Adjustment of Children in Planned Lesbian Parent Families

Alexandra Reagan

calliecat652000@yahoo.com

California State University, Sacramento

Child Development 138, Social and Emotional Development

Dr. Sheri Hembree (hembrees@csus.edu)

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More than ever, children are being raised in nontraditional family structures, such as gay and lesbian parent families. As such, it is essential to understand the experience of children raised with 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 been conducted with 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 has raised questions concerning the consequences such structures have on children’s development. The research reviewed here demonstrates that children in PLP families are at no more risk for adjustment problems than children 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. 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 (nonbiological mothers) scored higher than heterosexual fathers in these characteristics. For example, lesbian social mothers reported more satisfaction with their partner as a coparent 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 PLP family will negatively affect a child’s adjustment. Bos et al. found no differences in measures of child adjustment among families of heterosexual parents versus planned lesbian parent families, and in fact, found evidence of more positive family processes in the PLP families than in the 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 family structure and 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 were on average approximately 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 the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Teacher Report Form (TRF). Parental adjustment was measured via the administration of the following assessments: the Parenting Stress Index (PSI / SF), the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). Parental relationship satisfaction was measured through the use of the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT) and the Braiker and Kelley Partnership Questionnaire. Results indicated that children who exhibited more behavior problems had parents who demonstrated higher levels of parenting stress, higher levels of interparental conflict, and lower levels of love for each other. The data collected by Chan, et al. (1998) supports the hypothesis that children’s adjustment was 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 unknown donor parent. However, this circumstance does not appear to negatively affect children’s adjustment. For example, when 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 unknown donor parent, they found no differences between children of known donors and children of as-yet unknown donors. The study sample included 42 PLP families with a known donor and 58 PLP families with an as-yet unknown donor. Children 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 was 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 opvoedingssituatie (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). No differences were found between children with a known and those with an as-yet unknown donor on internalizing, externalizing or total problem behavior scores of the CBCL.

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. Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser and Sandfort (2008) compared 78 PLP families in the United States with 74 PLP families in the Netherlands to examine the effects of social climate on adjustment of children in PLP families. Families were selected from a broader study, known as the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS). Children were a mean age of approximately 11 years in the Netherlands sample, and 10 years in the United States sample. The instrument of assessment was identical in each study and involved conducting an interview of questions regarding peer disclosure and experiences with homophobia. In the American study, 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 Dutch study,
interviews were conducted in an hour-long, face-to-face meeting with the child, in which no siblings or parents were present. To measure openness with peers and experiences with homophobia, 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 Dutch children of PLP families demonstrated fewer emotional and behavioral problems than American children of PLP families, and that part of this difference was due to high levels of discrimination against PLP families found in the United States. These results suggest that it is crucial to recognize the significance that social climate plays in the life of a child raised in a PLP family. Studies support the idea that the more societal acceptance there is for PLP families, the more positive a child’s developmental outcomes will be. 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. Thus, children’s well-being is more linked to family process than family structure, and parenting ability and sexual orientation are unrelated. Further, there are no demonstrable differences related to method of conception. Research also indicates that adjustment in child in PLP families can also be affected by the level of acceptance the family feels.

As mentioned earlier, only recent research has been with lesbian parent families in which the decision of lesbian mothers to enter into parenthood together as coparents preceded conception of their child(ren). As such, the research presented in this analysis is particularly valuable in that this variation was eliminated by including only planned lesbian parent families.
In addition, the study samples were relatively large. Furthermore, all research reviewed here is recent, having been published in the past ten years, making this research especially current. This research is especially unique in that the data incorporated includes a multi-variable approach to understanding the effects of the PL family structure on child adjustment; for example, variables which are specific to a PLP family in the context of child adjustment, such as known or as-yet unknown donor. Factors such as this are crucial to taking into account 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.

One limitation of current research involves the use of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) and adoptive services. Current studies on gay and lesbian parent 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. As research reviewed here suggests, family processes are most relevant in child adjustment. As such, each of the family processes mentioned in these investigations (e.g. satisfaction with the partner as a co-parent, parental stress, parental concern and emotional involvement, presence of a known or an as-yet unknown donor, and social climate, etc.). 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. Future research must address the family processes and interactions present in families headed by gay fathers to understand the experience of children in
gay father families, as we cannot expect to predict adjustment outcomes of children in gay father families based on research conducted with children of lesbian parent families.
References


