



REAL FAMILIES, REAL FACTS: Research Symposium on LGBT-headed Families

As part of its *Real Families, Real Facts* public awareness campaign, Family Pride co-sponsored the first-ever multi-disciplinary symposium focused on the latest research about LGBT parents and their children. This conference, co-sponsored with the University of Pennsylvania's LGBT Center, took place on May 22-23, 2006 at the Radisson Plaza-Warwick Hotel in Philadelphia, PA.

This historic event was a tremendous success. It provided an opportunity for the leading researchers and scholars studying LGBT-headed families with children to come together to present and discuss their current research findings. Presentations were led by researchers from across the United States, as well as from Canada and Europe. A wide range of disciplines were represented, including sociology, psychology, medicine, law, social work, economics and education.

Planning of all aspects of the Symposium was overseen by an Academic Advisory Committee consisting of researchers from a variety of fields of study. Lively discussion took place during most of the presentations. As will be described below, many exciting and important findings emerged at this Symposium – and many topics for future research were identified.

Family Pride plans to host another Research Symposium in 2008. As soon as the date and location are determined, an announcement will be available on Family Pride's website (www.familypride.org).

Abstracts from the papers presented are available separately. Following is a summary of common themes that emerged across the research studies presented.

Common Themes that Emerged from the Research Presented at the Symposium

No Major Differences in Children Raised by Same-sex Parents

- A wide body of research was reviewed, all of which consistently finds that ***there are no critical differences in the emotional, physical and social well-being of children raised by same-sex parents vs. children raised by opposite-sex parents.*** These findings have been replicated across studies, using a variety of measures, such as: academic performance / school outcomes; quality of peer relationships; self-esteem; psychological adjustment and quality of family relationships.^{1, 2, 16, 25}
- A growing body of research also suggests that ***overall, children with same-sex parents are similar in sex-role identification to children of heterosexual couples, though some studies suggest there may be slight differences.***^{1, 2, 16, 25} A few noteworthy findings presented include:
 - One study of 33 4-to-6 year old children raised by lesbian parents and 33 children raised by heterosexual couples, found that overall, parents' gender-related attitudes and patterns of activity seem to be more strongly associated with individual differences in children's gender development than is parental sexual orientation. Furthermore, regardless of parental sexual orientation, in families where childcare labor was specialized, children reported occupational aspirations that were more consistent with traditional gender role stereotypes.²³
 - Another study of 20 gay fathers and 18 lesbian mothers suggests that many homosexual parents are quite invested in raising children who are comfortable with typical gender roles, though they are also more tolerant and open to a wider range of gender roles / identities. Parents with children of a different gender usually involve others of the child's gender to serve as role models, even if they believe they can appropriately raise children of a different gender. These role models are generally chosen to conform to heterosexual societal norms.²⁴
- A number of studies indicated that ***from most children's perspective, the only negative impact of having same-sex parents is other peoples' reactions to their family.***^{16, 25} Some school-aged children of same-sex parents have been targets of homophobia. According to a longitudinal study of 84 lesbian headed families, about one in five 5 year olds had experienced homophobia from peers or teachers (according to their mothers). By age 10, both children and mothers report that this figure roughly doubles – about two in five 10 year olds have experienced homophobia.²⁵

- One study suggests that children who have experienced homophobia seem to have more behavioral and social problems, based on CBCL Problem Scores (a standardized instrument that provides a parental report of the extent of a child's behavioral problems and social competencies).²⁵
- Due largely to concerns about the reactions they will receive from peers and other adults, only a little more than half of the 10 year old children in this study describe themselves as 'completely out' (open) about their family. Most of the remaining children are 'out to some'. Furthermore, about one-quarter of moms indicated they themselves are less 'out' as their child approaches adolescence.²⁵

Despite many legal obstacles, lesbians and gay men are adopting and fostering in increasing numbers

- In many areas of the country, lesbian and gay male individuals and couples face legal challenges and uncertainties in trying to adopt a child. Florida expressly prohibits homosexual individuals from adopting and measures have been proposed in other states that could make it impossible for openly homosexual individuals to adopt in those states as well. Furthermore, the vast majority of lesbian and gay couples live with the daily uncertainty and stress associated with only one partner being legally recognized as the child's parent. Only a handful of states have state-wide procedures to allow gay and lesbian couples to jointly adopt a child, via second-parent adoption.¹⁷
 - Preliminary findings from a recent study suggest though that gay men and lesbians are currently adopting and fostering in significant numbers in most states.¹⁸
- Findings from one of the first studies of LGB foster parents confirm that homophobia is an ongoing hindrance to placing children in the homes of gay men and lesbians. In a study of 30 gay men, 25 lesbians and 5 bisexual women, approximately one-in-three had encountered legal challenges to foster parenting.¹⁴
- Another study explored the potential relationship between state adoption laws and policies and exits to adoption from foster care. The proportions of foster youth waiting for adoption in states with "anti-gay," "neutral," and "gay-friendly" adoption policies were compared. Though causality has not been established, states with anti-gay adoption policies had larger proportions of children in foster care who were waiting for adoption than states with gay-friendly or gay neutral

adoption policies. ***Foster children in “anti-gay” states are 7.6 percentage points less likely than children living in “neutral” states to be adopted.***¹³

