NEW YORK
nymag.com

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Feature

Gay With Children

Even ten years ago, the only certain thing about a gay couple's future was that it wouldn't include children. But gays and lesbians are now becoming parents in record numbers, and it's changing how they think about themselves—and each other.

By David Usborne

Family Portrait: David Strah and Barry Miguel with Zev and Summer. (Photo credit: Erin Patrice O'Brien)

It is a weekday afternoon like most others for David Strah, a stay-at-home dad in Chelsea. Shortly before 3 p.m., he strolls the five blocks from his apartment to the City & Country School on West 13th Street to pick up his two children, Zev, 5, and Summer, 2. He lingers at the cubbies to chat with the teachers and some of the mothers while their children tear around them. Zev has a cardboard sword he made in class that he waves ferociously at anyone in his path. Finally, Strah and a couple of the moms agree that it is nice enough outside to take a detour to the Bleecker Street playground before everyone goes home.

The place is heaving. Children are screaming from the jungle gym and swinging like superheroes from the monkey bars while their parents sit nursing cappuccinos on the wooden benches and grumbling about their schools' fund-raising drives. Strah spots a friend, Amy Zimmerman, and walks over to remark on how brave she is to wear her new Marc Jacobs tweed coat to the playground. He also wants her advice—his hairdresser has recommended he dye his eyebrows darker to bring out the blue of his eyes. What does she think?

There is another, more implicit reason for Strah to seek her out. They are both gay parents. She has three children. Jerry and Ella are here, careering around the playground, while the youngest, 3-month-old Ruby, is back at home with Amy's partner, Tanya. Twenty minutes later, another gay friend arrives with her two preschoolers, who make a beeline for the sandbox. There's a brief debate on whether they should attempt an early supper together, but Strah has promised to visit yet another friend, a single gay man who has just become the father of twins, thanks to a surrogate mother. Later that evening, he's planning to drive Zev and Summer, with his partner and their other daddy, Barry Miguel, to the family beach house in East Hampton for the weekend.

The Bleecker Street playground, in the middle of the West Village, may not be representative of all city playgrounds, but it is arguably the epicenter of a seismic change in gay New York, as a growing number of same-sex couples have been plunging into parenthood. Typically, the men are either adopting or hiring surrogate mothers, the women buying donor sperm and being inseminated or adopting. While politicians and talk-show hosts debate the legitimacy of same-sex marriage, a significant number of gay couples are short-circuiting the discussion by starting families. "People are just doing it," says Strah, 36. "It's a revolution. It's the next step that everyone is talking about."

And those who are doing it point out that raising children together is a bigger commitment, given the divorce rate, than matrimony. "We did not want to wait for gay marriage to happen," says Amy Zimmerman.

Yes, even twenty years ago, you could find gay parents who, one way or another, had acquired children, but they were the brave few, fighting an uphill battle against skeptical adoption agencies, disapproving teachers, and heterosexual parents who weren't sure they wanted their offspring having sleepovers with friends whose two daddies would put the kids to bed. Now the mainstreaming of gay life has made adopting simpler, less controversial, and the number of people doing it has reached critical mass. "This issue has reached its tipping point," suggests Scott Goldsmith, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College. "Children are a far more visible part of gay culture."

Inevitably, all these families with two moms or two dads are having a dramatic effect on gay expectations—and gay and lesbian identity. When younger gays begin to consider possible future relationships, they must judge potential partners in a different light—are they parent-worthy and do they have the same feelings about progeny? For older gays, especially those in established relationships, the question of children has arisen suddenly. Across town, gays are debating the pros and cons of

becoming, of all things, breeders.

“When I was 24, what your life looked like it could become, for an upper-middle-class white gay guy with cultural aspirations, was a lot of clubbing, a lot of dating, and a lot of fucking and a lot more fucking,” observes the writer Daniel Mendelsohn. “We had some vague idea that if you got lucky, you might find someone to settle with far on the horizon.

“Now people in their twenties are looking at a cultural smorgasbord that includes not only Sunday nights dancing till six in the morning and taking ecstasy but also a time when you might get married and have children. And that is not all that different from the paradigm that all my straight peers were dealing with—that at some time they would settle.”

Ten years ago, Mendelsohn agreed to be part-time father to the children a (straight) female friend was eager to have. Today, they have two kids together, 8 and 4 years old, and Mendelsohn—whose memoir, *The Elusive Embrace*, reflects on gay-fatherhood—leaves Manhattan every week to spend time with them in New Jersey.

