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What should children call same-sex parents?

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When domestic partners Thomas Dysarz and Michael Meehan announced recently that they were expecting quadruplets — via a surrogate mother and in vitro fertilization — the Lexington, Ky., men also addressed what the children would call them.

“Michael will be ‘Dad’ because he’s the biological father,” Dysarz said. “I’ll be ‘Thomas.’”

Mumsy and Ma? Popster and Pa? It is a unique dilemma facing gay and lesbian couples who become parents.

“It can be an interesting question for the couple: What do those words mean to them?” said Lisa Bennett, who runs the Human Rights Campaign’s online family network. “It’s really very person-

al. For some people it might be based on what they called their parents. . . . I don’t think there’s any general rule.”

Aletha Fields, an Old Louisville woman who last year founded a local group for minority lesbians called Just Us, said she’s heard about couples who’ve used “Mom” and “Mommy” or namebased endearments along the lines of “Daddy Steve” and “Daddy John.”

Most of the parents in Just Us, however, are in situations like Fields’. She became a mother in a previous marriage and brought older children, who already have a second parent, into a later homosexual partnership.

Her two sons call Fields’ partner by her first name, and that is common among members of Just Us, Fields said. Although even that takes some negotiation.

Fields said that in the African-

American culture she was raised in, children didn’t use first names for adults, though that was what her partner, who is white, felt most comfortable with.

Fields thinks the negotiation is healthy and exciting. “It’s a chance to invent what your household structure is going to look like,” she said.

A Kaiser Family Foundation poll last fall revealed that of 405 gay, lesbian and bisexual adults, 8 percent had children under age 18 living with them. The 2000 U.S. Census counted 594,391 same-sex-partner households, but there isn’t information on how many of those have children living at home. In 1995, the National Opinion Research Center estimated that 1 million to 9 million American children have at least one lesbian or gay parent.

“We realized we are seeing more and more gay and lesbian

families,” said Joe Hagan, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ committee on psychosocial aspects of child and family health. Hagan has a family practice in Burlington, Vt., with a number of families headed by lesbian or gay couples.

“I have a family where children call them Mommy and Mama, another where they are called Mommy Sue and Mommy Jean, and a family where they go by first names,” Hagan said. “And they all work. I think kids know they have two parents.

They have two adults in their life who care about them, and for them, to whom these kids are psychologically bonded. It doesn’t make a lot of difference.”

Randy Johnson and Paul Campion, who live in eastern Louisville, faced the issue when adopting twin boys seven years ago.

“We talked about that a lot before,” Johnson said, and considered many different titles — including a simple division between “Dad” and “Daddy.”

Ultimately, Johnson said, they decided to play it by ear, and the two boys — who have Campion’s last name — came to call them “Daddy Paul” and “Daddy Randy.”

Sometimes they’ll just say, “Daddy,” and “both of us respond,” Johnson said with a laugh. “Then they’ll say, ‘I meant Daddy Paul’ or ‘I meant Daddy Randy.’”

Johnson said they had thought they’d eventually have to make a name decision, but they never did. “We communicate very effectively,” he said.

Information for this story was also provided by The Washington Post.