

The Effects of Same-Sex Parenting on Child Development

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Abstract

This research paper will address the present concern of the effects of same-sex parenting on child development. As homosexual relationships have become widely common, along with the subsequent building of families, concern over the differences between homosexual and heterosexual parenting have become of great interest and importance. Studies have taken on the subjects of gender identity, behavioral development, and the negative impact of social stigma on children whose parents identify as homosexual. It is concluded that there exist no significant developmental issues due to parental sexual orientation. Positive development is a result of warmth and positive parenting, regardless of familial structure. The prominence of studies on lesbian couples and lack of studies on gay male couples will be explored.

The record of the number of same-sex couples residing in the United States has not been fully documented. Only recently, in 1990, has the U.S. Census Bureau created a section of the census that allows participants to record if they are in residence with an unmarried partner. Census data from 2000 considered all same-sex couples as unmarried couples. Subsequently, the 2010 census was the first census that reported the number of couples who identified as same-sex (U.S. Census Bureau). The 2011 American Community Survey data estimated at the time that approximately 605,472 same-sex couples resided in the United States, with 168,092 reported being married (U.S. Census Bureau). This number has continued, and will continue, to increase due to the ever-changing social environment that has come to regard marriage as a right that should be held by citizens who identify as LGBTQ.

Due to the growth in recognition of same-sex couples, same-sex families as a whole need to be recognized as well. Data from the 2011 census estimated that 16% of same-sex households had at least one child (U.S. Census Bureau). Some sources have estimated that two to fourteen million children at the time were being raised by same-sex couples (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008). This rise in same-sex family units has also brought into question the psychological impact of same-sex co-parenting. Specific facets of the individual, such as gender identity, as well as general behavioral development, and the impact of social stigma encountered by children with same-sex parents, have all been of great concern and interest. Studies have only recently explored these areas, and with the growing number and general acceptance of same-sex family units, it is important to point out that there exist no significant developmental issues in children who are raised by same-sex parents.

Recent concerns regarding the development of gender identity have wrongly attributed homosexuality to early childhood exposure with a homosexual model. The topic of gender identity also constitutes societally gendered behavior. The question of whether or not same-sex co-parenting has a direct influence on this aspect of development has only recently been explored. A common fear has produced the claim that children who are raised by those who identify as gay or lesbian would grow up with a general confusion regarding their own sexual identity. It is important to note that gender identity and sexual orientation are not in any way equal. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines gender as, "the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for boys and men or girls and women" (Answers to Your Questions About Transgender People,

Gender Identity and Gender Expression, 2016), and sexual orientation as “an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attractions to men, women or both sexes (Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality: Answers to Your Questions For a Better Understanding, 2016). Although gender and sexual orientation may influence one another, one need not rely on the other.

In regards to gender, studies have been conducted that place young children in rooms with toys that are gendered by traditional standards. Crowl et al. (2008) explored children's gravitation to either group of toys and recorded the results. Interviews were also conducted that asked children about their television and extracurricular activity preferences. A similar study, which echoes that of the previously described, came to the conclusion that “girls and boys in same-gender parent families in the US were significantly less differentiated (stereotyped) in their play behavior than girls and boys in heterosexual-parent families” (Goldberg, Kashy, & Smith, 2012, p. 511). The results can be explained, not in terms of couples' sexuality, but in terms of approaches to parenting, with these approaches being influenced by personal ideas and opinions of gender conformity and nonconformity that are held by parents. Gender norms are not innate, but are imposed upon children at birth. As pointed out by Tasker (2010), Biblarz and Stacey noted that “father-lessness might remove pressure toward gender conformity that heterosexual fathers impose particularly on sons” (p. 37). The previous statement only accounts for lesbian co-parenting. There exists a lack of research focusing strictly on male same-sex co-parenting environments, making it difficult to discuss the idea of “father-lessness” in these instances. Tasker (2010) notes, based on the research of Crowl et al. (2008) and others, that there exists “considerable noise in the data, which they attributed to inconsistencies in the reliability of methods employed across studies” (p. 37). This conclusion further exacerbates the need for research with emphasis, or even exclusivity, on male-male co-parents. Homosexual parents are likely more forgiving when it comes to their children's choices of typically gendered objects and activities, due to “[...] parental attitudes and behaviors (e.g., conveying more liberal attitudes about gender and displaying more egalitarian division of labor in the home) [...]” (Tasker, 2010, p. 38). This general statement could account for a lack of pressure regarding gender conformity directed at children raised by male-male co-parents, as well. It is also a great possibility that “children's expressions of interest may influence parental interpretation and provision for their children” (Tasker, 2010, p. 38). It can be said that not only do parents impose gendered guidelines upon their children, but their children's natural gravitation toward certain toys and activities is simply accepted and acted upon appropriately by and according to the parents. Even though studies show a slight difference in gendered preference between children raised in heterosexual and homosexual households, there ceases to exist a difference so substantial that it seriously impacts the development of gender identity among children raised by gay and lesbian parents (Patterson, 2013).

