

APA Workshop 2:

Lesbian and Gay Parents

The National Gay and Lesbian Family Study

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Introduction

-Research on gay and lesbian parents and their children goes back for thirty years.

-The question “Are the children normal?”, which was the focus of much of the early research, has been answered in the affirmative. Some more recent work, as I have discussed, has begun to focus on family dynamics within the gay or lesbian-headed home. However, there is still a lack of information about life inside the gay and lesbian family.

-Even today, little is known about the demographics of these families. For example, are most gay and lesbian families, as has been long assumed, what we call G/L stepfamilies, or those that began within the context of a heterosexual relationship? Is the “gay baby boom”, where gay men and lesbians are creating families after coming out, changing that? Do most of these families live in urban areas where there are other families like them?

-It was our goal to collect data from a national sample of gay and lesbian parents.

-We were also interested in exploring how gay and lesbian parents view their own family functioning and dynamics and how they view their family’s experience within their community. For example, how open about their family makeup are gay and lesbian parents? How did they choose to create their families? What has the response been from their own families, friends, and the greater community?

-Finally, we wanted to look at daily life within the gay or lesbian-headed family. Variables we wished to investigate included parents’ expectations about the effect their sexual orientation would have on their children; the quality of the adult relationship within the family; their perceptions of their partners’ parenting abilities; and their parenting practices.

METHOD

-Participation in the study was limited to those people who identified themselves as gay or lesbian, and who had at least one child under the age of 18 living with them.

-Participants were recruited from:

- a. State and local gay and lesbian parenting groups
- b. advertisements in local and national gay and lesbian publications
- c. postings on gay and lesbian parenting internet sites

-questionnaires were mailed out to interested participants. In two parent families, both parents were invited to participate. Responses were anonymous.

MEASURES

1) **Demographic Questionnaire**

2) **Gay Parenting Assessment** (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001)

Sample questions:

-Do you have any special concerns about raising your children in a gay or lesbian home?

-Do you see any special advantages with raising your children in a gay or lesbian home?

-Have you been open about being a gay/lesbian parent with your child's teacher or other caregiver?

-Did you anticipate any negative reactions to your becoming parents from your family? Did your experience any negative reactions from your family regarding your plan to become a parent?

3) **Dyadic Adjustment Scale** (Spanier, 1976)

Sample questions:

-Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together? (5-point scale, All of them to None of them)

-How often do you and your partner quarrel? (6-point scale, All the time to Never)

4) **Parenting Alliance** (Abindin & Brunner, 1995)

Sample questions:

-When there is a problem with our child, we work out a good solution together. (5-point scale, Strongly disagree-Strongly agree)

-I believe my child's other parent is a good parent. (5-point scale, Strongly disagree-Strongly agree)

5) **Who Does What Scale** (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992)

Sample question:

-How do you and your partner share the household responsibilities (e.g., cleaning, cooking, laundry, shopping, etc.)? (7-point scale, I do it all- My partner does it all)

6) **Parenting Practices Survey** (Holden & Zambarano, 1992)

Sample questions:

-How often in an average week do you use each of the following discipline techniques with your child when he/she has misbehaved (7-point scale, Never- Nine or more times a week): Reasoning; Negotiating; Spanking.

PARTICIPANTS

415 participants, from 256 families

Women:

- 134 two-parent families, both parents participating
- 38 two-parent families, one parent participating
- 30 single parent families

Mean age 38 years

Education:

- 48% had graduate degrees
- 30% had college degrees
- 18% had some college

Men:

- 25 two-parent families, both parents participating
- 12 two-parent families, one parent participating
- 17 single parent families

Mean age 41 years

Education:

- 49% had graduate degrees
- 37% had college degrees
- 12% had some college

Participants came from:

Alabama

Arkansas

Arizona

California

Colorado

Connecticut

District of Columbia

Florida

Georgia

Hawaii

Illinois

Indiana

Iowa

Kansas

Louisiana

Massachusetts

Maryland

Minnesota

Missouri

New Hampshire

New Jersey

New Mexico

New York

North Carolina

Ohio

Oregon

Pennsylvania

South Carolina

Tennessee

Texas

Vermont

Virginia

Washington

Wisconsin

Wyoming

Demographics:

- 38% of the total sample live in urban areas
- 48% live in suburban areas
- 14% live in rural areas

- 94% of the sample is White
- 6% identify as Hispanic, Asian, African-American, or Native American

- 28% identify as Protestant
 - 13% Catholic
 - 10% Jewish
 - 20% some other religion (most commonly Unitarian)
 - 30% report no religious affiliation
- Background of Families

Mothers:

- 115 (57%) Primary Lesbian families
(children born or adopted into the lesbian relationship)
- 59 (29%) Lesbian Stepfamilies
(children born or adopted into a heterosexual relationship)
- 16 (8%) Blended Lesbian families
(children from a heterosexual relationship and from the lesbian relationship)
- 12 (6%) Single-parent Lesbian families
(children born to or adopted by a single lesbian)

Fathers:

- 30 (56%) Primary Gay families
(children born or adopted into the gay relationship)
- 18 (33%) Gay Stepfamilies
(children born or adopted into a heterosexual relationship)
- 6 (11%) Single-parent Gay families
(children adopted by a single gay man)

Primary Gay and Lesbian Families

- 88% of lesbian couples used donor insemination to give birth to their own biological child
- 85% of gay couples adopted a child

Family Demographics by Type of Family

	Average Length Of Adult Relationship	Average Age of Oldest Child
Women		
Primary Lesbian	9.7 years	4.8 years
Lesbian Stepfamily	3.4 years	11.5 years
Blended Lesbian	7.8 years	14.1 years
Men		
Primary Gay	13 years	5.9 years
Gay Stepfamily	4.2 years	15.6 years

-We were interested in exploring the experiences of gay and lesbian parents, beginning with their decision to become parents. For those who had become parents after coming out, we wanted to know what types of responses they had received from others about their intention to start a family.

Primary gay and lesbian families: Negative reactions from others on their decision to become parents

	Women	Men
Anticipated From own family	54% (101)	34% (15)
Experienced From own family	44% (81)	27% (12)
Anticipated From employer	27% (49)	7% (3)
Experienced From employer	9% (17)	5% (2)

from Gay Parenting Assessment (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001)

-Lesbians anticipated more disapproval from their own families about their decision to become parents than gay men did. They also experienced more disapproval from their families than gay men did.

-Lesbians were also more likely to expect and experience a negative reaction from their employer.

-We believe that these difference are due, at least in part, to the different ways that gay men and lesbians become parents. Most of the gay men adopted a child, while most of the lesbian mothers gave birth to their children. It may be that family members look more kindly upon adopting a child than they do conceiving a child in order to bring it into a homosexual home. Employment problems are also more likely to arise if an employee becomes pregnant.

-It is also worth noting that both lesbians and gay men anticipated more disapproval than they actually received.

-Once the child arrives, how open with others are gay and lesbian parents about their families? Does this differ for gay and lesbian stepfamilies?

-We hypothesized that the degree of openness would differ for the different types of families. We anticipated that primary gay and lesbian families would tend to be more open about their families than would gay and lesbian stepfamilies.

How open are gay and lesbian parents about their families?

Percent who are open
with child's doctor

Primary Lesbian	96%
Lesbian Stepfamily	44%
Primary Gay	100%
Gay Stepfamily	60%

from Gay Parenting Assessment (Johnson & O'Connor, 2001)

Percent who are open
with child's teacher

Primary Lesbian	80%
Lesbian Stepfamily	61%
Primary Gay	93%
Gay Stepfamily	60%

Percent who are open
with child's friends' parents

Primary Lesbian	67%
Lesbian Stepfamily	47%
Primary Gay	90%
Gay Stepfamily	33%

-The pattern that emerged, in terms of openness, is that parents who had had their children within the gay or lesbian relationship were more open about their families than were those who had their children while in a heterosexual relationship.

-Two points should be noted:

-One is that the children in the gay and lesbian stepfamilies were, on average, six to nine years older than the children in the primary gay or lesbian families. Parents of older children may feel it is not as necessary to inform everyone in their children's lives about their family; also, older children may prefer to decide whom they want to have that information.

-The second point is that the lesbian or gay relationship in the stepfamilies was relatively new. Since the child's mother and father are divorced, fewer questions may have been raised about the current family makeup. The situation of a divorced woman living with another woman probably raises fewer questions than would two women are both called "Mommy."

Concerns about raising a child in a gay or lesbian family

-It is certainly not lost on gay and lesbian parents that their families are unusual, and that this fact may have an impact upon their children. We asked in the Gay Parenting Assessment about whether the parents did have any concerns specifically related to raising a child in a gay or lesbian-headed family.

-Most parents admitted to having particular concerns about raising a child in a gay or lesbian-headed family.

-81% of lesbian mothers had concerns

-73% of gay fathers had concerns

-The most commonly cited worry was that the children would be teased by other children because of their family (cited by 82% of mothers and 85% of fathers who had concerns)

-Relatively few gay or lesbian parents worried about the lack of a role model of one gender in the household (17% of mothers, 8% of fathers). This is interesting, in that the problem of a lack of a role model of one gender is often mentioned as a drawback for gay and lesbian families. Our results suggest that few of these families feel that way.

