



background

Report # 127

Children of Same-Sex Couples

November 2011

Developmentally, the children do fine Studies say children of same-sex families fare as well as others

The legality of same-sex couples to marry and other rights related to gay and lesbian couples linger as matters of contentious public and political debate. But in terms of the outcomes of their children, available studies are remarkably consistent in their findings that the sexual orientation of their parents does not harm their development.

And the majority of studies done over more than three decades further report finding no significant differences in gender development, personal development and social relationships when children of same-sex couples are compared with children raised in heterosexual households.

“Just like the research, what we’ve seen in terms of development, children being cared for and children being happy suggests there isn’t any difference,” said Betty Hill, executive director of Persad Center, Inc., a Pittsburgh counseling center that provides services to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) community. “I can’t think of a case where a family has come in because their child is not adjusting to having gay parents or is having developmental issues.”

There isn’t complete agreement among researchers who study same-sex families. Some report that certain differences do exist between children of same-sex parents and children of heterosexual parents, although the differences are not necessarily harmful to their development.

But organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association

and the Child Welfare League of America have all concluded from the evidence that children raised by same-sex parents fare as well as children whose parents are heterosexual.

The research suggests children’s development is influenced more by the nature of the relationships and interactions within the family than by the sexual orientation of their parents.

Relationships

Studies report that, in general, children of same-sex parents have normal relationships with their peers in their neighborhoods and at school, with family members and with adults outside the family. For example, studies that have examined relationships between children of same-sex parents and members of their families report that those relationships do not differ significantly from relationships found among children with heterosexual parents and their family members.

Some studies have found that a

Children of same-sex couples have been studied for more than three decades. And the research suggests that their development is influenced more by the nature of the relationships and interactions within the family than by the sexual orientation of their parents.

minority of children with lesbian mothers report having been teased or having heard negative comments from peers. But such anecdotal evidence does not appear to be a widely experienced problem to the extent that it affected the overall adjustment and peer relationships of those children.

Personal Development

A range of characteristics of children with same-sex parents have been studied, including separation-individuation, behavior problems and competencies, self-concept, moral judgment, adjustment to school, intelligence, and drug and alcohol use. The studies report no significant differences in such personal development characteristics between children in same-sex families and those raised by heterosexual parents.

In general, research suggests the sexual orientation of parents doesn’t influence children’s adjustment.

(Continued on back)

Among adolescents, for example, studies generally report no major differences between those raised by lesbian couples and those raised by heterosexual parents on measures of anxiety, depression, self-esteem, delinquency, victimization, or tobacco, alcohol and marijuana use.

Gender Development

Whether gender development is compromised among children raised by same-sex parents is a question that, at times, surfaces in the debate over gay and lesbian rights regarding families, marriage and civil unions.

Organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association that have reviewed the scientific evidence conclude that neither homosexuality nor non-normative gender behavior represent a disease or disorder.

Research has largely failed to find a link between the sexual orientation of parents and major differences in the development of gender identity or gender role behavior. For example, a study of children of divorced lesbian mothers and children of divorced heterosexual mothers found no major differences in favorite toys, television programs, TV characters and games.

Another study that examined data obtained in the Preschool Activities Inventory found no significant differences in the gender role behavior of young children adopted by lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples.

And in terms of sexual orientation, research suggests that the majority of children of same-sex parents grow up to identify themselves as heterosexual.

Some Differences Noted

In 2001, University of Southern California researchers examined 21 studies related to children raised in

same-sex families and noted methodological shortcomings in some, as well as some differences between children with same-sex parents and children of heterosexual parents.

Among the methodological shortcomings was a tendency to draw data from families of comparatively well-educated, white lesbian couples who lived in progressive urban areas.

The differences researchers found among children raised in same-sex families and children of heterosexual families were not necessarily deficits. For example, researchers noted data that suggest older children raised by same-sex parents are more open to the idea of same-sex relationships than children of heterosexual parents.

Another area of difference was in stereotypical male-female behavior. A review of the research, for example, found that 53% of the daughters of lesbian mothers aspired to be physicians, attorneys and engineers compared with 21% of the daughters of heterosexual mothers. And the sons of lesbian mothers tended to be less aggressive and more nurturing than the sons of heterosexual mothers.

Psychological Adjustment

In 2010, the journal *Pediatrics* published a study that followed 78 children of lesbian mothers from birth to adolescence. The study concluded that adolescents who were raised in the lesbian mother families since birth showed healthy psychological adjust-

ment. The data included interviews with children and mothers' responses on the Achenbach Child Behavior Checklist, a widely-used method of identifying behavior issues in children. Those responses were compared with an Achenbach normative sample of 17-year-old U.S. adolescents.

The children of lesbian mothers were found to have lower levels of social problems, rule-breaking, and aggressive and externalizing problems than the normative adolescent sample. Among the possible explanations, researchers said, was the widespread use among lesbian mothers of practices such as verbal limit-setting and less use of corporal punishment and power assertion practices. Children of the lesbian mothers also showed higher levels of social, academic and total competence than the normative samples of U.S. adolescents, which researchers suggested was related to the high proportion of lesbian mothers who were fully engaged in parenting.

Such findings suggest the desires of same-sex parents are not unlike those of heterosexual parents. "When children come along, I think many people's family lives are pretty much like everybody else's," said Hill. "At some point, your life sort of centers around what your children are involved in. You are going to the softball games and sitting on the same bleachers with everyone else."



references

- Patterson, C.J. (2009). Children of lesbian and gay parents: Psychology, law, and policy. *American Psychologist*, 727-736.
- Gartrell, N., & Bos, H. (2010). U.S. longitudinal lesbian family study: Psychological adjustment of 17-year-old adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 126 (1),
- Stacey, J., & Biblartz, T.J. (2001). (How) does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review*, 66 (2), 159-183.

Children, Youth & Families background is published by the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development (OCD), a program of the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. These reports are based on available research and are provided as overviews of topics related to children and families.

OCD Co-Directors: Christina J. Groark, Ph.D.; Robert B. McCall, Ph.D.

background writer/editor: Jeffery Fraser; e-mail: jd.fraser@comcast.net

University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development 400 N. Lexington Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15208; (412) 244-5447; fax: (412) 244-5440

This report and others can be found on the Internet by visiting: <http://www.education.pitt.edu/ocd/family/backgrounders.aspx>