

IT'S CONCEIVABLE

THE PATH TO PARENTING ISN'T ALWAYS STRAIGHT.

Q & A WITH FAMILY BY DESIGN FOUNDER DARREN SPEDALE



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The LGBT community has always been on the forefront of alternative family-building. Now, thanks to a new website called [Family By Design](#), lesbian and gay singles and couples have a comprehensive resource available for finding their ideal parenting partner(s). Whether you're a single gay man looking to co-parent with a lesbian couple, a straight woman ready to have a child with a gay best friend, or simply a person – gay or straight – who isn't ready to take on the challenges of single parenthood alone, Family By Design is a resource anyone can use and a site anyone embarking on a non-traditional family arrangement should check out.

It's Conceivable spoke to Family By Design founder [Darren Spedale](#) about starting the site, the role parenting partnerships play in the LGBT community, and why a truly modern family revolution might be on the way.

IC: How did you get the idea to start Family By Design?

DS: This all began for me as a combination of the professional and the personal. On the professional side, I've been involved with modern family issues my entire adult life. In the mid-1990s, as an undergrad at Duke university, I began writing about domestic partnership benefits because at that time employers were struggling with the idea of whether they should extend health care benefits and other benefits to unmarried partners of their employees. I then received a Fulbright scholarship to research non-traditional family formation in Europe, and as part of that research looked at countries that had given the rights of same sex marriage to couples, which became the basis for a book, [Gay Marriage: For Better or for Worse?](#) I've been doing further research on modern families ever since. So that's the professional side.

The personal side is that I always thought that by my mid-thirties, I'd have found my better half, and have a family life that would include 2.25 kids and a white picket fence. When I hit 36 and realized that was not happening, I started to feel my biological clock ticking – because men have it too – and that got me thinking about what my own options for parenting would be. Initially, I thought it boiled down to either being a fun uncle for my nieces and nephews, or trying to make it on my own as a single parent. I wanted to be more



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than just an uncle, and in terms of single parenthood I felt that the scheduling and financial pressures on a single parent, in addition to the lack of emotional support, would be too much for me to handle. So that's when I began to explore other options.

I spoke with two friends of mine who both said, separately, "I know this woman you should meet. She wants to be a mom but she doesn't want to be a single mom." So I ended up going on these meet-ups that felt like dates (Editor's note: Spedale is gay). We met at a bar and we had a drink and talked. Although the chemistry wasn't right in those particular situations to move forward with a parenting partnership, it really got me thinking: I have to read the book on how you do this whole parenting partnership thing. And then I realized there wasn't a book! And so I started writing the book – and in conjunction with writing the book, started the website.

IC: What are parenting partnerships? How does the site work to facilitate those?

DS: Parenting partnerships occur when you bring like-minded people together who are at a similar point in their lives where they are ready to become parents, but are not in an opposite-sex relationship where that would occur on its own. The concept of parenting partnerships is to bring these people together to begin a dialogue with each other about parenting. So that can obviously take different forms depending on the person. It can be a single person looking for a person of the opposite sex to be their parenting partner, it can be a lesbian couple or gay male couple who may be looking for a person of the opposite sex to play that role in a child's life, and so on – there are various forms of parenting partnerships that are possible.

Family By Design is broken up into three sections – "Learn", "Find" and "Share". The "Learn" section provides in-depth information about parenting partnerships and provides a step-by-step "co-parenting guide" from the beginning to end of the process.

The "Find" section works similarly to a dating website, but asks in-depth questions about your personal thoughts on parenting. For example, you can indicate in your profile what level of day-to-day involvement you plan to have vs. your co-parent. You can indicate your financial commitment to the co-parenting structure. There are many other thoughtful parenting questions in these profiles so that potential parenting

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partners can find a highly-compatible match.

The “Share” section is where the community shares together – it includes professional experts and successful co-parents who answer the questions of site users in a “Dear Abby” format, and also includes forums where prospective co-parents can share best practices, questions, concerns, etc with each other.

IC: Who would you say is the typical candidate for the site?

DS: Right now, there’s a good balance between men and women, although single women probably slightly outweigh men. One common model that people tend to be looking for is the “Will and Grace” model – a straight woman looking to have a child with a gay man. Another common match-up for LGBT users is a lesbian couple with a straight or gay male, who plays an involved “known donor” role. Other situations we have seen are gay male couples looking for lesbian couples or straight women to co-parent with. So there are a lot of different ways in which people are looking for their parenting partners on the website.