Gay male and lesbian parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to share parenting responsibilities

- The parenting styles of lesbian and gay male couples are somewhat different from one another – and both styles are different from that of many heterosexual couples, among whom childrearing continues to be largely the domain of mothers, rather than fathers.
 - ***Lesbian couples tend to be egalitarian – dividing household and paid / ‘outside the home’ work equally.***^{2, 16, 25}
 - ***Gay males seem to share parenting more than heterosexual parents, but less than lesbian parents.*** Gay men appear more likely than lesbians to have defined roles. However, they also seem to divide labor very differently than either heterosexual or lesbian couples. Rather than assigning roles based on gender or trying to split all roles equally, gay men tend to choose their roles based largely on personal preferences and abilities.^{2, 5}
 - One study in particular suggests that gay male couples often ‘degender’ the role of parenting.⁵

External and extended family support for gay and lesbian-headed families is sometimes lacking, particularly soon after children are born or adopted.

- A study of lesbian-headed families with children conceived by donor insemination (DI) suggests that with the passage of time, many grandparents are more likely to publicly acknowledge their daughter’s lesbian family. In this longitudinal study, about one in three lesbian couples perceived their parents as ‘out’ (publicly open) about their family when their grandchild was 2, while approximately three out of four were reported to be ‘out’ when their grandchild reached age 10.²⁵
 - Another study, conducted in Canada and France suggests that biological related grandmothers have somewhat more frequent contact with their grandchildren than non-biologically related grandmothers.¹²

- In another study of 15 lesbian couples who adopted a child internationally, some perceived initial ambivalence among extended family members due to in part to homophobia, underlying racism and “adopted” status. However, most reported that over time, eventual love for the child and the desire to be a grandparent resulted in an ongoing connection with at least one grandparent.²¹
- In addition to dealing with homophobia and reactions to race or ethnicity of adopted child (when different than that of the parents), gay adoptive fathers face additional challenges including overcoming societal expectations of fathers as secondary, rather than primary parents, Some gay couples initially feel isolated after adopting a child as their relationships with family and friends change.⁶
- A study of single gay fathers suggests that though these parents have many positive experiences as parents, they receive very limited parenting support and they tend to feel particularly excluded from both the gay community and the parenting community overall.⁷
- Other studies suggest though that support and acceptance outside the community – including among schools and teachers varies significantly, and is often related to the type of community in which a family resides.^{19, 20} Results from another study of gay, lesbian and heterosexual adoptive parents and their children suggest that parental sexual orientation is not a significant predictor of adoptive family functioning; adopted children’s behavior or parental perceptions of helpfulness from family support networks.²²

Children of same-sex married couples in Massachusetts generally experienced their parents as ‘married’ and committed, both before as well as after their parents’ wedding ceremony

- In a study of 14 married same-sex couples in Massachusetts with children, couples generally indicated that having children influenced their decision to marry, or the timing of their marriage, due to a strong desire to secure legal rights and protections and to provide added ‘legitimacy’ to the family, for the sake of the children. Couples often perceived both the experience of being married and the wedding ceremony as extremely meaningful and impactful.³

- Though their children enthusiastically supported their right and choice to marry and enjoyed the wedding ceremony, most reported that their parents' legally marrying had more impact on their parents than on them. Most already considered their parents 'married' prior to the wedding ceremony, based on their family relationship and / or a previous commitment ceremony. Furthermore, the children perceived their day-to-day life as quite consistent before and after the wedding – again, due to their longstanding perception of their parents and family as committed to one another. It is noteworthy that though these children strongly support their family having equal rights, few indicated any depth of knowledge regarding the specifics of how their family's legal rights changed with marriage – whereas, all the parents were very aware of their newly obtained rights.³

Most LGB youth aspire to marry or have a partner and raise children

- Marriage and child-rearing aspirations of LGB youth – a study of 83 gay males and 50 lesbians aged 15 to 22 suggests that the vast majority of LGB youth expect to be married / partnered and raising children as an adult.¹⁵

Additional Research on LGBT-headed families is needed

- A panel including advocates for adopted children and LGBT-headed families discussed the many uses of sound academic research in their work. These advocates stressed the critical need for additional academic research to be used as support evidence in policy and legal decisions – especially in light of anti-gay groups' use of supposed research findings that are unscientifically based – and which continue to be widely reported despite the fact that they lack any basis for credibility.⁸
- Academic researchers identified numerous topics on which more data is needed. In addition, the following sub-groups were identified as particularly underrepresented in the academic literature: 'non-white' same-sex families; families headed by a transgender parent; and gay fathers and their children (though this is beginning to change).

