Last year, we were against each other quite a lot. Now, all of a sudden, we are very nice to each other... And when you get to know her, she's actually a very nice person. But it's very hard to get to know her." (lines 183,S3 & 271-279,S1; narrative p.23)*

As I noted in Ribbon Two, Kim's critical incident included experiencing a period of uncertainty and poor communication when her mother began to date new female

partners. This uncertainty and poor communication was something that they both somehow maintained.

*So, yes, we knew what was going on. But of course we never said anything at all. (line 79,S2; narrative p.14)*

*We were completely uninformed... We never knew when Linda would come or when she would leave... (line 177,S2; narrative p.15)*

*My mom was very low-key about it. But she never explained anything to us until it reached the newspapers. I think that really affected my brother because he likes to be in control of things. (lines 179-181,S2; narrative p.16)*

Kim tells me that even today she still withholds various kinds of information from her mother.

*I don't really want to tell my mom because it will obviously upset her. (line 203:S2, narrative p.18).*

What comes out strongly is that Kim and her brother were sometimes more open with *each other* during this challenging time in their lives. Kim also remains sensitive about the influence these events exerted on her brother, even though they are not all that close to each other anymore.

*We were good friends until he was in Grade Eleven... (lines 71-72,S1; narrative p.4)*

*My brother and I kept it completely to ourselves. (line 134,S1; narrative p.6)*

But Kim did not confide everything to her brother.

*I didn't even tell my brother until I was in Grade Ten or Eleven. (line 202,S2; narrative p.18).*

Despite the fact that Kim has to some extent moved away from her brother, the way in which they support one another makes me realise that it is possible for siblings who have lived through these kinds of experiences to remain open and supportive towards one another. Tom and Danielle also support each other by asking one another what is happening to their mother because they have been going through the same incidents.

*No, I think she understands everything. She was, like, my big buddy back then. She used to tell me everything. I was amazed at how much she knew. I used to think, 'Hey! How the heck did you find out all this stuff?' (lines 338-339,S2; narrative p.25)*

Sometimes siblings experience different levels of okayness with their situation – and this may act as a barrier that diminishes the kind of openness that would be optimal between siblings. Ryland mentions how much he would disapprove of Danielle, his sister, if she were ever to be open about their same-gendered family structure. As I indicated in Ribbon One, Danielle's reported experiences suggest a higher degree of openness than those of Ryland.

*Now if Danielle (for example) goes and tells everyone, 'I've got two mothers at home', then we will have big problems to deal with. (lines 345-346,S2; narrative p.3)*

Danielle mentions that although she is sensitive to the guidance that her mother gives her, she is also aware of what Tom, her older brother, thinks about things. It seems as though she tries to respect their opinions by deferring to them. This certainly suggests that these three (Tom, Danielle and Ryland) exist in a fairly complex symbiotic relationship.

*Because she [mother], like, tells me. She says, 'I know that you're having these boy moments, Danielle, but I am trying to stop you because when you grow up, you will find that you will have a difficult time... She says that I will start doing all those things that normal teenagers do, all those mad things like drinking and taking drugs and all those kind of things, and I am very scared of doing that. I don't want to do those things... I just don't want to do that. My brother really cares about that and he doesn't want me to do those kinds of things either. It's like, if you're a girl, then you won't do those things. He says that if you're too much of a girl, then you won't turn out like that. (lines 92-102,S2; narrative p.7)*

As I noted above, apart from the relationship that exists between disclosure and openness, openness may also be experienced in family relationships. Even though this is not the main focus of my inquiry, reflection on this topic does add a richness to what I have learned about the experiences of children who grow up in same-gendered families.

As I tie up this ribbon, I would like to list the contextual factors that I discussed. They were divorce and adoption, schools, the effects of changing schools, how age influences the interactions among of the children of same-gendered families and other children in schools, and openness in family relationships. My exploration of contextual factors situates the experiences of the children whom I interviewed in a social context, and serves to emphasise that simply making sense of their experiences can never be effectively accomplished without also focusing on those background factors that have significantly influenced their experiences.

In Bubble Five, I have reflected on the question that I originally asked: “What have I learnt from these children? What do I now know that I did not know before?” I answered these questions by discussing “three Ribbons” or aspects that emerged from the experiences of the children in my sample who grew up (or who are growing up) in same-gendered families. The first thing that struck me was just how okay nearly all of the children in my study are about growing up in same-gendered families. Their okayness cannot be isolated from the interactions that they have with other people. It was because of this that the strong linkages that exist between okayness and disclosure (and non-disclosure) emerged. For most of the children, some “critical incident” has happened in their lives that has significantly influenced the way in which they have learned to negotiate challenging situations. These challenging situations were usually (but not necessarily) linked to the mothers’ sexual orientation. I have discussed these critical incidents in Ribbon Two. Finally, I introduced contextual factors that have elaborated and broadened our understanding of the construction of the experiences of children who grow up in same-gendered families.

*So my dear King, Queen Academia and fellow listeners, I would like to bestow a special gift upon you. I have mirrored the reflection of different **Bubbles** that constitute the journey that I have followed as I have listened to and co-created the experiences of children growing up*

*in same-gendered families. I would therefore like to present this Mirror to you. But, before I present it, I need to explain something very important about this gift to all of you...*

*...the frame...*



