

FOREWORD

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MICHAEL LASALA HAS WRITTEN A LANDMARK STUDY OF the experiences and relationships of parents and their children in the coming-out process. It is a moving exploration of families working through the disruption of finding out their children are homosexual. Parents, as LaSala describes, “agonize that their children will be unsafe as they launch them into a world where gay and lesbian youth are discriminated against, assaulted, even murdered.” The important news is that parents can buffer the effects of these harsh realities, so LaSala’s book is essential reading for all clinicians working to facilitate family development and connectedness.

LaSala’s narrative challenges many of the myths about family relationships before, during, and after the coming-out process, such as the myth that families cannot be close before they are open about their child’s homosexuality. He conveys with touching descriptions that even though there is avoidance about the homosexuality, parents and children may be very caring and connected on many levels. What impressed and humbled him in doing the study, he says, is the way the parents and children held on to each other and even grew closer despite their fears and shattered expectations. Children must try to figure out their own identities while working to stay connected

to parents on whom they are still reliant for emotional and financial support, while parents go through a “maelstrom of feelings” during this phase. LaSala was awestruck by the depth and persistence of family connections, which led him to reflect on the mysterious ties that bind families together. Reading his book, I was similarly awestruck by the power, mystery, and persistence of families to stay connected in spite of everything. It also made me feel the tragedy and loss of those families not included in this study, those who could not appreciate the importance of family relationships and do not manage to stay connected. I wish they would read this book and realize what they are missing.

LaSala’s writing is refreshing, with humor and tenderness for the parents and children in these sixty-five families. He found these families’ stories went beyond the stereotypical narrative that children are victims of parents’ negative attitudes toward homosexuality and that once the parents are educated they relate better and relationships improve. LaSala achieved a broader understanding of the experiences of children and parents in the coming-out process.

The larger context for these families is, of course, facing the fear, shame, ostracism, and rejection from societal groups: religious, cultural, and social. The courageous effort of so many parents in this book to hold on to their own values and relationships in spite of such pernicious societal pressures is inspiring. LaSala discusses what has been called homosexual stigma—“society’s shared belief system through which homosexuality is denigrated, discredited, and constructed as invalid relative to heterosexuality” (Herek, Chop, and Strohl 2007:171). We have to remember it is only a few decades ago that the *Diagnostic Manual* ceased to call homosexuality a mental illness. Families live in the shadow of such societal negativity. The devastating impact of peer abuse, religious and societal intimidation and condemnation is hard to overcome. So every family here has a courage that must be appreciated.

LaSala has a deep understanding of family process. He explores with rich understanding the relationships of the parents and children in his study. As he describes the love of mothers he says, “It is hard to imagine anything quite as soothing for a distressed child as a mother’s love, particularly for children in this study who were being harassed by peers and felt like potential outcasts.” Most had strong relationships with their mothers, characterized by closeness, consistency, and warmth. On the other hand, as appears generally true between parents and children, mothers tend to have closer relationships with their children than do fathers, although there were examples where fathers

were the ones with whom sons or daughters had an easier time dealing with the issues of coming out and, in general, staying connected.

LaSala says: "Fathers tend to live on the outside edge of the emotional lives of their families." Only seventeen fathers agreed to talk with him compared to sixty-two mothers; thirteen of the children had little or no relationship with their fathers. Sometimes, as has been shown in other research, fathers remembered their relationships with their children more positively than children did. Many families found themselves in the common triangle where the father's only communication with the children is through what the mother relays to him or is left out of the loop altogether. Many of the children in LaSala's study reported that their fathers knew of their sexuality, but only twenty-six had told them directly; in the other families, mothers informed fathers. LaSala also discusses the socialization of fathers, which teaches all men that homosexuality is incompatible with real masculinity or full manhood. Fathers have been raised not only to look down upon homosexuality but generally to fear it in themselves. LaSala wonders whether fathers choose to be peripheral in the lives of their children and then families organize around them or whether families keep fathers distant. This is an important clinical dilemma, because, as family therapists, we need to work hard to change this pattern.

Generally lesbian and gay youth do not disclose their sexual orientation until they have become somewhat comfortable with themselves. LaSala recommends having great respect for the distance that parents and children seem to need for a period of time, until the youth are comfortable discussing their identity. LaSala's careful descriptions of parent-child relationships conveys the important point that parents and children sometimes feel close and connected even though the child has not discussed his or her sexual orientation. For one thing, because in our culture parents and children are expected to avoid discussing their sexuality with each other, families can share many other things though they keep silence about that one thing. It is important not to undermine the connections between parents and children even as they are in a phase of development where they are not yet ready to deal with all the issues between them. Indeed, this is probably true for most families at certain points of development. LaSala's respect for the complexity of family relationships, and the timing of opening up extremely difficult issues that challenge what family members mean to each other, is a critical insight in many situations. LaSala conveys that in this developmental phase parent-child closeness may require more nuanced understanding. Mothers and sons

may be close when discussing fashion or feelings but not regarding peers, school problems, or cross-gendered behavior. He believes the avoidance of talking about homosexuality until they are ready, while staying connected in other ways, may be important for maintaining nurturing connections until the time is right for the youth to come out.

LaSala conveys the importance of education in helping parents overcome the blame they tend to put on themselves, given the societal messages, despite all evidence to the contrary, that bad parenting makes a child lesbian or gay. He discusses the importance of intervening not only with families, to help them wend their way through the issues of coming out, but also within stigmatizing institutions and other environments. This is a strong mandate for us as clinicians. We must take the time to understand when and how to intervene with different family members, when to encourage them to talk together and when to coach them separately. The importance too of siblings, extended family members, friends, and other members of the family's social network cannot be minimized. Clearly, the wider the net we spread, as a container for young adults coming out to their parents, the better. The issues are not only personal or even familial but also social and societal, and this awareness is a critical part of our clinical mandate. LaSala's study shows this extremely well through the voices of parents and children who have a deep attachment, but are driven apart by societal stigma and prejudice.

All clinicians should keep LaSala's insights in mind as they work to create a therapeutic context to help families hold on to their connections in the face of painful social realities of ostracism, shame, and rejection, which, given our society's closed-mindedness, can too often break loving families apart.