

# ep48\_jun24

## Introduction to Mama Dragons

**Deborah:** [00:00:00] Mothers are known for fiercely protecting their children, but few are as fierce as the Mama Dragons.

**Liz:** Coming up. We talk about how families can accept, affirm, and celebrate their LGBTQ children.

**Deborah:** Hello everyone. I'm Deborah Linder and it's pride month

**Liz:** And I'm Liz Rivera, Director of Education for Utah Foster Care. And we're talking today about Mama Dragons. They started out as a small group of moms just over 10 years ago.

**Deborah:** and now they're a pretty prolific group. I know in Utah we have a lot of members, but it has spread into Idaho.

## Meet Jen Blair: Advocate and Podcast Host

**Deborah:** And in fact, [00:01:00] Our guest is from Idaho. She is Jen Blair. She's the host of Mama Dragon's podcast called In the Den. And she's also the court appointed special advocate for children in Idaho, So Jen, thanks for joining us.

## Supporting LGBTQ Children: Key Messages for Parents

**Deborah:** What is the first thing people want to hear when their child has come out?

**Jen:** I'm not sure what they want to hear, but one of the most helpful things that they can hear, to bring peace to the situation, is just to remind people that it's going to be okay. It's going to be okay. It might be new, you might be feeling vulnerable, or maybe, insecure about how your child will be perceived, or if they'll be able to have success in life, but it's going to be okay.

**Jen:** There are people, there are other parents who have walked this path, We've gone through the same fears and insecurities that you have, and we are happy to walk with you.

**Liz:** That must be so helpful to know that there are people who've already been through this or are going through this, but further down the line, they can [00:02:00] help and mentor and support their family as they enter this new realm.

## Challenges in Conservative Communities

**Jen:** Yeah, when you come from a conservative background, maybe you live in a rural area, or you come from a conservative religious background, sometimes there's just no information. You really just don't know what you don't know. You've never even encountered these things. And so you have this child who's expressed something, and your immediate reaction is to feel protective of them or to feel protective of yourself, your previously held beliefs.

**Jen:** And so you're kind of in new territory and the people who have given you advice previously, your social network, probably your church community, they don't necessarily have the advice and the support that you're looking for. So you have to find a new community that can help you walk through the issue.

**Deborah:** And is that why you really start with the moms?

**Jen:** I'm probably a little biased, but I tend to think if you have a child who needs something, whether it's medical care [00:03:00] or extra support in the school system or anything, if you can tap into the mom and educate the mom, you can protect the world. So instead of trying to catch these LGBTQ kids after there's a lot of issues, when there's trauma, if we .

**Jen:** Think about Desmond Tutu catching people downstream. Mama Dragons has organized the concept of going upstream and starting in the family, and whether it's a biological family or a step family or a foster family, adoptive family, whatever the situation is, heading upstream and educating the mothers so that these kids never have to fall into that river in the first place.

**Jen:** We can protect them and give them the best chance they have moving forward, having a healthy, productive, happy future.

# Proactive Parenting and Creating Safe Homes

**Liz:** Do you ever have parents contact you just in almost like that upstream idea, thinking about. I can't. Don't know if my child might be part of the LGBTQ community, but I think they might and what should I be aware of? They suspect something, but it's not confirmed yet.

**Jen:** Oh, absolutely. And those are the [00:04:00] parents that I'm most impressed with. They're really paying attention to their child, they're watching for cues, and they're trying to create the safest environment in advance. And there's a lot that all families can do. On the off chance, we have, what, somewhere estimated seven to ten percent of youth.

**Jen:** Will identify as LGBTQ. And if you're preparing your home to be safe for that 10 percent you're also preparing those kids to be welcoming and inclusive and safe to their peers who might come out or their siblings who might come out. And there's a lot of things you can do. You can just talk positively.

**Jen:** If you're excited to say, I don't know if you heard, but, secretary Pete Buttigieg and his husband Chase just adopted their second baby, what a beautiful family, simple as that at dinner or I have a wedding this weekend to go to, and I'm super excited because these two women seem perfectly matched with each other.

**Jen:** And you can just be conversational about those sorts of things all the time to normalize it for these kids who might [00:05:00] be questioning their own situation or curious about their peers. And in general, they might never need to come out, but they'll know that you will accept them in advance if they do need to.

**Deborah:** That's a great idea. If you do have thoughts or suspicions that might be the case, start also doing your homework.

## LGBTQ Youth in Foster Care

**Deborah:** it affected me when I found out that kids in foster care who are LGBTQ even at greater risk of self harm, mental health issues, and that sort of thing.

