



Sexual Orientation, Parents, and Children

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Lesbian and Gay Parents

Many lesbians and gay men are parents. In the 2000 U.S. Census, 33% of female same-sex couple households and 22% of male same-sex couple households reported at least one child under the age of 18 living in the home. Despite the significant presence of households headed by lesbian or gay parents in U.S. society, three major concerns about lesbian and gay parents are commonly voiced (Falk, 1989; Patterson, Fulcher, & Wainright, 2002). These include concerns that lesbians and gay men are mentally ill, that lesbians are less maternal than heterosexual women, and that lesbians' and gay men's relationships with their sexual partners leave little time for their relationships with their children. In general, research has failed to provide a basis for any of these concerns (Patterson, 2000, 2004b; Perrin and the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 2002; Tasker, 1999; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). First, homosexuality is not a psychological disorder (Conger, 1975). Although exposure to prejudice and discrimination based on sexual orientation may cause acute distress (Mays & Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003), there is no reliable evidence that homosexual orientation per se impairs psychological functioning. Second, beliefs that lesbian and gay adults are not fit parents have no empirical foundation (Patterson, 2000, 2004b; Perrin et al., 2002). Lesbian and heterosexual women have not been found to differ markedly in their approaches to child rearing (Patterson, 2000; Tasker, 1999). Members of gay and lesbian couples with children have been found to divide the work involved in child care evenly and to be satisfied with their relationships with their partners (Patterson, 2000, 2004b). The results of some studies suggest that lesbian mothers'

and gay fathers' parenting skills may be superior to those of matched heterosexual parents. There is no scientific basis for concluding that lesbian mothers or gay fathers are unfit parents on the basis of their sexual orientation (Armesto, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). On the contrary, results of research suggest that lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children.

Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents

As the social visibility and legal status of lesbian and gay parents have increased, three major concerns about the influence of lesbian and gay parents on children have been often voiced (Falk, 1989; Patterson et al., 2002). One is that the children of lesbian and gay parents will experience more difficulties in the area of sexual identity than children of heterosexual parents. For instance, one such concern is that children brought up by lesbian mothers or gay fathers will show disturbances in gender identity and/or in gender role behavior. A second category of concerns involves aspects of children's personal development other than sexual identity. For example, some observers have expressed fears that children in the custody of gay or lesbian parents would be more vulnerable to mental breakdown, would exhibit more adjustment difficulties and behavior problems, or would be less psychologically healthy than other children. A third category of concerns is that children of lesbian and gay parents will experience difficulty in social relationships. For example, some observers have expressed concern that children living with lesbian mothers or gay fathers will be stigmatized, teased, or otherwise victimized by peers. Another common fear is that children living with gay or lesbian parents will be more likely to be sexually abused by the parent or by the parent's friends or acquaintances.

Adopted by
the American
Psychological
Association Council
of Representatives

on July 28 and 30, 2004.

For more information, please see www.apa.org/pi/lgbt.

PLEASE CITE AS:

Paige, R. U. (2005). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the legislative year 2004: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist*, 60, 436–511. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.436



Results of social science research have failed to confirm any of these concerns about children of lesbian and gay parents (Patterson, 2000, 2004b; Perrin et al., 2002; Tasker, 1999). Research suggests that sexual identities (including gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation) develop in much the same ways among children of lesbian mothers as they do among children of heterosexual parents (Patterson, 2004b). Studies of other aspects of personal development (including personality, self-concept, and conduct) similarly reveal few differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents (Perrin et al., 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999). However, few data regarding these concerns are available for children of gay fathers (Patterson, 2004a). Evidence also suggests that children of lesbian and gay parents have normal social relationships with peers and adults (Patterson, 2000, 2004a; Perrin et al., 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). The picture that emerges from research is one of general engagement in social life with peers, parents, family members, and friends. Fears about children of lesbian or gay parents being sexually abused by adults, ostracized by peers, or isolated in single-sex lesbian or gay communities have received no scientific support. Overall, results of research suggest that the development, adjustment, and well-being of children with lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from that of children with heterosexual parents.