Three Kids, Two Moms, One Fire Truck: Amy Zimmerman and Tanya Wexler with Ella, Ruby, and Jerry. (Photo credit: Erin Patrice O'Brien)

Besides a potential invasion of double strollers on Eighth Avenue, the kiddification of the gay community has other implications. It even promises—given time—to erode the lingering stereotype of Manhattan gay men as promiscuous hedonists. But it may also mean that as the gay world becomes less isolated—and more bourgeois—it may be less politicized. “What do you have to be bitterly ironic about if you are living in your co-op raising two children?” Mendelsohn asks.

For those on the front line of the gay-rights fight, this is, of course, a mixed blessing. They respond by arguing that gay parenting and the right to marry are inseparable issues. “Having kids and marriage are hardly unconnected,” argues Andrew Sullivan, the conservative commentator and gay-rights activist. “In fact, one of the driving forces behind the push for marriage has been the fact that so many of us are having kids, and without marriage, you have no secure relationship. Marriage is at the core of this problem. And it is the central answer.”

Michelangelo Signorile, a gay writer who is adamant he does not want children with his partner, also refutes the notion that gays’ having children dilutes the political discourse. “I believe it broadens the array of issues to include such things as gay marriage and child custody,” he suggests. “If you have been discriminated against—say thrown out of the military— then that’s your issue. If you have kids, child custody and marriage are probably going to be your issues.”

To some extent, the gay baby boom is the result of recent changes in state law that allow for so-called second-parent adoption. In several states, including New York and New Jersey, when a gay person successfully adopts a child, his or her same-sex partner is also allowed to adopt that child. In New York, the process has been compressed to the point that both parents can simply adopt simultaneously. Among the first people to take advantage of simultaneous adoption were David Schutte and Rob Levy, who adopted Ethan, now 5. The family live in Chelsea when they are not spending summer weekends at their house on Fire Island. “We were pioneers,” says Levy, 42, a senior executive at the Public Relations Society of America.

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Among those interviewed, most couples who have started a family report that once they have their children, they encounter little obvious discrimination from the wider community—something that they attribute to living in New York. “You cannot overestimate the savviness of New Yorkers,” says Schutte, 39, a vice-president at Herman Miller, the furniture-design company. “Gay or straight, they get it immediately. Women come up to us and say, ‘Oh, did you guys adopt?’ ” Tony Traxler, an Upper East Side hairstylist with a long roster of wealthy private clients, reports having the same experience. “People are just cool in Manhattan, no matter how old they are.” His most recent triumph was getting his adopted Chinese daughter, Louisa, into the Brick Church School on East 92nd Street—not to mention the pages of *Vogue*. Louisa, almost 3 and currently a star of the Gap Kids campaign, is one of the most sought-after child models in the city. Traxler also pays tribute to his gay friends, insisting that they make the best baby-sitters in the world. “I’ve never read Hillary Clinton’s book *It Takes a Village*,” he says, “but I want to write a book called *It Takes the Village People*!”

None of this is to say the journey is easy. There are multiple obstacles that straight couples don’t face, often having nothing to do with discrimination. First, there is the cost. Neither adoption nor surrogacy comes cheap. “There is a class issue here,” Signorile points out. “It’s a luxury, not a mandate. Rich or poor, straight men are supposed to breed. The gay people that I know with children—well, it’s a laborious process. They need money to do it. It doesn’t just happen.”

When Traxler made the decision to adopt, he realized he could no longer rely on his acting career. It was time to return to his

former, more lucrative job of hairdressing. Having tackled the financial obstacle, he faced another one—selling the idea of parenthood to the man he had been living with for twelve years. “He couldn’t even talk about it. It just wasn’t anything that entered his consciousness as a possibility,” he says. “He didn’t think he was deserving of becoming a parent. It was pretty sad.” Their sex life had dwindled to zero years before, a detail that helped Traxler when he was asked by his adoption agency to sign an affidavit—to appease the Chinese authorities, who refuse to release children to gay parents—declaring he was not homosexual. “I was in a state of celibacy for twelve years, so I could sign the affidavit in good faith,” he says wryly.

