Adjustment of Children in Planned Lesbian Parent Families

Alexandra Reagan

California State University, Sacramento

Child Development 138, Social and Emotional Development

Dr. Sheri Hembree

May 13, 2009
Adjustment of Children in Planned Lesbian Parent Families

More than ever, children are being raised in nontraditional family structures, such as gay and lesbian parent families. It is estimated that 14 million children have been born into lesbian parent families between the early 1980s and 2008 (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser and Sandfort, 2008). As such, it is essential to understand the experience of children raised within these alternate family structures. The purpose of this paper is to review the current research concerning the risks and benefits that children of lesbian parent families face in regards to child adjustment.

In the past, much of the research on children of lesbian parents has involved children conceived in a heterosexual relationship, with one parent subsequently partnering with a member of the same sex. However, this research is not representative of the planned lesbian parent (PLP) families that are becoming more common today, families in which two women who already identify as being lesbians choose to enter into parenthood together as co-parents. The changing structures of today’s families have raised questions concerning the consequences such structures have on a child’s development. The research reviewed here demonstrates that children raised in PLP families are at no more risk for adjustment problems than children raised in heterosexual parent families. Instead, children’s adjustment outcomes are associated with family processes, such as parental characteristics, family interactions, the presence of a known or unknown donor, and the level of acceptance in the social climate.

Recent evidence supports the hypothesis that there are no adjustment differences between children raised in PLP families and children raised in heterosexual parent families. For example, Bos, Balen and van den Boom (2007) compared children of PLP families and children of heterosexual parent families in the measures of child adjustment, parental characteristics and child-rearing variables. The study sample was comprised of 100 PLP families and 100
heterosexual parent families, all of whom were Dutch. Bos et al. (2007) referred to biological co-parents in PLP families as lesbian mothers and to non-biological co-parents as lesbian social mothers, and emphasized the differences between the roles of each mother. Children included in the study were between four and eight years of age. Bos et al. (2007) administered questionnaires, conducted observations and had parents keep a diary of activities. Questionnaires included standardized tests such as the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/4-18), an assessment of internalized and externalized problem behavior, a subscale of the Parental Stress Index (PSI), and scales which assess parenting practices, including a subscale of the Child-Rearing Goals List, the Child-Rearing Practices Report (CRPR) and the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI).

Results indicated that children of PLP families are at no more risk for adjustment difficulties than children of heterosexual parent families. Instead, significant effects for child adjustment were related to parental characteristics and child-rearing variables, and lesbian social mothers scored higher than heterosexual fathers in these characteristics. For example, lesbian social mothers reported more satisfaction with their partner as a co-parent than heterosexual fathers did. In assessments of child-rearing variables, lesbian social mothers scored higher than heterosexual fathers in parental concern and emotional involvement, while heterosexual fathers scored higher than social mothers in power assertion. The results of this study contradict many of the arguments made by gay marriage opponents today, who claim that the effects of being raised in a PLP family will negatively affect a child’s adjustment. Bos et al. (2007) found no differences in measures of child adjustment among families of heterosexual parents versus PLP families, and in fact, found evidence of more positive family processes in PLP families than in heterosexual families.
Other research offers similar support for the “no differences” hypothesis. Chan, Raboy and Patterson (1998) also studied children’s adjustment with respect to parental sexual orientation, exploring the dynamics of family structure, family process and psychological adjustment in children conceived via donor insemination. A total of 80 families were drawn from a list of former clients of The Sperm Bank of California to be included in the study, 55 of whom were headed by lesbian parents, and 25 of whom were headed by heterosexual parents. Children in the study were on average seven years of age. Measures were organized into three areas: child adjustment, parental adjustment and parental relationship satisfaction. Data on child adjustment were collected using various assessment techniques, including the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Teacher Report Form (TRF). Parents and teachers described children in the sample as socially competent, well adjusted and not having any unusual behavior problems. Researchers were unable to distinguish between children who were raised in lesbian parent families and those who were raised in heterosexual parent families. These results found by Chan et al. (1998) indicated that both types of family structure supplied quality home environments which were beneficial to children’s development; therefore, parenting skills are not determined by sexual orientation. These findings contradict the view that a family structure comprised of heterosexual parents essential to child’s well-being. Chan et al. (1998) also found child adjustment to be dependent upon levels of parental adjustment. Children who exhibited more behavior problems had parents who demonstrated higher levels of parenting stress and interparental conflict, as well as lower levels of love for each other. This data supports the hypothesis that children’s adjustment is not affected by family structure, but rather by family processes and interactions.
There are challenges that can arise within PLP families related to the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) which may not be present within families headed by heterosexual parents, such as the presence of a known or an as-yet unknown donor parent. Bos and Hakvoort (2007) investigated the variations in parenting and child adjustment between PLP families with a known donor parent versus PLP families with an as-yet unknown donor parent. The study sample included 42 PLP families with a known donor and 58 PLP families with an as-yet unknown donor. Children in the study sample were between four and eight years of age. Questionnaire data were obtained in three different areas: child adjustment, parenting experiences and child-rearing. Child adjustment was assessed by means of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/4-18). Parenting experiences were measured in terms of stigmatization experiences, parental stress and parental justification. The incidence of stigmatization was evaluated using the Leidse Mobbing Schaal (LEMS) and the Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terrorization (LIPT). Parental stress was assessed by a Dutch questionnaire called the Nijmeegse vragenlijst voor de opvoedingsituatie (NVOS), which determines levels of parental burden (feeling burdened by the child) and parental incompetence (not being able to handle the child). Parental justification was evaluated using a scale which has been developed using data collected in small-scale qualitative studies of lesbian parenting. Child rearing was defined by measures of emotional involvement and parental concern, components which were assessed using the Child-rearing Practices Report (CRPR). Bos et al. (2007) found children’s adjustment outcomes to be associated with the presence of a known or unknown donor. Their findings suggest that the presence of an as-yet unknown donor does not appear to negatively affect children’s adjustment. First, children with an as-yet unknown donor did not differ from children with a known donor on internalizing, externalizing or total problem behavior scores of
the CBCL. Second, mothers in both types of families reported similar parenthood experiences, including parental stress, burden, incompetence and justification. Third, mothers did not demonstrate significant differences in child-rearing attributes such as emotional involvement and parental concern. In contrast, Bos et al. (2007) also found that children of a known donor tended to exhibit more social problems than children with an unknown donor. Regardless, the dynamics that can be introduced to families by the use of ART emerge as family processes and not as family structure; therefore, the findings of Bos et al. (2007) support the hypothesis that family processes are the main effect on children’s adjustment, not family structure.

