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How Same-Sex Parenting Affects Children

Same-sex marriage was first legalized in the United States in 2004 in Massachusetts (Lofquist 2) and is currently legal in 17 states and Washington, D.C. (“Lawsuit”). The number of same-sex households in the United States increased by 80 percent between 2000 and 2010 (Lofquist et al. 6). For the 2011 American Community Survey, 605,472 households, approximately 1 percent of all coupled households in the United States, reported as same-sex couples. Of those, 16.4 percent, 99,241 households, reported having children present (Vespa et al. 24). As same-sex relationships and marriages continue to become more common, so does same-sex parenting. This raises the question of how same-sex parenting impacts children and makes one wonder how, if at all, children with homosexual parents differ from children with heterosexual parents.

The earliest studies of children with homosexual parents examined children who were born into families with heterosexual parents and then lived with their lesbian mothers later on in life. It was not until the 1990s that researchers began to look at children who had never lived with heterosexual parents (Patterson 241). In the late 1990s, Charlotte Patterson studied children between the ages of 4 and 9 who had been either born to lesbian mothers or adopted by lesbian mothers during infancy. Patterson discovered that based on “standardized measures of social competence and of behavior problems,” children with lesbian mothers “scored within the range of normal variation for a representative sample of same-aged American children” (241).

Worried that the convenience sampling used for her study may have skewed the results, Patterson conducted another study, this time analyzing 80 families, 55 with lesbian mothers and 25 with heterosexual parents. Her second study again showed that children who are raised by homosexual parents do not greatly differ from children raised by heterosexual parents. Based on survey results and reports from the children's teachers, Patterson concluded, "Parental sexual orientation [is] not related to children's adaptation" (242). However, due to the fact that the women whose children were surveyed for this study were clients of the Sperm Bank of California, which attracts well-educated and wealthy individuals, and because the children were relatively young, averaging 7 years of age, Patterson was still concerned that these results may not have been demonstrative of all children who are raised by lesbian mothers.

In an effort to obtain more illustrative data, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health examined a more representative group of participants. Researchers surveyed and interviewed more than 12,000 children and parents from a range of diverse backgrounds. Forty-four participants between the ages of 12 and 18 reported living with a parent who was involved in a same-sex relationship. The self-reported levels of self-esteem, anxiety and substance abuse, as well as the grade point averages, history of being bullied, and likelihoods to be involved in a romantic relationship and to have engaged in sexual intercourse were not significantly different among children with homosexual parents and children with heterosexual parents. In fact, "The only statistically reliable difference between the two groups – that those with same-sex parents felt a greater sense of connection to people at school – favored the youngsters living with same-sex couples" (Patterson 242).

Patterson's findings align with the no differences hypothesis, according to which "children from same-sex families display no notable disadvantages when compared to children

from other family forms [...including] intact biological, two-parent families, the form most associated with stability and developmental benefits for children” (Regnerus 753). However, data from other studies have drawn conflicting conclusions. Results from the New Families Structures Study, for example, show that adults who grew up with lesbian mothers are at a disadvantage compared to adults who grew up with heterosexual parents (Regnerus).

Nearly 3,000 respondents between the ages of 18 and 39 were interviewed for the New Families Structures Study. Of those surveyed, 175 reported having a mother who was involved in a same-sex relationship and 73 reported having a father who was involved in a same-sex relationship. The study projects that 1.7 percent of Americans have parents who are involved in same-sex relationships. Ninety-one percent of those who reported that their mother was involved in a same-sex relationship reported having lived with her during the time of her involvement in that relationship, and 42 percent of those who reported that their father was involved in a same-sex relationship reported having lived with him during the time of his involvement in that relationship. Fifty-seven percent said they lived with their mother for four months or more during her same-sex relationship, and 23 percent said they lived with her for three years or more. Twenty-three percent said they lived with their father for four months or more during his same-sex relationship, and less than 2 percent said they lived with him for three years or more (Regnerus 755–757).

