Lesbian Mothers

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“Do you have a family?” has become a commonplace euphemism for having children and, usually, a husband. Like others in our society, lesbians associate having a child with “starting a family.” For women who had their children during marriages, continuing ties with children can come to represent the stability of the most meaningful of family links. For women who had their children outside of marriages, having a baby can represent their ability to overcome both concrete barriers and social disapproval, to demand a piece of family life that they value.

Daily Routines

Lesbian mothers’ accounts of their relationships with their children tend to focus on the pace of daily life, the ongoing round of cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry, and child-care arrangements that define the rhythm of existence. Particularly those who do not have partners may devote considerable energy to devising strategies for getting everything done; these strategies, however, are constantly fragile and may be easily undermined by small setbacks or unanticipated obstacles.

The complex of strategies needed to manage child-care arrangements emerge as major themes in the narratives of mothers whose children are very young. Mothers not only must find adequate child care that they can afford but often are preoccupied with locating alternatives when the arrangements they have made break down. Transportation is likely to be a key issue. Mothers who do not own automobiles talk at length about the time required to travel by public
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transportation to child-care providers and to their jobs, and the difficulties of handling such tasks as grocery shopping and laundry. Going out in the evening may present problems so overwhelming that many mothers decide it’s easier just to stay home.

Margo Adler describes how the daily routine of her twelve-year-old daughter dictates her own schedule. Because Amy is developmentally disabled, she cannot assume as much independence as most girls her age, and Margo is acutely aware that this burden will not decrease appreciably as Amy grows up.

Margo realistically admits that the system of strategies she has devised for arranging supervision of Amy is subject to breakdowns at virtually every point. So that she can get from her suburban home to her job in San Francisco on time, she has persuaded the school bus operators to pick up Amy at the beginning of their route; so, Amy’s morning “child care” is essentially provided by the bus driver. After-school care—difficult to locate for a child as old as Amy—requires Margo to pay to have her picked up at school. All of these arrangements are workable, of course, only when school is in session.

Every time the season changes I have to figure out a whole new thing to do with her. Child care is definitely one of the biggest hassles and issues in my life. And it’s particularly difficult because she’s old and still needs child care.

The most recent disruption of Margo’s routine came when Amy joined a soccer team. This is Amy’s first experience with team sports and Margo is delighted when she wants to do it, but getting her to soccer practice has forced Margo to leave work only once a week and to rearrange her schedule to make up the time she misses. Amy’s health is poor, and Margo’s routine is further disrupted by the need to schedule medical appointments and manage her care when she is sick.

Finding baby-sitters among local teenagers has been so difficult—apparently because the kids who live in Margo’s upper-middle-class neighborhood have no need to earn money—that she almost never goes out at night, though as a last resort she sometimes takes Amy to a friend’s house in a nearby East Bay city. Her friend, a married
woman who does not work outside the home, is someone she has known since childhood and has a child the same age as Amy. Margo hates to ask her friend to watch Amy, though, because she has no way to reciprocate.

Margo's child-care problems are even more acute during the summer. Community activities when school is not in session are not necessarily scheduled to dovetail neatly, often there are gaps between the end of one program and the start of another. Sometimes her parents have come over from the East in the summer and have handled child care for her. At other times Margo has been forced to take Amy to work with her. This is far from an ideal arrangement, not only because her employer, a major financial institution, objects to children in the office, but because Amy's unpredictable behavior makes it difficult for Margo to concentrate on her work. The problems are even worse during school breaks at Christmas and Easter, when the school district runs no programs at all.

Margo knows that her child-care problems have affected her progress at work both because of the amount of time she misses and because she is often distracted and worried. She talks longingly of the possibility that her parents will move to the Bay Area; though she would lose some of her privacy, they would assume responsibility for much of Amy's care in a way she feels no one else ever will. Because Amy is a difficult and demanding child, Margo believes that few people but her parents can ever be expected to take a major role in her life.

