

RAINBOW FAMILIES SUBMISSION

Early Years Strategy



About Rainbow Families

Rainbow Families was formed in 2015 as the peak body for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) families. The mission of Rainbow Families is to build a community that fosters resiliency by connecting, supporting and empowering LGBTQ+ families.

Rainbow Families has a growing membership and includes people from across Australia. Rainbow Families is an incorporated organisation, governed by a constitution which provides a structure for how the group operates. Rainbow Families is a registered charity with DGR status from the ATO.

What is a Rainbow Family?

A Rainbow Family is an LGBTQ+ parented family. At Rainbow Families, we define a Rainbow Family as: any lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer person who has a child or children; or is planning on having a child or children by way of donor insemination (known or unknown), surrogacy (altruistic or commercial), foster care, foster to adoption, adoption (domestic or international), opposite sex relationship, coparenting or other means.

Rainbow families, like many modern families, come in all shapes and sizes and are formed in many different ways. But the thing we all have in common is that our families are created through love. Over thirty years of peer reviewed research into same-sex parented families shows that children from these families do as well as their peers from heterosexual-parented families.

For the community, by the community

Rainbow Families is a volunteer-led organisation, providing a network of support to children and families within the LGBTQ+ community.



We welcome the move create a national Early Years Strategy and were grateful to be part of the Early Years Strategy Summit in Canberra earlier in the year. As an organisation concerned with supporting LGBTQ+ families, we see parents of young children facing additional challenges compared to traditional families as well as outright discrimination at times. Accordingly, we believe it is important that our community has a voice in contributing to the creation of an Early Years Strategy that meets the needs of all families.

In preparation of this submission, we consulted with our community and have included quotes from this consultation in the submission. The submission has been divided into the 3 main areas that our community provided feedback on.

Two things are clear from the community consultation: the power of language to make us feel included or excluded; and that family diversity and inclusivity training would go a long way to remove barriers for our community and support diverse families in the early years.

Respondents were asked if they believe family diversity inclusion training for frontline staff would help to remove discrimination and increase inclusion of our families. All respondents answered yes. Our community is crying out for more inclusive services and are being discriminated against because of a lack of understanding of our families. We would like to see mandatory family diversity inclusion training for all staff affected by the new Early Years Strategy.

In 2017, our community campaigned for marriage equality. While that battle was won, what this submission reveals is that there is still a long way to go before members of our community experience full equality when accessing government services.



Education

Many families in our community have experienced issues in relation to their children's school or early childhood education and care services because of the makeup of their family. Some families told us that education and early childhood services lacked specific resources related to family diversity.

A simple way to be more inclusive is to include different family structures in story books and early learning activities.

One respondent told us that such resources were banned at their children's centre due to complaints from other parents:

I found out that some parents had written to the preschool forbidding their children from being exposed to children's literature depicting same sex families. As a result the preschool would not read stories that showed families like ours with two mums.

Despite some staff having good intentions, a lack of understanding by educators about diverse families was also an issue for several respondents:

I've had to explain my family countless times to staff who have no training in diversity and have no idea how a child can have same sex parents. It's awkward at best.

Early Learning Centres are an important space as all Families deserve to be understood and represented in education, it's imperative that teachers are educated and have comprehensive understanding of LGBTIQ parents and children to create safe and inclusive places.

The school curriculum and Early Years Learning Framework both need to be updated to include more learning opportunities for students around family diversity and LGBTQ+ people.



Help ensure inclusivity by educating other children and their parents to be accepting by teaching about different compositions of families.

There should be more discussion about different types of families.

Inclusive language was raised over and over by our community. Educators and school staff often do not understand the importance of language and how it can impact families.

Ask us what language we would like the educators to use when talking about our family.

Recommendations

- The Department of Education should develop a program of inclusive practice for preschools, early childhood education centres and long day care centres around family diversity.
- The Department of Education should work with Rainbow Families and other peak groups for trans and gender diverse families to develop plain English resources that outline issues faced by children of trans and gender diverse parents and describe best practice for schools. Such information would ensure teachers, counsellors, support staff and principals have a good basic level of knowledge.
- The Department of Education should work with Rainbow Families and other peak groups to facilitate LGBTQ+ advocacy training for parents to help them navigate issues with their children's schools.
- The Department of Education should mandate LGBTQ+ inclusivity training for all school and early education staff, particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ family formation and trans and gender diverse people.
- The Department of Education's forms should be reviewed to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and our families, including families with more than two parents.



