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## Expanding Kindergarteners' Understanding of Family Structure Regarding Same-Sex Parents

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Expanding Kindergarteners' Understanding of Family Structure Regarding Same-Sex Parents

Scout Sique\*

A Capstone Project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

\*Formally *Emilia Sique*

## Expanding Kindergarteners' Understanding of Family Structure Regarding Same-Sex Parents

### Introduction

There is a lack of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ+) representation in elementary school curriculum. This deficit leads to a lack of understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, limited gender role diversity, and a predisposition to teasing and anti-gay bullying among children. Therefore, I created a two-day lesson for kindergarteners at Del Rey Woods Elementary in Seaside, California.

### Needs Statement

Kindergarten students are limited in their understanding of diverse family structures, particularly of sexual-minority families. Historically, schools have been influential in students' lives and how they grow to perceive others (Lugg & Adelman, 2015). Schools have also been effective mechanisms for perpetuating homonegativity through lack of representation and lack of support for LGBTQ+ students and faculty (Lugg & Adelman, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for more LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools in order to provide a safe environment.

In 2011, California passed the FAIR Education Act, which made it mandatory for schools to incorporate LGBTQ+ history in public schools throughout the state. In 2017, California teachers finally began to integrate LGBTQ+ history into their classrooms (Leno, 2013). An early introduction to LGBTQ+ themes can help to combat anti-gay attitudes (Kosciw et al., 2014). For example, LGBTQ+ themes being included in classrooms can increase the likelihood of some children becoming friends with the children of these same-sex couples. Increasing knowledge of and comfort with LGBTQ+ themes creates a safe space in which to talk about and explore different types of people (Lugg & Adelman, 2015).

There is a lack of education for elementary-aged children regarding the diversity of family structure, especially with regards to LGBTQ+ families. In one study, less than 20% of elementary school students were taught positive LGBTQ+ representation in their schools and almost 15% have been taught negative content about LGBTQ+ topics in school (Kosciw et al., 2014).

Additionally, children of same-sex parents are not given resources to navigate their lives. School libraries are often provided books that are inclusive of the percentage of a school's demographic. For example, a school where 23% of their student population is black, their library is more likely to have around 23% of books be written by black authors or depicting black characters. Children of sexual minorities are not measured and are therefore not provided with adequate literature resources to fit their demographic (Winter, 2019). This lack of representation in children's classrooms may impress upon the children that sexual-minority families are invisible or unimportant (Davis & Hanline, 2016). By including sexual-minority families in elementary school literature, the curriculum is made more inclusive for all children (Blackburn, 2012).

Elementary-aged children are developing an understanding of gender and gender roles early in life. Gender is a major factor in how children learn to behave and present themselves to the world. By Kindergarten, most children have developed stable gender identities and may judge others based on their adherence to or violation of gender norms (Vilkin et al., 2019). Common gender stereotypes are that females are more emotional, quiet, and submissive. Males are often seen as dominant, intellectual, and aggressive (Baker, Tisak & Tisak, 2015). Girls often believe themselves to only be able to pursue careers as teachers or nurses, while boys are meant to be police officers and doctors. Young boys believe only males should use tools or enjoy cars,

while young girls believe that only females can enjoy shopping (Baker, Tisak & Tisak, 2015). These gender stereotypes are part of gender essentialism, an idea that men and women are fundamentally different in the ways that they interact with the world due to their sex. This gender essentialism is often detrimental to children developing their sense of self. It limits their self-expression and may lead to strong sexism in the future (Meyer & Gelman, 2016). Children learn cultural gender stereotypes through peers and media and exposing them to education regarding discrimination does not negatively impact them (Pahlke, Bigler & Martin, 2014). The strict gender roles that elementary students are exposed to heavily influence their performance regarding romantic relationships. In order to adhere to these perceived roles, students must play either the male or the female in a relationship (Renold, 2000) People who deviate from these roles are seen as “other” when they do not fit into a heterosexual mold.

