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Parents and their Children: The Unique Challenges Associated with Same-sex Parenting

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Abstract

This paper explores the unique challenges faced by children raised in same-sex households, from early development to adolescent years. Key areas of focus include: children's early development, gender role behavior, gender identity, social and emotional development, adolescent development, and academic achievement. In addition to the direct effect that same-sex parenting has on child development, some studies explore the indirect impact of same-sex parenting, such as the social stigmatization, bullying, and peer relationship development due to parents' sexual orientation. With a unique focus on the impact of same-sex parenting on children, this review will discuss challenges faced by children as they grow up living in same-sex households, including how some adults, who have grown up in same-sex households, develop and maintain their identities. Societal bias in prior literature has caused researchers to primarily explore the negative effects of same-sex parenting; more contemporary research has continued to refute the claims made by the pervasive homophobia in historical research. The children of same-sex parents show little to no differences when compared to those reared in heterosexual households.

Key Terms:

- Gender Identity
- Gender Role Behavior
- Heteronormativity
- Same-sex Parenting

Introduction

Same-sex parenting is not new and has been more commonplace since the legalization of same-sex marriage (Lamb, 2014). According to Gattrell, Bos, and Goldberg (2010), there were approximately 600,000 same-sex households in the United States in 2010 and 115,000 of these households reported having children who live in the home. However, out of the children currently being raised in same-sex households, the majority of them were born into heterosexual relationships where one or both of the parents confirmed their homosexuality after beginning the family (Rekers & Kilgus, 2002). Nonetheless, we still find that only 50 percent of same-sex couples have absolutely no lawful association to each other (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008), meaning that the children from the former heterosexual marriage are now in an alternative family upbringing and may never be represented in the data calculations.

Children raised in a same-sex household still face certain disadvantages (Gattrell et al., 2010; Lamb, 2014). Same-sex parenting has been advocated and restructured as an alternative way of parenting. Children who grow up in non-heteronormative household environments are exposed to situational circumstances that affect the development of self, such as discrimination, homophobia, and stigmatization. With a unique focus on the impact of same-sex parenting on children, this review will discuss challenges faced by children as they grow up living in same-sex households, including how some adults, who have grown up in same-sex households, develop and maintain their identities. Further, this review will also highlight why some researchers see differences in the data between same-sex and heterosexual parents, but still hypothesize that there is no difference. To summarize, the goal of this review is to inform readers of the potential impacts of same-sex parenting on adolescent development, and

discuss the unique challenges identified that same-sex parents' children face.

Early Gender Socialization

Controversy grew as Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) argued that having same-sex parents had no effect on children's development because other researchers were concluding same-sex parenting actually did have differential impacts on children's development (Allen & Burrell, 1997). For example, recent studies show that lesbian and gay parents indirectly instill alternative attitudes about gender (Lev, 2010; Lamb, 2014; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Fearing that children of gay and lesbian parents would have a lifelong disadvantage in society, gender researchers began to study the effects of lesbian and gay parenting on their children. Understanding the lack of strictly enforced gender norms in same-sex households, initial studies of younger children were done using novel methods such as placing the participant in a room with traditionally gendered toys and observing the toys that they played with the most (Gattrell et al., 2010). Such studies revealed some minor differences such as slightly higher levels of gender fluidity and emotional expressiveness in the children of lesbian and gay parents (Manning et al., 2014).

Early gender socialization begins with the parent-child connection developed. The parent-child relationship is a product of both a child's gender role behavior from outside sources as well as indirect influences (Pennington & Knight, 2010). Children's gender role behavior is directly affected by whom they see as a role model and what is reinforced as correct behavior (Pervin, Cervone, & John, 2005, as cited in Pennington & Knight, 2010). When a child is exhibiting correct behavior, they are praised, reinforcing the habit. According to McCann and Delmonte (2005), ultimately a child will model the gender roles of the parent of the

same sex. The major concern to society with same-sex parenting is the lack of influence from the opposite gender, which may lead to gender role confusion (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). However, children are no more likely confused about their gender role behaviors than those children raised by heterosexual couples (Amato, 2012). Children do not only mirror gender roles from their parents, but also other people around them that they feel influenced by (Pennington & Knight, 2010). According to Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, and Patterson (2007), the approaches parents embrace about gender are seen to be the most influential factors on their children's own gender role development. The slight variances between gender opinions of children of gay or lesbian parents can be due to the parent's liberal attitude rather than a direct result of their sexual orientation itself (Sutfin et al., 2007).

