



Children of GLBTQ Parents

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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Despite over three decades of research that has repeatedly shown that children of glbtq parents are no different from their peers reared in heterosexual families, glbtq families and their advocates continue to feel the need to justify their family structures and find ways to support them in a world sometimes hostile to their identities. Recently, *queerspawns* themselves have added their own voices to the discourse.

Gay and Lesbian Baby Boom

Since the 1990s, same-sex parenting has exploded in the United States, Canada, and much of Western Europe, becoming increasingly visible and prompting scholars like Suzanne Johnson and Elizabeth O'Connor to observe that the "gay and lesbian community is experiencing a baby boom."

The birth of children to glbtq celebrities such as Rosie O'Donnell, B. D. Wong, Dan Savage, and Melissa Etheridge has also helped make the gay and lesbian baby boom more visible in the mainstream media.

Scholars estimate that six to fourteen million children in the United States have at least one gay or lesbian parent involved in raising them. Using data from the 2000 Census, Sean Cahill and Sarah Tobias have calculated that "34 percent of lesbian couples and 22 percent of gay male couples have at least one child under eighteen years of age living in their home."

Although many children of same-sex couples were conceived in traditional heterosexual relationships, same-sex couples often decide to produce children themselves, utilizing such methods as adoption, artificial insemination, and surrogacy. They make their decision to have children for the same reasons as do heterosexual couples. Some wish to cement the bonds of love they feel for their partner with a larger commitment to sharing the responsibilities of raising a family. Others want to feel connected to the next generation and enrich themselves by nurturing another life, while still others may simply wish to help children who have been abandoned or mistreated by their biological parents.

Yet glbtq parents typically face many more challenges in having children than do heterosexual couples, and they have to be more thoughtful both as to how they have children and how they care for them in a legal and cultural climate that is often extremely hostile to their interests.

Lesbians may decide to get pregnant through artificial insemination, but in some states they are not allowed to seek the assistance of medical providers if they use a known donor; and in most jurisdictions the non-biological mother may not be acknowledged on the child's birth certificate. Gay men may wish to adopt, but may be deemed ineligible by some adoption agencies or prohibited outright in some states. Or they may hope to have a woman serve as their surrogate, but face exorbitant fees and the possibility of



Two photographs from *Family Portraits* (2003) by artist Amber Davis Tourelentes. Images courtesy of the artist's [web site](#).

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legal complications.

Once same-sex couples actually have a baby, securing parental rights for both parents remains difficult and in some states impossible. In states that do not recognize same-sex marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships, glbtq parents often exist in legal limbo. Some parents turn to private contracts to designate parenting rights and responsibilities, but it is unclear whether these will be respected by the courts, especially in states hostile to glbtq rights.

Despite these challenges, same-sex couples and glbtq individuals have turned to parenting in increasing numbers in the past three decades.

Initial Research on the Children of GLBTQ Parents

Since the 1970s, a growing body of scholarly literature assessing glbtq parenting has emerged. Most of this scholarship has been conducted within the disciplines of psychology, sociology, law, and medicine. Overall, this research refutes the charges commonly leveled by opponents of glbtq parenting that children are harmed by being reared by glbtq parents or same-sex couples and even the more benign suggestion that the optimum parenting model is a married heterosexual couple.

This research initially focused on children being reared by divorced lesbians whose children had been born in heterosexual marriages. Coming out during the rush of second-wave feminism and the early gay liberation movement, these women were often subjected to difficult custody battles in which their legitimacy as mothers was challenged.

To measure the impact of their mother's lesbianism on these children, researchers typically compared the development of children of divorced lesbian mothers with those of divorced heterosexual women. As Charlotte Patterson notes, these studies found "few significant differences" between the two groups.

According to Saralie Bisnovich Pennington, normal childhood development depends on the "*quality of mothering*" rather than the mother's sexual orientation." In her 1987 clinical study of children of lesbians, all of whom were born in heterosexual contexts, she identified three main issues that confronted these children: concern about disclosing their mother's sexual orientation, daughters' worries about becoming lesbian, and anxiety about custody issues.