Given the current lack of representation of LGBTQ+ families in the school curriculum, same-sex families may be excluded from full participation in schools. Same-sex parents often worry about the homophobic and heteronormative practices in school settings, therefore creating more concern regarding their children’s safety as the children of homosexual parents (Davis & Hanline, 2016). Many children of lesbian parents report consistent anti-gay sentiments from their peers, and gay fathers may experience more social stigma in schools that their children attend than heterosexual parents in the same school (Davis & Hanline, 2016; Perrin, Pinderhughes, Mattern, Hurley & Newman, 2016). A 2018 Midwestern-US study found that there are higher rates of anti-gay bullying against children of same-sex couples than children of opposite-sex couples. These children also demonstrated less favorable feelings towards children of same-sex parents and were more likely to report desires for friendship with children of other-sex parents (Farr, Salomon, Brown-Iannuzzi & Brown, 2018). In this study, very few children were able to

accurately define the concept of being gay or lesbian, suggesting that they are socializing around anti-gay stereotypes without even understanding what it means to be gay or lesbian. To make same-sex parents feel more comfortable in school settings, there is a need to increase general acknowledgment of their existence (Farr, Salomon, Brown-Iannuzzi & Brown, 2018).

LGBTQ+ students are consistently more likely to be victims of biased bullying, driven by discriminatory behaviors, than are heterosexual students ("District Profile: Monterey Peninsula Unified (CA Dept of Education)", 2019). Data from the US Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that roughly 85% of LGBTQ+ students have been verbally bullied and 40% had been physically assaulted at school (Rivers & Duncan, 2013). When faced with isolation or harassment from peers, students are more likely to entertain suicidal ideations than other students. They are also more prone to drug and alcohol abuse than their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2011). Experts in multicultural literature believe that an inclusive curriculum encourages students to hold intrinsic value in a diverse society and individual people (Kosciw et al., 2011). Providing a safe environment with an inclusive curriculum can increase a student's feeling of school connectedness and lead to a decrease in rates of suicidal ideation.

To increase knowledge of LGBTQ+ families, I have formulated a 3-session lesson for Kindergarteners at Del Rey Woods Elementary School in Seaside, California. I have chosen two elementary-appropriate picture books depicting same-sex parents to use in shared reading with the students.

#### Development Area

In my project, I am teaching Kindergarten students at Del Rey Woods Elementary School about same-sex parents. By the age of four, children develop a strong sense of gender. Gender

development is heavily influential as it molds male and female children into masculine and feminine adults. They are likely to choose toys and activities based on their idea of their assigned gender (Vilkin et al., 2019). Children who are assigned a gender at birth believe that they must perform activities consistent with their gender rather than pursue their own unique interests (Ruble et al., 2007). Their individual skills, wants, and interests may be deterred by the societal expectations of their gender conformity (Baker, Tisak & Tisak, 2015). Until the age of six or seven, children cannot comprehend that their sex is invariant. Their sex, based on whether they possess a penis or a vagina, is fixed while gender is more fluid (Ruble et al., 2007). This understanding helps lead children to gender constancy. Gender constancy consists of three components: 1) correctly label the sex of another individual, 2) understand that the individual's sex remains the same over time, and 3) an individual's sex is not changed by a change in their physical representation, such as playing with an other-gendered toy or wearing other-gendered clothing (Ruble et al., 2007).

The approach of this project addresses gender roles and gender "policing." Children learn gender roles early on in their lives and can easily assign different activities to their perceived respective gender. For example, girls are seen as more submissive and emotional than boys, and boys are seen as more active and aggressive (Baker, Tisak & Tisak, 2015). This can lead to negative reactions towards people who do not fall into these norms. Girls who are loud are more likely to be shushed, while loud boys are brushed off. With gender roles comes gender "policing," the act of punishing someone for behaving outside of their assigned gender roles (Vilkin et al., 2019). In elementary schools, for example, this policing can take the form of shunning another male student for choosing a pink pencil instead of a red one or teasing a female student for liking superheroes. Gender policing is common for young children learning what it means to be a certain gender (Vilkin et al., 2019). This policing can dissuade children

from pursuing their personal interests or developing aspects of their personalities that come naturally to them. Examining the variations of gender in a Kindergarten classroom may help students to understand the limitations that gender roles may place on their own lives.