**Deborah:** Is that what you've seen?

**Jen:** Oh, absolutely. Sadly, LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system. , like I said, upwards maybe of 10 percent of the overall population identifies as LGBTQ, but about 30 percent nationwide of kids who are in foster care. There's more kids in the system than in the general population, and we can ask a lot of questions about why that is.

**Jen:** Primarily, it seems to be they're in [00:06:00] care for the same reasons everyone else is in care, right? But there's additional issues because of the high levels of rejection or mistreatment. If you have parents who are already struggling with parenting in general and then this news strikes them inappropriately they don't know how to handle it, that can increase the stress in the home, which increases mistreatment in the home.

**Jen:** Additionally, a lot of kids in more extreme situations, if they are maybe not expressing themselves in really normative ways, and the adults don't know how to appropriately process the information sometimes the child's just forced out of the home or forced or runs away because of the mistreatment. so that, results with more kids being in the system. So anyone who wants to foster, I would strongly encourage to get educated as much as you can on LGBTQ issues. Because these kids are coming with potentially an extra layer, an additional layer of trauma that we want to help them with.

**Liz:** Absolutely.

## The Importance of Family Acceptance

**Liz:** And then one thing you said too, that I really liked is it's, [00:07:00] This kind of proactive approach is not only benefiting a child who might be LGBTQ, but another child who may not be, but they're friends with someone who is, or they're just those people in their school. And so creating a community that is more welcoming and accepting and celebrating of all peoples.

**Liz:** Yeah.

**Jen:** We want our kids to be kind. We want them to be in the school system and be kind to the other students. We don't want to say things or not say things. And they make assumptions about who it's okay to bully. Because we know that LGBTQ kids experience dramatically higher rates of bullying in school.

**Jen:** Also, we want our kids to be on the non bullying side.

**Liz:** Yeah. Absolutely. as Debra just noted, you're really noting that safety aspect of this. We actually have on our website, a safe home pledge that a foster parent can take or really any family in the community can take. And it talks about the different things to do in order to [00:08:00] create a safe home.

**Liz:** For any child. And one thing we've learned too, is that we do a lot of work, with kids who have had trauma in their life. But one thing I've learned over the years is that if it's good for a kid with trauma, it's good for kids period. And it feels like committing to be a safe home for a child who's LGBTQ is committing to be a safe home for any child.

**Liz:** And so it's just like you're saying, it's just how we should treat people regardless of whatever issue they may be bringing with them.

**Jen:** Yeah. And there's some interesting things. Thankfully, there's a lot of research.

## Research and Resources for Parents

**Jen:** I'm not sure if you guys are familiar with the Family Acceptance Project out of San Francisco State University. But they've done a lot of research, and it's interesting that some of the things parents do, I'm old, but I'm a Gen X er, and some of the things we maybe saw in the 80s about how to parent these ideas of tough love, if your kid's doing something you think is inappropriate, These boundaries that you put up, these are actually really harmful for LGBTQ children.

**Jen:** [00:09:00] Perhaps you want your kid to not be bullied. You have a gay son who's a little bit more animated and flamboyant and you don't want him to be bullied. And so in order to try to protect him or keep him safe, you remind him repeatedly not to stick his hip out to the side like that, or not to stand on his toes or not to talk in that.

**Jen:** Higher voice and like genuinely these are good parents with good hearts who want desperately to protect their children from a world that's not always safe for them. But what they're unintentionally doing is sending a message over and over to these kids that the way you exist in the world naturally is not okay. You are the one who needs to change. You need to fix yourself in order to be safe. And it's actually a really harmful message. So if we can look into the research as parents and feel empowered. If you have an LGBTQ kid, they need

to be around LGBTQ people. They need to find adults that they can look up to, mentors, who are successful and happy and thriving.

**Jen:** So that [00:10:00] they can see a future for themselves. You might, as a well intended parent, think my kid might be a lesbian, but she's going to be a normal quote unquote, normal lesbian. So we're just going to have her be friends with the normal kids. All the air quotes. I know you guys can't see me, but all the air quotes normal kids.

**Jen:** Cause then she'll grow up and be successful and she can date whoever she wants. But we don't want her to be in the GSA club or we don't want her to go to these activities. Where she'll be associating with these weird kids.

**Liz:** Interesting.

**Jen:** the air quotes. It's very common. And it's damaging for kids.

**Jen:** They need to associate with their peers. They need to meet transgender adults who are thriving. And they're happy and they need to see and experience queer joy and what that looks like. It gives them hope for the future as they're making plans for themselves and making plans for their own lives moving forward.

