

Children of Lesbian and Single Women Parents

This Research Note summarises the existing empirical data on the psychological and social development of children raised in single woman and lesbian parented families.¹

A number of recent events has served to focus public attention on single woman and lesbian parenting.² Although these have related to unmarried (or non de facto) women seeking medically assisted reproduction, the broader issues of fatherless parenting and the child's interests have been prominent in the accompanying debate.

Background

Single women and women in a lesbian relationship can become parents through sexual intercourse or through self- or assisted insemination. Women may also gain custody of their child(ren) after separation or divorce, and in some cases may then co-parent with a female partner.

Adoption laws in all Australian States/Territories favour married couples.³ Also, legislation in some States purports to confine provision of medically assisted reproductive treatments to people who are married or living in heterosexual de facto relationships. Surrogacy arrangements are not legally enforceable in Australia.

In 2000, 18.6 per cent of families with children under fifteen had single women as parents (403 992).⁴ The 1996 Australian Census indicates there were also 8304 female same-sex couples. Reported analysis of ABS data indicated that 1483 (18 per cent) of these were

couples with children.⁵ Recent surveys also suggest that the rate at which lesbian couples are having children is increasing (14 per cent of respondents in 1993, 19 per cent in 1995, 22 per cent in 1999).⁶

There is little reliable data on how many single and lesbian women access assisted reproduction in Australia. However, an informal survey of accredited fertility centres conducted by the author indicates approximately 190 women in the last 12 months.

The Developmental Questions

A prominent claim in the current debate is that it is in the interests of the child and, moreover, a right of a child, to have the opportunity of the care and affection of a father (as well as a mother).⁷ Underlying this is the assumption that a child's psychological and social development is likely to be adversely affected by the absence of (good) father parenting, and by parenting by lesbian women.

In particular, some might hold that children parented by single women or lesbian-couples are significantly more likely to:

- become homosexual
- have an atypical gender identity/orientation
- have lower self-esteem from the social stigma of having lesbian parents
- experience behavioural and social maladjustment (in the case of children of single-woman parents)

Are these assumed effects *actual* outcomes of lesbian or single

woman parenting? Should all such putative outcomes be considered *adverse*?

The Developmental Evidence

There is a body of research evidence, spanning over 20 years, on the developmental outcomes of children of single woman and lesbian parents. This includes longitudinal studies which track the development of children over a number of years into adolescence and adulthood, as well as cross-sectional studies that comparatively investigate a child's development at a single time. Results are generally consistent across these various studies, for both single woman parent studies and lesbian couple parent studies.

Single motherhood appears to be a strong risk factor in negative social, behavioural and emotional outcomes for children. Some argue that this is due specifically to the absence of a male parent.⁸ However, there is strong evidence to suggest that these negative outcomes are the result of the age, educational, economic and social isolation disadvantages that often accompany single motherhood.⁹

With regard to lesbian parenting, studies tracking the long-term progress of children of lesbian mothers have revealed no significant differences between them and children of heterosexual mothers along any of the following key developmental dimensions:

- *Gender development*: children of lesbian parents are no more likely to have confused or unconventional gender identity or behaviour, or to have gay or lesbian sexual orientation.

- *Self-esteem and emotional wellbeing*: the behaviour, intelligence, psychiatric and emotional condition of children of lesbian parents is within the normal range.
- *Social development*: children of lesbian parents are within the normal range of confidence, and have positive peer relationships. They are no more likely to be teased or bullied than children of heterosexual mothers.

These longitudinal studies report on children of lesbian mothers separated from previous heterosexual relationships. There are fewer studies on children raised from infancy in lesbian parent families. Such studies nevertheless corroborate the findings of the longitudinal studies.

Some studies, however, do report that some children of lesbian parents exhibit some of the following developmental differences:

- are more willing to consider homosexuality as an option (even if not pursue it)
- are characterised as more affectionate and responsive, and report a greater sense of well-being and contentment about themselves
- fear stigmatisation, have a more negative reaction to stress, and remember teasing more

- perceive themselves as less intellectually and physically competent than children from father-parent families

Overall, though, the existing evidence indicates that the sexual orientation of parents does not appear to be a determinant of the success of a child's development. Nor does the presence of a father appear crucial for normal development. The available evidence, therefore, does not support the developmental assumptions mentioned earlier.

Strong as the existing evidence on lesbian parenting is, it is nonetheless based on certain types of study, which inevitably involve certain types of limitation. For example, subjects were generally English-speaking, middle-class, and voluntary participants. Findings were also generally based on participants' own verbal reports, and were conducted in either the USA or UK. These factors may have influenced findings, but it is not clear that they would have done so extensively.

Quality Families, Quality Development

None of the evidence above serves to denigrate the contribution of good father parenting. It does indicate, though, that it is the good parenting rather than the father parenting that is relevant.

Developmental research consistently reports that it is the

quality of family *processes*, rather than the nature of family structure (e.g. single, same-sex, or heterosexual couple parents) that is most important to the adjustment of the child.

The issue of what counts as appropriate development is also important. It is regrettably true that those with non-conventional gender or sexual orientations are likely to face adversity in their lives. But the assumption that those orientations in themselves should count as adverse or inappropriate developmental outcomes is entirely questionable.

In this matter, not only is some of the public debate open to criticism, but also some of the developmental literature.

Maurice Rickard Social Policy Group Information and Research Services

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1. A large number of research studies is summarised here. As an example, see S. Golombok et al., 'Children Raised in Fatherless Families from Infancy', *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, vol. 38, no. 7, 1997, pp. 783–91; R. Chan et al., 'Psychosocial Adjustment among Children Conceived via Donor Insemination by Lesbian and Heterosexual Mothers', *Child Development*, vol. 69, no. 2, 1998, pp. 443–57; B. Fitzgerald, 'Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents', *Marriage & Family Review*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1999, pp. 57–75.
2. For example, *McBain v Victoria* (2000) 177 ALR 32; *Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill (No 1) 2000*; *Re McBain*; *Ex parte Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*; *Re McBain*; *Ex Part Attor* [2002] HCA 16 (18 April 2002).
3. Some States and Territories also allow adoption by heterosexual de facto couples. Single people generally can adopt only in 'special' or 'exceptional' circumstances. Recent legislation in Western Australia will allow gay and lesbian couples to adopt: *Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Act 2002* WA.
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends 2001*.
5. Reported in K. Mikhailovich, S. Martin and S. Lawton, 'Lesbian and Gay Parents: Their Experiences of Children's Health Care in Australia', *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2001, pp. 181–91.
6. Significant Others, 'Australian Lesbians Get Used to Being Called Mum', *Press Release*, 30 March 2000.
7. Prime Minister John Howard, Press Conference, Canberra, 1 August 2000. Also, Melbourne Radio 3AW, 19 April 2002.
8. For example, H. B. Biller and J. I. Kimpton, 'The Father and the School-aged Child', in M. E. Lamb, ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, Wiley, New York, 1997, pp. 143–161.
9. When these disadvantages are not present with single motherhood, the negative outcomes are not either. See, for example, S. Golombok, *Parenting: What Really Counts?*, Routledge, London, 2000. Also see S. McLanahan and G. Sandefur, *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1994.