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The Children of Same-Sex Parents – Are They Well-adjusted?

February 26, 2018

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Article Tags: same sex parents



For the past four decades, researchers have been studying children raised by lesbian and gay parents. These studies began at a time when stigmatization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people was routine, and it was assumed that children would do well in emotional and cognitive development only if they were raised in households containing a mother and father.

Since the late 1970s, scientists in many countries have compared children in same-sex parent households with children in different-sex parent households to determine whether the well-being of the children is influenced by their parents' sexual orientation. The first such studies involved children who were born in the context of heterosexual relationships and later raised in lesbian families after their mothers came out.

In the mid-1980s, researchers began to study planned lesbian families in which the mothers identified as lesbian before children entered the family unit. As gay men became parents in increasing numbers at the end of the 20th century, their families were studied as well. This research has consistently shown that the psychological development of children raised by lesbian or gay parents is similar to that of those with heterosexual parents, and that the quality of parenting has a greater impact on children's well-being than does the sexual orientation of the parents.

We are the lead investigators of two ongoing longitudinal studies of lesbian-parent families: the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) and the Dutch Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (DLLFS). The NLLFS has been following lesbian mothers and the children they conceived through donor insemination since the time that the mothers were pregnant (in 1986). The DLLFS began when the children were on average 5.8 years old.

In most assessments of well-being, the NLLFS and DLLFS children were similar to children raised in heterosexual-parent families. However, on a standardized test of psychological adjustment, when the 17-year-old NLLFS adolescents were compared with same-age peers, those with lesbian parents scored higher in academic achievement, social activities, and overall competence, and lower in social problems, rule-breaking behavior, and aggressive behavior. The DLLFS adolescents had higher self-esteem than their peers who were raised in mother-father families.

Why did the adolescents with lesbian mothers fare so well? In following these families over many decades, we know that the children were highly desired, and their lesbian mothers were very involved in parenting. These mothers took parenting classes, formed parenting support groups, and participated in preschool and elementary school curriculum development (especially in educating about LGBT families and developing anti-bullying programs). This kind of involvement clearly paid off, since 93% of the 17-year-old NLLFS adolescents described their mothers as good role models.

In 2016, we undertook a different kind of investigation—a population-based study. Unlike the NLLFS and DLLFS, in which we have met the participants and visited their homes, the 2016 study used data gathered by the U.S. government in the very large National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH). The NSCH contained questions that allowed us to compare same-sex and different-sex parent households. It had the added benefit of being described to participants as simply a survey on children's health, unlike the NLLFS and the DLLFS, in which all participants knew that the focus was lesbian-parent families.

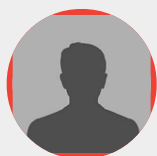
In our NSCH study*, we matched (paired up) female same-sex parent families with different-sex parent families on eight characteristics (the parent's age, education, U.S. birth status, urban/rural residence, and the child's age, gender, race/ethnicity, and U.S. birth status). We then compared the two types of families on family relationships, parenting stress, and children's general health, emotional difficulties, coping behavior, and learning behavior. We found no differences between the same-sex parent families and the different-sex parent families on spouse/partner relationships, parent-child relationships, or any child outcomes. Same-sex parents reported more parenting stress, even though their children were doing just as well as children with different-sex parents.

We know from the NLLFS and DLLFS that lesbian mothers have concerns about raising their children in a homophobic society and feel more pressured to justify the quality of their parenting than do heterosexual parents. We also know that lesbian mothers use support groups and

counseling services to foster healthy child development. It is possible that utilizing such supports made it possible for the same-sex mothers in the NSCH study to cope with parenting stress without compromising their children's well-being.

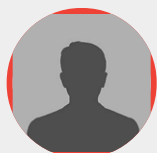
The answer to the question, "Are the children of same-sex parents well-adjusted?" is a resounding "Yes." Four decades of research on psychological adjustment, including our own longitudinal and population-based studies, demonstrate that the children of same-sex parents fare as well as, or sometimes even better than, their peers raised by heterosexual parents.

*See: Bos et al. Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 2016.



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