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## The Effects of Lesbian and Gay Parenting on Children's Development

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## **THE EFFECTS OF LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTING ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT**

This paper explores the research regarding the effects of homosexual versus heterosexual parenting on children. Over the past two decades, researchers have begun examining the differences between the development of children with same-sex parents and children with heterosexual parents. These differences have been studied in terms of children's cognitive development, gender role behavior, gender identity, sexual orientation, social and emotional development and the quality of parent-child relationships. In addition to the direct effect that homosexual parents have on their children's development, some of these studies explore the indirect consequences of homosexual parents, such as the potential for children to face social stigmatization because of their parent's sexual orientation and differences between children's relationships with their parents and peers. This paper will address both the direct and indirect effects that homosexual parents have on their children's development.

### **BACKGROUND**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were approximately 250,000 children being raised by same-sex couples in 2000 (Robitaille and Saint-Jacques 2009). Other sources have speculated that the number of children being raised by same-sex couples ranges anywhere from two to fourteen million children (Crowl , Ahn, and Baker 2008). The discrepancy between numbers can be attributed to many factors; the US Census cannot require citizens to specify the nature of their living situation due to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which prohibits direct questions about citizens' sexual orientation. Researchers speculate that the U.S. Census identifies same-sex partner households in approximately 97% of all U.S. counties (Oswald and Kivalanka

2008). Although this has generated relatively representative numbers of households headed by homosexual couples, it allows for a large variety of informal child-rearing arrangements to remain undefined. Furthermore complicating reliable numbers, most children currently being raised by same-sex parents were born into heterosexual relationships where one or both parents declared their homosexuality after beginning a family (Robitaille and Saint-Jacques 2009). Yet we find that approximately 50% of homosexual couples have no legal ties to one another (Oswald and Kuvalanka 2008) which means that children from previous heterosexual marriages now being raised by same-sex couples may never be represented in these approximations. These facts make it difficult to approximate the number of children raised by same-sex parents, as self-report and snowball-sampling may not generate a truly random sample which is reflective of the diverse arrangements of same-sex couples and homosexual parents raising children.

In addition to the difficulties in identifying the number of homosexuals raising children, the number of variations in family composition further complicates identification. Although in 1992 approximately 5,000 -10,000 lesbians (a number assumed to be continuously increasing) had children through adoption or conception via donor insemination after declaring their homosexuality (Patterson 1992), the majority of children raised by same-sex couples were born into heterosexual relationships. This can result in joint custody between the parents, creating an environment where the child experiences the influences of both homosexual and heterosexual parents. If the homosexual parent has full custody of the child, the child may be raised by a single parent or by the parent and his or her new same-sex partner, which results in different environmental factors. These studies attempt to use matched controls in order to accommodate for the differences in family composition. However, this paper attempts to encompass the most common variations of family construction. The term 'same-sex couples' will refer to homosexual

couples who have been the primary parents in the child's life. The term 'homosexual parent' will generally refer to the child's primary parent or caregiver who may or may not have a current or long-term same-sex partner. I will refer to both using the terms 'lesbian' or 'gay' in order to include both homosexual and same-sex parents. The term 'stepfamily' is used loosely homosexual, heterosexual or both, as many long-term homosexual partners do not have legal recognition as a marriage or as a child's adoptive parent.

In this paper, I will demonstrate the effects that lesbian or gay parents have on their children's development through a series of studies comparing various aspects of the development of children with lesbian or gay parents and children with heterosexual parents. I will begin by considering the studies which explore the earlier aspects of child development, specifically studies of gender role behavior and gender identity. I will continue into middle childhood (generally children ages six through eight) and beginning adolescence with a focus on parent/child relationships, social and emotional development and the child's experience with stigmatization and bullying due to their parent's homosexuality. I will continue to adolescence through adulthood with qualitative studies regarding the perceived social stigma about their family. I will conclude by summarizing how these studies demonstrate the direct and indirect effects of gay or lesbian parents on their children's development and provide suggestions for future policies and research.