The NFSS explored 239 possible sources of difference between respondents, including levels of education and income, employment status, frequencies of marijuana use, alcohol use, smoking and arrest, as well as likelihood to vote and thoughts about suicide. Eight percent of respondents with heterosexual parents were unemployed at the time of the survey, compared to 28 percent with lesbian mothers and 20 percent with gay fathers. Fifty-seven percent of

participants with heterosexual parents reported having voted in the 2008 presidential election, compared to 41 percent with lesbian mothers and 73 percent with gay fathers. The reported frequency of smoking was more than one-and-a-half times greater among respondents with lesbian mothers than respondents with heterosexual parents. Overall, participants with lesbian mothers reported worse outcomes than participants with heterosexual parents for 57 of the 239 differences, and participants with gay fathers reported worse outcomes for 11 of the differences (Regnerus 761–764).

According to both Patterson and Regnerus, fewer studies have been conducted examining children with gay fathers than have been conducted examining children with lesbian mothers. Furthermore, the studies of children with gay fathers that have been conducted show fewer differences between them and children with heterosexual parents than between children with lesbian mothers and children with heterosexual parents (Regnerus 763).

Other researchers have evaluated how parents' sexual orientations affect children's interpretations of and adherence to gender roles. Studies show that girls with lesbian mothers are more likely to be interested in traditionally masculine activities and that boys with lesbian mothers tend to show less aggression. In addition, children with heterosexual parents are more likely to traditionally define gender roles than children with homosexual parents. However, research examining children's physical environments, such as the manner in which their bedrooms are decorated, and their reactions to non-traditional gender roles during interviews show that parents' liberality more strongly influences children's thoughts about gender roles than does parents' sexuality ("The Effects"). Yet while parents' sexual orientations do not necessarily determine children's sexual orientations, "the attitudes that parents hold about gender are the most influential factors" impacting children's gender development ("The Effects" 6).

Studies of the psychosocial health of children have also concluded that parental sexual orientation is not the strongest factor impacting children's ability to adjust. Other more important factors include parent relationship satisfaction and quality of parent-child relationship. However, the social stigmatization of both homosexual parents and their children often impacts children as well. In a 1999 study of 76 children between the ages of 11 and 18 with lesbian mothers, the children who were more aware of the stigma associated with their parents' sexual orientations reported lower levels of self-esteem. This is because children with homosexual parents often tend to keep their parents' sexual orientations a secret. Furthermore, in a 2001 study of children between the ages of 5 and 18, 50 percent of children with homosexual parents reported being bullied because of their parents' sexual orientations ("The Effects"). According to Patterson, however, while this exposure to discrimination is likely uncomfortable for children, "evidence for the idea that such encounters affect children's overall adjustment is lacking" (243).

Studies examining how children raised by homosexual parents differ from children raised by heterosexual parents have produced inconclusive results. Some researchers have determined that no statistically significant differences exist between children with homosexual parents and children with heterosexual parents, while other researchers have concluded that same-sex parenting puts children at a disadvantage. A potential cause of these disparities is the possible lack of diverse representation among study participants (Regnerus). Furthermore, according to Regnerus, an accurate understanding of how same-sex parenting impacts children "depends on to whom you compare them" (764). Homosexual parents and married heterosexual parents are not the only types of parents by which children are raised. Other family structures and additional factors, such as whether homosexual parents are in a male-male relationship or a female-female

relationship and the level of liberality practiced by parents, both homosexual and heterosexual, also impact children's development.

In addition, "most children currently being raised by same-sex parents were born into heterosexual relationships where one or both parents declared their homosexuality after beginning a family" ("The Effects" 7). The introduction of a homosexual parent into an already established family often leads to "upheavals in family structure" ("The Effects" 7), meaning it is nearly impossible to determine which family arrangement has a greater influence on children and to what extent the shift in family structure impacts children. Perhaps as same-sex marriage becomes legal in more states, consequently increasing the number of children born to and raised exclusively by homosexual parents, further research will be able to uncover how, if at all, such children differ from children raised by heterosexual parents.

Works Cited

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