

**A Utopian Setting with Non-Utopian Characters: A Study of Parent-Child
Relation in *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan**

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Abstract:

Boy Meets Boy is a young adult romance with same sex couple at its center, set in a utopian small town having not so utopian characters. It functions mostly as a romance but displays a plethora of issues faced by students and people of gay, lesbian, transgender and other gender-variant community. This paper deals with the parent-child relation represents in the novel, support and encouragement of friends and family of non-traditional gender performers. This paper studies and contrasts the two most studied parenting constructs, which are parental acceptance and parental psychological control. The impact of support and nurture through positive parenting can affect the self-esteem and self-regulation of adolescents and youth who have variant sexual identities or preferences.

Keywords: gay youth, parent-child relation of LGB youth, mental health of LGB youth.

David Levithan is an American young adult fiction author and editor, *Boy Meets Boy* is his first novel published in 2003. This novel is set in a gay-friendly small town in New Jersey and revolves around a group of high school students. The story has a linear event of a traditional romance novel where a boy meets a girl, they fall in love, then get away from each other and eventually the boy gets the girl, except both the characters in this novel are boys. This novel is a love story between Paul and Noah, two teens in their high school and their friends. Levithan has set this novel in a utopian small town where the gay, lesbian, bisexuals and other gender variants are accepted and celebrated and firm boundaries of traditional gender expression have thawed. This setting assists the author to effectively undermines the paradigm of compulsory heterosexuality in young adult fiction in general and young adult romance specifically.

In an era where, according to The Trevor Project report, more than 1.8 million LGBTQ youth between the ages of 13 and 24 in the U.S. seriously consider suicide each year, and over a third (35.6%) of LGBTQ students had received detention, 15.1% of LGBTQ students had received in-school or out-of-school suspension, 1.3% of LGBTQ students had been expelled (GLSEN 2016), this novel sets a relief and alternative to homosexual students, where their sexuality is to be celebrated.

Paul, a gay teen is the narrator of this story, Tony (Paul's best Friend), Joni (Paul's other best friend), Infinite Darlene, a drag queen (school's homecoming queen and a star quarterback), Kyle (Paul's confused ex-boyfriend, who turns out to be a bisexual), Ted (Joni's ex-boyfriend) and Chuck (Joni's current boyfriend). Paul and Joni are old friends from kindergarten and Joni was the first-person Paul came out to be gay, Tony and Paul met in a bookstore and became friends. Kyle is Paul's ex-boyfriend who is confused about his sexuality and later finds out to be a bisexual. Joni is straight and had a romantic relation with Ted, later Joni finds new love interest in Chuck. Infinite Darlene is a drag queen who is school's homecoming queen and the star quarterback. Noah is new in town, Paul first saw Noah in a bookstore and falls in love immediately, they gradually develop their relation only to get apart and finally get back together. This set of characters display a plethora of burning issues of our times such as homophobia, inclusion of homosexuals and gender variant students in schools and colleges, upheaval in young minds and most importantly the constant help and support of friends and family of gays, lesbians and transgenders.

Parental influence on human offspring cannot be undermine, although the influence of peers, media and school increase with age, they cannot fully supplant the role of parents in the lives of their children. Parent-adolescent relationships inevitably influences how adolescents navigate their journey into early adulthood. The importance of these relationships may be even more significant for sexual and gender minority youth, whose identities are developing in a highly heteronormative world and during a developmental period when their cognitive and emotional abilities are still growing and adapting. Although many children experience parental warmth and acceptance when they disclose their sexual or gender identities, while others experience resentment and mistreatment. Some may feel forced to remain "in the closet" and isolated from their families out of fear of judgement and potential rejection. Parental acceptance can be a protective factor for sexual and gender minority youth (Ryan,2010), psychological control, rejection, and fear of coming out increases the risk for psychopathological development. Paul and Tony show both types of parental treatment in the novel, Paul's sexuality is confirmed when he was in kindergarten, his teacher wrote in his report card "PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF" (Levithan 8). Instead of mistreatment and isolating Paul from other students the teacher appreciates and assures "What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that." (Levithan 9). His parents also, did not dread and mistreated him for being gay rather in Paul's word "Parents never react the way you want them to.", rather it took his parents a couple of years, but "eventually they got used to it."(Levithan 9). Later in his third-grade class with Joni's help he became the "first openly gay class president" (Levithan 11) of his class. Paul was a mighty talented student who since then been a part and head of various school committees and creative groups. This so happens with the parental support and comfort for a non-traditional gender performer child, this relationship between a child and their parent, as much as it is a biological necessity it holds social and emotional importance. As a result of these interactions children develop a sense of self and others, the ability to regulate emotion, behavior and forge relationship with others. Each of these developmental acquisitions are critical to physical and mental health throughout life (Cassidy, 2008). Paul's parents and his brother Jay were all

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apprise of his sexuality and welcomed his new found love Noah, “they’re pretty good about meeting my boyfriends,....my fear isn’t that my parents are going to push Noah out the door.....instead, I’m afraid they’ll be too friendly” (Levithan 60). Recognizing family units as systems of interconnected individuals and dyads that bidirectionally influence each other and the overall functioning of the system (Minuchin, 1985) is a necessary framework for understanding how an adolescent’s LGBT identity can create an effect within the family, this theory also accounts for how these effects ultimately resound back to the child. Paul, throughout was not lost, his tumultuous relation with Noah may have caused chaos, he might have felt lost but he never was been lost. This clarity of one’s self/identity is a sign of positive and strong parental acceptance.