**Jen:** If we can tap into that research again, I can't recommend highly enough the Family Acceptance Project from San Francisco State University. They do bullet point lists. Do this, please don't do this is [00:11:00] harmful, this is rejecting. And kids who come from households. that are rejecting experience significant rates of self harm and suicide ideation as compared to those kids who are in accepting households.

**Liz:** I love that. we'll make sure to link to that our show notes. And I, and what you were saying reminds me, I don't know if it's still going on or not, but I know there was a campaign and I think it was like, it gets better or something like that, where it was, LGBTQ adults.

**Liz:** Messaging to younger people saying, hang in there. I promise you it's going to get better. And it's almost like what you were saying at the beginning where you were saying when a parent contacts you, what they need to hear is it's going to be okay. And it sounds like that's the same message that our kids need to hear.

**Jen:** yeah, there's a million ways to be healthy and productive and have glorious families. And being queer will just become this little tiny part of you. Where when maybe you're 11 or 12 or 13 and you're trying to sort it out and you haven't decided if you can tell your [00:12:00] parents it becomes almost all consuming.

**Jen:** That's all they can think about, it's so big. And once it gets normalized and they're accepted and they're loved then they can Go on to experience joy in all of their life

**Deborah:** And some of our foster parents have told me that they were actually the ones that their kids came out to when they came into their home. Is that unusual or is that pretty common?

**Jen:** Kids tend to come out in my experience in one of two ways they come out to the person who's safest who they know, right? They're trying to build this safety net of people who do accept them instead of facing rejection right off the bat So that might be a teacher or a friend or a parent or a foster parent Anyone that you feel is going to love you regardless You So that's the first of two things we see often. The second is they come out to people that they have slightly less attachment to, if that makes sense. If a kid comes out to me and they're like friends with my kid, [00:13:00] right? They're just friends with my kid. I've already accepted my kid. I'm a safe person to come out to.

**Jen:** And if I reject them, the cost is minor. The cost is not that steep to be rejected by a random person. And then they up the ante after that. So it's, Huge, as you guys know in the foster system, for sure, huge to be rejected by a biological parent. And some of these kids have experienced rejection in multiple ways from their biological parents to begin with.

**Jen:** And to tell them something else and give them another reason to potentially reject you is huge. That's a huge risk for the kids. So sometimes they find people who are less risky. If the foster parent rejects you, maybe you're not as invested to begin with, or maybe you've just decided there's zero chance that they'll reject you.

**Jen:** So it comes from two different angles. Sometimes parents hearts are broken. How come they didn't trust me? Why didn't they come talk to me?

**Jen:** Why did they think I would reject them? But really they're just experimenting a little bit before they get to this highest risk. Because losing [00:14:00] their relationship with you is so important to them that they have to

practice a little bit first to see how it feels to come out and gauge people's responses.

**Jen:** They're testing themselves before they go in for the big relationship that matters most to them.

**Liz:** I love that. Cause it's more about honoring that relationship that they're trying it out to figure it out before they, yeah, I think that's great.

**Jen:** We see the same thing a lot with suicide, right? People wonder, why did they call the ER instead of calling me? And it's that same thing. Our relationships that we value most are the ones we're the most afraid to damage.

**Liz:** And do we know a lot of this because of conversations with the kids themselves? Do they talk about why they came out to certain people and what their thought processes were and

**Jen:** Oh yeah, if you can get, anyone that can get an opportunity to talk to dozens of queer youth, I'd, I wish everyone could have that opportunity. Because they are so thoughtful and so articulate. That everything that they've done is intentional because they [00:15:00] know that they're part of this marginalized group and they hear the messages.

**Jen:** And they go to church or on the news, or currently they hear messages from their actual legislators that are appearing on their Tik Tok feeds or Instagram, and they know that there's a portion of the population that just isn't safe. And so they are amazingly thoughtful and phenomenally articulate about why they did, as an individual, what they did.

**Jen:** And they all do it differently, right? Because their situations are different. But they're really the most thoughtful group of kids I've ever worked with.

## **Navigating Religious Beliefs and Family Dynamics**

**Deborah:** I also wanted to get into the religious beliefs, how in this part of the country, we live in such, a conservative environment how do you really begin to talk about that with. The parents.



**Jen:** it's really difficult for parents who have invested a lot of their self identity into their religious community or religious beliefs because what you're really asking them to do when they support their child fully and affirm their child, even if it's 100 percent [00:16:00] based in research, they've read the research, they know what they need to do to protect the child.

