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News

San Francisco Examiner
Saturday Jun 03, 2000

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New film on families shows how 'different' is normal

Kids on video share varied experiences, nontraditional lives

By Carol Ness
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

"Some kids think divorce is their fault. But it's not. Your parents just don't want to be with each other anymore, but it's not your fault."

Wise words. And from the mouths of babes — in this case 8-year-old Montana — they carry the power to reach other children who may live with unspoken doubts and fears — and with tough questions from other kids — about the shape of their families.

That's the hope of a San Francisco-made teaching film called "That's a Family!" premiering Saturday at Herbst Theater.

The peppy half-hour video is intended to be shown in elementary and middle school classrooms. It's the latest release by Women's Educational Media and its producers, Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen, and was made with support from the San Francisco Arts Commission, Board of Supervisors, and San Francisco, Berkeley and Oakland schools.

This is the film Chasnoff and Cohen envisioned when they made "It's Elementary," the first educational film on how to teach children about the existence of gays and lesbians. Their original idea, almost a decade ago, had been to make a film for children, but teachers convinced them the schools

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weren't ready for that yet. So they made it for parents and teachers.

Used in teacher trainings

The film generated a firestorm of protest from the religious conservatives, but has been shown on more than 115 public television stations and is widely used in teacher trainings.

"That's a Family!" is designed for children, and it's children who tell a story about living in families that are so-called different. The focus isn't on families headed by gays and lesbians, in couples or alone, but they are included.

Children watching "That's a Family!" will see kids like them in their various families. Some have parents of different races or religions. Some, like Montana, have parents who divorced. Some have single parents. Some were adopted. Some are being raised by a grandparent or guardian.

Glimpses of almost 50 family types make the point that in the United States today, "different" families are the norm.

A fact sheet that will be part of curricular materials circulated with the video contains statistics supporting that thought: Only 28 percent of American children live with their married, biological parents; as many live with one parent; more than 1 million kids a year have parents who divorce; 2 to 4 percent of families have an adopted child; an estimated 6 million to 10 million Americans, including adults, have at least one gay, lesbian or bisexual parent.

Regular kids talking

Kids like Montana are the stars of the film. They introduce their families and talk openly about things that can be hard for kids to talk about: being adopted, having gay parents, living through divorce.

Emily has a mother of German descent and father who is Chinese. She says she gets to celebrate Christmas and Chinese New Year.

"You don't have to be a rat to marry a rat. You can be a rat and marry a mouse," she says in a 9-year-old's explanation of interracial marriage.

Josh, who lives with his lesbian mothers, Joan and Stacey, describes one classmate who sometimes "uses mean words for gays and lesbians and that hurts my feelings." He adds,

"I wish he knew it was OK to be different."

It's startling but honest to hear Brittany say she's living with her grandmother "because my parents were on drugs for a long time."

Clips show the families at home, eating, getting ready for school. In their own words, the kids talk about their lives, and what they'd like other kids to know about their families. And they show how it's possible to talk about their feelings about such personal issues.

Director Chasnoff, whose documentary exposé of General Electric won an Oscar in 1991, said focus groups of children, parents and teachers confirmed the power of the idea and shaped the film.

Allowing open feelings

One girl watched, and then said her own parents' divorce hadn't affected her. But there were tears in her eyes. When Chasnoff asked how it was to see Montana in the film, she admitted, "I never knew anyone else whose parents were divorced."

An 8-year-old boy saw it and then turned to his mother, a lesbian, and told her, "That's what happens at my school. All the kids say very bad things about gay people and it really upsets me," Chasnoff recounted.

"It was the first time he'd ever said anything. His mother had been trying to figure out a way to get him to talk but he wouldn't, until he saw other kids expressing what he felt," she added. "This opened the door."

That's exactly what Chasnoff and Cohen hope the video will do — open discussions about what kids often feel and fear but don't know how to talk about. It would be just one part of a broad family diversity curriculum if used, as they hope, in schools around the country.

Stirring up criticism

It's already stirred up criticism from right-wing organizations such as the American Family Association and Concerned Women for America. They call it "yet another attempt to indoctrinate our children with the lie that homosexuality is merely an 'alternative lifestyle' that should be accepted and affirmed."

Chasnoff and Cohen hope the cultural wars over "That's a Family!" will be less fierce than those waged over "It's Elementary." Chasnoff said the climate has changed over the last decade, in part because so many gays and lesbians have children in schools.

They point out the support the film has from schools and teachers, including California school Superintendent Delaine Eastin and state and national teachers' associations.

The premiere on June 10, with an appearance by actor Robin Williams, sold out so quickly that organizers may add a second showing that Saturday. The video also will be shown June 18 at San Francisco's gay and lesbian film festival.

Women's Educational Media is reachable at (415) 641-4616 or www.womedia.org.

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