

Lesbian and Gay Parenting

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The 2000 Census report revealed that 96% of all U.S. counties have at least one same-sex couple with children [1]. As in the case of same-sex marriage, the issue of lesbian and gay parenting is a deeply contested terrain, and legal and social progress on this issue varies from state to state. This research summary presents an overview of 1) the key legal challenges facing same-sex headed households with children and 2) the significant research studies conducted on various issues related to same-sex parenting. Additionally, the 1995 pro same-sex parenting policy statement of the American Psychological Association (APA) will be examined, as well as the right-wing reaction which attempts to politicize and discredit the scientific validity of the research considered by the APA in its formation of the policy.

Overview of issues facing same-sex headed families

A growing number of lesbian and gay couples either have children or would like to have children. Many lesbians and gays bring biological children from past heterosexual relationships into their same-sex relationship. Surrogacy and advances in reproductive technologies, such as artificial insemination, now make it possible for both male and female couples to have their own children. For many other same-sex couples, adoption remains the best option. Similar to the issue of employment non-discrimination, adoption laws applying to same sex couples vary by region. The states of California, Colorado, Connecticut, Washington D.C., Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington, all allow adoption by openly same-sex couples. The remaining states either allow adoption by single lesbian or gay individuals, or allow couples to adopt within regions, or disallow adoption by couples across the board. Florida remains the only state that completely bans lesbian and gay adoption. In recent years the situation in Florida has received much media attention due to Rosie O'Donnell's outspoken efforts to repeal the ban.

Prohibitions against adoption, combined with prohibitions against same-sex marriage or civil unions in most parts of the country, can complicate the lives of same-sex headed households greatly. Dependent health coverage, visitation rights and inheritance matters are just some of the issues that same-sex couples and their children must try to settle without any of the legal protections afforded opposite-sex headed families. It is a fair assessment to state that proscriptions against same-sex parenting, including legal adoption, are based on ignorance, fear, and outdated notions of a contagious nature of homosexuality. Laws prohibiting legal protections of same-sex families and lesbian and gay adoption have no basis in scientific research and ignore recommendations and policy statements from respected and influential organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the Child Welfare League of America, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Psychiatric Association.

Research on same-sex parenting:

The American Psychological Association's 1995 policy statement

In 1995 the APA issued the following policy statement regarding same-sex parenting:

On the research about lesbian and gay parenting: "The results of existing research comparing

gay and lesbian parents to heterosexual parents and children of gay or lesbians parents to children of heterosexual parents are quite uniform: common stereotypes are not supported by the data...In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that lesbians and gay men are unfit to be parents or that psycho-social development among children of gay men and lesbians is compromised in any respect relevant to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychological growth. [2]

This strong statement of support for lesbian and gay parenting continued the progressive shift away from the disease model of homosexuality held by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973. To support this statement, the APA cited 43 scientific research studies related to lesbian and gay parenting conducted between 1978 and 1995 [3, for a web-link to summaries and citations of all 43 studies]. The nature and subject of these studies cover a considerable range, including:

- Sexual orientation of adult sons of gay fathers
- Parenting behaviors of homosexual and heterosexual fathers
- Children in lesbian and single parent households
- Sexual identity of children raised by homosexual or transsexual parents
- Definitions and dynamics of motherhood and family in lesbian communities
- Self-esteem of adolescent children of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers

The studies were conducted by independent, experienced and credentialed researchers, and were based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches and used diverse sampling techniques. All studies were published in peer-reviewed psychological and public health journals. The APA's decision to formally support the lesbian and gay parents was based on the collective, overriding analyses of the studies that revealed positive associations between lesbian and gay parenting and childrearing with no evidence that the children's sexual orientation was influenced by their parents.

In 2000, five years after the APA issued its pro same-sex marriage statement, a group of conservative academicians – many representing religious institutions -- organized a conference entitled “Revitalizing the Institution of Marriage for the Twenty-First Century.” The conference was promoted as an opportunity for scholarly exchange regarding cultural changes affecting marriage, but a key point of discussion was in regards to same-sex parenting. One of the organizers at the conference was Lynn D. Wardle, a law professor from Brigham Young University who has basically argued that conservative values are underrepresented in psychology. Borrowing from the language of left-wing social movements, Wardle and his

colleagues presented the idea that conservative values needed greater representation in psychological research in order for such research to be “diverse” and “pluralistic.” The conference coincided with several publications that attacked psychological research on same-sex parenting. These attacks were based not only on the idea that decades of research by independent scholars and clinicians were all faulted by “liberal bias” but also on the idea that they were methodologically unsound.