Although these issues were significant, she concluded that the "quality of the relationships in the household" was far more important for the children than the mother's sexual orientation. In this way, her initial research exemplified how some researchers sought ways to mitigate "societal homophobia" and help lesbian mothers and their children's teachers and therapists better assist their children adjust to their mother's coming out, divorce, and new lesbian relationships.

Shifts in Research

As many scholars have noted, there were significant limitations in the early studies. For some, the heterosexual origins of these children raised questions about whether the results could be extrapolated to children who were adopted or conceived via artificial insemination. For others, the limited number of participants and sampling procedures undermined the studies' credibility.

These criticisms prompted further research that focused more precisely on children who were born into same-sex families, most commonly to lesbian couples who had children through artificial insemination or adoption.

For example, in the 1990s Charlotte Patterson conducted the Bay Area Families Study, which examined the impact on children from the ages of 4 to 9 who had been adopted by or born to lesbian mothers. Like earlier studies, Patterson concluded that "it was quite possible for lesbian mothers to raise healthy children."

Acknowledging the sampling flaws in her initial work prompted Patterson and other researchers to continue developing studies that were based on more representative samples. Her work studying the development of children born from artificial insemination compared children conceived in lesbian and heterosexual families who had been clients of the Sperm Bank of California.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Patterson and colleagues were also able to study the impacts on adolescent children over longer periods of time. Similar to the results found by British scholars Susan Golombok and her colleagues, such research has shown that children of lesbian mothers develop in healthy ways and are not harmed by having same-sex parents.

Gay Male Parents

Research on the children of gay men is much more limited, in part because in the 1970s and 1980s gay men who came out in heterosexual marriages and divorced were either less likely to fight for custody or simply were deemed unlikely or unfit parents in a system that favored women and heterosexuals.

Those gay men who did maintain ties with their children after coming out often faced difficult decisions as to when and how to disclose their sexual orientation to ex-wives and children. The need for such discretion may explain why fewer gay men were visibly parenting during this time.

Still, the few early studies of the children of gay fathers from previous heterosexual relationships suggest that a gay father's sexual orientation has little negative impact. Frederick Bozett argued that when a father comes out to his child in this situation, "there is little change in the father-child relationship." He, in fact, suggested that this step often resulted in a "more mutually intimate relationship."

Even in the past ten years, research on the children of gay men has been less robust than on the children of lesbian mothers. Scholars tentatively suggest that children raised by gay men are not negatively impacted, but too few studies have been completed to justify this conclusion with as much certainty as in the case of lesbian mothers.

But those studies that have been completed do suggest similar findings, especially on the effect of children's sexual orientation. According to a study conducted in the mid-1990s, in which 82 sons at least 17 years of age of 55 gay or bisexual men were interviewed, 9% of these sons were identified by their fathers as nonheterosexual and 91% as heterosexual, prompting the authors to conclude that the "large majority of sons of gay fathers are heterosexual."

Reviews of the Literature

As Charlotte Patterson has observed, viewed collectively "the results of existing studies . . . yield a picture of families thriving, even in the midst of discrimination and oppression."

Norwegian researchers conducted a review of studies completed from 1978 to 2000 and came to similar conclusions. Surveying 23 empirical studies, which in total included 615 children of lesbian mothers or gay fathers, ranging in age from 18 months to 44 years, Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytterøy concluded that their review "did not reveal evidence that children of lesbian mothers differed from other children on emotional adjustment, sexual preference, stigmatization, gender role behavior, behavioral adjustment, gender identity, or cognitive functioning."

Still, scholars have begun to recognize more carefully the subtle distinctions between the different ways that same-sex couples and glbtq people have children. As scholars have noted, children born to lesbian mothers via artificial insemination face different issues--especially in terms of access to medical history and learning more about their origins--from those who were conceived in heterosexual relationships, where the trauma of their parents' separation or divorce may be more of an issue than their mother's sexual orientation. Despite this awareness of potential differences, studies that focus specifically on children who were adopted or exclusively on the children of gay men who choose to parent after coming out are still lacking.

Although a scholarly consensus has emerged that children reared by same-sex couples reveal no major differences in terms of emotional adjustment and development from those reared in heterosexual families, some scholars have probed this research to discover subtle differences in these children.