Tony, on other hand have an orthodox and traditional house hold, his parents are extremely religious and thinks that his “personality is simply a matter of switches, and that if they find the right one, they can turn off his attraction to other guys and put him back on the road to God” (Levithan 70). His sexuality was a matter of social disgrace and blasphemy for his parents. Sexual and gender minority youth experience unique and ongoing stressors specific to their LGBT identities, including direct institutional discrimination and interpersonal victimization, expectations and fears of rejection and harm, and the internalization of homonegativity (Meyer, 2003). These minority stressors have been associated with psychopathology through their effects on psychological processes involved in coping, resilience, and emotional functioning as well as experiences within families. These stressors on his way of emotional functioning hinders him to be happy and proud of being himself, his parent’s ideal and ‘normal’ heteronormative construct makes his condition miserable, Paul wants “Tony to be happy.....a part of me still fell in hope with him. I want a fair world. And in a fair world, Tony would shine.” (Levithan 5). Sexual identity development, for most adolescent is a continuous process often starting before puberty, during which children form attitudes and preferences about sexual attractions and experiences. This process can sometimes involves engaging in sexual behaviors, whereas it can be a purely mental exercise for others. These experiences result in a new conceptualization of self and how the self relates to others. This important period of identity development is challenging for all adolescents, but it can be markedly more so for LGBT youth who are confronted daily by a heteronormative society that explicitly and implicitly reinforces sexual and gender expectations that are incongruent with their emerging LGBT identities. The ‘coming out’ is one of the components of developing LGBT identity, and this can happen at any point in the lifecycle. When a youth discloses his/her gender identity to their parent it can be a unique experience. This disclosure may be met with a positive, negative or delayed/neutral reaction, which may have immediate and ongoing effects on children, (acceptance and support versus distance and rejection) and is likely to directly influence their health and well-being. When Tony’s parents found out that he is gay “they didn’t kick Tony out of the house, but they made him want to leave. They didn’t yell at him- instead they prayed loudly, delivering all of their disappointment and rage and guilt to him in the form of an address to God.” (Levithan 96). Tony’s coming out was received with hatred, rejection and even dismissal of the fact that he is gay, he was confined to his room, no phone calls, and no friend was allowed to visit him.

Family and parenting researches, over a few decades have identified multiple parenting construct, but two of the most commonly studied are parental acceptance and parental psychological control. Parental acceptance is generally operationalized as warmth, affection, approval, support, and positive engagement with children and is positively associated with child’s self-esteem and self-regulation.

Parental psychological control refers to parents' attempts to impose their agenda, beliefs and desires on children, undermining their individuality and autonomy and is negatively associated with externalizing and internalizing behaviors, including depression, self-injury, and suicidal ideation. Paul and Tony's case represents both the sets respectively. Paul has a better and conscious understanding of self which helps him to establish himself as an important person in his school, whereas Tony remain in his cocoon for a long time that hinders his mental and personal growth.

This utopian town has a P-FLAG Community, which helps parents and friends to regulate with the new found identity/sexuality of their loved ones. Paul's parents and brother were eager to send the P-FLAG commandos to Tony's house to help his parents to understand his state of being. Tony, contrary to the parental psychological control decides to be more assertive and persistent, he faces his mother with confidence upholding to be a brave and confident gay boy. Fortunately, the novel demonstrates a positive change in the attitudes of his parents towards the end. Everyone gathers at Tony's house to pick him for the Dowager Dance "girls and boys. Straight boys and a drag queen." (Levithan 183). His father was "torn between dogma and helplessness...he simply walks away" and his mother was teary and nods him off saying have fun.

Considering this relationship history, adolescents can either 'comeout' to their parents and disclose their sexual/gender identities or they can choose not to disclose. Each decision has ramifications for parent-child relationships and adolescents' health and well-being. Parental acceptance negatively correlates with parental rejection, and these two parenting dimensions can be experiences simultaneously, or in alternate sequence with in a short period of time. It is possible that such co-occurrence is due to parents' use of psychological control, if a parent tries to persuade an LGBT adolescent into adopting a heteronormative identity, that behavior is more in line with the parent's wishes and expectations, and it is likely to be perceive as rejection. Parents may believe that they are making a simple and logical request by asking them to wait till they get older and wise, this projects that the adolescent's feelings are invalid or unacceptable and undermines a normative developmental process by imposing heteronormative expectations in an implicit, yet coercive, manner. Whether these experiences of rejection are direct or indirect, they are particularly salient for LGBT youth.

The direct effects of parental behaviors and attitudes on LGBT adolescent health and well-being, shows that family acceptance can also buffer youth from the negative effects of homosexuality outside home. even in this 21st century as children come out earlier in life, they report more experiences of homophobia and may be more vulnerable to negative peer behaviors and victimization. All of this is happening against a cultural backdrop that is gradually becoming more accepting of LGBT persons and issues, but still lacks adequate support and protection for LGBT youth, the experience of parental support goes far beyond just being a "lack of rejection". Parental support attenuates the negative effects of LGBT-related experiences of victimization on children's psychopathology.

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