Although a majority of researchers on the topic report that there is no difference, it is shown in recent research that there is a small difference in gender role behavior between children of same-sex and heterosexual parents, as shown in Crowl et al.'s (2008) study on gender role identity. The study indicated minor differences in gender role identity, such as the daughter of a lesbian mother showing more interest in conventionally masculine activities and behaviors or the sons of lesbian mothers expressing less aggressive play. However, Crowl et al. (2008) concluded that the small difference in gender role behavior has no major significant difference overall.

Regardless of evidence that concludes that there is no direct effect from gay and lesbian parents on their children's gender development (Chan et al., 1998), sociologists still argue that there is some underlying key issues regarding sampling and research methods to cause the minor disparities in research results of gender among children of same-sex parents and the children of heterosexual parents (Manning et al.,

2014). According to Lev (as cited in Lev, 2010), the major difference between heterosexual parents and same-sex parents is the uniqueness of how lesbian and gay families are formed. Families with same-sex parents are usually formed through adoption, however there are other options such as insemination, surrogacy, foster care, or other means (Lev, 2010).

Social Development in a Heteronormative Society

Unlike many heterosexual parents' children, lesbian and gay parents' children face greater prejudice because of the sexual orientation of their parents (Amato, 2012). Studies have shown that children, in particular boys that are raised in same-sex households, are more likely to be bullied and teased by their peers than a child from a heterosexual household (Redding, 2007).

Children that grow up in same-sex households learn how to negotiate this stigma as they learn and accept their parents' sexual orientation (Van Voorhis & McClain, 1997). As children receive messages and experience negativity living in a heterosexist and heteronormative society, they must begin to learn how to create their own identity in order to mediate the social feedback (Gelderens, Bos, Gatrell, Hermanns, & Perrin, 2012). As referred to here, identity can be measured through the examination of stigmatization, peer relations, gender identity, sexual orientation, childhood outcomes and adolescent outcomes (Manning, Fetto, & Lamidi, 2014).

When it comes to forming social relationships, children from same-sex households learn to first manage their own identity before initiating social relationships. According to Lamb (2014), many children feel the need to hide their family's identity in order to not feel different. They begin to feel as if they

must negotiate their relationship with their peers and decide when it is the best time to tell others that they are a child of same-sex parents (Lamb, 2014). They feel the constant fight of defending their family while trying to prove themselves as separate from their same-sex parents' sexual orientation (Lamb, 2014). In short, prejudicial attitudes about their parents (real or anticipated) affect the children of same-sex couples (Short, et al. 2007; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson 2004).

Social stigmatization is not a new concern, but has been a prominent concern since the early 1990s. It is even been used to show how same-sex parents might be unfit parents to raise children in custody battles between former heterosexual partners (Allen & Burrell, 1997). Also focusing on non-beneficial outcomes, Gershon, Tschann, and Jemerin (1999) found that children who perceived the greatest amount of stigmatization about their parents' sexual orientation had a lower self-esteem than heterosexual children. Regnerus (2012) also highlighted how social stigmatization has the potential to hinder child development and psychosocial adjustment. Researchers have explored how social stigmatization due to the parents' sexual orientation might result in an unfit environment for the child due to constant threats or bullying towards the child, effecting their psychological development in the future (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004).

Historically, in this society, heteronormativity has shaped the definition of a normal family and primary family experiences (Perrin & Siegel, 2013). Because of such dominant ideologies, same-sex families are immediately judged regarding what it means to be a family and how a family should function based on hetero-normative values in schools, neighborhoods, social structures, and the healthcare system (Manning et al., 2014).

According to Short et al. (2007), research findings do not reveal any significant difference in children's development. This may be due to same-sex parents' adaptations as an alternative family. This can mean that alternative families must constantly negotiate to legitimize their family in context of heteronormativity in order to minimize any difference and gain social validity and acceptance (Short et al., 2007). Given the family's intersection with multiple social institutions, heteronormative assessment systems are applied to children of same-sex parents. Although there has been extreme progress in LGBTQ rights, gays and lesbian are still looked at as different or outsiders. This indicates that society is still heterosexually dominant. The dominance of heterosexual ideologies impacts how families are defined and shaped (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009).

Adolescent Development

A key point of debate among many researchers is how the parents' sexual orientation impacts adolescent child development, particularly gender identity (Stacy & Biblarz, 2001; Patterson, 2006; Sullins, 2015; Short et al., 2007). The differences in the impact of parental advisement on children's gender identity do not suggest major differences in parent child relationships (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), however lesbian and gay parents may be responsible for having influence on their children's gender and sexual identity, which later affects them in adolescent years.

According to Marks (2012), research shows that children often model the gender expressions and expectations based on having both parents present (male and female). Researchers agree that children that are raised in gay, lesbian, or even single parent households may not grow to develop traditional gender identities (Marks, 2012; Regnerus, 2012). However, as Allen and Burrell (1997) concluded,

children with same-sex parents do not grow up to show gender identity confusion, nor do they exceed normal levels of adolescents engaging in same-sex activity. In fact, more recent findings suggest children that grew up in same-sex households develop a more stable gender identity and are more accepting of other gender identities than children from heterosexual households (Pennington & Knight, 2010).