Traxler’s final hurdle was the skepticism of friends and family. The initial response from one of his older sisters—who eventually accompanied him to China to help him collect Louisa—was a “gasp for air.” But it was not only straight people who cautioned him. He recalls the warning of a gay Brazilian friend to news that he was adopting. “He said that part and parcel of being gay was not having children. He said it was what set us above heterosexuals. I thought he was nuts.” Ten months after he returned from China with Louisa, Traxler and his boyfriend split up, and he is now wrestling with what sort of relationship, if any, he thinks Louisa should have with his ex. He has since embarked on a new relationship with another man, who, after a few awkward weeks, he reports, has managed to win Louisa’s affection.

Amy Zimmerman and Tanya Wexler met at Yale. Once their relationship blossomed, Zimmerman assumed they would remain childless: “I went through this painful internal process of accepting that I was not going to have children.” It wasn’t until four years later that Wexler, a film director, suggested they think about having kids. Amy just started crying.

“For me, it was, ‘Of course we will have children,’ ” says Amy Cappellazzo, the international co-head of postwar contemporary art at Christie’s. “You have old people and you have children, that’s the way it is.” She admits that her partner, Joanne (who preferred not to give her last name), a real-estate professional who is 47, was anxious at first. “But now she is twice the mother that I am.” They adopted Marina, 3, from China and Benjamin, 2, from Las Vegas. She suggests that having children nowadays has almost become a “rite of passage” for younger lesbian couples.

It may also be less complicated for children of lesbians to explain having same-sex parents, adds Wexler. “In nursery school, moms are the greatest thing, and the idea of two is quite appealing.” And with an extra mom to attend the PTA, the school probably doesn’t mind, either.

David Strah was living in Amsterdam, running philanthropic programs for Nike, when he started thinking about kids. He had been living with Barry Miguel, now executive vice-president at Ermenegildo Zegna, for several years. “I was turning 30,” says Strah. “I just started asking what had given my parents meaning in their lives, and, of course, it was me and my sisters, and that’s when I started thinking about being a dad.” Miguel was less certain about it, but eventually the couple decided to try to adopt in the United States. Contrary to all expectations, the process moved at a dizzying speed. After assuring them that their being gay was not an issue, the first agency they contacted quickly found a birth mother who appeared to be a match. “The first call! It was very unusual,” Strah recalls. Seven months later, Zev was born. By that time, Strah had given up his job with Nike. “Having a child was too precious to work again; it was too much fun. And frankly, one of us had to get a good night’s sleep.” Sleeping was a serious issue, because Zev was six weeks premature and needed to be fed every two hours. “He didn’t grow out of that sleep pattern until he was about 9 months old. Did both of us need this?”

Not unusually, Strah and Miguel found that it was at the moment of collection, rather than any time subsequently, that they encountered discrimination. When they arrived at the hospital, Strah says, “the nurses wouldn’t speak to us, and the doctor wouldn’t speak to us for about a week. Neither would the social worker. I said, ‘Listen, lady, I don’t know who you think you are, but we have been working with this birth mother for seven months, and we are not leaving without this baby!’ ”

Three years later, determined to find Zev a sibling, they went back to the same agency, which hooked them up with a pregnant woman in Nevada who delivered three weeks later. “They handed me this sleeping six-pound baby, and she woke up and looked right at me and I just knew she was my daughter,” says Strah. Again, there were some initial wrinkles. After Summer was born, the couple’s paperwork was not entirely in order, and the baby was handed over to foster parents. Suspecting his and Miguel’s sexuality might also have become a problem, Strah swung into action with their lawyer. Five days later, they took Summer home, and a few months after that Strah started writing *Gay Dads* (published by J.P. Tarcher), a book encouraging other gays to take the plunge.

The prize for determination to have children should go to Stephen Davis and Jeffrey Busch, who’ve been together for fourteen years. Davis, who runs the digital-library program for Columbia University, is 51, and Busch, a judge in the Bronx, is 40. “We were from the generation of ‘It’s not possible to have kids, and you don’t want them anyway,’ ” Busch says.

For a while, the issue divided them. “For Stephen, it was really not part of his plan,” says Busch. Part of Davis’s hesitation had to do with his own troubled childhood—after his parents broke up, he was left at a young age with the responsibility of raising younger siblings. He also suffered under a stepfather he describes as brutal. But Busch was adamant. “He just wanted a baby, and that’s it. That’s what it really comes down to,” says Davis. “I just concluded that I loved him and I was going to try.” They moved next door to Busch’s parents in Wilton, Connecticut, and decided to find a surrogate mother.