**Jen:** You're essentially asking them to sacrifice or give up or modify a part of their personal identity, and that's not a small ask. That's a huge thing for people to, potentially lose their social support themselves. I know that when my first child came out, one of my biggest fears, I had nightmares about my own parents telling us that we couldn't participate in family events anymore.

**Jen:** My fear wasn't just community, and I had fantastic parents and they ended up being fantastic, but there's this insecurity that you don't know. And so when the parents affirming the child, you're trying to figure out how to keep the kids safe, but you're also trying to figure out, okay, this might cost me all of my friends.

**Jen:** And in our case, it did. We lost all of our friends. And had to start from scratch, and our younger children lost access to all of their friends. They were no longer allowed to play with the neighbor's kids, or they stopped being invited to birthday parties. And all of these things are real. They're real consequences.

**Jen:** And so when you're talking to parents, like the idea [00:17:00] of, it's a minute by minute. We're going to breathe in, we're going to breathe out, and we're going to prioritize the kid. And then we're going to do the next step in the very same way. We're going to breathe in, we're going to breathe out, we're going to learn a little bit more, and we're going to prioritize the kid.

**Jen:** And you have to baby step through it, because it isn't just the kid. The kid's the priority, right? The child who's coming out is the priority. But the family has to change. You have to really embrace the culture of the child, and join the child's culture, and be willing to give up your own culture, and potentially walk away from it if they won't let you stay.

**Jen:** And it's hard. It's big stuff.

**Liz:** And I just want to stress too, we're talking about conservative, we're talking about little c conservative. This isn't a political distinction. More that people are just wanting to keep things the way they've always been.

**Jen:** Oh yeah. I don't mean

**Jen:** politically at all.

**Liz:** Yeah, I just want, I know what you mean.

**Liz:** I just want to stress that for our listeners that we're not, we're not making any, derisive remarks about any particular political view. But just more that idea of conservative or conserving a way of life [00:18:00] they've always thought life was going to be and they don't want to necessarily be.

**Liz:** Rock that boat, and then it goes back to what we're talking about the very beginning where you're really creating now a community to catch not only the child, but the family too. So that these families do still have a community, even if they are losing their own, which still is going to be painful, but they have people there to help them pick up the pieces.

**Jen:** They have somewhere to go if they have to walk away. Absolutely.

**Liz:** And then going back to what Deborah said at the very beginning in our intro that, Mama Dragons are fierce.

**Liz:** And I was thinking about what you were saying about what these kids may face in the community and the parents being the ones to go ahead of the kids to. Protect them. And like you said, that's the number one goal is what the child needs.

**Jen:** Yeah, I want to be like, particularly mindful that there's different ways of being fierce. For some people's personality, to be a fierce advocate for your kid might mean sitting in your church community and raising your hand [00:19:00] and saying, that's not true in our situation.

**Jen:** Or if anybody has additional questions about that, you can come to me. Or whispering to the person next to you who feels vulnerable and feels like they have to leave. That might be fierce for you. For other people, it might be marching around on a capital steps. With signs and lobbying your legislatures, , so I just want to be clear that when we say fierce, nobody's expected to become someone else in order to advocate for their kid.

**Jen:** You can advocate for your kid by writing emails to teachers and very politely and maybe someone else is going to be fierce by absolutely demanding that the school system accommodate the needs of their child. Based on the research, and there's all different kinds of ways to do this, but I've never seen anyone be able to advocate better than a mom who's fighting for her child.

**Deborah:** So right. So right. , you do have some online training too, that is actually quite a wonderful place to start for parents.

**Jen:** Yeah, absolutely. We have a program [00:20:00] called Parachutes, and if you envision a parachute You're safe way back to the ground. You're coming down. It's slow. You're pacing yourself to get where you need to be. And people can find access to the parachute program on our website, mamadrasons. org. But basically, it's an e learning program. There's video clips. There's stories. It's animated. The people who created it did a phenomenal job. It really is just an amazing program. I wish everyone would watch it. Even if you feel like you've been marching in pride parades and advocating for years, there's something different about parenting.

**Jen:** That angle of parenting a queer child is different even than being queer yourself. We have a lot of people who come to our group who are trans, who are lesbian, same sex couple. They know how to fight for themselves. But they need support to learn how to fight for their child in the school system and things like that.

**Jen:** So we hear back a lot from the parachute program that people start it feeling very confident, like this is going to be easy. I already know [00:21:00] all of this. And they all walk away saying, wow, I really learned something new.

**Liz:** Yeah. That was definitely my experience going through it is it's incredible. You said it's incredibly well done. And just really enlightening. And just as we were talking before we started recording just things that I never thought about, I'm like, Oh, I've never even considered that.

