

Gay Parenting *Does* Affect Children Differently, Study Finds

—Authors Say It “Has Some Advantages”

Taking issue with 20 years of research conclusions that say there are no differences, two University of California sociologists recently re-examined data from 21 studies on gay parenting dating back to 1980.

The new study by two University of Southern California sociologists says children with lesbian or gay parents show more empathy for social diversity, are less confined by gender stereotypes and are probably more likely to explore homosexual activity themselves.

Authors Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz suggest these differences have been glossed over because gay parenting is so politically controversial. Writing in recent issue of the *American Sociological Review*, the authors say that while the emotional health of the two sets of children is essentially the same, they are different in some notable ways that have been downplayed.

Leaders of national groups supporting gay families welcomed the article.

“I’m thrilled that they’re tackling these issues,” said Aimee Gelnaw, executive director of the Family Pride Coalition, who is a lesbian parent raising two children with her partner. “Of course our kids are going to be different,” Gelnaw said. “They’re growing up in a different social context.”

Kate Kendall, head of the San Francisco-based National Center for Lesbian Rights, also is raising two children with her partner. “There’s only one response to a study that children raised by lesbian and gay parents may be somewhat more likely to reject notions of rigid sexual orientation — that response has to be elation,” Kendall said.

Amy Desai, a policy analyst with the group Focus on the Family, said the new report is alarming in its suggestions that children of gay parents might be more open to homosexual activity. “Kids do best when they have a married mother and a married father,” she said.

The study’s co-author, Judith Stacey, is a professor of contemporary gender studies. In addition to pointing out the gender differences in the two groups of children, she states that there are in fact some advantages to an all-female parental team without Dad living in the home: a female couple tends to be more involved in the children’s lives and is in greater harmony in terms of parenting approaches.

Among the findings she cited:

1. Compared to the daughters of heterosexual mothers, the daughters of lesbians more frequently dress, play and behave in ways that do not conform to sex-typed cultural norms.

They show greater interest in activities with both masculine and feminine qualities. They have higher aspirations to occupations that are not traditionally female.

2. In terms of aggression and play, sons of lesbians behave in less traditionally masculine ways. They are likely to be more nurturing and affectionate than their counterparts in heterosexual families.

3. One study examined by the researchers indicated that a significantly greater proportion of young adult children raised by lesbians had engaged in a same-sex relationship (six of 25 interviewed) than those raised by a heterosexual mother (none of 20 interviewed).

4. Those raised by lesbian mothers were also more likely to consider a homosexual relationship.

5. Teen-age and young adult girls raised by lesbian mothers appear to be more sexually adventurous and less chaste than girls raised by heterosexual mothers. Sons, on the other hand, were somewhat less sexually adventurous and more chaste than boys raised by heterosexuals.

6. The studies indicate that sexual orientation has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on the mental health of children.

“These studies find no significant differences between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers in anxiety, depression, self-esteem and numerous other measures of social and psychological adjustment,” said the authors.

NARTH’s Joseph Nicolosi commented: “This paper was authored by a professor of gender studies, so it is not surprising that the differences on which she focused have to do with a rejection of gender conformity. Indeed, what she found makes sense—lesbian mothers tend to have a feminizing effect on their sons, and a masculinizing effect on their daughters.

“But the question is, are these differences healthy? More research is needed to understand how a rejection of conventional gender roles can have not just a healthy and expansive, but also a constricting and negative effect on identity and psychological health.

“And despite what many gender researchers claim, research tells us that the absence of a father in the home is not, on balance, good for families.” ■

(Source: *The Los Angeles Times*, “Professors Take Issue With Gay-Parenting Research,” April 27, 2001, and “Report: Kids of Gays More Empathetic,” by David Crary, National Writer, Associated Press)