Executive Summary

The past several decades have seen a proliferation of studies on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parenting, with increased attention to (a) family building by LGB people; (b) the transition to parenthood for LGB parents; and (c) functioning and experiences of LGB parents and their children. The findings are consistent in suggesting that despite confronting heterosexism in a variety of social contexts -- including the health care system, the legal system, and the school system -- LGB parents and their children are functioning quite well. This report provides an overview of the contemporary LGB-parent family research. We emphasize research that has been subjected to scientific peer review. Critical areas for future investigations are noted, such as how race, ethnicity, social class, region of residence, and the changing legal landscape affect the experiences of LGB parents and their children.

Family Building by LGB People

LGB Parents Formerly in Heterosexual Relationships

- In the majority of contemporary LGB-parent families, the children were conceived in the context of different-sex relationships.
- Since most contemporary research on LGB parenting focuses on the newer phenomenon of planned LGB families, research is needed on LGB stepfamily formation post-heterosexual divorce, covering such topics as incorporating a new stepparent and a new family identity. This can inform the development of parenting resources for LGB stepfamilies.

LGB-Parent Families Formed Through Donor Insemination (DI)

- Because many states prohibit the nonbiological mother from legally adopting her child, female same-sex couples that choose DI to build their families face choices (e.g., who will be the biological mother; whether to use sperm from a known or unknown donor) that have profound legal and psychological implications.
- LGB-parent families continue to experience discrimination in health care settings (e.g., during the perinatal period).
- More research is needed on the influence of social class on the DI decisions of sexual minority women.
- Few studies have addressed the psychological consequences of infertility in LB women who fail to conceive through DI.
LGB-Parent Families Formed Through Adoption

- Same-sex couples are approximately 4.5 times more likely than different-sex couples to be rearing adopted children.
- LGB parents adopt through international, public domestic, or private domestic programs, with varied information about and access to the birth parents of the children they adopt.
- The legalities of adoption by LGB parents are complicated since many birth parents and all international agencies prohibit adoption by same-sex couples, resulting in a pool of available children that far exceeds the number of heterosexual prospective adoptive parents.
- LGB prospective parents are vulnerable to discriminatory attitudes on the part of adoption professionals.
- More research is needed on the impact of power and privilege (especially with regard to race, class, and gender) on LGB prospective parents’ responses to perceived discrimination during the adoption process.

LGB-Parent Families Formed Through Surrogacy

- The limited available data on LGB-parent families formed through surrogacy suggest that this option is used primarily by affluent gay men.
- Studies are needed that explore the gender, race, and class dynamics of domestic and international surrogacy.

The Transition to Parenthood

- LGB prospective parents perceive less support from their families of origin than do heterosexual parents, but many LGB parents find that family ties strengthen after the arrival of the child.
- The involvement and support of the family of origin may vary depending on the LGB parent’s biological and legal ties to the child.
- Similar to heterosexual parents, LG parents’ mental health and relationship quality decline across the transition to parenthood, although support from friends, family, and the workplace buffers all parents from the challenges of new parenthood.
- Same-sex couples with children share childcare, housework, and paid employment more equally than different-sex couples with children.

LGB-Parent Families’ Functioning and Experiences

LGB Parents: Functioning and Experiences

- Studies comparing LG and heterosexual parents in regard to mental health, parenting stress, and parenting competence have found few differences based on family structure.
• Conditions linked to poorer well-being for LG parents include: living in less supportive legal contexts, perceiving less support from family or supervisors, having higher levels of internalized homophobia, and encountering more child behavior problems.
• More research is needed that explores the unique strengths that LGB people bring to parenthood that may protect against mental health challenges.
• Studies are also needed to examine the intersecting identities of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation vis-à-vis family formation, mate selection, and overall family life.

Impact on Children of Having LGB Parents

• Researchers have found few differences between children raised by lesbian and heterosexual parents in terms of self-esteem, quality of life, psychological adjustment, or social functioning (research on the psychosocial outcomes of children with gay male parents is limited).
• Several studies, some of which have utilized nationally representative datasets, provide no evidence that children with same-sex parents demonstrate problems with respect to their academic and educational outcomes.
• According to self-, peer-, and parent-report, children and adolescents with same- and different-sex parents do not differ in social competence or relationships with peers.
• There is some evidence that the play behavior of girls and boys in same-sex parent families may be less gender-stereotyped than the play behavior of girls and boys in different-sex-parent families.
• Research on adolescents reared since birth by lesbian mothers found that youth with male role models were similar in psychological adjustment to adolescents without male role models.
• Although adolescents and young adults reared by LGB parents are no more likely to self-identify as exclusively lesbian/gay than those reared by heterosexual parents, having a lesbian mother was associated with a greater likelihood of considering or having a same-sex relationship, and more expansive, less categorical notions of sexuality.
• Adolescents and adults point to potential strengths associated with growing up in LGB-parent households, including resilience and empathy toward diverse and marginalized groups.

Bullying and Harassment

• Studies that compare the teasing/bullying experiences of children with LGB and heterosexual parents are conflicting, with some suggesting higher rates of reported bullying among children with LGB parents and others finding no differences in these rates, according to self- and parent-report. However, homophobic slurs were reported only by children with same-sex parents.
• Whereas perceived stigmatization by peers has been linked to compromised well-being in children of LGB parents, both the broader school context and family processes may offset some of the negative impact of bullying.
Relationships between Parents or Donors and Children

- Compared to heterosexual parents, LGB parents have not been found to differ, on average, in parental warmth, emotional involvement, and quality of relationships with their children. Children’s relationships with their biological mothers appear similar in quality to their relationships with their nonbiological mothers, which researchers attribute in part to the fact that lesbian mothers tend to share coparenting. However, parent-child closeness and contact may be threatened when same-sex parents break up, suggesting that legal parentage may have important implications for parent-child relationships post-same-sex relationship dissolution.
- Compared to heterosexual parents, LGB parents tend to demonstrate less gender-stereotyped attitudes and to be more accepting of gender-atypical behavior in their children.
- In lesbian-parent families, the relationships that children have with their sperm donors vary in quality and intensity, and the nature of these relationships may change over time. More research is needed that explores children’s, and LGB parents’, relationships with known donors, as well as with identity release donors (i.e., anonymous donors who agree to be contacted when the child reaches some specified age, such as 18 years).
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The Williams Institute is dedicated to conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy. A national think tank at UCLA Law, the Williams Institute produces high-quality research with real-world relevance and disseminates its work through a variety of education programs and media to judges, legislators, lawyers, other policymakers, and the public.

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