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I think the thing that seems the most important to me now is that I feel like . . . I will be the only person that has a certain kind of responsibility and feeling for this kid. That's something very heavy to me. That even if I end up with another person, that won't be their kid. That will be my kid. No matter how they feel, it's still going to be my kid. . . . I feel like she's only my kid, and not [my exhusband's] kid at all. The only time I ever think of it as being any kind of shared thing is like if I think I think he would have to take responsibility for her. But other than that, I really feel like she's my kid. It's sort of like I had this kid alone. I think that aspect of feeling like that will never change. It's probably the heaviest piece to me.
Some lesbian mothers find unusual solutions to their complex domestic problems. Ruth Zimmerman, a computer technician, lives in San Francisco with her five-year-old son and a male roommate. She recruited the roommate to live in her apartment in exchange for a wide range of household and child-care duties. He handles all of her baby-sitting needs, goes to the store, and takes responsibility for laundry and most of the house cleaning. Her friends think it's strange for her to be living with a man in this sort of situation, and she herself finds the arrangement a bit odd, but it meets a variety of needs and is difficult to give up. Her concern about continuing to have the roommate take this role is that she fears his becoming too attached to her and her son as his "nuclear family," something that doesn't seem appropriate in a situation she defines as temporary and justified only by its convenience.


Some lesbian mothers, then, shape their accounts of being mothers in terms of the practical challenges they must successfully overcome. Perhaps because becoming a mother so dramatically alters the daily pace of life, getting through routine tasks and devising solutions to persistent difficulties stands as evidence of a woman's ability to act as a mother in the world. These narratives tell us not only how the speakers cope with their responsibilities but that they define motherhood, at least in part, as a set of concrete constraints and challenges that demand innovative, practical solutions.

"Companionate" Households

Particularly when they live alone with a single child, lesbian mothers tend to view their relationships in a way I think of as "companionate": mother and child accomplish essential tasks in much the same way one would in a two-parent family, with the trappings of the sort of hierarchical authority that are typically found in two-parent families.
This is not a pattern unique to lesbian mothers. Heterosexual mothers I interviewed expressed similar sentiments. Alma White, who lives alone with her sixteen-year-old son, sees her relationship with her son as exceptionally harmonious.

"Basically, what we've tried to do since [my son is] older is to say we are two adults living in the same house. We share. We take care of each other. We take care of the house. We take care of meals. Dad, and chores and all of those kinds of things together collectively. . . . We just kind of do it together and it's worked out pretty well."

Besides managing basic household chores cooperatively, Alma says, she and her son seek out each other's company for "fun" things: bowling, eating out, going to the movies, going camping. They do not share all of their meals, largely because of Alma's busy schedule of community activities. She views the relationship as one in which each respects the autonomy of the other, so that arguments never arise. According to Alma, she and her son discuss "everything": her job, his schoolwork, household finances, and her homosexuality. They have had extended conversations about her most recent breakup, and he has expressed his hope that she will be somewhat discreet about being a lesbian. Alma says that out of respect for his wishes she has tried to make the public areas of the house "neutral" in decor so that he will feel comfortable when he brings his friends home. She keeps books on lesbian and gay subjects, posters for lesbian community events, and everything else of that sort in her bedroom.

Along similar lines, Leslie Addison views her relationship with her twelve-year-old daughter, Jennifer, as much like a marriage. A major theme in their relationship is compromise, a process whereby they work out differences and agree to accommodate each other's preferences. Leslie's admitted restlessness used to lead her to relocate herself and Jennifer to a different part of the country nearly every year. As Jennifer has grown older, however, she has become more assertive about expressing her wish to stay in the same place longer, largely because of the ties she forms in school and with neighborhood children. So they have compromised: Leslie has agreed not to move..."
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during the school year and Jennifer has agreed that they can travel in the summer and possibly can remain in the same place next year. We've worked out little compromises like that because it took us a long time to work out our relationship, that now there's kind of hard, sometimes it makes it difficult for other people to break into it, because we have our set patterns. Like when we got a roommate, so I get a lover, so she gets a new friend, it's not hard. It's just like being a couple.

The analogy between mother-child ties and those of a couple arises frequently among single mothers, lesbian and heterosexual alike. The companionate model certainly recalls the equality of an ideal couple. Many lesbian mothers, as we have seen, describe women who have no children as "single".

Tanya Petroff speaks strongly of her finding that she does not share the same fundamental concerns as people who have no children. Though she does not have a lover, she does not see herself as single precisely because she is a mother.

I don't seem to have the need to get together with someone of either sex as much as my single friends do. I have a real solid relationship [with my daughter] that gives me a feeling that I am necessary and worthwhile... and all of that other stuff.