References / Research Presented at the Symposium

¹ *"Research on children of same-sex parents: A historical perspective across 30 years"* Dr. Susan Golombok, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

² *"How does the gender of parents matter?"* Dr. Judith Stacey, New York University & Dr. Tim Biblarz, University of Southern California

³ *"These are my parents: The experiences of children in same-sex parented families during the first year of marriage legalization in Massachusetts"* Dr. Georgia Hall, Wellesley Centers for Women

⁴ *"In the best interests of the children? Marriage rights and children of lesbian and gay parents"* Dr. Katherine Arnup, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

⁵ *"Queer eye for the straight family: Gay headed families as an adaptive resource for mainstream families"* Dr. Carl Auerbach, Yeshiva University & Dr. Louise Silverstein, Yeshiva University

⁶ *"Adaptation and transformation: The transition to parenthood for adoptive gay male couples"* Dr. Mark Gianino, Boston University

⁷ *"Process and outcomes: Lessons learned by studying single, gay adoptive fathers"*, Dr. John Matthews, Eastern Washington University & Dr. Elizabeth Cramer, Virginia Commonwealth University

⁸ *"Advocacy & Academics – The interconnectedness of research and politics"* Adam Pertman, Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute; Shannon Minter, Esq., National Center for Lesbian Rights & Jennifer Chrisler, Family Pride Coalition

⁹ *"Thirty-five years of LGBT parents in court: An historical overview"* Prof. Nancy Polikoff, American University

¹⁰ *"The uses and misuses of social science research in legal decisions about gay and lesbian families"* Prof. Joan Hollinger, University of California, Berkeley

¹¹ *"Planned gay fathers: Parenthood & family functioning"* Dr. Henny Bos, The University of Amsterdam

¹² *“Children’s contacts with grandmothers in multi-parent lesbian headed families: Does biological linkage matter?”* Dr. Danielle Julien, University of Quebec, Montreal

¹³ *“Exploring the impact of gay adoption laws on foster care outcomes”* Kate Kovalanka & Sarah Hayes, University of Maryland

¹⁴ *“Gay, lesbian and bisexual foster parents: Lessons from the field”* Dr. Chris Downs, Casey Family Programs & Dr. Steven James, Goddard College

¹⁵ *“LGB youth: Marriage and child-rearing aspirations”* Dr. Anthony D’Augelli, Dr. Arnold Grossman & Jonathon Rendina, Penn State University

¹⁶ *“Adolescents with same-sex parents: Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health”* Dr. Charlotte Patterson, University of Virginia

¹⁷ *“Adoption and gay and lesbian households: A survey of the law in the 50 states and the District of Columbia”* Valerie Blanks, Esq. & Didier Jean-Baptiste, Esq., Kaye Scholer LLP

¹⁸ *“Demographic information on GLB parenting and implications for adoption and foster care policy”* Dr. Lee Badgett, UMass, Amherst / Williams Institute, UCLA

¹⁹ *“Rainbow Illinois: Lesbian and gay parents in the heartland”* Dr. Ramona Faith Oswald, Dr. Angela Wiley & Carl Rabun III, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

²⁰ *“I can’t think of anything I would do differently for parents who are lesbian or gay: Rural early childhood educators’ thoughts and practices concerning lesbian and gay parents”* Dr. Robin Fox, University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

²¹ *“Parental perceptions of diversity and early childhood attachment processes within international adoptive lesbian families”* Dr. Susanne Bennett, The Catholic University of America

²² *“An analysis of adoptive family functioning, children’s adoptive behavior and family support networks among families with gay and lesbian parents”* Dr. Stephen Erich, University of Houston - Clear Lake

²³ *“Parental sexual orientation and children’s gender-role development”* Dr. Megan Fulcher, Washington and Lee University

²⁴ *“Baseball games and bra-shopping: Gay dads and lesbian moms talk about engendering children”* Dana Berkowitz & Maura Ryan, University of Florida

²⁵ *The USA National Lesbian Family Study”* Dr. Nanette Gartrell, University of California, San Francisco

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