For example, Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz's 2001 review of 21 studies on the children of gay and lesbian parenting published from 1981 to 1998 suggests that children who grow up in families with same-sex parents or that accept homosexuality may, in fact, reveal particular strengths. They observed that children of lesbian mothers were less likely to adhere to or believe in traditional gender roles. Moreover, despite the difficulties they sometimes faced from the homophobia of peers, many children of glbtq parents ultimately developed strong identities based on their differences.

Same-Sex Marriage Debates

In recent years the debate surrounding same-sex marriage has intensified the discussion about glbtq parenting. Often opponents of same-sex marriage and gay rights generally use their putative concern for children as the focus of their opposition. For example, they describe marriage's primary purpose as the rearing of children, in spite of the fact that producing children has never been a legal or religious requirement for marriage, and argue that since same-sex couples are unable to have their own children biologically they ought not to be able to marry (though they never argue that infertile heterosexual couples should be prohibited from marrying).

At the same time, they also discredit same-sex couples who have or want children by arguing that such families harm children or do not deserve civil recognition for their partnerships because homosexuality is immoral and antithetical to family values. For such opponents, the welfare and interests of children are best served by a family headed by a man and a woman who are married.

In rebuttal, however, proponents of same-sex marriage argue that by denying same-sex couples the rights and privileges of marriage, many of which foster a more stable environment for children, the state endangers children being reared by same-sex couples. They rightfully point out the contradictory logic of those who oppose same-sex marriage in the name of protecting children by highlighting the lack of legal protection afforded same-sex couples and their children without access to the rights and responsibilities of marriage.

Recent political debates in Canada illustrate the tendency of those who oppose same-sex marriage and glbtq parenting to ignore research that undermines their political goals. In 2003, after opponents of same-sex marriage called for additional research into child-rearing by same-sex couples, the Liberal Canadian government commissioned a study by developmental psychologist Paul Hastings on child development in a number of different family structures.

Hastings reached the same conclusion as other reputable researchers: children are not harmed by being reared by homosexual parents. His study even found that children might slightly benefit from this experience, because same-sex parents tend to share child-rearing and household responsibilities more

equitably, thus creating a more harmonious household, and they are slightly more effective at socializing their children.

Moreover, Hastings noted that glbtq parents may work harder at being good parents precisely because they are aware of the discrimination that their children may face: "Perhaps anticipating that their children may be at risk of social disadvantage due to discrimination, gay and lesbian parents may put extra effort into meeting the needs of their children and providing them with strong social and emotional resources."

When Hastings' study was completed in 2007, however, the government of Canada had changed, and Stephen Harper's Conservative government was committed to reversing Canada's historic legalization of same-sex marriage. Despite the demand for additional research by opponents of same-sex marriage, the government buried Hastings' study even though it was supremely relevant to Parliament's debate on whether to reopen the question of same-sex marriage. The report came to light only as a result of a suit under the Access to Information Act.

As marriage equality activists in Canada assert, Hastings' report was suppressed because it did not support the Conservative government's political stance toward same-sex marriage and glbtq parenting.

Support for GLBTQ Parenting

Data from the 2000 Census suggests a steady growth in glbtq parenting. As Cahill and Tobias point out, 46 percent of heterosexual couples are parenting, while 34 percent of lesbian couples and 22 percent of gay male couples are. This means that lesbian couples are parenting at roughly three-quarters the rate of heterosexual couples and gay male couples at half the rate.

Researchers have also found that glbtq African Americans are raising children at higher rates than white same-sex couples. Census data from the previous two decades, along with research from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, suggests that 40 percent of African-American lesbian and bisexual women are parents, 25 percent of whom are raising their children in their homes. Fifteen percent of African-American gay or bisexual men are fathers, with 4 percent of them living with their children.

Perhaps surprisingly, children of glbtq parents are more prevalent in rural and Southern states, which, as Cahill and Tobias note, are also the areas most hostile legally to glbtq individuals and families. Advocates for these children continue to publicize this basic message: "family structure is not a strong determinant of a child's well-being, and lesbian and gay parents can raise children as well as heterosexual parents can."

In contrast to those conservative organizations and individuals who continue to lobby against glbtq parenting, national organizations that advocate on behalf of children have highlighted the research on same-sex parenting in their attempts to defend the best interests of the children in these families. Since 2002, a number of prominent professional organizations have publicly stated their support for glbtq parenting, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers in conjunction with the APA, and the American Psychoanalytic Association.

