

## Gay parents under microscope in "Daddy & Papa"

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PARK CITY, Utah (Variety) - A personal look at the growing number of gay men who choose to become fathers, "Daddy & Papa" brings honesty, humor and humanity to its examination of a significant phenomenon in the ever-changing map of the American family.

While it could have benefited from being contextualized with greater statistical input and more detailed information on related legislative battles, writer-director Johnny Symons' engaging profile of four gay-parent households, including his own, is a touching firsthand account of both the rewards and challenges of the experience. The one-hour documentary is sure to find an appreciative audience at gay fests and in public television showings.

Seemingly, the most common cases of adoption among gay men are of black children, who often linger in the system for years before being placed with families due to the fact that the majority of heterosexual couples hold out for white or Asian kids. Non-black Symons and his partner's adoption of African-American baby Zachary is chronicled from day one, starting with the complications when the boy's Christian fundamentalist foster mother expresses her anxieties.

Other subjects include a couple that became fathers thanks to a college friend who acted as a surrogate mother. More than their sexuality, it's the breakup of their relationship that causes problems for their daughter.

Another gay man in Florida -- among the most conservative states regarding gay parental rights -- faces difficulties in being recognized as the legal guardian of a boy in his care for five years after the child was abandoned by his homeless father.

Perhaps the most interesting case on view is a San Francisco AIDS activist, who adopted two black brothers living in separate foster homes. He discusses the anomaly of raising kids in the childfree environment of the Castro, as well as acknowledging the loneliness of single-parenting.

Interesting points emerge from his and other interviewees' comments about hedonistic aspects of gay culture and the personal needs that arise in older gay men when that part of the lifestyle begins to pale.

What makes the tidily edited documentary more than just an infomercial for open-mindedness and acceptance is the candor and often self-deprecating humor of the men interviewed, such as the shock of Symons and his partner -- both decidedly non-sporty types -- at find themselves raising a baby jock with extraordinary athletic abilities.

Without hammering the point, Symons' film casually underlines how the formation of a traditional two-parent family model is in itself a revolutionary act for gay couples, though one clearly born not out of defiance but of a need for self-fulfillment. While the film functions more on an intimate level than in encompassing the broader picture, it nonetheless addresses problem areas such as divorce and adoption and surrogate difficulties. The incomprehension and prejudice surrounding gay parenting also is covered, with one of the fathers described by a friend as "America's nightmare," or exactly what most of the country doesn't want to see happening.

In this respect, the documentary serves a useful purpose in its straight-up validation of gay men to be dedicated, loving parents, no more or less prone to mess up the job than anyone else. The film provides food for thought by quietly challenging norms such as the basic belief that women are

better child-rearers than men. It also underlines the fact that gay people remain largely an untapped resource in a society in which large numbers of children, especially African-Americans, wait years to be adopted.

An Independent Television Service presentation. Produced by Johnny Symons. Co-producer, Lindsay Sablosky.

Directed, written by Johnny Symons. Camera (color), Gail Huddleson, Symons, Andy Abrahams Wilson; editor, Kim Roberts; music, Janice Giteck, David Conley, Glenys Rogers; sound, Sienna McLean. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 15, 2002.

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