

THE DAILY SPECIAL



WARD PERRIN/VANCOUVER SUN

Randy Simpson (left) is Daddy and his partner Drew Ryan is Papa to son Jack, who was adopted from an Alberta family. The family is featured in the documentary *Fatherhood Dreams*.

THE 'GAYBY BOOMERS'

PARENTING | Vancouver couple Drew Ryan and Randy Simpson are among a growing segment of gay men who, despite obstacles, are adopting children to become fathers

BY CHANTAL EUSTACE
VANCOUVER SUN

Papa and Daddy sit on the couch while their toddler, Jack, jumps up and down next to them saying the word "monkey."

His two dads laugh adoringly, and give their son a squeeze.

"You are sure hamming it up," says Drew Ryan, rubbing his adoptive son's head. "He's so outgoing."

Ryan's husband, Randy Simpson, nods.

"I'm just so proud of our family, Drew, and the baby, and where we are lucky enough to live," said Simpson, to whom Jack refers as Daddy. Drew is Papa.

They like to spend their days off as a family going for brunch or playing at Kitsilano Beach. They live in a tidy bungalow near South Granville, with a tricycle parked on the lawn. Most of their friends are straight couples who have children.

The Vancouver couple are part of an emerging gang of gay dads who — despite physiological, economic and social obstacles — are raising kids.

So-called "gayby boomers," they are growing in numbers, said Chris Veldhoven, who runs a twice-yearly 12-week course in Toronto called Daddies and Pappas 2B. It's always full, he said.

"I think there's a growing sense of possibility, whereas people five or six years ago didn't have a sense of entitlement or outreach," said Veldhoven, adding he knows about 20 gay couples who have become parents.

Instead of baby showers, he said, they host "gayby brunches."

And while more and more people may be accepting same-sex parents as normal, he said, it isn't always easy.

In his course, which is directed at gay and bisexual men who are interested in becoming dads, he prepares future dads for the worst.

"Part of our training in the course is to talk about the statements people will face — the assumptions about, there's a mother missing, the child will be damaged because of not having proper gender role models in the

family, or that we shouldn't be parents because we are automatically abusers or the kids will question or have confused gender or sexual identities," said Veldhoven, who has had about 120 students participate in the program, which he began offering in 2003.

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Who's different now? We want to keep saying that the family that is gay and lesbian, single, multiple-generational or whatever is different, but they're not.

The family that is now the minority is the one where kids are living with two biologically related parents.

KAREN MADEIROS

Adoptive Families Association of B.C. executive director

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"There's a lot of disproving those myths and learning to talk back to them in public."

But overall, he said, there is a growing awareness that a person's gender doesn't matter when it comes to parenting.

"Being a male-female parental unit does not mean that you're qualified," said Veldhoven. "People have different strengths and weaknesses about the type of parents they can be and that is not linked to one's biology as male or female."

Karen Madeiros, executive director for the Adoptive Families Association of B.C., said sexual orientation and gender are not issues when it comes to the public adoption system.

"I don't really care in what form potential adoptive parents arrive. I only care that they're potential good resources to be parents to children who are waiting," she said, adding there are more than 1,300 B.C. children in need of good homes.

In any case, she said, there is no such thing as a typical family any more.

"Who's different now? We want to keep saying that the family that is gay and lesbian, single, multiple-genera-

tional or whatever is different, but they're not," said Madeiros, who has worked with the non-profit association for 15 years.

"The family that is now the minority is the one where kids are living with two biologically related parents."

Lyle Jones, a Vancouver social

on Global.

"I'd never thought a man would have such a desire to have children," said Ivanova, who has a daughter.

"Each of [the men in the film] always wanted to be fathers," said Ivanova. "Society doesn't have expectations [for men] to have babies but

share their story with the public, adding some people are likely to disagree with their lifestyle.

"You know what, if somebody said, I don't agree with this, I would have a lot of respect for their honesty," said Ryan, holding onto Jack, a veritable ball of energy in a T-shirt that reads "Hang Ten."

"Nobody ever skips a beat or bats an eye when I say this is my husband Drew," said Simpson, adding that Vancouver is a particularly open-minded city.

Still, they said they feel like a minority within a minority. When they first became parents, they wanted to meet other people with similar experiences, so they started a gay fathers' group online at meetup.com. Initially there was no interest. Since then, the site has grown to include 11 members.

He said he is living his dream, being part of a loving and supportive nuclear family.

"We live in the right time. Now we can get married. Now we can adopt," said Ryan.

Being a dad is worth the diapers, the sleep deprivation and the round-the-clock watch, said Simpson, who did the "legwork" for their adoption. The process was difficult and expensive, he said. They travelled to visit their son's family in Alberta many, many times, Simpson said, sometimes going out just to meet for lunch.

While becoming dads was exhausting, they both said fatherhood is something they have always wanted. The couple even discussed it when they first dated in 2001, three years before they tied the knot in a simple ceremony.

"Just having [the baby] in our lives, I feel like we're the luckiest people in the world," said Ryan, as his chubby-cheeked boy climbed from one dad to another.

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they do it because they really, really want it."

And it isn't easy, she learned.

Adopting a child through the public system can take years and there are very few newborns. The alternatives are private adoption and international adoption. This latter is difficult for gay men, since apart from the U.S., most countries won't consider them for adoption.

Other ways gay men can become dads are through surrogacy or co-parenting, said Ivanova, who explored both of these routes in her film.

She said she hopes people will watch her work and leave with a more open mind.

"I really would like straight people to watch it from beginning to end and to maybe start thinking that gay men are not any different," she said. "It sounds very simple or limited as a goal but everything starts with small steps."

In the film, she follows Ryan and Simpson as they go through the process of adopting their son from an Alberta family. It's a complicated and emotional tale, one of three she profiles in the hour-long film.

The couple said they were happy to

worker, said becoming a father to his teenage adopted son was a life-changing experience.

"It was like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm a parent in reality here,'" said Jones, recalling the moment he and his husband became parents. "I think it's fate."

Jones, who does foster-family recruitment at Vancouver's Pride Parade, said he's found that some men still don't know they are able to become parents.

Last year, Rachel Epstein, who runs Toronto's Dykes Planning Tykes parenting group, helped to survey gay fathers for the Father Involvement Research Alliance through polls and interviews.

A report on the findings said men who want to become fathers after "coming out" faced challenges particularly related to "acquiring a child," as well as negative stereotypes about gay men and parenting.

Vancouver-based documentary filmmaker Julia Ivanova was inspired to make a movie on the subject after meeting a single gay man at a party and hearing about his dream of becoming a dad.

Her film on the subject, *Fatherhood Dreams*, was broadcast last Saturday