

# SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

*Examining Identity and Development in  
Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People*

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## LESBIAN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN: FINDINGS FROM THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES STUDY

MEGAN FULCHER, ERIN L. SUTFIN, RAYMOND W. CHAN,  
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Parenthood is often considered to be the prerogative of heterosexual adults. In fact, substantial numbers of lesbians and gay men are parents, and many American children are being reared in families headed by these parents (Patterson & Friel, 2000). Such families have become the subject of a number of controversies in legal and public policy domains in recent years (Patterson, Fulcher, & Wainright, 2002; Patterson & Redding, 1996). Social science research on lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children has also emerged, and a considerable research literature has accumulated (Patterson, 2000, 2004).

The most visible group of nonheterosexual parents may be lesbian mothers. Many lesbian mothers conceived and gave birth to children within the context of heterosexual relationships but assumed a lesbian identity later in life (Kirkpatrick, 1996). More recently, observers have commented

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on the growing numbers of women who have chosen to have children after assuming a lesbian identity, and this trend has sometimes been referred to as a *lesbian baby boom* (e.g., Patterson, 1994; Weston, 1991). Similar trends can be observed among gay fathers, but perhaps because of their prominence in child custody cases (Patterson et al., 2002), lesbian mothers have generally drawn more attention from researchers.

To determine whether being raised by lesbian parents results in different outcomes for children, as has often been assumed in the legal system, researchers have designed studies that examined the social and personality development of such children. A few studies have focused on the normative development of children born to or adopted by women who already identified as lesbians (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000; McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1995a, 1995b; Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998; Steckel, 1985, 1987). Overall, these studies indicated that children of lesbian mothers were developing normally.

Similarities were revealed between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents across a wide array of assessments of cognitive and behavioral functioning (Patterson, 2004; Perrin, 2002). More recently, Gartrell and colleagues (1996, 1999, 2000) have analyzed data from a longitudinal study of 84 lesbian-headed families who conceived their children through donor insemination. They reported that at the age of 5, the children were developing normally, and that in most cases, both parents were actively involved in the child's upbringing (Gartrell et al., 2000). These findings provide valuable information about the development of children born to lesbian mothers, as well as about the adjustment of such families over time, yet many questions remain in need of study.

One important issue concerns parental division of family labor and partners' satisfaction with their division of labor. In many families headed by heterosexual couples, mothers are responsible for the bulk of household and child-care labor (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Lesbian couples, however, are more likely to report dividing household and child-care labor equally between partners (Kurdek, 1993; Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996). Lesbian couples also report generally high satisfaction with division of labor arrangements in their households (Flaks et al., 1995; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992). If lesbian couples with children maintain equal division of labor, and if they are satisfied with these arrangements, then parents' satisfaction with these arrangements may be associated with positive outcomes for their children.

Another important issue concerns the nature and extent of children's social networks. In particular, grandparents can contribute to the healthy development of their grandchildren on many levels, both directly and indirectly (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Until recently very little information has been available about the social networks of lesbian mothers and their children

(Allen & Demo, 1995; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Laird & Green, 1996; Patterson, 1998). In the absence of research, it has sometimes been assumed that lesbians may be estranged from their families of origin. For instance, informal reports suggest that grandparents may be less likely to remain in contact with children being raised by lesbian daughters as compared with those being raised by heterosexual daughters (Patterson, 1996; Saffron, 1996). Some anecdotal reports suggest that such stereotypes are incorrect (Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991), but empirical research has been limited.

To examine these and other related issues, Patterson designed the Bay Area Families Study (Patterson, 1994). This study involved 4- to 9-year-old children who were conceived or adopted by a lesbian mother or mothers. This study examined the mental health of mothers, the mental health of children, division of household labor among parents, parents' relationship satisfaction, and the relations among these variables (Patterson, 1994, 1995a, 2001; Patterson et al., 1998).

The results of this study revealed several important findings. On the basis of results from standardized assessments, both mothers' and children's average levels of adjustment fell within the normal range for all measures (Patterson, 1994, 2001). Lesbian couples who took part in this study reported that they divided household labor and child care in a relatively even manner (Patterson, 1995a). A third major finding was an association between division of labor and psychosocial outcomes for mothers and their children (Patterson, 1995a). When lesbian couples shared child care more evenly, mothers were more satisfied and children were more well-adjusted. This suggested that children might benefit from egalitarian divisions of labor.

