

This brief reflects an update from the November 2016 brief.

LGBTQ+ Parents and Their Children

by Charlotte J. Patterson, Ph.D., Rachel H. Farr, Ph.D., and Abbie E. Goldberg, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) parents and their children has found that both parents and children are generally well adjusted and that they do not differ in well-being or in multiple developmental outcomes from parents and children in the general population. In general, LGBTQ+ parent families living in supportive environments, and families with more social, financial, and legal resources, show the most positive adjustment. The legal climate in the United States for LGBTQ+ people and their families has improved in recent years, but significant legal and practical difficulties remain, including greater poverty among, and pervasive stigma and discrimination toward, families headed by LGBTQ+ parents. Federal, state, and local laws are needed that reduce the likelihood of discrimination against these families, including in domains of housing, education, and parenting. In addition, support is needed for research to explore the full range of experiences among diverse LGBTQ+ parents and their children, and to develop ways to help LGBTQ+ parents and their children to thrive.

LGBTQ+ Parents and Their Children

In recent years, considerable controversy has surrounded lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) parent families in the United States. Questions posed by courts, legislators, and others have included the following: Do LGBTQ+ people make good parents? How do their children “turn out”? Should LGBTQ+ adults be allowed to adopt and

foster children? Research has revealed that LGBTQ+ parents are generally well adjusted, that their children are developing in positive ways, and that those living in supportive circumstances seem to have the best chance to thrive. Considerable diversity characterizes LGBTQ+ parent families, however, and studies of LGBTQ+ parent families have focused more on sexual minority (gay, lesbian, or bisexual) than on gender minority parents.¹⁻⁴ In this brief, we

provide an overview of what is known about LGBTQ+ parents and their children from social science research. We also offer policy recommendations that, if implemented, can help these families to flourish.

Diversity Among LGBTQ+ Parents

Families headed by LGBTQ+ parents are sometimes viewed as a homogeneous group, but the reality is that they are quite diverse.²⁻⁴ Like other families,

TALKING POINTS

- LGBTQ+ parent families and their children are a diverse group.
- Overall, LGBTQ+ parents and their children are as well-adjusted as parents and children in the general population.
- Like others, LGBTQ+ parents and their children fare better when they have adequate resources and when they live in supportive environments.
- Even after the advent of marriage equality in the United States, LGBTQ+ parent families are still more likely than others to live in poverty.
- Supportive federal and state laws, such as a federal nondiscrimination bill, can help LGBTQ+ parents and their children to thrive.
- Increased research funding is needed to explore and to enhance the experiences among a full range of diverse LGBTQ+ parents and their children.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Passage of federal and state legislation (e.g., John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act) to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in housing, education, parenting, and other areas.
2. Elimination of religious exemptions in the law that allow for discrimination against members of sexual and gender minorities.
3. Increase research funding to explore the full range of experiences among diverse LGBTQ+ parents and their children.
4. Provide support for the development, evaluation, and dissemination of effective programs to help LGBTQ+ parents and their children to thrive.

Author Bios

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they vary in gender, race, ethnicity, education, geography, income, and pathway to parenthood.¹ LGBTQ+ parent families also differ in ways that are more specific to them. For example, some LGBTQ+ parents had children in the context of marriages or other relationships with different-gender partners, before they came out as LGBTQ+; after coming out, many rear children as divorced and/or single LGBTQ+ parents. This pathway to parenthood is less common today than in earlier years, partly because people come out at younger ages,¹⁰ and partly because of increasing opportunities for family building,¹ but it is still a prominent mode of family formation among LGBTQ+ parents.⁵ In contrast, others become parents after coming out as LGBTQ+ and/or in the context of relationships with same-gender partners.

Contexts of LGBTQ+ Parenting

Although LGBTQ+ parents and their children show good adjustment overall, there are marked variations among the social and political environments in which they live.⁵ Legal and policy climates vary across national and state boundaries, social conditions vary from one neighborhood to another, and attitudes vary from one family to another. How do such variations affect the lives of LGBTQ+ parents and their children? Research has consistently shown that minority stressors, such as stigma and discrimination, have negative effects on LGBTQ+ family members and that those who live in supportive environments are more likely to thrive.⁵

Studies of LGBTQ+ parents in the United States have indicated the importance of supportive laws and policies. For instance, legal marriage recognition has been shown to be associated with positive LGB identity and greater social support among same-gender couples.²⁸ In a study of more than 700 gay fathers by Perrin and colleagues, parents and their children were often found to face stigma and discrimination from religious institutions as well as from their families, friends, and neighbors.²⁹ In this same study, fathers reported more obstacles to becoming parents when they lived in states with fewer legal protections.²⁹ The children of LGBTQ+ parents also seem to fare better when they attend schools with supportive social climates. Thus, family, school, and community contexts affect both LGBTQ+ parents and their children.^{15,33}

Supportive federal, state, and local laws to address discrimination in housing, education, and parenting could be helpful for the well-being of LGBTQ+ families.

Please see the full brief for a complete set of references and more information about the authors.

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