For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics has stated that "children who grow up with 1 or 2 gay and/or lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, social and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual."

Networks of Support

One way that children of glbtq parents and their families have found support in the face of hostility has been through creating national and local networks.

In 1979, a group of gay fathers formed the Gay Fathers Coalition, which in 1986 expanded to include lesbian mothers, and in 2007 became the Family Equality Coalition, the name change representing its goal of securing equality for all families.

In 1988, the Family Pride Coalition organized a meeting at their annual conference for children of glbtq parents. A year later, similar workshops were offered, which prompted the youth to form their own steering committee with the intent to start their own organization devoted to their own needs and interests.

COLAGE

Initially called Just for Us, the group changed its name to COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) in 1993. At that time it produced a newsletter that reached approximately 500 families as its primary means of supporting children of glbtq families across the nation.

In 1995, COLAGE opened a national office in San Francisco with an all-volunteer staff. As the organization grew and began to incorporate children of bisexual and transgender parents into its programs, it also began to foster and support a number of local chapters, all the while preserving its youth-centered focus. It became an official non-profit in 1999 and now supports a full-time, professional staff, but COLAGE continues to address the needs of children of glbtq parents from their own perspectives. It is now the primary organization in the country that does so.

As of 2004, there were over 50 chapters in the United States, with two chapters in Canada and a chapter devoted to COLAGE members in Sweden and England. Among the services COLAGE offers are a pen pal program, leadership training for COLAGE members, advocate training for glbtq family issues, scholarships, and Second Generation, a support group/network for children of glbtq parents who are either questioning their own sexual orientation or who identify as glbtq.

One of the more important programs that COLAGE sponsors is its Speak OUT Program, which trains young people to respond to media and community requests for children of glbtq parents to share their stories with the larger public.

COLAGE has been particularly active in the Bay Area, where it has supported advocacy of glbtq families in creative ways. In 2003, COLAGE's Youth Leadership Action Program created an exhibit of images, text, and art titled, "That's So Gay: Portraits of Youth with LGBT Parents," which documented their lives and experiences.

Donor Sibling Registry

Children born via artificial insemination--both to same-sex and heterosexual parents--have also developed networks of support. In September 2000, Wendy Kramer and her son Ryan founded the Donor Sibling Registry, a non-profit organization devoted to helping children born through artificial insemination connect with their sperm donors and half-siblings. Although the organization assists anyone involved in this process--sperm, egg, or embryo donors, as well the children born from these donations--most of the connections that DSR facilitates have been between half-siblings.

As the children born from artificial insemination have grown up, they have begun to advocate for their own interests, which sometimes conflict with a system that has traditionally privileged anonymity. Testifying to the importance of biology even in family contexts that have otherwise proven supportive and nurturing, many of these children desire to know their sperm donors and the other children he fathered. Of the over 3600 matches that have been facilitated by DSR, many of them involve the creation of half-sibling family

networks, which allow these children to develop relationships with each other. Some of these reconfigured families spend holidays or parts of their summer vacations together as a way to connect with an extended family.

Summer Camps

In the past ten years a number of glbtq community centers have developed summer camps as one way to support glbtq youth and children of glbtq parents. One of the overarching goals of these camps has been to provide these children with a yearly retreat where they are able to meet and form supportive relationships with children from similar backgrounds. Often children of glbtq families feel isolated, so the opportunity to discover children who share their backgrounds is especially important to them.

In 2005, there were fourteen camps for children of glbtq parents and their families, seven of which focused primarily on children. The most recent addition then was Ten Oaks, a camp in Ontario, Canada, which was formed to provide these children with a traditional camp experience without the need to explain or justify their families' structures.

Other well known camps include the Seattle LGBT Community Center's Camp Ten Trees in Washington state and Mountain Meadow in southern New Jersey, an hour outside of Philadelphia. These camps stress the power of immersing these families and children in the natural world as a means through which to develop powerful connections with new friends and feel honored and supported in their families.

In this way, these camps work to normalize the experience of children with glbtq parents and empower them to make a difference in their everyday social worlds.

