

## Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children

by Charlotte J. Patterson, Ph.D.  
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### Talking Points

Lesbian and gay parents and their children are as well adjusted as parents and children as is the general population.

Like others, lesbian and gay parents and their children fare better when they have adequate resources and live in supportive environments.

Despite the recent introduction of marriage equality in the United States, children of lesbian and gay parents are still more likely than children of heterosexual parents to live in poverty.

Supportive laws, such as a federal nondiscrimination bill, can help lesbian and gay parents and their children to thrive.

### ABSTRACT

Research on lesbian and gay (LG) parents and their children is consistent across studies and samples in finding that both parents and children are well adjusted and do not differ in well-being or related developmental outcomes from the general population. LG-parent families living in supportive environments, and families with more social, financial, and legal resources, generally show the most optimal adjustment. Although the legal climate for same-sex couples and their children has improved in recent years in the United States, there is still evidence of greater poverty among families headed by LG parents. Laws are needed to reduce the likelihood of discrimination against these families in domains such as employment.

In recent years, considerable controversy has surrounded families headed by lesbian and gay (LG) parents. Questions posed by courts and legislators have included: Do lesbians and gay men make good parents? How do their children turn out? Despite diversity among LG-parent families, results of research have shown that LG parents are generally well adjusted, that their children are developing in positive ways, and that families living in supportive circumstances seem to show the most positive developmental outcomes. This brief provides an overview of findings from social science research, as well as recommendations for policies to help LG-parent families to thrive.

### Diversity Among Lesbian and Gay Parents

Families headed by LG parents are sometimes viewed as a homogeneous group, but they are in fact very diverse.<sup>1</sup> Like other families, they vary on and are influenced by many characteristics, including race, ethnicity, education, and income. In addition to these shared forms of diversity, LG-parent families also differ in ways that are more specific to them.<sup>1</sup> For example, some LG parents have children in the context of marriages to heterosexual partners, before coming out as LG; after coming out, many rear children as divorced lesbian mothers or divorced gay fathers. This pathway to parenthood is less common today than it was 20 or 30 years ago, in part because of increasing opportunities for family building, but it is still a prominent mode of LG-parent family formation. In contrast, some LG parents have children in the context of LG identities, and their experiences are likely to be different in many ways.<sup>2</sup>

LG adults take many different pathways to parenthood after they have come out.<sup>3</sup> Some lesbian women conceive children via assisted reproductive technologies such as donor

insemination. Some gay men conceive children via surrogacy. Donors and surrogates may be friends or relatives, or they may be contacted through a clinic and remain unknown to the family. Other LG individuals become parents through adoption or serve as foster parents. Still others may conceive via sexual intercourse with a different-sex partner.

## Research on Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children

Considerable research with LG parents and their children has been conducted over the past 30 years by social scientists who are specialists in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and family science.<sup>4,5</sup> This research has addressed aspects of LG parenting, as well as children's development. In this section, we present an overview of findings from this research.

Research on LG parents has shown them to be generally healthy and well adjusted.<sup>5,6</sup> For example, in a study of divorced lesbian and divorced heterosexual mothers, mothers were found, regardless of sexual orientation, to be similar in self-reported mental health, as well as in observations of their behavior with children.<sup>7</sup> In another study of lesbian and heterosexual women who conceived children via donor insemination, mothers in both groups reported high self-esteem and few symptoms of mental health problems; they were also equally happy in their couple relationships.<sup>8</sup> A recent study of LG and heterosexual couples who had adopted children found all the parents to be well adjusted and successful in caring for their children.<sup>9</sup> In fact, many studies have reported that LG parents are indistinguishable from heterosexual parents in terms of overall mental health.<sup>6</sup>

Research has found LG parents to be succeeding in parental roles, and it has also revealed that their children are developing in positive ways. For example, in the previously mentioned study of divorced lesbian and divorced heterosexual mothers, children in the two groups were found to be developing in much the same ways; there were no differences in sexual, social, or psychological development among the children.<sup>7</sup> In the study of children conceived via donor insemination, both parents and teachers reported that children were developing in typical ways and that those with lesbian mothers were indistinguishable from those with heterosexual mothers.<sup>8</sup> In the study of LG and heterosexual adoptive couples and their children, teachers and parents reported that children in all three groups were generally healthy and doing well.<sup>9</sup> Overall, children of LG parents appear to develop in ways that are similar to children reared in families headed by heterosexual parents.<sup>4,5</sup>

Early research on children of LG parents often involved smaller, relatively homogeneous groups of families, but newer studies have been based on larger, more diverse samples.<sup>5</sup> The central findings described here have been confirmed in studies based on larger studies of representative samples. For instance, one set of studies was based on findings from a large nationally representative sample of American teenagers.<sup>10</sup> The central findings described here have also been confirmed not only for young children but also for older children and young adults. For instance, a number of studies interviewed young adults who grew up with lesbian mothers and came to conclusions similar to those described earlier here.<sup>4</sup> A few investigators have suggested different conclusions, but their work has been discredited by reputable scholars and by major scientific organizations.<sup>11</sup> As replications of results accumulate in studies from different investigators who are working with multiple samples, confidence in the soundness of these findings has increased.

## Contexts of Lesbian and Gay Parenting

Although LG parents and their children have been found to show good adjustment overall, there are marked variations in their social and political environments.<sup>12</sup> Legal and policy climates vary across national boundaries, social conditions may vary from one neighborhood to another, and attitudes may vary from one family to another. How do such variations affect the lives of LG parents and their children? Researchers have found that families who live in supportive environments are more likely to thrive.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Some research has examined differences across national boundaries. For example, one study focused on experiences of lesbian mothers who were living in Canada versus the United States. Conducted at a time when Canada recognized and the United States did not recognize the marriages of same-sex couples, the study found that mothers in the United States reported more worries about legal recognition of their family ties than did mothers in Canada.<sup>13</sup> Another study, conducted in the Netherlands and the United States, showed that in the more tolerant environment of the Netherlands, children of lesbian mothers were more likely to be open about their families with friends and less likely to report feeling stigmatized.<sup>14</sup> Thus, families who live in more favorable national environments seem to have fewer worries and to be more open than those living in other contexts.