Along similar lines, but with an added edge of anger, Leslie Ad-dison also characterizes childless women as "single":

I think that the lesbian community is organized around the single lifestyle only. I've heard more than a hundred times from a woman, a lesbian—"I choose not to have kids, so don't push yours off on me."

And Tanya Petroff says:

I've had [lesbians] tell me that I had chosen a privileged position in having a child and if it was going to be difficult for me then it was so much the better.

Another lesbian mother, Gloria Frank, has lived on her own with her three children for most of their lives. Her experience has often
been that important people in her life, including her lovers, have not
wished to make the kinds of sacrifices she sees as unavoidable for a
mother, and she tends to feel that she cannot rely on anyone outside
of the family—herself and her three kids. But there can be comfort in
ties to children, as she makes clear.

I think what happens when you're alone with children is that you very frequently
think, well, I feel like I'm an adult while you talk to them about
tings that you would normally share with an adult, and they . . . see themselves
as being much more responsible . . . and they really see themselves as the other
adult in your life.

Gloria points out that this closeness can backfire, particularly when
she wants to get involved with a lover. The child who has been acting
as confidant does not want to relinquish this position to a stranger,
and may try to sabotage the new relationship.

The theme of equality emerges as a core value in accounts given by
other lesbian mothers about their lives with their children. Rose Eso-
cobar, who lives alone with her twelve-year-old daughter in an iso-
lated suburban housing tract, describes a routine that is notable for its
apparent lack of routine. Although her daughter is supposed to keep
her room clean and wash the dishes after dinner, and often takes
responsibility for doing the laundry or cleaning the house, her arrangement as informal and easygoing.

We don't have anything definite set up for chores now, really. Whenever anything
needs to be done, we just kind of decide to do it. Housekeeping is really not a pri-
ority. I don't think. We'd just as soon do something, go to the movies, or play
a game or chores . . . Here to do. Kind if separable so we see really. All I
know for sure is that I have to go to work. [My daughter] knows that her job is
to go to school. The rest of our time is just real free flowing. Like I say, if we
want to be the housework, we can . . . or we can just forget it or . . .

Part of sharing responsibility for the daily operation of family life is
being aware of the financial constraints the mother faces. If anything
is a consistent theme in the lives of both lesbian mothers and biomo-
ternal single mothers, it is the persistence of economic pressures, the
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nearly constant fear that they may not be able to manage. The mere fact of their survival becomes a mark of honor for some mothers; for others, the reality of an unpredictable financial situation is a source of ongoing anxiety.

As part of the kind of openness lesbian mothers seek with their children, discussions about budgets and finances are described as frank and explicit. In every instance, of course, financial stress can be traced directly to non-payment of child support, so mothers must weigh the benefits of believing in their children against the possible harm of attacking a fragile link to their fathers. Nonetheless, most mothers told me they take pains to explain their income and budgeting decisions, largely so hopes the children will appreciate the efforts they make to manage on skimpy resources. These frank discussions, however, may not assuage children’s desires for the luxury items their friends have.

Most of the conflicts Doris Johnson has with her eleven- and fourteen-year-old daughters focus on clothes and on the narrow limits on the kinds of purchases they can make. Doris is a graduate student, trying to complete work on a doctorate in history. She lives with her lover, June Kepler, a medical student, and her two daughters in cramped campus housing, getting by on student loans, her earnings as a research assistant, small contributions from June, and sporadic child-support payments from her former husband, who lives in another state.

All of these sources together add up to a minimal income, and Doris must plan her budget carefully. The girls become upset when they compare their wardrobes with those of their friends. Though Doris wishes she could spare her daughters this experience, she also thinks that it builds character and that they will later come to appreciate the benefits of learning to economize.

They will never, probably, in the future, take for granted that you can just have whatever you want.

Similarly, Winnie Moses, who lives with her lover and her two teenage sons, has had to have frank discussions with her children
about financial realities. Though her ex-husband is reliable about paying child support, he has resisted all her efforts to get the amount raised; there have been only very minor increases since they divorced twelve years ago. At one point the boys complained that she wasn’t spending enough on them in view of the amount of the support payment. She took this occasion to explain the entire household budget and how she calculated the costs of raising them. This discussion apparently resolved the matter.

