

Growing Up in a Lesbian Family: Effects on Child Development

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Gay and Lesbian parents and their families have recently been the subject of heated political debate and the object of considerable public scrutiny. The avenues that some gay and lesbian people have pursued to publicly reflect and register private commitments such as gay and lesbian marriage and second parent adoption are at risk of being foreclosed via conservative legislation. Arguments against lesbian and gay parents in courts across the United States continue to be founded upon notions of normality that have been historically defined in part by the psychological and, in particular, psychoanalytic establishments. Such arguments have often prevailed in court decisions involving the fate of infants and young children who are not able to speak for themselves.

In the decades since Stonewall—the first incident of gay activism to capture broad public attention—however, mental health professions have reckoned with and rethought homosexuality as a mental disorder. In 1973 the American Psychological Association declassified homosexuality as a diagnostic category, asserting that homosexual object choice in and of itself does not constitute a psychiatric disorder. In 1995 the American Psychological Association published an annotated bibliography reviewing 25 years of research on gay and lesbian parented families that overwhelmingly refuted concerns that parents' sexual object choice alone presents a threat to children or an impediment to their development (Public Interest Directorate, 1995). In keeping with such findings, it is the trend within contemporary psychoanalytic literature to adopt a neutral rather than an *a priori* pathologizing stance in relation to homosexuality (Frommer, 1994; Renick, 1994; Spezzano, 1994).

Because gay and lesbian families have emerged as an explicit social category only in the last few decades, studies have been limited in terms of examining the long-term effects for children of being raised within this particular alternative family constellation. Nevertheless, nearly 300 children of gay and lesbian families have now been included in studies considering the immediate developmental implications for children currently being raised by gay and lesbian parents. Results of these studies contribute to the growing understanding that the sexual orientation of the parent does not pose a threat to children's emotional well-being. Still, the paucity of information regarding the long-term effects for children of being raised by gay and lesbian parents permits the promulgation of myths to which psychologists, social workers, lawyers, and judges often subscribe in making decisions around custody disputes.

Growing Up in a Lesbian Family: Effects on Child Development provides a detailed account of results from The British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families. This project comprised the first longitudinal study examining the effects on psychosocial and psychosexual

development for children raised by lesbian mothers. Beginning in the mid-1970s, this study examined lesbian mothers with children averaging 9.5 years of age (at the time of the study) and compared these families to single, divorced heterosexual mothers with children of the same age group. The investigators then sought these same families 14 years later to interview the children regarding their experiences of having been raised by lesbian as compared with heterosexual mothers through adolescence and into young adulthood.

In particular, the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families examined areas of concern most frequently cited by the courts, which repeatedly preclude lesbians from securing primary custody of their children. The authors reviewed the findings of this study in light of these perpetuating concerns. In addition to a meticulous and exhaustive account of the results of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families, the authors provide a thorough review of the literature which illuminates false beliefs about lesbian parents—common myths or misgivings—which are frequently stated as fact to discredit lesbian parents who are fighting for custody of their children.

For example, despite current trends within psychiatry and psychology, judges frequently rule based on the belief that homosexuality in and of itself constitutes a mental illness, thus calling into question the fitness to parent of a woman who identifies herself as lesbian. Related to this idea is the belief that lesbians are not as maternal as heterosexual women and would, therefore, be compromised in their ability to be sufficiently nurturing or attentive to their children. And lesbian relationships with sexual partners are thought to be unusually consuming, leaving little time for ongoing, mutually satisfying parent–child interaction. The British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families found that, “. . . there were no differences between the lesbian and heterosexual mothers in the stability or the type of relationship that they had become involved in after the father departed” (p. 57).

Other concerns have to do with the effects of lesbian parents on the psychosexual development of the children that they raise. It is believed that children of gay and lesbian parents may develop gender identity confusion. A related concern holds that children of gay and lesbian parents are more likely to be homosexual. Findings in the British Longitudinal Study indicated that there were no significant differences between children from lesbian and children from heterosexual families in the areas of sexual identity or sexual object choice.

Another area of concern identified by these authors and frequently stated in judicial child custody decisions is that children raised by lesbians will suffer from deficits in their personality, and will experience increased vulnerability to mental illness. Of the long-term psychological effects of being brought up in a lesbian household, these authors state that there were no significant differences between the two groups in levels of anxiety or depression, reliance upon psychiatric services, or subjective experiences of happiness.

The final area of concern considered in this book anticipates that children of lesbian parents will have difficulty in relationships with peers and other adults outside their home. It is feared that children of lesbian parents will be ridiculed, stigmatized, or rejected by peers or adults. The results of this study suggest that mothers’ attitudes about their own sexuality and mothers’ abilities to appreciate their child’s related struggles as they emerge are the most salient variables in determining whether the child will feel successful in negotiating his or alternative family arrangement within the broader cultural context.

Growing Up in a Lesbian Family carefully and responsibly reflects upon each of these areas of concern in considering the results of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families, as well as the numerous other studies referred to throughout the book. Results from these many studies categorically refute the concerns detailed above. The authors are, nonetheless, careful to appraise the limitations of each study. They painstakingly trace the nuances of the findings reviewed, and consider the implications of such findings on both the families in ques-

tion and the culture at large. Overall, this is a necessary and important contribution to sociology, psychology, law, and any other profession concerned with matters involving the best interests of children and parents together.

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