### *Early Childhood: Effects on Gender Role Behavior and Gender Identity*

Some of the earliest oppositions to same-sex parenting argued that gay and lesbian parents could directly affect their children's development of gender conceptions, potentially

causing the child to be unsure about his or her gender identity and the traditional roles and activities that members of their gender engaged in. The fear was that the children of gay and lesbian parents would be put at a lifelong disadvantage due to their gender confusion, and potentially disrupt society by operating outside of social norms and roles. Because of this, many of the earliest studies were conducted about the direct effect that homosexual parents had on the development of their children's gender role behavior and gender identity. As the results from the first studies refuted the initial argument that gay and lesbian parents directly affected their children's gender development, opponents maintained that children would still develop alternative attitudes about gender through the indirect effect of their gay or lesbian parent's homosexuality. To explore this claim, later studies conducted about the effects of lesbian or gay parents on children's gender development focused specifically on how the parent's sexual orientation affected how their children's attitudes about gender.

Many of the initial studies exploring the effects that gay and lesbian parents had on their children's gender role behavior and identity used novel methods of determining how well the children's conceptions of gender fit those of their heterosexually parented peers. Studies of younger children often placed participants in a room with many traditionally gendered toys and observed which toys were most played with over the course of the study. Others interviewed the parents about the toys that their children independently chose to play with as well as the activities that they independently engaged in (Crowl et al. 2008). Older children were asked to draw pictures of themselves or pictures of men and women engaged in an activity. Qualitative studies interviewed children and parents about favorite television shows, extracurricular activities and vocational aspirations (Golombok and Tasker 1994). Although some studies found minor differences, such as the daughters of lesbian mothers showing greater interest in

traditionally masculine activities and behaviors and the sons of lesbian mothers expressing wider ranges of behaviors, less aggression and less play activities, the results consistently demonstrated that children of heterosexual and gay or lesbian parents did not significantly differ overall in terms of gender role behavior or gender identity development (Crowl et al. 2008; Patterson 1992). The culmination of these studies concluded that gay and lesbian parents do not directly affect their children's gender development.

Despite overwhelming evidence that gay and lesbian parents did not directly affect their children's gender development, sociologists still argued that there must be some underlying cause for the minor variations in perceptions of gender between the children of homosexual parents and the children of heterosexual parents. If the parents' sexual orientation had no direct effect on the child's gender development, why were there minor variations between findings? In a recent study, researchers explored the influence of the primary parent's sexual orientation on their children's physical environments and whether that influence might in turn alter their children's own attitudes about gender. The children's physical environment was assessed by how masculine or feminine their room was, and their attitudes were assessed through interviews exploring the children's acceptance of 'gender transgressions' (actions which contradict traditional gender roles, such as a girl playing football). The researchers found that children of heterosexual parents held more traditional attitudes about gender and gender transgressions and that boys reported these traditional attitudes more than girls. The study also found that regardless of sexual orientation, parents who had liberal attitudes about gender were less likely to decorate their children's rooms according to gender stereotypes and were more likely to have children with similar attitudes about gender (Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, and Patterson 2007). The results indicate that, regardless of sexual orientation, the parents who hold more liberal attitudes about

gender and provide environments for their children with fewer gender stereotypes have children who also hold correspondingly liberal attitudes about gender.

This study represented a major turning point in our understanding of children's gender role behavior and gender identity development. Although previous studies had consistently demonstrated that there were no significant differences between the gender identities of children raised by heterosexual parents and children raised by gay or lesbian parents, it was clear that there were subtle differences emerging (Crowl et al. 2008). Sutfin et al.'s (2007) study demonstrated that, in fact, there was a great deal more going on than differences of parental sexual orientation. This has incredible significance for our understanding of children's gender identity development because it demonstrates that the attitudes that parents hold about gender are the most influential factors in their children's gender development. The minor differences between gender perceptions of children of gay or lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents can be attributed to the parent's more liberal attitudes rather than as a direct result of their sexual orientation. This is monumentally important in our understanding of the effects of lesbian and gay parents on children's overall development.

*Middle Childhood and Early Adolescence: Parent-Child Relationships and Psychosocial Adjustment*

Once researchers confronted conceptions about the potentially detrimental influence that gay or lesbian parents might have on their children's gender identity development, questions were raised about other influences lesbian or gay parents might have on other areas of their children's development. Researchers questioned what effect a parent's sexual orientation had on

their relationship with their child and how it might affect both their child's social and emotional development, often referred to as 'psychological adjustment' (Crowl et al. 2008). Studies addressing parent-child relationships and psychosocial adjustment are considered to explore the indirect effects of parental sexual orientation. We assume that parents sexual orientation does not directly affect children's relationship with their parents or peers or their psychosocial development, but rather that it may vary in a certain way as an indirect result of parents heterosexuality or homosexuality.