Concerns about raising a child
in a gay or lesbian family

	% of parents who cited this as a concern	
	Mothers	Fathers
My child will be teased by others	82%	85%
My child lacks a role model Of one gender	17%	8%

Advantages to raising a child in a gay or lesbian family

-In the Gay Parenting Assessment we also asked the parents whether they felt that their children would gain any particular advantage in having been raised by gay or lesbian parents.

-The majority of parents did feel that their children would gain some particular advantages as a result of living in a gay or lesbian-headed family.

- 89% of lesbian mothers saw some benefits
- 82% of gay fathers saw some benefits

-The most commonly mentioned advantage was the belief that the experience of growing up in up in a family that is seen as “different” would make the children more accepting of differences in others.

-54% of lesbian mothers and 63% of gay fathers felt that their children would grow up to be more tolerant and less prejudiced a as result of having gay or lesbian parents

-The second most commonly named advantage was predominantly cited by parents who had begun their families within the context of a gay or lesbian relationship.

-32% of mothers and 23% of fathers felt that since gays and lesbians have to surmount so many obstacles in having children, this makes them more appreciative and loving parents. The idea that “there are no accidents in gay and lesbian families; all children are wanted” is one that many of these parents expressed.

-A few parents felt that children raised in a gay or lesbian home would develop less stereotypical ideas of how men and women should behave

-8% of mothers and 5% of fathers felt their children would grow up to be less rigid about gender roles as a result of seeing their parents not divide up tasks along gender lines. These lesbian mothers felt their children would benefit by seeing women do all kinds of things-being nurturing as well as being the economic provider, doing housework as well as yardwork, repairs, and so on. The gay fathers felt it was beneficial for their children to see men being warm and nurturing.

Advantages to raising a child in a gay or lesbian family

	% of parents who cited this as an advantage	
	Mothers	Fathers
My child will be more accepting and tolerant of other people	54%	63%
My child has parents who went through a lot to have a child	32%	23%
My child will be less rigid About gender roles	8%	5%

Sharing the Tasks

-Previous studies have found that lesbian share household and childrearing tasks in a fairly egalitarian manner. We were interested in exploring this in our sample. We wanted to see whether family type (i.e., primary lesbian vs. lesbian stepfamily) was related to the division of labor. We also wanted to examine this variable in gay families.

Who Does What?
Sharing the Tasks

Percentage of parents who report equal responsibility

	Childcare	Housekeeping
Mothers		
Primary lesbian	54%	51%
Lesbian stepfamily	44%	57% Fathers
Primary gay	54%	33 %
Gay stepfamily	9%	0%

Who Does What scale (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992)

-We found that parent in both the primary lesbian families report sharing childrearing fairly evenly.

-Parents in the primary gay and lesbian families were more likely to indicate that they shared child-rearing responsibilities evenly than were the parents in stepfamilies.

-In a sizable proportion (44%) of the lesbian stepfamilies, the partners assumed equal responsibility for the children. This suggests that lesbian stepmothers as a group are quite involved in their stepchildren's lives. This contrasts with the gay stepfamilies, where only a small minority (9%) had both partners equally involved in caring for the children.

-Lesbian families, no matter what type, reported equal responsibility for household tasks much more often than did gay families.

-We wanted to look more closely at the parenting aspect of the adult relationship. Parenting alliance refers to the parents' investment in the child, their opinion of their partners' parent skills, and their degree to communication and agreement about the child. The higher the parenting alliance, the greater degree of agreement with and confidence in one's partner's parenting skills. Again, we wanted to look at the subgroups of gay and lesbian families in terms of this variable.

Parenting Alliance

	Alliance score Mean (SD)
Women	
Primary lesbian	91.7 (7.1)
Lesbian stepfamily	80.1 (12.5)
Married women*	84
Men	
Primary gay	88.2 (7.9)
Gay stepfamily	94.8 (4.6)
Married men*	86

*Abindin & Brunner (1995), reported norms on married men and women

The Parenting Alliance score has a theoretical range of 20-100.

-Overall, scores on the parental alliance were similar to norms that have been reported on married men and women.

-We found that the strength of the parental alliance differed by family type.

- Specifically, mothers in the lesbian stepfamilies expressed less positive feelings about their partner as a parent and had more disagreements with their partners about childrearing.
- As we noted earlier, lesbian stepmothers show a high level of participation in childcare. It may be that more disagreements over the child arise precisely because of lesbian stepmothers' greater involvement.
- In line with this, parents in the gay stepfamilies showed the highest levels of parenting alliance, yet as we noted earlier the fathers in the gay stepfamilies were the least likely to be equally involved as parents.
- It may be that more involvement is related to more disagreements, at least in stepfamilies.