A related event is the Family Pride Coalition's annual Provincetown Family Week, where thousands of glbtq families gather to celebrate and network and, perhaps most of all, introduce children to other kids whose families are similar.

R Family Vacations, a commercial travel venture, specializes in family-friendly vacations and cruises designed especially for the glbtq community.

Queerspawn Speak for Themselves

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, publications emerged that presented the experiences of children of glbtq parents in their own words. In contrast to much of the scholarly research, these accounts reflect a much more personal sense of the complex experience of growing up as a child of glbtq parents.

These writers generally affirm their families and express love and appreciation for their parents, but their interviews, essays, and memoirs also record the difficulties of their experience and paint a more nuanced and complex portrait of how children respond to growing up with glbtq parents. They register embarrassment, self-consciousness, fear, resentment, shame, and guilt, in addition to respect and gratitude. (These emotions and ambivalences are, of course, also common among children of heterosexual parents as well.)

For example, a fifteen-year-old daughter of a gay man stressed the difficulties of negotiating her father's coming out, her parents' divorce, and its impact on her: "Sometimes it's crappy being with my family, but I love them anyway."

"Having a gay dad can be challenging," she told Jane Drucker, "but it doesn't really bother me. Any adult, gay or straight, who cares about you, loves you, and doesn't abuse you in any way gives you a healthy family."

Another daughter of a lesbian couple said, "Knowing that they are gay has taught me to be honest about my feelings with them, because they have always been honest with me."

In 2000, editors Noelle Howey and Ellen Samuels published the first collection of personal essays written by the children of glbtq parents. These personal accounts do not shy away from the more challenging realities that children must face as they come to accept their glbtq parents.

As Laura Zee admits of her transgender father, "Truth is, I was ashamed of my dad. I thought it was freaky that he felt the way he did. And as long as I pretended to myself and others that he was 'normal,' I didn't have to face my guilt about those feelings."

Despite this painful acknowledgment, Zee slowly progressed in her own understanding and acceptance of her father's gender identity. Even though theirs is not a perfect relationship, she knows that the road to full acceptance will take time. "I wished I could tell my dad," she writes, "who had always been there for me, that I was proud of him, too. I couldn't. I'm not there yet. But I'm getting closer."

Zee's essay is characteristic of the volume's more complicated advocacy for glbtq families. Written by children from their own experience, it does not flinch from telling the entire story, even the parts that might not allay the fears and misunderstandings of many Americans.

In one of the most moving of the essays, Stefan Lynch, the son of the late Toronto activist Michael Lynch and a closeted lesbian mother, recalls how he grew up fearful of the ever-present threat of violence from antigay haters and hostile police and how this experience affected him. "When I hid the truth about my family, I thought it was because I didn't want to be ostracized. I was a bit nerdy and awkward and out of place already without adding to it by outing my parents. But now I can more fully appreciate how my anxiety about antigay violence motivated my silence. I only caught a glimpse of that anxiety's true impact once or twice a year: usually at a Gay Pride march, when every step felt lighter, like a weight I didn't know was there had gone away."

As children of glbtq parents mature and come into their own as adults, activists, and writers, they are increasingly speaking on their own behalf, taking ownership in a debate that ultimately affects them most.

Abigail Garner's 2004 book, *Families Like Mine: Children of Gay Parents Tell It Like It Is*, perhaps most clearly exemplifies this impulse. Presenting a less than politically correct take on glbtq family advocacy, Garner speaks as the daughter of a gay man. Her primary purpose is to support other children of glbtq parents as they struggle through the difficulties that can beset them. Consequently, she does not idealize or glamorize glbtq families or minimize the toll that homophobia sometimes takes on the children of such families.

Perhaps the most exciting recent development in the advocacy for the children of glbtq families is the creation of a term: *queerspawn*. The term, coined by Stefan Lynch and employed by Garner, has been embraced by a new generation of children who have incorporated the campy irreverence of queer activism and adopted it for their own identities.

In identifying as queerspawn, they assert their membership in a larger glbtq community even if they are heterosexual.

The term is used as the name of a blog in which children exchange stories and experiences online, as well as of an online audio documentary project that hopes to produce narratives by the children of glbtq families.

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