The first attempt failed after the surrogate miscarried at two and a half months. “It took us about a year to decide whether we really wanted to go through that again,” recalls Davis. But they pressed on. As is most often the case, it was a bifurcated process—one woman donates eggs, and another agrees to carry the child. They found an egg donor in Indiana, who, says Davis, seemed “smart and athletic.” Her eggs were then frozen while the two men hunted for a surrogate. Finally, they found a

young woman living outside Chicago. Two viable embryos were ultimately produced, one fertilized by each man. Both were implanted in the mother, who carried one to term.

Once again, things got unexpectedly complicated. To prepare for the birth, the surrogate went to her local Catholic hospital and, to avoid any later confusion, explained that the child was going to two gay fathers. The hospital turned her away. Another hospital nearby agreed to deliver the child, but after the birth, confusion still arose. Busch recalls arriving to collect the child: "The social worker said, 'You understand that you are going to be adopting this child,' and I said, 'No, I am the biological father.' "

The surrogate mother FedExed them breast milk for six months. "She altered my view of what it means to be emotionally generous," says Busch, who declines to say how much the couple paid her. Another detail also remains unclear: When he told the social worker he was the biological father, he was trying to make a point, but he wasn't entirely sure of his ground. Since both men fertilized embryos, but only one survived, he didn't know who had actually fathered Elijah. Even now, eschewing DNA tests, the couple has no desire to find out.

Amy Zimmerman and Tanya Wexler know precisely who the birth parent is. They have taken turns having their three children and are planning a fourth. They chose a sperm bank in California, because the law there allows children to find out who their father is when they turn 18. After researching the backgrounds of several anonymous donors—paying close attention to their medical histories—they settled on one and had his sperm cryogenically frozen and shipped to New York. They dip into the supply whenever they need it. Wexler got pregnant first and had Jerry. Then, a year later, Zimmerman produced Ella, technically his half-sister. Wexler is now nursing Ruby, who arrived in July. "It works very well. I really had a rough pregnancy this time, so I am glad that next time it will be Amy," she says.

Whether one is straight or gay, there are few more life-changing experiences than having children, but ostensibly the changes to a gay lifestyle are more dramatic. "Your radar suddenly changes," says Davis. "It goes from 'gaydar' to 'kiddar.' " Strah says he last went to a bar in the summer of 2001. And, of course, it's farewell to sex. "Sex?" Amy Cappellazzo asks incredulously. "You make love like you're running for a bus!"

Schutte and Levy—who found a child for adoption by placing a toll-free number in papers upstate—have determinedly held on to as much of their previous lives as possible. Ethan, their son, has become the "mascot" of their Chelsea neighborhood as well as Fire Island. "I will tell you how to get attention in Chelsea," says Schutte. "Boy-plus-boy-plus-stroller on Eighth Avenue!" With mock sadness, Levy adds: "They are looking down, and we think they are looking at our crotches, but they are not. They are looking at our stroller. They never looked before!"

Like other couples, Schutte and Levy report that support for them has come from both gay and straight friends. Certainly introducing Ethan to Fire Island was not a problem. "He's easy compared to some of those high-maintenance queens out there!" says Levy. "He goes to bed at nine, he sleeps, he doesn't take any drugs, and he doesn't complain or *schmutz* around the house. And he meets the cutest men, too!" But there was an inevitable shake-out of friends. "Our circle has shifted," says Levy. "When we got Ethan, some friends we got closer to—and other people drifted away."

"There has been tension," suggests Signorile, "like, when do you not bring the kids? What events are adult events, and what events are not? It's very blurry as to when it's an event when kids are welcome and when it might be more a pickup type of gathering and more overtly sexual. I think the gay community is still trying to work out these kinds of rules." Signorile recalls a recent cocktail party he attended. He ended up talking to two gay dads. Within seconds, they started talking about their children: "This conversation just immediately shifted to what I felt were the most boring topics imaginable. I just wanted to die."