Anita Korman is also open about financial realities with her fourteen-year-old daughter. She discusses her plans to pursue a doctorate with her daughter, weighing the possible economic advantages of the degree against the costs they would both have to bear during the lengthy process of obtaining it. She doesn’t feel that she can ask her daughter to sacrifice endlessly, but she knows that in the long run they would both benefit from an improvement in her credentials.

“...I don’t burden her with every bill that I owe but we talk about it a lot in a realistic way. What we can afford and what we can’t, and particularly lately we’ve been talking about if our living situation should change, how we would deal with that, how we would deal with it financially as well as the other ways... I mean the money is hers and she understands the structure.”

Managing Stigma

Though lesbian mothers share with single heterosexual mothers a concern with child care and family finances and a preference for an egalitarian style of interaction, they also have to manage the stigma attached to homosexuality. Coming out as lesbians means in important ways with the relationships mothers maintain with their relatives, and, as we shall see, with ongoing ties with their children’s fathers. Mothers’ homosexual orientation can have other layers of meaning for children. Mothers’ interpretations of the impact of their sexual orientation on their children’s lives, and therefore, the nature of its significance for ties to relatives and fathers and on its presumed effects on their children’s friendships.

Bernice Nelson, who lives alone in a North Bay suburb with her seven-year-old daughter, describes a rather positive self-image as a
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Lesbian and has strong views about the importance of the independence she has achieved in coming out. She lived in several communal situations when she was still with her husband and her current lifestyle retains a counterculture flavor. Yet at the same time that she values nontraditional approaches to daily life and to child-rearing and believes, at least in the abstract, that being "open" is good, Bernice is fearful of what would happen if her lesbianism became widely known.

It's hard for me to know exactly how to get across to her that it's important for her own sake that she be discreet about who she shares her life with and yet encourage her at the same time to be willing to share her feelings with someone. . . . For her my fear is that she'll be identified at school by her teachers. . . . as something real strange and unusual, because of the way I live, and that she'll change the way they relate to her. Then the kids will find out the way I live and care remembering her. You know how mean kids are to each other—your mommy's a queer, and that kind of stuff.

To ensure that other children do not accidentally have access to compromising information, Bernice has developed a set of rules that restrict her daughter's friends to her room, denying them access to other parts of the house, especially when she is entertaining her own adult guests. Bernice is afraid that being known as the daughter of a lesbian not only would subject her daughter to discrimination at school but would bar her "options" in the future. On another level, she takes seriously her ex-husband's occasional threats to seek custody, and sees any breach of family confidentiality as providing him with potential ammunition. These fears seem closely related to similar concerns about the impact of her sexual orientation on her future career. Bernice hopes to begin studies toward certification as a psychotherapist, but wonders that being known as a lesbian might prevent her from practicing or obtaining licensure.

What is noteworthy about Bernice's fears is that they do not reflect any personal history of actual discrimination. Her daughter has never, to her knowledge, been teased by friends; her husband has not made any serious attempt to gain custody; and she has not even begun to train for a career in psychotherapy or counseling. Bernice's narrative
This Permanent Roommate

The Permanent Roommate [105] tells us more about the meanings she attaches to being a lesbian than about her concrete experiences.

In a somewhat similar vein, Lisa Stark, who has an eleven-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son, is concerned about the impact being "out" would have on her relationships with her neighbors. She would prefer to live in a neighborhood with more gay people, but explains that at present the only place she can afford to live is a rather bleak working-class neighborhood on the Peninsula. She doubts that her neighbors are open-minded about homosexuality, though she has never raised the subject with any of them. But her relationships with them are vital; they are her principal source of the babysitters on whom she depends. An available pool of local teenagers allows her to stay at her office in a city agency for the long hours she is often required to work, or which she chooses to work in the hopes of being promoted to a supervisory position.

Some children find that knowing other children whose mothers are lesbians helps them to normalize what might otherwise seem like a deviant situation. But even these children learn that information about their mothers’ sexual orientation may have to be carefully managed. Judy Tolman’s nine-year-old son knows many other children in lesbian families, but Judy has a feeling that he senses that school is part of the world out there that doesn’t like gay people. Same when he goes to be with his father—I don’t think he really talks about it that much.