#### Consideration of Diversity

I will be conducting my project at Del Rey Woods in Mrs. Driscoll's Kindergarten classroom. Roughly 66 percent of the student population are English Language Learners, reflected in Mrs. Driscoll's classroom with more than half of the students speaking primarily Spanish in their homes ("EdData - School Profile - Del Rey Woods Elementary", 2020). There are some primarily Spanish-speaking students who may not be able to grasp the ideas of same-sex parents from the books that I will be presenting in English. The books and worksheets will be in English; therefore students must be proficient enough in English to complete the program and understand the content. It will be necessary for students to have Kindergarten-level vocabulary at least in order to participate in these lessons.

The content of this program may appear controversial to some students' families. Not all of the students come from families that readily approve, accept, or appreciate LGBTQ+ families. Some families hold traditional beliefs on both gender and sexuality. This LGBTQ+-centered content may be more difficult to understand for students who do not have previous knowledge of family structures that differ from their own or from traditional stereotypes. In both books I presented, there is a same-sex couple raising a child depicted; in one, there is a male-male couple and the other has a female-female couple. This program is focused on bridging the gaps for children in heteronormative families and for those in sexual-minority families.

#### Learning Outcomes



I intend to provide two lessons for kindergarten students enrolled in Miss. Driscoll's class. This will span over two weeks, one day a week. The first book I will be reading to them is *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole. The second book during the following week will be *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman, illustrated by Laura Cornell.

1. Students will be able to identify what factors make a family.
2. Students will be able to identify same-sex families as a family type.
3. Students will compare familial similarities.

### **Method**

#### **Day 1**

First, I introduced myself and explained to them why I was there. Then, I asked the class to examine the front cover of *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson, Parnell & Cole, 2005) before leading a discussion about what they saw in the illustration. I read the book to the participants. After the story was done, I asked them what constitutes a family. I then asked them what made Tango and her fathers a family. Then, I distributed their worksheets. See Appendix A. I read aloud the instructions and the participants began their work. At the conclusion, I collected their worksheets and we discussed the ways that their families are different and alike to Tango's family. I wrote their answers on the board.

#### **Day 2**

Today, I asked the class to define what makes a family and they listed all of the various familial roles that people can play (mom, dad, aunt, uncle, cousin, etc.). Then, I distributed a pre-test regarding the different possible combinations of parents in a true/false format. See Appendix B. I read aloud the instructions and the questions, then instructed the participants to circle the

checkmark if they agreed and the x if they disagreed with each statement. I asked the participants what information they could gather from the cover of the new book. Then, I read aloud *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Cornell, 2015). I then facilitated a discussion about the events of the book asking questions such as “Do Heather and her mommies love each other? How can you tell?”, and “Why did Heather feel sad at school?” After that, I asked them how this book was like the first book that I had read during the previous week. As a class, they then went over their true/false pre-test answers and discussed how the parents in *Heather Has Two Mommies* were able to take care of and love their daughter while being a same-sex couple. I then wrote a list of their answers about how their families were different and alike to Heather’s family in the book.

### **Results**

Learning outcome 1 was that participants would identify factors that make a family (i.e. love, support, family members). I believe this learning outcome was met. From the two discussions about what makes a family, the participants focused a lot on family taking care of each other via sharing, giving each other food, and being nice to one another. Other answers included family members, such as mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, grandparents, and nieces and nephews. See Table 1 for examples. By using their examples of family characteristics, I explained to them that these aspects of family are what made the same-sex families from the storybooks valid families.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would be able to identify same-sex families as a family type. After I read aloud *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson, Parnell & Cole, 2005), participants individually completed worksheets that instructed them to identify the family that most resembled the penguin family in the book. In the book, the main characters are a male penguin couple who adopt an egg that then hatches into a female penguin. On their worksheets,

only human couples were depicted. Of the 16 participants, 16 circled same-sex families. See Table 2. I feel like this is evidence that this learning outcome was met.