Behavioral development of all young children is a serious and sensitive matter. There exist concerns regarding if homosexual parenting negatively impacts this specific facet of child development. Child behavior has been studied several times with the co-parenting couple being heterosexual, but less has been explored in the realm of same-sex co-parents. The few studies conducted in the last several years have pitted co-parents against one another to determine if being raised by a specific set of parents – in terms of sexuality – predicts the behavioral well-being of children raised in each environment, respectively. According to Farr and Patterson (2013), “Variations in coparenting contribute uniquely to children's development, beyond the influence of marital quality and individual parent-child relationships” (p. 1226). Although previous studies have greatly explored heterosexual parents raising biological children, there is a need for studies considering a more diverse range of households, including adopted children raised by non-heterosexual parents. As considered above, studies seem to conclude that the specific nuances of the parenting itself influence children. That is what Farr and Patterson's

(2013) study concluded after it explored heterosexual and homosexual parent-child relationships. The study took into consideration the division of labor between each parent. Research shows that same-sex couples more often evenly divide childcare and household duties among themselves, whereas heterosexual couples experience uneven labor division due to societal gender norms; for example, females tend to stay at home with children and perform most household duties, while the male works all day and does minimal work around the house in comparison to the female co-parent (Farr & Patterson, 2013). Quality and satisfaction of labor division between parents is not the only factor that plays a role in child development.

Farr and Patterson (2013) also studied and recorded the interactions between child and parent when playing occurred, and took division of labor into consideration. Outside behavior was recorded via interviews with teachers and childcare workers who were able to report on children's daily out-of-home behavior. In interacting with their children, lesbian couples tended to be extremely supportive of their children. Many embodied an expected (most likely socialized) maternal attitude that seemed to present itself as a greater influence because of there being a presence of two female co-parents. Gay couples showed the most passive behavior towards their children. As for heterosexual couples, there tended to be more undermining behavior towards their children. This included fathers participating less in play with children, and therefore, the mothers playing with the children more. Undermining behavior was significantly associated with couples' dissatisfaction with their division of childcare. It was found that division of labor itself does not determine behavior of children, but rather parent satisfaction with said labor division. It was concluded that, "[...] parental sexual orientation was linked more with qualitative differences in family experience than with difference in outcomes for children" (Farr & Patterson, 2013, p. 1239). Children, regardless of the way in which their family was structured, showed little, if any, behavioral adjustment problems. The behavior of co-parents, not their sexuality, accounted for the small variations in child behavioral outcomes (Farr & Patterson, 2013). These findings were echoed by another study that examined the pre- and post-adoptive context of parental influence which found that "according to the spillover hypothesis, negativity in the parents' intimate relationship is carried into the parenting domain, and in turn shapes child adjustment behaviors" (Goldberg & Smith, 2013, p. 1). The quality and satisfaction of labor division between parents themselves, as well as parental warmth, influence child behavior, not the sexual orientation of the parents.

Parenting style and the effect it has on children plays an instrumental role in positive behavioral development. Seay, Freysteinson, and McFarlane (2014) analyzed and compiled data from 120 articles in order to comprehensively define *positive parenting* and its constructive outcomes as, "the continual relationship of a parent(s) and a child or children that includes, caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of a child consistently and unconditionally" (p. 207). Consistent positive parenting and warmth have been shown to result in a decrease of aggressive behaviors and the externalizing of problems in children. Eisenberg et al.'s (2005) longitudinal study explored how parental warmth and positivity did in fact result in greater emotional regulation two and four years after the initial assessment of 199 children and their parent and/or co-parents. Positive parenting not only ensures children's ability to successfully regulate their emotions and behavior in childhood, but also affects them well into adulthood; specifically parenthood. Parents who experience consistency in positive parenting during adolescence display higher levels of positive parenting behaviors themselves (Friesen, Woodward, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2012). The outcomes of parental warmth are not exclusive to any single familial structure. For example, when positive parenting is implemented, and sufficient resources are sought and utilized, single parent households do not guarantee adverse behavioral outcomes for children (Ricciuti, 2004). Seay et al. (2014) echoes this general sentiment by concluding, "[...] adoptive parents, aunts, other extended family members, gay/lesbian couples, or stepparents may also be good parents" (p. 204). Regardless

of the number of parental figures, gender, and sexuality of the parent or co-parents, positive parenting and warmth result in more desirable emotional regulation abilities and behavioral outcomes.