Chan, Raboy and Patterson (1998) examined the psychosocial adjustment of children conceived via donor insemination by lesbian and heterosexual mothers. The circumstances of this study allowed for a more reliable assessment of psychosocial adjustment because the adjustment of the children was a reflection of the difference in parenting styles as opposed to the potential influence of upheavals in family structure which may have accompanied the introduction of a homosexual parent/family. The results demonstrated that the parent's self-reported relationship satisfaction was significantly correlated with the child's well-being (Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998). Studies of the peer relationships of children of lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents found that children who reported more positive relationships with their parents also had greater network centrality within the social relationship networks of the school, regardless of their parents' sexual orientation (Wainright and Patterson 2009). These results have enormous significance as they demonstrate that it is the quality of the parenting and the corresponding positive parent-child relationships as well as happiness within the parent's relationship that best determines a child's psychosocial development and well-being.

Other studies, however, suggest that there is another layer to children's psychosocial adjustment. Many researchers have suggested that while the parent's sexual orientation may not

directly affect the child, the social stigmatization that the child perceives regarding his parent's sexual orientation may have a negative effect on his or her development and psychosocial adjustment, regardless of their relationship with their parents. Initial qualitative studies suggested that this may indeed be the case. In a 1999 study of 76 children of lesbian mothers aged 11-18 years, Gershon, Tschann, and Jemerin (1999) found that adolescents who perceived greater stigma about their mother's sexual orientation had lower levels of self-esteem. A study conducted by Hare (1994) found that 80% of the lesbian mothers interviewed considered social homophobia and the stigma of being a lesbian couple raising a child kept them from being recognized as a family. Social stigmatization of the children of lesbian and gay parents has been considered a real and prominent concern for parents and researchers alike since the early 1990s and has even been used to demonstrate how a homosexual parent might be unfit to raise a child in custody battles between formerly heterosexual couples (Clarke et al. 2004). Researchers have been quick to explore the claim that social stigmatization due to the parent's sexual orientation might result in an unfit environment in which to raise a child. However, the studies often involved participants who were in the midst of adolescence and were unable to objectively reflect on how their personal experiences might compare to the experiences of children of heterosexual parents around them. The studies that Clarke et al. (2004) reference demonstrate that kids get bullied about everything and anything, and the sexual orientation of their parents provides an alternative opportunity for attack. A more recent study conducted in 2001 found that 50% of children aged 5-18 who were raised by lesbian or gay parents reported verbal or physical bullying, often regarding their parent's sexual orientation. However, in the matched control sample of children raised by heterosexual parents, there were no fewer reports of bullying (Robitaille and Saint-Jacques 2009). A potential explanation for this discrepancy was suggested

by Fiona Tasker (2005) who hypothesized that this may be because children of gay or lesbian parents are more likely to remember and pay attention to the bullying because it is a reminder of their membership to a minority family.

Studies of social stigmatization of children raised by lesbian or gay parents continued to run up against the limitations of qualitative analyses of self-reports of bullying and stigmatization by adolescents. Researchers eventually proposed alternative methods of study which might be more successful in objectively exploring the indirect effects of the unique experiences of children raised by gay and lesbian parents. Sociologists began exploring the use of retrospective studies of children's experiences of social stigmatization, reported through qualitative studies of the adult children. The hope was that interviews conducted in retrospect might provide a more objective perception of the effects of lesbian or gay parents on children's social development.