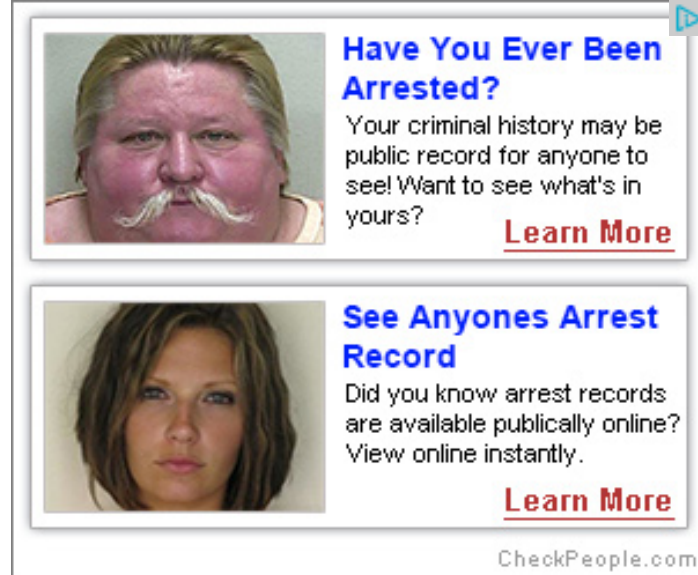
IC: What percentage of your users are LGBT singles or couples?

DS: The LGBT representation on the site is definitely higher than their representation in the general population. What surprises me is what a large percentage of the LGBT community has never heard about parenting partnerships as an option. Most of the gay men I know either think that they’re going to have to utilize a surrogate or they’re not going to be a parent, and many lesbian couples I know have said ‘we just need a donor and we’re going to go off and do our own thing.’ But the idea that you’re actually looking for an engaged other parent is still new for most of our community.

IC: Do you feel that in general LGBT couples are starting families more?

DS: My personal belief is that the next frontier for the LGBT community after marriage is going to be around parenting issues. Younger gay men and lesbians have grown up not only with the sense that they can get married, but also that parenting can be a normal event for them too.

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IC: How long do you recommend that people get to know each other before they embark on a parenting partnership?

DS: I've learned three key things from my interviews with people who have successfully gone into a parenting partnership:

First, you should not have a baby until you've built a strong bond of friendship and a relationship of trust and comfort with the other person(s). So that timeframe can be different for different people. I would say less than 6 months would be too short for most people to get to know each other. You want to be able to take the time to hang out with each other, hang out with each other's friends and family members. One of the things I've heard from the co-parents I've interviewed is try to hang out with them around other children and see how they interact. If you feel you've found the right person to go down this path with, you should be spending enough time to feel you've gotten to know them well, and you've built an open and honest channel of communication with each other. So when things go wrong, you'll be able to openly and honestly talk through the issues.

Second, as you're going through this process of getting to know one another, integrate discussions about parenting into the process and go into details on parenting issues. Family by Design includes a co-parenting template in the legal section of the site, where we give you a long list of issues that should be part of your conversations. For example, are you both going to be legal parents? How will you allocate parental rights and responsibilities? Who has the right to name the child? What do you do on birthdays? We go into tons of detail to get you thinking about many of the issues you haven't yet thought about, but should.

Third, now that you've done all this planning and taken the time to get to know your parenting partner(s), expect everything to change. Because once the baby is born, there will be many unforeseeable things and bumps in the road. That's why it's so important that when you get to unforeseen issues you've built a relationship that's strong enough and flexible enough to get through them.

IC: How binding are co-parenting legal documents?

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THE BISCUIT LIST
THE MODERN DAY GAYDY BUNCH
TURKEY BASTER AND A BOTTLE OF WINE
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DS: The short answer is that a co-parent agreement is not legally binding. If this goes to court, a judge will always act in the best interests of the child. So the judge can look at your co-parent agreement for intent, and may very well say, ‘I believe what you’ve intended is in the best interest of the child and I will uphold this agreement,’ but they can also say, ‘I don’t think what you wrote in here is in the child’s best interest and therefore I’m not going to enforce it’.

IC: From the couples that you’ve interviewed, what was the biggest hurdle for them?

DS: Every couple is different, but I think where I’ve seen things not go the way they’ve expected is when they didn’t take the time to get to know their parenting partner(s) the way they should have, whereas with people who really knew each other and felt comfortable with each other, there haven’t been as many problems. Obviously, things come up in parenting partnerships that place stress on the relationship, like if someone loses their job, but that’s no different than any other family that’s raising children.

IC: How would you compare entering a parenting partnership for either a lesbian couple or a gay male couple to going the “traditional route” of going through a sperm bank or surrogacy agencies?

DS: I wouldn’t want to say that one is always better than the other. I would say it depends on what you’re looking for. For lesbian couples, it may be the case that they want a male figure – perhaps even a father figure – in their child’s life. In other cases, they may have started off simply wanting their child to know who their biological father was, but over time the “known donor” became more and more involved in being part of their child’s life as well in a natural way. If a lesbian couple wants to avoid these outcomes, they can choose to get an anonymous sperm donor who won’t be involved in the child’s life.