- Examine religious freedom protection in Australia: the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) should be reviewed with a view to removing exemptions that allow for discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and our families – particularly in the case of publicly funded organisations. As major employers that are allocated taxpayer funds to deliver services to the general public, these organisations should be required to deliver services in a way that is equitable and accountable to the public. Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and our families should not be enshrined in law, nor supported by public funding.



Health

There is an assumed heteronormativity within many government departments which is detrimental to LGBTQ+ parents and their families. This is highlighted repeatedly with our consultation for this submission.

Don't assume everyone has a traditional nuclear family. There is a lot of diversity in family structures in 2023.

It would be nice if they didn't just assume every family was a mum & a dad & refer to it as such when providing training or education to families or any intersection really.

Less assumptions, less exclusion of non biological parents.

Better use of correct language/terminology and an understanding that assumptions can be harmful.

One respondent talked about missing out on postnatal depression screening because he is a gay dad. Postnatal depression can affect anyone, and all parents and carers should be screened, not only birth mothers.

I was not asked about my mental health once with my first born. When my second baby came along I struggled with postnatal depression, but this was not picked up until my daughter was one year old as I was never asked the screening questions because I am a gay dad.

Language is a powerful tool to make people feel included in community and society. Inclusive language allows people to see that their family will be welcomed and valued by a service. On the other hand, language can also exclude people. Our community sometimes feel othered by a lack of inclusive language.



Better use of correct language/terminology and an understanding that assumptions can be harmful.

Changing "mothers group" to new parents group through Community health centres, updating hospital and registration forms to reflect modern families.

Understanding the importance of inclusive language.

Making systems more flexible so they don't just include "mother" and "father" is a good start. Empowering professionals with the language to ask relevant questions in a sensitive way e.g. not asking about the "real mum" but asking about genetic background. I think people mean well but lack the language skills to correctly discern the information they need.

Safety in health setting by not being othered by careless uses of dated language practice. We no longer assume all women are married and have culturally adapted language in most professional settings to ensure women are respected and it's also an easy fix to train staff in respect LGBTIQ respectful language practices.

Inclusive language extends to forms on paperwork and in systems. In NSW the hospital IT system still uses the terms mother and father. Many parents are asked which one wants to be in the system as mother and which one as father. Some well-meaning practitioners will discretely make that choice for the families which can lead to even more issues in the future when they don't realise that one of them has been misgendered in the system.

Inclusive language - reducing assumptions - wording in paperwork (ie Parent 1, Parent 2 rather than mother and father).



Recommendations

- The Health Department should mandate LGBTQ+ inclusivity training for all frontline staff, in particular in relation to LGBTQ+ family formation and trans and gender diverse people.
- Health forms and systems should be reviewed to be inclusive of LGBTQ+ people and our families.
- Health processes should be reviewed to ensure that trans and gender diverse people are appropriately recognised and not required to answer intrusive questions or use names and/or pronouns that do not relate to their affirmed identity.



Centrelink

Families told us that dealing with Centrelink was frustrating, confusing and at times embarrassing. A lack of understanding about rainbow family formation, and of trans and gender diverse people generally, created a range of issues for respondents to our consultation.

When our first child was both I had to be listed as a female father. I found it degrading.

My second child (birthed by my partner) is still not listed as my child. All staff seem to think that it's not a problem and doesn't matter and it will be fixed but each time I call the problem is not fixed and I have to go through the whole story again. So educating staff that it is actually an issue if your system is not accepting and being dismissive does not assist.

Family diversity inclusion training for all frontline Centrelink staff is essential to prevent these issues from continuing in the future.

Education so that people are only asking relevant questions and not being nosy about family structures.

Often government systems are outdated and do not represent the diversity of modern Australian families. Ensuring that government systems allow for parent 1, 2, 3 and 4 rather than mum and dad will help families access services without being forced to fit heteronormative IT systems.

My partner and I spent 9 months and were incorrectly billed \$5000 after one worker change the date my child finished school, I couldn't help feel this was almost



deliberate to make life hard for us because this male employee was disgust at our relationship. I had to spend months trying to get sorted and eventually cleared due to ineptitude and lack of knowledge on how to blend a same sex female working family of 7.

Recommendations

- The Department of Human Services should mandate LGBTQ+ inclusivity training for all frontline staff, in particular in relation to LGBTQ+ family formation and trans and gender diverse people.
- Centrelink forms should be reviewed to be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ people and our families.
- Centrelink processes should be reviewed to ensure that trans and gender diverse people are appropriately recognised and not required to answer intrusive questions or use names and/or pronouns that do not relate to their affirmed identity.

Conclusion

Two things are clear from the community consultation: the power of language to make us feel included or excluded; and that family diversity and inclusivity training would go a long way to remove barriers for our community and support diverse families in the early years.