Signorile may have to get used to it. What pleases Schutte and Levy is the knowledge that by having Ethan, they have prompted many of their gay friends to at least talk about becoming parents, too. "We had years of discussions on Fire Island about D.J.'s and hair removal, and adoption never came up," says Schutte. "Since Ethan was born, so many people have come up to us and said they always wanted a child." Levy confirms that they are often told by other gays how lucky they are. "When I hear that," he says, "the first thing that comes out of my mouth is, 'Don't envy me. You can do it, too.' "

Scott Goldsmith, who has many gay patients, confirms that the emergence of parenthood as an option is unsettling to older gay men, especially some in long-term relationships: "As with most issues, the two people do not arrive at the same place at same time. One person feels a real awakening of a passion to have a family, and the other may not."

Jeff Corbin, a 37-year-old psychiatrist in private practice, and his partner of five years have been in a stand-off for almost a year over whether to have children. "I really want to have kids, and he doesn't," says Corbin. Earlier this year, he gave his boyfriend, who is 45, an ultimatum—one month to tell him yes or no—but his partner begged for six more months. The extra time will soon be up. "I don't want to break up over this," says Corbin, "but I also don't see living my life without kids."

While same-sex couples with children find it easy fitting into straight Manhattan, there are still moments of surprise. Strah remembers when he, Miguel, Zev, and Summer were first invited to read from the Torah at Miguel's synagogue. "I could just tell when we sat down that people were like, 'Wow, what was that?' " he says. Davis and Busch, in semi-rural Connecticut, know they are a curiosity. "No matter what man I walk with, with Eli, the cars slow down," says Busch. "You can see them

saying like, ‘Oh, is that the couple?’ ”

Occasionally, the mere appearance of two moms or two dads with children leads to misunderstandings. David Kim, a doctor at a Gramercy Park practice, and his partner of seven years, Jim Logatto, recently took their adopted son, Ethan, to the playground in the Hudson River Park. Adults are allowed in only if accompanied by a child, and Kim walked in with Ethan, but a security guard stopped Logatto. It just didn’t compute that both men could be parents of the same child. But as the two men were girding themselves to explain, they saw it dawn on him, and he grinned and let both of them inside.

Something else that gay parents share is having, repeatedly, to explain the deal to strangers. “It’s like coming out all over again,” says Levy. And it happens day in and day out, at the grocery store, at the doctor’s, in the park, wherever. Sometimes, it just becomes too exhausting. Busch recalls taking a flight with Eli recently from Seattle to Chicago. When a middle-aged businessman sat next to them on the plane, Busch preferred not to talk because he couldn’t face the conversation that would inevitably follow. But when he had to go to the front of the plane to warm up a baby bottle, the man offered to hold Eli. Up front, Busch found himself being quizzed by a flight attendant about where the child’s mother was. He explained he was gay. Moments after he sat back down, the flight attendant came up to them and said, “I just want you to know that you guys are wonderful. I just think a gay relationship is fantastic!” The businessman, whose family was on a religious retreat, melted with embarrassment. As did Jeffrey.

All gay parents will tell you they have concerns about how, as they get older, their children will deal with having same-sex parents. Kim, who lives in Brooklyn Heights, admits that he hesitated before succumbing to Logatto’s urgent desire to adopt a baby: “Did I want to bring up a child facing the stress of having gay dads? Junior high can be pretty mean.” In the end, they put those worries aside, and in April 2002 collected Ethan from Vietnam. He was 3 months old. “I probably wasn’t sure until I actually held him in my arms—then I was just so happy,” says Kim.

What gay parents will not take seriously is any suggestion that because of their sexuality and the absence of either a traditional mother or father in the home, it is somehow more likely that their kids will turn out gay. “There is no correlation,” Zimmerman responds firmly. (She recently came across 3-year-old Ella acting out a play in which Cinderella was marrying Snow White.) But she and Wexler know that these kinds of thoughts still lurk among those who disapprove of what they’re doing. “There is definitely this stuff about us having a malicious influence on children,” says Wexler. “And for men, there is still this horrible taint of pedophilia.”

Of more concern to some gay parents is the racial discrimination they fear their adopted children may suffer. “Race is much bigger than the genders of your parents,” argues Amy Cappellazzo, who has joined her children with their baby-sitter in Washington Square Park. “Or the fact that they are adopted.”

As evening sets in, it is time for her to corral the children home for dinner. Ben grabs his sister’s new pink bicycle, demanding that he ride it home, and Marina bursts into angry tears. As their mother wearily attempts to broker a truce between them, another woman walks by and shoots her a knowing grin. At this moment, Amy is just like any other mom trying to teach her children about sharing. It could not matter less if she is gay or straight.