For gay male couples who have chosen to co-parent with either a lesbian couple or a single woman, I sometimes hear that they wanted to become parents but were concerned they wouldn’t be able to make it happen because they both work and have incredibly busy lives, and were not sure they could be full-time, live-in dads – so they wanted the support of another parent in their child’s life. For other gay male couples, I’ve heard that they wanted to be biological parents but would not have been able to afford surrogacy, as it’s a six figure proposition which puts it out of the realm of possibility for many people, but a parenting

partnership was able to allow them to make parenting a reality.

IC: Why are parenting partnerships becoming more common?

This relates to the changing way Generation X and Y are thinking about parenting. We are pushing off having kids until later in life so that we can focus on our own personal development and our career development.

And as a result of that, more and more people in these generations aren't really thinking about parenting until their mid-thirties or later – and may often still be single at that point in their lives. So I often talk about “Liz Lemon” from 30 Rock as being the target demographic – but when it comes to the LGBT community, you also have large numbers of single men and women for whom this is an interesting solution.

And for women who use sperm donors, my sense is that there is a slow movement away from anonymous donors to wanting to be able to let your child know who their biological father is. Yes, you can get medical history when you get sperm, but later on it can difficult or more difficult to get medical information should you need it. And many of these known donors are becoming actively involved in their child's life as well.

IC: What do you say to people who might have a negative reaction to parenting partnerships?

DS: Well certainly parenting partnerships aren't for everyone. People need to give thought to the significant responsibilities that come with child-raising, and decide what's most important to them in a family structure. One major objection comes from people who assume that parenting partnerships are about having a child with someone you don't know well. So part of what we try to educate people about with Family By Design is the fact that we are introducing people who are like-minded to start on the path of building a strong friendship and relationship with each other first, before they get to the parenting part.

The other thing I would say is that it's all relative. So if you're comparing doing this to single parenting – say you're a single gay man or a single lesbian and you decide you want to be a single parent, I would just encourage you to think about the level of intensity that raising a child as a single parent is on one person. Going back to those financial pressures, those scheduling pressures, and that lack of emotional support that may come with single parenting, you may decide that this is a more appealing option.

IC: Have you gotten a reaction since the site launched?

DS: What I love about working in the modern family space is that I always get a reaction from people. When I'm at a party and people say, "What do you do?" I may hear, "Oh my god, that's amazing, I have three female friends and this would be perfect for them" or you might get "Oh my god, that's horrific, you are destroying western society as we know it." So I love that people are engaged and interested, one way or the other. I don't think you'll ever convince everyone that this is a great option, but I do think you can get people to look at the spectrum of parenting options and I think at the very least people will find this to be a better option than some of the other ones they might consider.

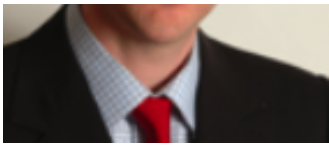
Historically, from the LGBT perspective, parenting partnerships have been happening for some time, because gay men and lesbians have known each other socially – and it was one of few options. Today, there are many more lesbians and gay men who see this as an appealing option to parenthood, but don't have the right person in their lives who would make for an ideal parenting partner. So we want to connect them so they can find the right person(s) with whom to build a relationship leading to parenthood.

IC: How many profiles and active users do you have on the site so far?

DS: We already have thousands of profiles with little marketing having been done, so that's been a nice surprise. A lot of what we are doing is educating people around parenting partnerships as an option. I think over the next ten years, this is going to become much more of a mainstream parenting option for members of Gen X and Gen Y – and as this becomes the case, I think we'll see a lot more people signing up to find their ideal parenting partner.





Darren Spedale is a subject matter expert on modern families and has been conducting research on non-traditional families for the last 20 years. In 1997, Darren was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to research modern family structures in Northern Europe, where he worked with governments, NGOs, and many dozens of couples living in non-traditional family relationships to understand what the



needs of non-traditional families are, and what the United States could learn from how non-traditional families were being recognized abroad. Based on a subset of this research, Darren published the book “Gay Marriage: For Better or For Worse? What We’ve Learned From the Evidence” (Oxford University Press, with co-author Prof. William Eskridge of Yale Law School), sharing insights on a modern family growth trend.

Darren is currently finishing a new book, “Family By Design: The Complete Guide to Successfully Finding a Parenting Partner and Navigating the Co-Parenting Process”. Family By Design is the first book to explore the concept of parenting partnerships, and provides expert advice on whether a parenting partnership is right for you, how to find the right parenting partner, and how to work with that parenting partner through the entire co-parenting process from beginning to end.

Darren holds a bachelor’s degree from Duke University, a law degree from Stanford Law School, and an MBA from the Stanford University Graduate School of Business.

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