#### *Late Adolescence through Adulthood: Retrospective Analyses*

In a longitudinal study of twenty-five young adults from lesbian families and twenty-one matched controls of young adults from single mother families, Tasker and Golombok (1995, 2005) studied how these young adults perceived their mother's sexual identity, lifestyle and stepfamily relationships. They found that young adults brought up in lesbian families were more likely to be proud of their mother's sexual identity as a lesbian than were children brought up in heterosexual single mother families. Many of the young adults raised by lesbian mothers stated that they had seen the stigmatization of their homosexual parents as demonstration of political inequality and sought to inform public opinion on gay rights through their own experiences and

history. The matched controls in this study, young adults brought up by heterosexual single mothers, felt that their mother's sexual identity and lifestyle as her own personal choice and any details regarding either were a private family matter (Tasker and Golombok 1995). These results contradict suggestions that young adults may attempt to conceal the sexual orientation of their parents and thus isolate themselves from their peers. It appears that, instead, young adults may use their mother's alternative sexual orientation as a way of political self-expression.

In the follow-up study of these same young adults ten years later, Tasker and Golombok (2005) found even more significant data. They found that young adults raised by lesbian mothers were more positive about their non-conventional family identity than were the young adults raised by single mothers. Young adults reflecting on their adolescence as children being raised by lesbian and single mothers suggested that the negative responses of others to their family identity lead to negative attitudes about themselves and their membership to a marginal family identity. Young adults with lesbian mothers who felt that their mothers had been too open about her sexual identity with their peers were less accepting of their family identity and mother's sexual orientation. However, when mothers were more discrete about their sexual orientation with the children's peer group, the young adults reported being more comfortable with their non-conventional family identity and more likely to disclose information about their family to their peers. Similarly, those who reported close relationships with their mother reported being more comfortable with their non-conventional family identity during adolescence and beyond (Tasker and Golombok 2005). These results continue to find support with the theory proposed by Wainright and Patterson (2005) which suggests that the relationship between child and parent is the most influential factor in the child's perception of his or her non-conventional family identity and his or her parent's sexual orientation.

In their qualitative study in 2009, Robitaille and Saint-Jacques found that young adults who had been raised by lesbian parents suggested that while they may not have been comfortable immediately after their parent's disclosure of their homosexuality, as they became older they became more capable of dealing with other people's potentially negative opinions of homosexuality. These young adults suggested that they may have employed various strategies to keep their non-conventional family a secret during their early adolescence before developing alternative strategies of disclosure with time (Robitaille and Saint-Jacques 2009). The suggestions proposed by these young adults succinctly describe how the social stigmatization of non-conventional family identity might indirectly affect the development of adolescent children raised by lesbian or gay parents. The development of strategies used to confront this social stigmatization and the later subjective analysis of how those strategies were implemented has overwhelming implications for the opponents of gay and lesbian parents.

### *Conclusions*

This paper discusses the relevant studies which explore the direct and indirect effects that lesbian and gay parents may have on their children's development. Initial arguments against gay and lesbian parents have suggested that gay and lesbian parents have a direct negative effect on various aspects of children's development, such as the development of their gender identity. Other arguments have suggested that gay and lesbian parents may indirectly negatively affect their children's development, such as the child's psychosocial adjustment, development of peer and parent relationships as well as the potential for social stigmatization resulting. Research regarding each of these issues has been conducted and while it has validated certain aspects of

these concerns, such as the potential for indirect negative effects of parental homosexuality on children's development, the claims of the direct negative effects that homosexual parents have on their children's development have largely been refuted.

This research has implications for larger policies regarding lesbian and gay parents within the justice system where parents have been denied custody on the grounds of unfit parenting and subjection to social stigma as well as within the school system where children of lesbian and gay parents might face the greatest social stigmatization. These studies demonstrate that homosexual parents do not directly affect their children's development and the negative effects that gay and lesbian parents have on their children's development stem from perceived differences leading to potential social stigmatization or stemming from factors independent of the parent's sexual orientation. If society was informed the sexual orientation of parents does not directly affect their children's development, it is conceivable that we might eradicate the negative indirect effects of gay and lesbian parents on their children's development, such as social stigmatization and custody denials.

There is still a great deal of research to be conducted exploring the ever-changing social perceptions of gay and lesbian parents. While it is clear that lesbian and gay parents do not have an effect on their children's overall development, it is important to explore the indirect effects of being a member of a non-conventional family in the light of the ever-changing social perceptions of these non-conventional families. However; the body of research exploring the effects of lesbian and gay parents on their children's development strongly indicates that, while there is clearly a need for more research, children are not at any developmental risk directly resulting from their membership to a non-conventional family.

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