

Takes two to tango but many to argue

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The move by the National Library Board (NLB) to take three children's books off its shelves has sparked off a lively debate.

NLB removed the books from its shelves on Tuesday, following complaints from a member of the public that the books "do not promote family values".

Some agree with the move. Pre-school teacher Samantha Ng said that "there should not be unsupervised reading of such books".

She understands why some parents might be worried about books that address mature themes.

"If kids come across a lot of these books, they might think that it is a norm or that there are a lot of families like that," she said.

One of the books, *And Tango Makes Three*, features two male penguins that behave like a couple and are given an egg to raise. It is recommended for children aged four to eight.

However, experts said that parents might be imposing their worries on their children.

"What we are doing is inputting adult views and perspectives on children", said family therapist Benny Bong.

Mr Bong, who clarified that he supports the censorship of material for children, said: "Children who are just looking at two penguins, might not distinguish whether they are male or female."

Similarly, child psychologist Brian Yeo said: "Children will not form a judgment. Judgment and opinions are formed through adult guidance."

While children may be exposed to books that aim to normalise alternative relationships, it is daily interaction with peers and family that influence a child's perspective, Dr Yeo said.

"The important thing is that parents are ready to talk about it should questions arise," he said.

Meanwhile, two online petitions have been launched, calling upon NLB to reinstate the books.

One was an open letter written to NLB by openly-gay writer Ng Yi-Sheng, along with Lim Jialiang and Liyan Chen.

It argued that withdrawing the books "is irresponsible and unfair to other library users and parents who may want to teach their children about acceptance, tolerance, and the heterogeneity of family structures".

The other is a petition on campaigning site Change.org, started by Bernadette Chow.

It attracted some 850 signatures, with many protesting against the censorship of books.

“Such an action violates the library’s purpose as a wealth of information and knowledge,” wrote a supporter, Samuel Hun.

Others argued that the move by NLB suggested that it was spelling out its stance on homosexuality.

“What NLB has done by removing these titles is to blatantly announce its bias,” wrote Seri Rahayu.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser said that the library’s actions are in line with societal values.

“Recent surveys have shown that the majority of Singaporeans disapprove of same-sex relations. So I reckon the complainant and the library’s action can be said to be reflecting the majority’s stand on the subject,” he explained.

Dr Yeo suggested that the library can address parents’ concerns without removing the books completely, by marking out books with “areas of controversy”.

Parents would then be aware of the nature of the books they were borrowing for their children.