More commonly, mothers talk about the need to maintain secrecy as rooted in the possibility of a custody challenge. To protect their children from having to manage potentially damaging information, these mothers like the best policy is to keep their homosexuality a secret from them.

Rita Garcia has worked out a difficult truce with her family over her homosexuality. Her former husband has failed to make contact with her for several years, has never paid child support, and has a record of alcohol abuse and battery. All the same, she fears he might suddenly return and try to take their son away from her.
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I feel that I would be laying a guilt trip on him if I told him that I was gay but to keep it a secret. Because if we ever had to go to court again and somebody found out, they would take him away from me.

Although virtually all of her friends are gay and she has lived with Jill for most of her son's life, Rita is convinced that he knows nothing of her sexual orientation. She alluded to this belief several times during our conversation, despite the fact that he was in the room during the entire interview.

Theresa Baldocchi has carefully shielded her nine-year-old son, Tom, from knowledge of her lesbianism. Her former husband, John, sued her for custody at the time of their divorce, alleging (inaccurately at the time) that she was a lesbian. Despite the bitter memories of the divorce, which nearly bankrupted her, Theresa is pleased that John is willing to stay with Tom in her home every night while she is at work. But, this arrangement requires Theresa to be very careful about leaving any evidence of her lifestyle around the house; she finds herself often examining everything while he is there. Her caution has extended to keeping her lesbianism a secret from her son.

If John weren't around, I would probably be real open with Tom. But I don't want him torn between having to lie to his father and having to accept me, too.

Laura Bergeron, who had her three children outside of marriage, is also cautious about letting her children know that she is a lesbian. The primary consideration she cites is her lover, Margaret Towers, who is married, determined to do nothing that would disrupt the customary rhythms of her life, and thus adamant that the nature of their relationship be kept secret. Laura also mentions a vague worry that the father of her two sons might try to get custody of them if he knew about her sexual orientation, even though he agreed to cooperate in her two pregnancies only with the understanding that he would never have any formal obligations to their children. The man who fathered her third child, a daughter, through insemination knows that Laura is gay, so she feels more comfortable having him visit and spend time
with her and the children. But she has never discussed her lesbianism with her children and is sure she will never be able to do so. My children don’t know that I’m a lesbian. You can’t be trusted with what you’re told. We’re very conventional. Our whole life is very conventional. My profession would be endangered, and her life is the neighborhood. I mean there’s just no way but we could use anything her loosely thread. We have a lot of women’s activities that go on here, but we don’t talk with the world. That’s why my children can’t know.

Though Laura was so eager to have children that she became pregnant three times on her own, she has more recently begun to see her children as a limitation on her ability to live spontaneously. She faces pulled between her obligations to them and her relationship with Margaret, and sees no way to harmonize these two parts of her life. Further, she believes that having children has wrecked her finances and that the expenses of child care for three children are the direct cause of her recent bankruptcy.

Laura has made arrangements for before- and after-school care, and her children also check in with Margaret, who lives next door, when they return home. To maximize the time she can spend with Margaret, Laura has installed an intercom system between the two houses, so she can listen to what is happening at her house while she is at her lover’s. She fits shopping and other errands in on her lunch hour, or does them on her way home from work. These complicated arrangements have left Laura with virtually no time to herself.

When I’m alone, I’m usually doing something with my kids, because if anything I feel guilty that I don’t spend enough quality time with them. I’m more of a caretaker a lot of the time. It seems like I’m always just hurrying them up and making them do this and that, so . . . I make myself take one evening a week, the same evening every week. This is it, this is hers. And we either go out for pizza or go to a movie or do an around and read stories to each other. In other words, we are together on a family basis at least once a week.

These arrangements do little to allow Laura to enjoy the more creative aspects of motherhood that many other mothers speak of
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with such deep feeling. She has convinced herself that her life with Margaret can continue only if she separates herself from her children; she is left with little beyond obligation to them, and intense self-consciousness about maintaining the secrecy of her lesbianism.

I just feel like I'm a robot sometimes. There's just not enough of me. And someday they're going to realize that, you know. And I want them to. I don't want them to grow up and look back and think my mother was a robot. But I don't know that there's much I can do about it because I've got too many things on other men, you know.