Aside from family processes, another critical component to the dynamic of child adjustment in PLP families is the level of acceptance for PLP families in the surrounding social climate. To examine the effects of social climate on adjustment of children in PLP families, Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser and Sandfort (2008) compared 78 PLP families in the United States with 74 PLP families in the Netherlands. Families in the United States were drawn from the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) and families in the Netherlands were selected from the ongoing study mentioned above, known as Parenting in Planned Lesbian Families. The United States sample was limited to the wave of data that had been collected when children were 10 years old, to better match the age of children studied in the Netherlands sample, who were 11 years old. The instrument of assessment in each sample involved conducting an interview of questions regarding peer disclosure and experiences with discrimination. In the United States sample, interviews were held by way of telephone, with the request that parents allow children to respond in privacy, so that parents would not influence children’s responses. In the Netherlands sample, interviews were conducted in an hour-long, face-to-face meeting with the child, in which no siblings or parents were present. To measure children’s openness with
peers and experiences with discrimination, questions such as “Are you out to your peers about having a lesbian mother?” and “Did other kids ever say mean things to you about your mom(s) being a lesbian?” were included in the interview. Bos et al. (2008) found that children of PLP families in the United States demonstrated more emotional and behavioral problems than children of PLP families in the Netherlands. In addition, children in the United States had experienced more encounters with homophobia than children in the Netherlands and felt significantly less open with their peers about their private lives, such as the sexual orientation of their mothers. These results imply that the well-being of children of PLP families is affected by the amount of homophobia they experience as well as the level of disclosure they maintain with peers about their family. Children in the United States who reported high levels of homophobia scored higher on problem behaviors and levels of anxiety/depression, rule-breaking behavior and aggressive behavior. Likewise in the Netherlands, children who reported instances of homophobia scored higher on problem behaviors and thought problems. These findings evince that regardless of country of residence, discrimination has a negative effect on child adjustment. Bos et al. (2008) concluded that the differences in psychosocial adjustment between children of Dutch PLP families and children of American PLP families reflected the level of social acceptance for PLP families in each country. The discrimination against gay and lesbian families in the United States finds institutional support in society in the form of the legal regulations against same-sex marriage and parenthood that are upheld in nearly every state in the nation. The results found by Bos et al. (2008) suggest that it is crucial to recognize the significance of social climate in the life of children raised in PLP families. The more acceptance society has for PLP families, the more positive the developmental outcomes will be for a child in a PLP family.
Likewise, environments that are hostile to the lesbian parent family structure can contribute to adjustment problems in children of PLP families.

In conclusion, research demonstrates that children of PLP families are at no more risk for adjustment problems than children of heterosexual parent families. Rather than family structure, family processes were found to be most significant in children’s adjustment. For instance, parental attributes, within-family relations and the possible complications that can arise with ART have been shown to be associated with children’s well-being, while parental sexual orientation and quality of parenting are unrelated. Research indicates that adjustment in children in PLP families can also be affected by the level of social acceptance the family experiences.

As mentioned earlier, only recently have studies been conducted with lesbian parent families in which the decision of lesbian mothers to enter into parenthood together as co-parents preceded the conception of their child. As such, the data presented in this analysis is particularly valuable in that it was limited to planned lesbian parent families. In addition, the study samples were relatively large. Furthermore, all findings reviewed here are particularly current as each study was published in the past ten years. This research is also especially unique because the data incorporated includes a multi-variable approach to understanding the effects of the planned lesbian family structure on child adjustment, such as children with a known versus an as-yet unknown donor. It is crucial for researchers to take into account factors such as these as well as all of the possible effects on child adjustment in PLP families. Lastly, a cross-cultural approach was taken by comparing families in the Netherlands to families in the United States as a means of investigating the role of social climate in child adjustment.

Limitations of the research reviewed here include the reliance on report measures such as questionnaires. In addition, current studies on gay and lesbian families do not require that their
heterosexual counterparts be limited to heterosexual parents who struggled with conception of their children, and therefore had to either use ART or adoption. This can affect results in a number of ways; thus, researchers must screen heterosexual families for infertility to better increase the matching similarities between PLP families and heterosexual parent families who are used as counterparts. An additional limitation of the research on gay and lesbian parent families as a whole is the exclusion of fathers who are gay.

One of the family processes that future research must address is the interactions present in families headed by gay fathers. We cannot expect to predict adjustment outcomes of children in gay father families based on research conducted with children of lesbian parent families. The relations in gay and lesbian parent families must be further examined in order to comprehend the experiences of children in these families as well as to better understand all types of family structure. Further research on planned lesbian parent families will continue to help clarify the relations between child adjustment, family processes and family structure for all types of families.
References