Learning outcome 3 was that participants would be able to compare familial similarities. In order to assess this learning outcome, I asked for similarities between their families and the family *And Tango Makes Three*. Their answers all included ways in which their parents took care of them. When asked if there were any differences, the only differences they identified were related to how the book family was made of penguins. See Table 3 for examples. In regards to *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman & Cornell, 2015), the only difference that participants found was that the main character had two moms, and they did not voice any concerns about this arrangement. See Table 4. I believe this learning outcome was met as participants were able to provide sufficient similarities. They stated similarities that corresponded with their own ideas of family and were, therefore, able to label these same-sex families as such.

### **Discussion**

I believe this project was successful. The participants were engaged in the readings and the worksheets and learned a lot from the experience. Because the participants are of the age where they are cementing their understanding of gender roles, I think that the project helped participants clarify what people are able to do regardless of gender. I think the discussions about how same-sex parents are capable of raising a child made the largest impact, given that the Kindergarteners are at the stage of learning how to identify families and family is a highly influential aspect of their lives. At the same time, because they are learning what gender roles are, they are beginning to think about how they fit into the gender binary and recognize how others fit into this binary. When we discussed same-sex parents on the worksheets, many of the participants did not realize that children can have two moms or two dads as alternatives to having

one mom and one dad. A commonly raised question during this time was: "Don't kids have to have a mom and a dad? They're *supposed* to." As I explained that same-sex families can effectively raise children with love and proper care, most participants came to understand that same-sex couples are not much different in functionality for a family, only in appearance.

In terms of diversity, I think my project included everyone, except that I presumed that showing visual examples of same-sex families would help all children to understand the existence of them. There was a single participant who seemed to comprehend the lesson, but could not understand that child can, in fact, have same-sex parents. His comments often reflected steadfast opinions on the situation, such as statements on the inefficiency of same-sex parents and questioning their ability to take care of a family. However, he was able to correctly label same-sex families and offered examples of how both fictional families were in fact families. This could be due to ideas voiced by his family in their homes. It could also be that his understanding of concepts goes only slightly past visual and he has a difficult time imagining or implementing the concepts he learns.

If I had to do this over again, I wish I would have developed some more interactive activities for the Kindergarteners to participate in. I believe this would have helped to strengthen their understandings of same-sex families. I think that our discussion of family characteristics told me that the participants had basic understandings of family dynamics, but no real need to know different family types. I think if I had introduced more interactive activities, I could hope to increase their understanding of same-sex families through pretend play. Regardless, I feel like the participants learned about the topic and are walking away much more aware of the existence of same-sex families and perhaps more acceptance towards them raising children.

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[stats/?topic=LGBT&area=6&sortBy=percentage&sortDirection=descending#ranking](https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT&area=6&sortBy=percentage&sortDirection=descending#ranking)

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*Table 1**Participants' responses to the question "What makes a family?"*

<i>Response</i>	<i>Occurrence</i>
<b>Mothers and Fathers</b>	<b>5</b>
Aunts, Uncles, Cousins	2
Siblings	2
Grandparents	1
Nieces and Nephews	1
<b>Live with them</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Feed me</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Take me to school</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Go to the park</b>	<b>3</b>
Hold my hand when I cross the street	1
<b>Play together</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Take care of me</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Lots of hugs</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Make sure I am safe</b>	<b>2</b>
Buy me toys and clothes	2
Tie my shoes	1

\*Note: Bolded responses are those that are accurate for the Learning Outcome

*Table 2**List of participants' responses to And Tango Makes Three worksheets.*



<b>Worksheet options</b>	<b>Number answered out of 16</b>
Chose male-male family	16
Chose female-female family*	2
Chose opposite-sex family	0

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\*Chose in addition to the male-male family

*Table 3**Participants' responses to comparing and contrasting the Tango's family with their own.*

<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>
Get her food	Hatching from eggs
Are nice to each other	Live in the water and ice
Treat her carefully	Did not shower in the book
Share	Are penguins
Go on walks together	

*Table 4**Participants' responses to comparing and contrasting Heather's family with their own.*

<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>
Parents bring her to school	Did not shower in the book
Parents cook for her	She has two moms
They go to the park	
Take care of her	
Make cookies together	
Give her love	
Draw pictures together	
Give her hugs and kisses	

*Appendix A*

*Worksheet to accompany the reading of And Tango Makes Three*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## **There's More Than One Way to Make a Family**

Families come in all shapes and sizes...