Finally, contrary to popular stereotypes, Patterson and her colleagues reported that most children of lesbian mothers in their sample were in regular contact with grandparents, relatives, and other adults outside their immediate households (Patterson et al., 1998). Consistent with expectations based on earlier research, children who had more contact with grandparents also showed fewer internalizing behavior problems than did other children (Patterson et al., 1998). Taken together with those of previous studies, results from the Bay Area Families Study suggested that children of lesbian mothers show normal psychosocial development. Although these results were valuable, a number of limitations hindered a clear-cut interpretation of them. Data for the Bay Area Families Study were drawn from a convenience sample of families who lived in a single geographical area. In addition, the study did not include a comparison group of heterosexual families. Clearly, it would be desirable to study a larger, more diverse sample of children with lesbian mothers, and it would be helpful to include a well-matched comparison sample of children with heterosexual parents.

## THE CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES STUDY

The Contemporary Families Study (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 2002) was designed to address these and related issues. The Contemporary Families Study involved a sample of lesbian- and heterosexual-headed families who had conceived children through donor insemination using the resources of a single sperm bank. Although all the families were clients of a single sperm bank, they actually resided in many parts of the United States, so the findings are not limited to a single geographic area. This sample allowed a comparison of heterosexual- and lesbian-headed families drawn from the same population. In addition, among families headed by couples (as opposed to a single parent), regardless of sexual orientation, one parent was genetically related to the child and one was not. This allowed the separation of questions regarding sexual orientation from those regarding genetic relatedness.

In this chapter, we describe the Contemporary Families Study itself and its principal results to date. First, we describe demographic and other characteristics of the participating families. Next, we describe assessments of adjustment of both parents and children in heterosexual- as well as lesbian-parented families, indicating parental relationship status (i.e., single or coupled). In families that were headed by couples, the study also examined key facets of couple functioning (e.g., relationship satisfaction, division of labor), and we report comparisons by parental sexual orientation. The study also investigated associations of individual differences in children's adjustment with couple functioning variables. Finally, the study also explored children's contacts with grandparents and other important adults. Although we do not provide statistical details here, all findings described as statistically significant were at the  $p < .05$  level. The methods and findings are summarized briefly in the following sections, but additional details and commentary are available elsewhere (Chan, Brooks, et al., 1998; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Fulcher et al., 2002). There were no significant sex differences in the data presented here, so our presentation does not consider this variable.

### Description of Participating Families

Families participating in this study were all former clients of The Sperm Bank of California (TSBC), which is located in Berkeley, California. TSBC has been providing reproductive services to clients regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status since 1982. Clients who had conceived and given birth prior to July 1990 were considered eligible to participate in this research (thus their children were at least 5 years old at the beginning of data collection). Six families who had already participated in Patterson's

Bay Area Families Study were excluded to maintain independence of data between the two studies. Also excluded was one family headed by a woman who identified herself as bisexual.

The sample consisted of 80 families—34 headed by lesbian couples, 21 by lesbian single mothers, 16 by heterosexual couples, and 9 by heterosexual single mothers. Children averaged 7 years of age and genetically related mothers averaged 42 years of age. There were 26 girls and 54 boys. The families were primarily Caucasian and parents were generally well educated, with most holding a college degree and most employed at least part time. They were relatively affluent, with family incomes well above national averages.

We explored the possibility that demographic differences might exist among the four family types. We found that, on average, lesbian genetic mothers had completed more years of education than had heterosexual mothers, and lesbian nongenetic mothers had completed more years of education than had heterosexual fathers. As one would expect, families headed by couples reported higher annual household incomes than did families headed by single parents. Otherwise, no significant demographic differences emerged from these analyses.

### Procedures

Each eligible family was initially contacted by a letter from the executive director of TSBC. The letter gave a brief explanation of the study and asked each family to consider participation. Telephone calls from TSBC staff members followed these letters to describe the study more fully and to request each family's participation. When a family agreed to participate, a brief, structured telephone interview about family background and current family status was conducted. It was during this interview that parents responded to questions about their child's contact with grandparents and other adults. Remaining materials were then mailed to participating families along with self-addressed stamped envelopes in which the participants were asked to return questionnaires to investigators. In families that consented, a parent gave the child's teacher the Teacher's Report Form (TRF; Achenbach, 1991). Teachers returned the form in a provided self-addressed stamped envelope.

### Mental Health of Mothers

Parenting stress was measured using the Parenting Stress Index–Short Form (Abidin, 1995). This short form includes 63 items on 5-point rating scales, scored from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The score reflects stress directly related to the parenting role as well as stress from other life events.

Items such as "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent" are included. Higher scores indicate reports of greater stress. Depressive symptoms among parents were measured with the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977). On this 20-item self-report measure, respondents indicate how often they felt or behaved in a certain way on a 3-point rating scale (e.g., "I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing"). Higher scores indicate more depressive symptoms.