Additional studies have focused on the qualities of neighborhoods in which families live. For instance, one study found that, among LG couples who were becoming adoptive parents, those who considered their neighborhoods supportive were less likely to suffer from depressive symptoms.<sup>15</sup> The same study also found that those who saw their families of origin as supportive were less likely to feel depressed. Thus, LG parents who live in favorable social contexts seem to have fewer symptoms.

The offspring of LG parents also seem to fare better when they attend schools with climates that are favorable for them.<sup>5</sup> Many researchers have studied the experiences of children of LG parents with regard to homophobic teasing or bullying, and all these have reported that children described this as a negative experience.<sup>4</sup> Some research has suggested that both LG parents and their children are less likely to feel alienated and more likely to have favorable experiences overall when school curricula and policies are explicitly inclusive of them. In one study, adolescents with lesbian mothers were asked about their views of the communities in which they lived. Results showed that youth who saw their neighborhoods and school environments as supportive also reported greater feelings of overall well-being.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

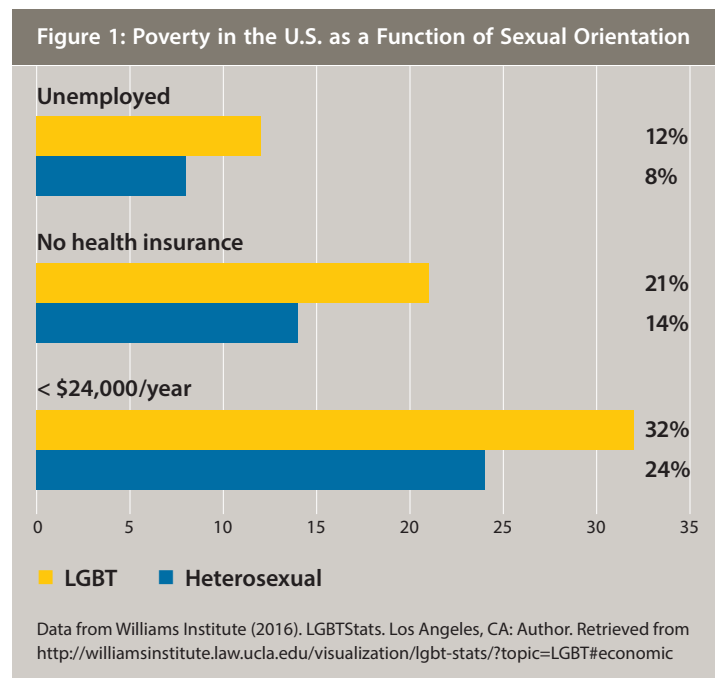
Overall, the findings from many years of research in this area have yielded some important conclusions.<sup>4,5,6</sup> First, LG individuals have been found to do well in parenting roles. Second, children reared by LG parents are well adjusted and seem to develop in positive ways. Third, when they live in supportive environments, LG parents and their children are more likely to thrive.

Research suggests that children of LG parents fare best when they live in environments that are characterized by support for their families.<sup>5,6</sup> Like those in other families, when children have positive relationships with grandparents, they seem to benefit.<sup>5</sup> When children view their schools and neighborhoods as supportive, they are more likely to thrive.<sup>4</sup> Family, school, and neighborhood contexts make a difference for both parents and children.

In the United States, recent changes in federal law have improved the climate for LG parents and their children. In 2013, in *United States v. Windsor*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that the federal government cannot refuse to recognize legally contracted marriages of same-sex couples. In 2015, in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the

right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex as it is to other-sex couples under the Constitution, thus legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the country. In this way, same-sex couples who wished to marry were given access to many rights and benefits, such as increased access to health insurance for their children.

While the legal terrain for same-sex couples in the United States has changed dramatically in the past few years, many concerns remain. Discrimination against sexual minorities in employment, housing, and other areas is still legal in most parts of the country. Across the country today, 22 states and the District of Columbia forbid employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, but the other 28 states do not offer such protections. Thus, in a majority of the states, discrimination against LG workers is legal. Even in states with nondiscrimination laws, religious exemptions have been introduced to allow for discrimination in some cases.<sup>17</sup>



In the United States, children of LG parents are also more likely than children of heterosexual parents to lack adequate financial resources. LG adults are more likely than others to be unemployed and to have low incomes.<sup>18</sup> Findings from a recent federal survey revealed that 12% of children living with different-sex couples but 20%–24% of children living with same-sex couples were living below the poverty line (see Figure 1).<sup>19</sup> Poverty among families headed by same-sex couples may be linked with employment discrimination.

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**Charlotte J. Patterson** is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia. Best known for her work on child development in lesbian- and gay-parented families, Patterson won APA's 2009 Distinguished Contributions to Research in Public Policy Award, and (with Rachel Farr) NCFR's 2015 Alexis Walker Award for best paper in the field of family science for 2013-2014.

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## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

**An important policy change that could improve the climate for LG parents and their children would thus be passage of a federal nondiscrimination bill, on the model of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, and other areas. In addition, closure of religious exemptions that allow for continued discrimination against sexual minorities would be a valuable step toward full equality. In these ways, the United States could ensure more inclusive and supportive environments for LG parents and their children.**

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