Can you circle the family that looks like Tango's family?



Can you draw YOUR family?

*Appendix B*

True/false pre-test for the reading of Heather Has Two Mommies

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## What makes a family?

TRUE OR FALSE. Read the sentences. Circle the checkmark if it is true. Circle the X if it is false.

Circle one:



1. Two moms can take care of a child.



2. Two dads CANNOT take care of a child.



3. There has to be one mom and one dad to take care of a child.



4. Two moms can raise a happy and healthy child.



5. Two dads can raise a happy and healthy child.



6. A child CANNOT have two moms.



7. A child can have one mom and one dad.



8. A child can have two dads.



**Something to think about...**

Can one dad raise children?

Can one mom raise children?

Why or why not?

Appendix C

Presentation from Capstone Festival

# “My Friend Has Two Mommies?”

Expanding Kindergarteners' Understanding of Family Structure

Scout Sique\*

\*Formally Emilia Sique




## Lack of LGBTQ+ Inclusive Material

- Less than 20% of elementary school students given *positive* content
- Almost 20% have been exposed to *negative* content
- Children with same-sex parents do not find representation commonplace\*

Are elementary schools honoring the FAIR Education Act?

\* These children are more likely to report anti-queer bullying and suicidal ideation than those of heterosexual couples.





3


# Can girls do that?

“Doesn't my friend need a mommy and a daddy?  
They do, right?”

4

## Gender constancy

- x Correctly label sex of others
- x Understand an individual's sex remains the same over time
- x Imposing rigid gender roles can limit an individual's view of their abilities



5

## Gender policing:

The act of enforcing strict gender roles according to an individual's sex assigned at birth.