Laura and Margaret do have a limited social life with other lesbians, hosting rather formal social gatherings such as bridge parties. These parties, however, provide additional occasions when the children must be segregated from interaction with adults and excluded from Laura's life. She comments that the boys, in particular, are "understandably" not welcome at a lesbian social event, and that, in any case, she can't risk having her children make observations on these occasions.

So I've set my life up so that it doesn't include my children. That's what it amounts to. . . [Being with a man] was so much easier. It seems like such a hassle to be gay. . . . But still, I might always be a little closeted. I don't want to go around alienating everybody and destroying their reality and upsetting their reality. I'm not trying to convert anybody and make any stand for lesbianism. I told you I'm not in the least militant or radical or political or anything.

At the same time, Laura understands that the gulf being created between herself and her children will probably have long-term effects on their relationship, effects that she can no longer control.

I think at some point it's probably going to be important to me that my children know. I'm lesbian and I'm going to be able to tell them as long as I'm in this relationship, you know. I think I have fantasies about maybe we could talk [my daughter] when she's about fifteen or so. . . . But I guess I'm never going to be able to tell the boys, and I feel a distance between me and them for that reason.
Laura's situation contrasts sharply with that of most mothers I interviewed. She has chosen, in effect, to submerge her decisions as a mother to sustain a complex system of secrecy that she and her lover have established. This system is based on the assumption that terrible consequences would flow from any revelation of their lesbianism, and that secrecy can be maintained only if Laura's identities as mother and lesbian are strictly separated. It also rests on a related, but questionable, assumption that no one knows about her lesbianism if she chooses not to talk about it.

Laura is hardly the only lesbian mother to shield her children from knowledge of her sexual orientation, but she is in the minority. Far more of the mothers I spoke to find strongly that being open is best for everyone involved. Elaine Weinman's daughters are twelve and fourteen. Since her divorce she has been very circumspect about her lesbianism, both because her husband sued her for custody at the time of their divorce and because her job as a teacher might be compromised. She decided to be more open with her daughters when her lover moved into the household, and since then she has been able to look forward to spending time with them.

I used to live for the weekend that the kids would go away... It was just so nice to have that break. Now I don't feel that way anymore, mostly because they know that I'm a lesbian... It's like a big weight has been lifted. So I don't feel a need to have them gone.

Ruth Zimmerman, who had her son five years ago while she was living with a man, has been very open with him about her lesbianism. She tells him that her son's father will never try to get custody, though he has retained some interest in the child and visits occasionally. Ruth believes that her son's understanding of her lifestyle can only be positive.

We don't think it's strange to see two women in bed together. I mean, I can only see it as a broadening experience. It's not like the thing in the world for him to find strange or different.
In a similar vein, Gloria Frank, who had three children with three men, thinks her kids have an advantage because their mother is a lesbian.

I think it probably will just leave openings for more possibilities in their lives. I would hope... I think it's incredibly valuable that my children be exposed to as many different lifestyles as possible.

Motherhood as a Central Identity

Mothers who are strongly committed to maintaining total secrecy about their sexual orientation find that segregation of their daily lives into time when they are "mothers" and time when they are "lesbians" creates constant concern about information management. Their self-consciousness is heightened as they evaluate and analyze every episode that might breach their confidentiality. While some such mothers are motivated by fears about custody, others seem to be thinking more in terms of what they construe as broad community standards. They understand that homosexuality is generally disapproved of, and want to protect their children from being stigmatized in the way they feel themselves to be. Some of these also understand that motherhood tends to be perceived as contrary to lesbianism, so that the mere fact of being mothers can protect them from being identified as gay.

As Valerie Thompson, the mother of a twelve-year-old daughter, said, "Of course, I have the mask. I have a child. I'm accepted [as heterosexual] because I have a child and that kind of protection." But fears about stigma are not the only reason for segregating roles. Virtually all the women I interviewed commented on the pressure they felt to do everything adequately alone. As we saw earlier, some women focus on the successes they have achieved and derive considerable self-esteem from the effort. Others tend to focus on how difficult it is to manage under the conditions that motherhood imposes in their situations, how discouraged and overwhelmed they feel, and how little hope they see that their situations will become easier until their children are grown.
Both approaches revolve around a common understanding: that being a mother eclipses and overshadows all other roles. A few women, such as Laura Bergeron, in a sense keep motherhood at a distance in order to manage a particularly difficult lesbian relationship. But Laura does not find this separation easy, and as we have seen, she is haunted by the impact her segregated lifestyle has on her children.