At this point, it would be easy to fully conclude that no negative impact exists when it comes to children being raised by same-sex couples, but it is never so simple. Developmentally, it has been studied and shown that the sexual orientation of caregivers has no direct effect on children. This cannot be as simply discussed when it comes to outside influences, such as the stigma families face for being same-sex; specifically the stigma children face. An unprecedented study on the well being of 264 children raised by same-sex couples in Australia looked specifically into social and emotional development as well as the overall physical health of said children. This long-term study conducted by Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power, and Davis (2014), concluded that, "[...] there is no evidence to support a difference in parent-reported child health for most measures in these families when compared to children from [general] population samples [...]" (p.14). Although overall health for children raised by same-sex parents was recorded as being no different when compared to children raised by heterosexual parents, the impact of social stigma was strongly considered. For two thirds of the children studied, parents reported at least one act associated with stigma having some sort of emotional effect on the child or the family as a whole. This ranged from basic homophobic remarks, to discomfort when discussing family well-being at hospitals and doctor's offices (though the latter, in context with this study's findings, is exclusive to the discussion of homophobia in the Australian healthcare system). The existence of social stigma is a barrier that must be overcome. Other studies have explored adolescent peer relations and the stigma surrounding same-sex parents, and have come to find that stigma may exist, but in the end this bullying equates to standard bullying experienced by the general child population (Patterson, 2013). A qualitative study of adults raised by homosexual parents, conducted by Fairtlough (2008), documented the subjects' feelings toward homosexual caretakers as well as feelings regarding homophobic bullying during adolescence. After compiling self-reported data, it was concluded that "[...] children are best able to deal with homophobia or negative reactions from others when their parents are open with them about their sexuality" (p. 526). The adverse emotional effects caused by homophobic remarks aimed at the children of homosexuals can be positively combated by parental support and guidance. Warmth comes into play when same-sex co-parents seek to protect their children from any negativity resulting from being raised by homosexual parents (Tasker, 2010). This sentiment would apply to both lesbian and gay co-parents. Crouch et al. (2014) determined that, despite the existence of social stigma and its potential negative effect on psychosocial development, "[...] these children are faring well on most measures of child health and wellbeing, and demonstrate higher levels of family cohesion than [general] population samples" (p.20). Looking towards the more complex and broad social systems that exist on every level, it would benefit most everyone if more studies were conducted in order to understand and eliminate problems in settings that facilitate acts of prejudice on any child or family.

An important element of most of these studies to note is the type of population that is being sampled. Same-sex studies have been conducted for several years, but have studied lesbian couples more exclusively. Only in the past couple of years have male same-sex couples been included in significant child development research. This could be explained by several circumstances, one being that studies have relied on relatively small sample sizes, which may have excluded male same-sex couples (Crouch et al., 2014). This exclusion can be explained by the difference in number of gay couples versus lesbian couples, shown by statistics compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2011, 284,295 male-male couples were recorded, versus 321,177 female-female couples (U.S. Census Bureau). Another explanation could be a persisting bias that favors lesbian couples as subjects for studies. Reports seem to "favor the double maternal

involvement that lesbian couples offer” (Tasker, 2010, p. 39). This adds a positive spin on the argument that children experience entirely “normal” development when raised by same-sex couples. It is not feasible, though, to group male same-sex couples under lesbian couples. It is not completely clear what differences exist between the two groups. As more and more studies continue to be conducted, researchers appear to be taking this lesbian-favored occurrence into consideration, and developing studies that include both gay males and females as a part of subject samples.

Although further work is needed to confirm researchers’ findings, there is positive outlook in regards to children raised by same-sex parents. Different aspects of the individual, such as gender identity, behavioral development, and the impact of social stigma encountered by children with same-sex parents have all been of great concern and interest in recent years. Studies have only recently explored these areas, and with the growing number and general acceptance of same-sex family units, it is important to point out that there exist no significant developmental issues in children who are raised by same-sex parents. What unites all of these aspects of development, and supports the proper and positive development of children, is the quality of parental and child-parent relationships. It does not matter whether parents are heterosexual or homosexual, but what really matters is that parents put in the time and effort to ensure that their children are raised with warmth and encouragement. Despite there being a now debunked common assumption that same-sex parenting directly affects children negatively, more research must be conducted in order to explore the indirect effects of social interactions that occur between the general populace and families that consist of same-sex co-parents. Taking into consideration all of the research that has been conducted, as well as the unfortunate existence of social stigma on multiple social-ecological levels, steps can be taken forward to ensure that all families, and in extension, children, are able to develop within positive and nourishing environments, regardless of familial structure.

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