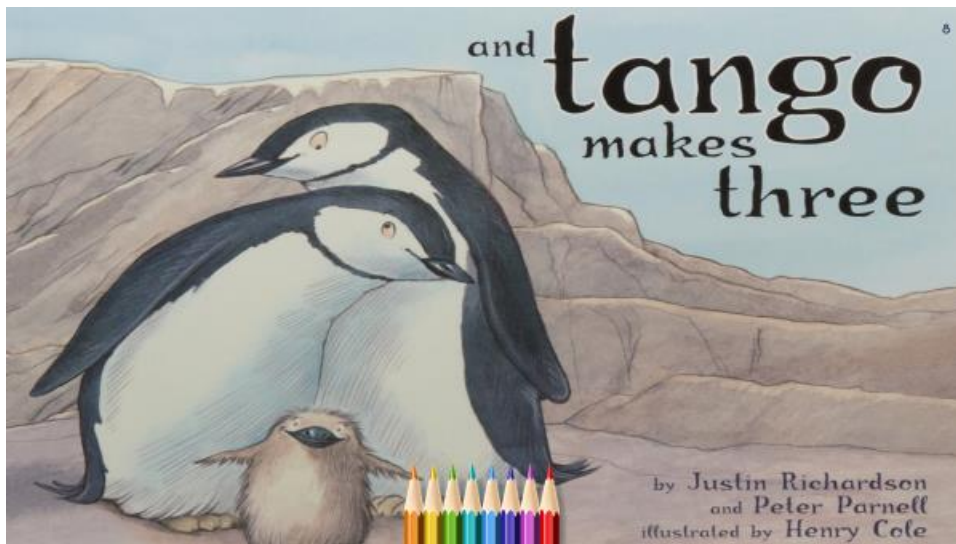




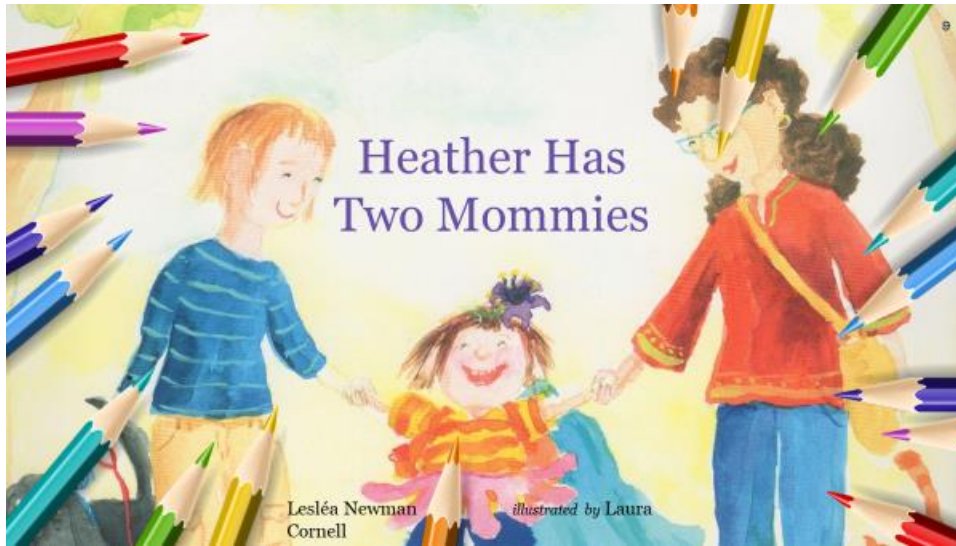
## Introduction to LGBTQ+ Literature

Week One: I read to them  
*And Tango Makes Three*  
by Justin Richardson and  
Peter Parnell, illustrated  
by Henry Cole.

Week Two: I read  
*Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa  
Newman, illustrated by  
Laura Cornell.







10

## Consideration of Diversity

66% of students at Del Rey Woods are Spanish-speaking, English Language Learners.

**Content may appear controversial to families with more traditional beliefs regarding gender and sexuality.**



11

## Learning Outcomes

Students will...

Identify factors that make a family.

Students will...

Identify same-sex families as a family type.

Students will...

Compare family similarities.



12



# Results

Did the participants meet the Learning Outcomes?

13



## Yes!

Discussing LGBTQ+ families increased the participants' understanding of those dynamics.



14


## Learning Outcomes Were Met

- 1 Identify factors that make a family**

Ex. feed each other, take care of each other, being nice to one another, consisting of family members such as moms, dads, aunts, uncles, and cousins
- 2 Identify same-sex families as a family type**

All participants able to identify the proper same-sex couple on worksheet
- 3 Compare familial similarities**

Ex. found similarities in their own families to the families in the storybook, such as giving hugs and going for walks




15

Similar	Differences	Same	Different
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• get you food</li> <li>• nice to each other</li> <li>• treat you carefully</li> <li>• share</li> <li>• go on walks together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hatching from eggs</li> <li>• in water</li> <li>• don't shower</li> <li>• penguins</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents at school</li> <li>• Parents cook</li> <li>• go to park</li> <li>• take care</li> <li>make cookies</li> <li>give us love</li> <li>• draw pictures</li> <li>hugs &amp; kisses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• didn't shower</li> <li>• don't have 2 moms</li> </ul>

(From And Tango Makes Three)

(From Heather Has Two Mommies)




**16 of 16 participants** answered the worksheet correctly


Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**There's More Than One Way to Make a Family**

Families come in all shapes and sizes... Can you circle the family that looks like Tango's family?



Can you draw YOUR family?



**During this discussion,** only one participant still questioned whether or not a child could have same-sex parents

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What makes a family?**

TRUE OR FALSE: Read the sentences. Circle the checkmark if it is true. Circle the X if it is false. Circle one:

	1. Two moms can take care of a child.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. Two dads CANNOT take care of a child.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	3. There has to be one mom and one dad to take care of a child.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	4. Two moms can raise a happy and healthy child.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	5. Two dads can raise a happy and healthy child.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	6. A child CANNOT have two moms.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	7. A child can have one mom and one dad.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	8. A child can have two dads.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>


Something to think about...  
Can one dad raise children?  
Can one mom raise children?  
Why or why not?

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## Discussion

The project was successful and participants showed change in their ideas about family.

A change would be to introduce more interactive activities, such as pretend play, to the teaching aspect.



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# Thank you!

**Any questions?**

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