Tanya Petroff is very much aware that being a mother overshadows being a lesbian. "The mothering thing," she says, "the thing about being a mother seems to be more important to me than my sexual orientation." She views herself and her seven-year-old daughter as an indivisible social unit, which takes first place over any other sort of relationship.

"I'm definitely part of a package deal. I come with my daughter and people who can't relate to both of us are not people I want to relate to for very long."

Tanya sees other mothers, regardless of their sexual orientation, as the people with whom she has the most in common. Since moving to the Bay Area a few years ago from the Midwest, she has tended to avoid the lesbian community in favor of socializing with other mothers. Her past experience was that the "lesbian community" put pressure on her to make her daughter a "little amazon." As a mother, she feels strongly that her daughter should be free to develop in whatever direction she chooses, not constrained by "political correctness." When Tanya speaks of "political correctness," she is referring to the standards that lesbian feminists first imposed on themselves in the 1970s. At that time, efforts to create a "lesbian nation" gave rise to often rigid expectations in such areas as dress, political activity, sexual behavior, and language. Behavior that could be construed as "straight" or oriented toward conventional standards of success and attractiveness was generally censured, as were such traditional markers of femininity as high heels and makeup.2

Being a mother seems to release some lesbian mothers from pressures to be a lesbian in that "correct" way. Most women who raise
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this issue frame it in terms of dress or other aspects of personal appearance, but the implications that other behavior is also involved in that. Many of the women who discussed this problem were veterans of 1970s radical feminism, and their stories resonant with resentment over the limitations the ideology placed on their ability to express themselves as individuals. It seems that once a child is on the scene, one's presentation as a lesbian is inevitably altered, and this experience may be freeing in some ways. Louise Green, who came out as a lesbian while still in her teens and has had no heterosexual experience, has relaxed her earlier efforts to be as “butch” as possible in her personal style, though it seems that dress and style are only outward manifestations of other levels of personal change.

Since I had [my daughter] I felt it was OK to do these things I've been wanting to do for a while. One of them is to paint my toenails red. I haven't done it yet, but I'm going to do it. I feel really OK about wearing perfume and I just got a perm, now in my hair. I feel like I'm letting myself do some of the things I want to do by simply accepting the changes. I feel like I'm facing this stuff, it has already changed me as a mother.

Other mothers locate the centrality of motherhood in the sheer quantity of obligation that having a child imposes on one's life. Peggy Lawrence lives with her lover, Sue Alexander, her ten-year-old daughter, and Sue's two sons. Her comments on motherhood focus on the limitations it imposes on her personal freedom. Having a child makes her be more concerned with living in a stable environment than she thinks she would be otherwise, and it makes her conscious of a social system, particularly in its educational dimension, that she personally disagrees with. Travel seems impossible when one is a mother. Raising a living becomes the center of her existence because of her obligations to her daughter. She and Sue have chosen to live in a neighborhood convenient to the children's school, and though they would prefer to relocate to the Midwest, where both of them have lived before, they are reluctant to do so because they believe that the kids encounter less bigotry as the children of lesbian mothers in San Francisco. Peggy explains:
"This Permanent Roommate" [113]

Being a mother, to me—being a mother is more consuming than any other way
that I could possibly imagine identifying myself—any other way that I identific-
ify myself is an identification of some part of my being a mother. I am a lesbi-
ian mother, a working mother—a mother hardly ever modifies anything else.
"Mother" is always the primary—it's always some kind of mother, but it's never
a mother-anything. "Mother" is—"mother," like mother, is always the thing that
is more consuming. Because being a mother is so big. I have much more in com-
mon with all mothers than I have in common with all lesbians. It's so big. It
starts out as a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, and it just goes on and on and on.

But still other mothers locate the meaning of motherhood in the sheer intensity
of feeling that exists uniquely between mother and child. Lisa Stark, who is often visibly depressed by the unrelenting
obligations of single parenthood, has come to see her children as the
reason she can face the obstacles that seem to make up her daily life.
Since her life presum ably would be easier without children, her cele-
bration of their importance is somewhat paradoxical.