Another controversial area of research explores whether children of same-sex parents are more likely to identify as gay or lesbian themselves (Perin & Siegel, 2013; Redding, 2007; Gershon et al., 1999). According to Garner (2005), not only is this controversial because it suggests that sexual identity is “communicable,” but the claim lacks support. Children of same-sex parents are no more likely to be gay or lesbian than a child of a heterosexual parent (Garner, 2005). A review of the literature by Rekers and Kilgus (2002) showed that there was little to no evidence shown for “intergenerational” transfer of sexual orientation from the parent to the child. There has been no research found to date that supports the claim that gay or lesbian parents are the cause of their own children having thoughts about the same-sex or becoming gay or lesbian (Patterson, 2006). The only significant evidence researchers found according to Crowl et al. (2008) suggests that adolescents raised in lesbian households are more likely to be proud of their mother’s sexual identity as a lesbian than children raised in heterosexual single mother households. Many of the adolescents indicated that they had seen the impact of stigmatization on their families and sought to enlighten the public through their own experiences with same-sex parents. These adolescents’ responses to stigmatization supports Wainright et al.’s (2004) theory which suggest that the relationship between child and parent is the most influential factor in the child’s perception of family identity and sexual orientation.

Another troubling issue some researchers like Amato (2012) and Crowl et al. (2008) point out is that children in heteronormative traditional households (heterosexual married parents), tend to do a lot better in school than their peers with nontraditional families. Others however, find that children with same-sex parents do not exhibit these sorts of outcomes associated with nontraditional families (Potter, 2012; Wainright et al., 2004). Lesbian and gay parents and their children continue to challenge traditional family structures and their influence on children’s development (Powell et al., 2010 as cited in Potter, 2012). Rosenfeld (2010) identifies that there are several reasons why children of gay or lesbian parents might not have the same academic readiness leading to higher retention rates than heterosexual parents’ children. Lesbian and gay parents are also subject to greater amounts of stigmatization within the school systems, which has a direct effect on their child’s performance in school (Potter, 2012).

It has been confirmed by Potter (2012) that the stigmatization faced does effect the children’s success in school causing the graduation rate for children with same-sex parents to decrease. Potter (2012) uses a study of academic achievement to demonstrate the disparities with those saying there is no difference between same-sex and heterosexual households. This study is used to show the consequences of family instability within same-sex families, however it is limited to academic achievement. The study is based on the means of children’s math assessment scores and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Also according to Allen (2013), there are significant differences for high school graduation between same-sex parents’ children and heterosexual parents’ children. Children of same-sex parents are about 69 percent more or less likely to graduate from high school compared to children from heterosexual households (Allen, 2013). Although this is still under question, it is seen by

Rosenfeld (2010) that children of same-sex parents have a greater distraction from school due to being bullied or teased by their classmates which causes them to not feel motivated about going to school. Research to date shows that many outside factors also contribute to a child's emotional well being, such as divorce. Although same-sex marriage just became legalized, in some areas it was institutionalized years ago. Divorce of parents cause long-term effects on children that persist into adulthood (Patterson, 2006; Lamb, 2014). Children who have experienced divorce, especially those from same-sex households, experience a greater level of emotional and behavioral problems (Lamb, 2014). For instance, using a convenience sample of both children and adults of same-sex parents, Lamb (2014) finds adolescents in same-sex families face a greater challenge of integrating their family identity with their own personal identity. This suggests that growing up with stigmatization associated with same-sex parented families can be a risk for children's psychological development.

Discussion

Overall, there is still conflict with research results because as Stacy and Biblarz (2001) show, adolescents in same-sex families score as highly on tests of psychological adjustment as those from heterosexual households, despite the stigmatization they face. Moreover, Short et al.'s (2007) review of recent studies have shown that there are no difference anxiety, psychological adjustment, and school. Some studies that Short et al. (2007) reviewed showed fewer indications of behavior and emotional problems in children with lesbian parents as compared to children with heterosexual parents. However, Sullins (2015) found while conducting a strengths and difficulties questionnaire that children of same-sex households were twice as likely to be above the mark for emotional or behavioral difficulties

as were children of heterosexual households. Also, gay and lesbian parents reported that their child experienced significant emotional problems over two times as often as the heterosexual parents (Sullins, 2015). Since this is the only indication of significant psychological concern, overall, the research on adolescent growth is indicating that children of same-sex parents are developing in positive ways (Wainright et al., 2004).

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