**Liz:** So helpful. And for foster parents who are listening in Utah it is available in the bridge training portal. Mama Dragons has graciously allowed us to make that available to all foster families. So you can access it there

**Jen:** That's fantastic.

**Liz:** Yeah, it's great. We love it.

**Deborah:** And this may be a good time to mention to you once again, you can live in Utah you can be LGBTQ yourself. And you can be a foster parent. And often, DCFS, DCFS. will place with those parents and it's often the best place for an L-G-B-T-Q child or team to be.

**Jen:** Yeah. The LGBTQ teens. are harder to place. Nationwide, it's harder to place those kids in homes. Not every home is equipped. [00:22:00] And I appreciate the reality, the self awareness when families say right now, we can't provide this child with what they need. I appreciate that self awareness so that we can get those LGBTQ youth.

**Jen:** into homes that are appropriate for them, but it's harder to place. And we know research after research shows that family acceptance is the most important predictor of how well that youth will fare as an adult. And so we need accepting homes, foster care houses, more and more homes that are willing to take and support and nurture these kids to provide them a healthy and successful adulthood.

**Liz:** Yes.

## Pride Month: Celebrating Diversity and Acceptance

**Liz:** And that kind of gets us into June, which is pride month. Why pride? Why not, acceptance month or tolerance month or something? Why pride month? Why is that the word that gets used?

**Jen:** Yeah, if people have never been to a pride festival, they're different across the country, little rural pride festivals or giant ones in San Francisco or New York. It really is a chance to take [00:23:00] yourself out of our heteronormative. world that we are used to, and see people who have been told their whole lives quiet down, don't dress like that, that's embarrassing, , it's fine to be whatever, just don't have to tell anyone, keep it a secret, be in the closet, all of those sorts of things, and pride is opportunity for people to show up and say, you I will not be silent about who I am.

**Jen:** I am going to express myself as loudly and boldly in all of these social norms that you have tried to squish me into. This is a spot where I don't have to do that anymore. I can be absolutely proud of who I am, and everyone here is going to celebrate that with me. It's a fantastic place to just watch all of the people who often feel like they need to hide themselves.

**Jen:** Do not have to at Pride.

**Liz:** That's so great. And once again, an opportunity for people to expand their visions and the idea of what it means [00:24:00] to be human. There's so many different ways for us to live this human life.

**Jen:** Yeah, and you'll see all of it at Pride. The diversity at Pride is phenomenal. You've got me with, my conservative attire, stay at home mom, homeschooled four kids, they're right next to someone else who's the exact opposite of that and and we just hug anyway.

**Jen:** It's a fantastic experience and so important for the LGBTQ youth. to have a chance to go somewhere where they can be fully celebrated and feel no need to hide at all.

**Liz:** to be loved and seen. That's wonderful. Thank you.

## Final Thoughts and Resources

**Deborah:** So we're nearing the end of the podcast and let me just ask real quick, Jen, any final thoughts?

**Jen:** Mostly just for anyone listening who's recently coming upon this or even considering fostering or considering having kids, if there's a question that you might be parenting an LGBTQ child right now, Is the perfect time to get educated. If your child came out three [00:25:00] months ago and you don't know anything now is the perfect time to get educated.

**Jen:** And if you're pregnant now is the perfect time to get educated. There's so much information that's available now. Mama Dragons is a great resource. We'd love to help you if that's something that works with you, but there's dozens of other organizations that are doing similar things for different demographics.

**Jen:** Like now's your best chance. It's not too late. If you have a damaged relationship with your child. Not too late. Now is the time to get things, to get educated and take advantage of the things that are out there for you.

**Liz:** Fantastic message.

**Deborah:** It's so great to have a support online to know that there are people out there just like you. And of course, if you are an LGBTQ person who wants to be a foster parent please give us a call at Utah Foster Care. Go to [utahfostercare.org](http://utahfostercare.org) for that information. This has been a wonderful discussion.

**Deborah:** For Pride Month, we want to thank [00:26:00] our guest, Jen Blair. She hosts the Mama Dragon's podcast, In the Den. And Liz Rivera, Director of Education for Utah Foster Care, my co host. And producer Marshall Shearer Davis, who makes sure everything is running on time and just right behind the scenes.

**Deborah:** Remember, you don't need to know everything to be a foster parent. You just need to be willing to learn. For details on foster parenting and so many other ways you can get involved, go to [utahfostercare.org](http://utahfostercare.org). This has been Fostering Conversations. I'm Deborah Lindner