RESOLUTION

WHEREAS the American Psychological Association (APA) supports policy and legislation that promote safe, secure, and nurturing environments for all children (DeLeon, 1993, 1995; Fox, 1991; Levant, 2000); and

WHEREAS APA has a long-established policy to deplore “all public and private discrimination against gay men and lesbians” and urges “the repeal of all discriminatory legislation against lesbians and gay men” (Conger, 1975); and

WHEREAS the APA adopted the Resolution on Child Custody and Placement in 1976 (Conger, 1977, p. 432); and

WHEREAS discrimination against lesbian and gay parents deprives their children of benefits, rights, and privileges enjoyed by children of heterosexual married couples; and

WHEREAS some jurisdictions prohibit gay and lesbian individuals and same-sex couples from adopting children,

notwithstanding the great need for adoptive parents (*Lofton v. Secretary of Department of Children and Family Services*, 2004); and

WHEREAS there is no scientific evidence that parenting effectiveness is related to parental sexual orientation: Lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children (Patterson, 2000, 2004b; Perrin et al., 2002; Tasker, 1999); and

WHEREAS research has shown that the adjustment, development, and psychological well-being of children are unrelated to parental sexual orientation and that the children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish (Patterson, 2004b; Perrin et al., 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001);

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the APA opposes any discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA believes that children reared by a same-sex couple benefit from legal ties to each parent;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA supports the protection of parent–child relationships through the legalization of joint adoptions and second-parent adoptions of children being reared by same-sex couples;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA shall take a leadership role in opposing all discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA encourages psychologists to act to eliminate all discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services in their practice, research, education and training (APA, 2002, p. 1063);

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the APA shall provide scientific and educational resources that inform public discussion and public policy development regarding discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services and that assist its members, divisions, and affiliated state, provincial, and territorial psychological associations.

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist, 57*, 1060–1073. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.57.12.1060
- Armesto, J. C. (2002). Developmental and contextual factors that influence gay fathers' parental competence: A review of the literature. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity, 3*, 67–78. doi:10.1037/1524-9220.3.2.67
- Conger, J. J. (1975). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1974: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 30*, 620–651. doi:10.1037/h0078455
- Conger, J. J. (1977). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1976: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 32*, 408–438. doi:10.1037/h0078511
- DeLeon, P. H. (1993). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1992: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 48*, 745–782. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.48.7.745
- DeLeon, P. H. (1994). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1993: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 49*, 586–635. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.49.7.586
- Falk, P. J. (1989). Lesbian mothers: Psychosocial assumptions in family law. *American Psychologist, 44*, 941–947. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.44.6.941
- Fox, R. E. (1991). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the year 1990: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 46*, 689–726. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.46.7.689
- Levant, R. F. (2000). Proceedings of the American Psychological Association, Incorporated, for the legislative year 1999: Minutes of the annual meeting of the Council of Representatives. *American Psychologist, 55*, 832–890. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.8.832
- Lofton v. Secretary of Department of Children & Family Services, 358 F.3d 804 (11th Cir. 2004).
- Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (2001). Mental health correlates of perceived discrimination among lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 91*, 1869–1876. doi:10.2105/AJPH.91.11.1869
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 674–697. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674
- Patterson, C. J. (2000). Family relationships of lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*, 1052–1069.
- Patterson, C. J. (2004a). Gay fathers. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (4th ed., pp. 397–416). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Patterson, C. J. (2004b). Lesbian and gay parents and their children: Summary of research findings. In *Lesbian and gay parenting: A resource for psychologists*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Patterson, C. J., Fulcher, M., & Wainright, J. (2002). Children of lesbian and gay parents: Research, law, and policy. In B. L. Bottoms, M. B. Kovera, & B. D. McAuliff (Eds.), *Children, social science and the law* (pp. 176–199). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Perrin, E. C., & the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. (2002). Technical report: Coparent or second-parent adoption by same-sex parents. *Pediatrics, 109*, 341–344. doi:10.1542/peds.109.2.341
- Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T. J. (2001). (How) Does sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review, 65*, 159–183.
- Tasker, F. (1999). Children in lesbian-led families—A review. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 4*, 153–166. doi:10.1177/1359104599004002003
- Tasker, F., & Golombok, S. (1997). *Growing up in a lesbian family*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.