I've never had to be for myself. The only reason I get up in the morning is
to get them off to school. I'm not at one of [her] work in order to save the money to
support them. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have them. They're everything
I've got... I love them so much that it really is painful.

Her comments echo her description of her own relationship with
her parents. She describes her parents as the only people other than
her children who care about her, the only reliable source of sup-
port in her rather bleak social world. This relationship contrasts dra-
matically with the minimal connection she maintains with the
children's father, who has cut himself off from her and the children
nearly completely.

He doesn't have [his baby] and doesn't want to. He signs their cards, or he fills
the bills, with [first names], not "Daddy", or "Your father" or anything.

Similarly, relationships with women lovers have not proved to be
stable or supportive for Lisa. She is left with the intensity of her kin
relations, her closest ties being those with her children.
Lesbian Mothers

In a somewhat different vein, Ruth Zimmernan describes the process that led her to decide to have a child on her own.

One of the reasons I probably decided to have a kid was to have a certain kind of continuity. What you call a long-term relationship. I wanted that. I wanted to feel the important to somebody else, that connected to somebody else. I guess I really am a family person, in spite of the fact that I don't feel real comfortable with my own family. But being... committed to people is kind of important to me... I wanted more continuity in my life than going through a series of roommates and having the household change with the roommates. That just seemed... so transitory, it just didn't feel like a life. So now I've got me this permanent roommate... And that closeness—that's possible with a child—I mean, I don't know where else that's possible... A lover relationship can approach the intensity of a parent-child relationship, but never have that same quality of how close that is. Thus having a child anchors one socially, puts one in the world in a way that creates meaningful connections and that reinforces, and is reinforced by, continuity with other kin. At the same time, in the case of Lisa Stark, is that children are the source of considerable difficulty and hardship at the same time that their ability to generate feelings of intimacy and links to the outside creates the apparent solution to the very problems they generate. By becoming mothers, lesbians are able to negotiate a more satisfactory stance with respect to traditional gender expectations. Paradoxically, however, this very process of accommodation presents them with further problems to be resolved, frequently demanding that they reorganize their identities with motherhood at the core.

As we saw earlier, having children has the added benefit of connecting lesbians and other women to forces of “good” in the world, of allowing them to participate in the mystery of childhood, and to be altruists. The intensity of their feelings makes the experience of motherhood meaningful, rather than just burdensome. For some women, this is almost an astonishing transformation.
Christine Richmond, who had a baby on her own about three years ago, speaks with amusement about the changes he has brought into her life. She is a successful musician, and until she became a mother she spent most of her time perfecting her skills, planning performances and tours, and being caught up in the excitement of her professional world. But her son, she says, brings new feelings in me that I have never experienced before, both love and anger.

"It's the first thing in my life that matters more to me than I do. I would do anything for him. I mean I would give my life for him. If anything were to happen to him I don't know if I would want to go on living.

Inez Escobar sees her daughter not only as her closest friend and companion but as the person whose existence helped her to improve her life, particularly to overcome her early problems with alcohol and drugs.

"I think being responsible for somebody, and kind of like having a stake in the future. Like wanting the world to be a better place. But just kind of when I started to see her mirror me, it kind of made me want to change, and be a better person.

Lesbian mothers' narratives reveal the resilience of relatively traditional notions of family, even as their structural expression may vary tremendously. More profoundly, perhaps, lesbian mothers appear to accept motherhood eagerly as a core identity, and to be willing to allow its demands to override other kinds of relationships and other sources of identity. Their narratives show that links to children, and particularly the need to engage in altruistic behavior and the opportunity to be in touch with the higher order one encounters with children, may be what family means in the shifting situation of lesbians. Here ideas about one's blood kin provide a model, albeit highly idealized, of what one can expect from one's connection to one's children.

Ties with children are anchored by the twin weights of responsibility and connectedness. Having a child on one's own; whether one..."
Lesbian Mothers started on that back or not, locates one in the world, gives a woman a partner, a collaborator in the business of living, and takes some of the uncertainty and formlessness out of daily existence. At the same time, motherhood imposes heavy burdens and feelings of obligation and inadequacy that undermine other concerns and areas of competence, relegating them to triviality. Nothing else seems as important in one's children, and women paradoxically resent the tyranny of motherhood at the same time that they derive value from their experience of it.