-The adult relationship encompasses more than the co-parenting relationship. The participants' satisfaction with the adult relationship, apart from their role as parents, was one we wanted to look at as well.

-The Dyadic Adjustment Scale yields an overall adjustment score. The overall adjustment score is comprised of four subscales: Consensus, Satisfaction, Affection, and

Cohesion. Each of these if thought to reflect an independent and meaningful aspect of the adult relationship.

Relationship adjustment by family type

	Mean (SD)	N
Women		
Primary lesbian	118.7 (11.5)	197
Lesbian stepfamily	118.6 (13.8)	70
Men		
Primary Gay	111.7 (12.4)	48
Gay stepfamily	120.3 (14.1)	9
Married people*	114.8 (17.8)	218

Dyadic Adjustment Scale score has a theoretical range of 0-151.

*norms reported by Spanier (1976)

-Overall adjustment scores for the parents in the sample were consistent with norms reported for married men and women.

-We found that one group of parents, men in primary gay families, scored significantly lower than all other groups on overall adjustment. Of the four groups of gay and lesbian families we looked at, the ones who were least satisfied with their adult relationship were the gay men who had had children together.

- In order to examine this finding further, we looked at the subscales, to see if we could identify the particular problem areas for men in the primary gay families.

-The primary gay fathers did not differ from the other groups on Affection or Satisfaction. However, they were significantly lower than parents in all other groups on Consensus. On Cohesion, they scored lower than both lesbian mother groups.

-These areas assess how well the couple works together, and their general agreement on how they spent their time together.

-It is not clear why gay fathers who have a child together would have more difficulty in these areas as opposed to lesbian mothers or fathers in gay stepfamilies. This finding does not suggest that these families are in distress—the mean score is still a high one. What it does suggest is that there may be some areas of weakness in gay stepfamilies, in particular areas of the adult relationship. This suggests an intriguing direction for future research.

Disciplinary Techniques: How do gay and lesbian parents discipline their children?

-We asked the participants to report on the types of disciplinary techniques they use in a typical week with their child. We separated their responses into positive techniques (including distracting, reasoning, or negotiating with the child) and negative techniques (spanking, yelling, and withdrawing privileges).

-We did not find any differences among the groups of parents on their use of negative discipline techniques—all reported quite low use of these methods.

-We want to look more closely at spanking. The use of physical punishment has been associated with a host of negative consequences.

Percentage of parents who report no spanking by family type

Women	
Primary lesbian	86%
Lesbian stepfamily	89%
Men	
Primary Gay	95%
Gay stepfamily	100%

Note: Includes responses of parents whose children were over two years of age.

-The rates of reported corporal punishment in these families was quite low. It is well documented that corporal punishment is a common occurrence in American families. As a point of reference, Straus (1994) cites data from national samples showing that the majority of American parents do hit or spank their children, with overall rates being over 60%. This sample of gay and lesbian parents showed a very different pattern. In this sample, fewer than 15% physically punish their children.

-This suggests that gay and lesbian parents do parent differently in at least one tangible way: they use less physical punishment. This is the first study to look at this variable, and we look forward to future studies examining the parenting styles of gay and lesbian parents.

Conclusion

-According to our results, gay and lesbian-headed families are functioning very well. As a group, they scored as well as, or better than, heterosexual couples on measures of relationship adjustment and satisfaction, and communicating about their children. Few of them report using physical punishment with their children.

-The portrait that our study paints of gay and lesbian families today is of a group of parents who have given their parenting a great deal of thought. They discussed, often at length, the obstacles they faced in becoming parents, their concerns for their children, and their philosophy about dealing with people outside their family.

-Most of the families were living openly as gay or lesbian families within their communities by coming out to their children's teachers, doctors, or friends' parents.

-We found that gay men and lesbians take different routes to parenthood and have different experiences along the way.

-Lesbians who become mothers after coming out usually choose to bear their own biological child.

-Gay men who have children after coming out almost always choose to adopt their children.

-Lesbians face more disapproval from their own families regarding their decision to become parents than do gay men. Lesbians are also more concerned about the ramifications that having a child will have on their employment.

-Parents who have children within a heterosexual relationship and then form a lesbian or gay stepfamily face a different set of issues, including fear of losing custody and establishing a new family.

-By far the most common concern of these parents was that their children would be teased or treated unkindly by others because of their sexual orientation.

-At the same time, a majority of the parents felt that their children would benefit in the long run, in that they would be more tolerant and accepting of others.

-We urge those professionals involved in making custody evaluations to be mindful of the strengths of gay and lesbian parents.