A publication in point is Redding’s critique of research on same-sex parenting for “small sample sizes, non-representative and self-selected samples, reliance on self-reports subject to social desirability biases, and lack of longitudinal data [4]. Sidestepping the fact that the different methodologies and sampling techniques served to strengthen the analyses (because if a subject of inquiry is approached through multiple research techniques then there are greater checks and balances) Redding went so far as to claim that the entire body of research regarding outcomes of children raised by same-sex parents is flawed and inaccurate. Rooney, a psychologist at the University of Missouri, subsequently responded to Redding’s critique of voluminous research on same-sex parenting outcomes with a critique of his own, claiming that if the bar for legitimate psychological research were set to Redding’s standard, it would be necessary to throw out most of the studies ever completed in the field of psychology based on self-reporting measures [5].

Rooney added:

Redding’s (2001) critique also failed to consider an important issue when conducting research with sexual minorities: Lesbian and gay parents face social stigmatization and may have fears of being too openly public about their parenting statuses because of custody concerns. This stigma and these fears can make lesbian and gay parents a more difficult sample for researchers to obtain. Such difficulties may result in the need for self-selected samples. Of course, researchers cannot be sure if such samples are representative of the entire population of lesbian and gay parents, just as they cannot be sure that convenience samples of freshman psychology students are representative of all Americans. Does this mean that such studies should not be completed? Clearly, it means psychologists should be cautious about generalizing from the results of just a handful of these studies. Redding cited only 3 studies on gay and lesbian parenting, however, 43 empirical studies exist in this area (American Psychological Association). The strength in the interpretation of results of each of these studies is in considering the findings as a whole [6].

Rooney may also have added that it is hypocritical for scholars such as Redding and Wardle to accuse other researchers of bias: Wardle’s own biased view of homosexuality is made very clear in his own article:

Children are the innocent victims who suffer the most from choices their parents make to experiment for personal self-gratification with extramarital relationships. We must be concerned that a parent who makes a calculated decision to deprive a child of a parent of the opposite gender may be making a decision that shows insufficient regard for the needs of the children [7]

Wardle's distillation of homosexuality into "personal self-gratification with extramarital relationships" demonstrates, *a priori*, a narrow and biased view of what it means to be gay or lesbian. If there is to be no bias at all held by researchers on this subject then Wardle, by his own prescription, should not be allowed in the field.

Essentially, the attack on decades of research of same-sex parenting can be seen as part of the overall package currently being distributed by the religious right that aims to confuse and muddy the terms over research outcomes that are not in sync with specific religious ideology.

Most lay people do not have a background in research so when someone like Redding throws out terms like "small sample sizes, non-representative and self-selected samples" general audiences may be taken in by what is basically scientific jargon. A close reading of Redding's critique, however, reveals that his argument has little substance as it obscures facts and distorts principles: it accomplishes the very strategy that he accuses other researchers of utilizing.

Beyond being fit to parent: Examining the strengths of same-sex parenting

Decades ago, a primary motivation for conducting research on same-sex parenting was to assess the "contagiousness" of homosexuality, as it was widely believed that children of lesbians and gays would also become lesbian or gay. We know now that this is not the case, as study after study has demonstrated that people with lesbian or gay parents have the same incidence of homosexuality as the general population, about 10% [8]. Beyond this concern, however, what are other possible impacts of being raised by same-sex parents? Recent studies have indicated that not only do children of same-sex parents tend to turn out relatively healthy and well adjusted, they might also benefit from the experience in ways that children from heterosexual do not.

Hoeffler's research, for example, has suggested that daughters of lesbians have higher self-esteem than daughters of heterosexual women and sons of same-sex parents are more caring and less aggressive [9]. Overseas, England has been the site of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families, which is recognized as the first longitudinal study examining the effects of being raised by lesbian mothers on children. One finding from this pioneering study set another nail on the coffin of the contagion theory: by growing up in an accepting atmosphere young adults had the opportunity to explore same-sex relationships without fear or shame and this opportunity served to actually *confirm* heterosexual identity [10].

The case for same-sex parenting: utilizing an informed approach

The research and reporting cited in this summary provide basic information of issues relevant to same-sex marriage. This report will be expanded and updated as more data become available. As is, however, the current information provides a basis from which to strengthen the arguments for same-sex parenting. The following points may be helpful when presenting this case:

- People with same-sex parents have the same incidence of homosexuality as the general population, about 10%.

- Laws against adoption by same-sex parents are based on prejudice alone: there is no scientific basis supporting the idea that same-sex parenting is harmful to children.
- Studies show that people with same-sex parents can be more open-minded and have higher self esteem than people with heterosexual parents.
- A major study has shown that growing up with same-sex parents can actually help to confirm heterosexual identity.
- The major problems faced by children of same-sex parents stem from divorce, homophobia and the lack of legal protections that are available for opposite-sex headed families.
- The major psychological and child welfare organizations support same-sex parenting and base this support on multiple research studies that have been conducted over the past 30 years.
- The right-wing attack on research studies that support same-sex parenting is based on an ideological opposition to homosexuality and is not scientifically based. If the right-wing critique of the sampling and other methodologies used in research on same-sex parenting were applied to all psychological research, then we would have to throw out the results of psychological studies that have been conducted on all aspects of human nature.

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