Maternal self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale consists of 10 statements, each with four response alternatives, indicating the respondent's degree of agreement with each statement (e.g., "I am able to do things as well as most people"). Results were tabulated to obtain total scores, following the recommendations contained in Rosenberg (1979). Higher scores indicate higher self-esteem.

Our results indicated that the parents participating in this study were well adjusted when compared with available norms. Very few parents in this sample showed symptoms of serious depression or low self-esteem. There was no difference in parental adjustment between parents who were coupled or single. Likewise, there were no significant differences in reported stress, depressive symptoms, or self-esteem in genetic mothers as a function of sexual orientation. In families headed by couples, there were also no significant differences in adjustment measures between nongenetic fathers and nongenetic mothers. In summary, parents were generally well adjusted, and there were no significant differences in adjustment as a function of parental sexual orientation.

### Assessment of Couple Functioning

To get an overall indication of couple functioning, we assessed couples' division of labor and marital satisfaction. The measures of couple functioning were given only to parents who described themselves as being involved in a coupled relationship. To assess division of labor in the household, as well as satisfaction with the division, Cowan and Cowan's (1990) *Who Does What?* was used. This instrument was designed to measure parents' perceptions of the current and ideal distribution of labor within the family, as well as each parent's satisfaction with their arrangements.

The *Who Does What?* instrument is divided into three sections: division of household tasks, decision making, and child care within a family. Minor wording changes were made to make the measure suitable for lesbian mothers. Each section began by asking respondents to rate, on a scale from 1 to 9, their actual and ideal distribution of certain family tasks (1 = *my partner does it all*; 5 = *we both do this about equally*; 9 = *I do it all*). The first section included 13 household tasks (e.g., meal preparation and cleanup), the second section included 12 family decision-making tasks



(e.g., making financial decisions), and the third section included 20 child-care tasks (e.g., bathing the child). Scores around 5 indicated a relatively equal division of labor, whereas high scores indicated that the respondent reported performing more of the labor. At the end of each section of this instrument, respondents were asked to indicate their overall satisfaction with that specific area of household labor. Finally, in the decision-making and child-care sections, respondents were asked to indicate global ratings of both their own and their partner's influence over family decisions and involvement in child care.

To assess relationship satisfaction, we used two instruments. The Locke–Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) was used to indicate overall relationship quality, whereas the Partnership Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) assessed more specific aspects of couples' relationships. The LWMAT is a 15-item self-report measure that was designed to assess marital adjustment in heterosexual marriages (e.g., "Do you confide in your partner?"). To make the instrument suitable for use with lesbian couples as well as with heterosexual couples, we made minor wording changes. Possible scores range from 2 to 158, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction.

The Partnership Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) is a 25-item instrument designed to assess components of a close relationship. We used two scales: the Love scale, consisting of 10 items relating to caring and emotional attachment (e.g., "To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?"), and the Conflict scale, consisting of 5 items concerning problems and arguments (e.g., "How often do you and your partner argue with one another?"). Each partner indicates level of agreement ranging from 1 (*not at all or very little*) to 9 (*very much or very often*). Higher scores on these scales indicate, respectively, more love and more conflict.

For division of labor, the results for lesbian couples indicated that overall, household tasks, family decision making, and child care were all seen as being shared relatively equally between the partners. Lesbian genetic mothers reported doing almost the same amounts of child care as their partners. Lesbian parents also divided time spent on work outside the home about equally. Lesbian nongenetic mothers reported working longer hours in paid employment than lesbian genetic mothers, but this difference did not reach statistical significance.

There was more variation in scores for heterosexual couples. Heterosexual parents reported sharing household tasks and family decision making relatively equally. However, for child care, the results indicated an unequal distribution of labor. Mothers reported doing more child care and fathers reported doing less child care. Indeed, heterosexual mothers reported doing more child care than did lesbian genetic mothers, and heterosexual fathers reported doing less child care than did lesbian nongenetic mothers.

Comparisons were also made between actual and ideal divisions of labor. In the areas of household tasks and family decision making, both lesbian and heterosexual respondents reported sharing these responsibilities relatively equally with their partner. They also reported that this matched their ideals. In the area of child care, however, differences emerged as a function of parental sexual orientation. For ideal distribution of labor, heterosexual mothers indicated that they would prefer a more equitable distribution of child-care labor than they currently experienced. Fathers reported preferring that their wives assume most of the child care; their actual score on current child-care participation was similar to their report on their ideal amount of responsibility. However, in addition to reporting the practice of equal child care, both lesbian genetic mothers and their partners reported wanting an equal division of child care. Overall, both lesbian and heterosexual mothers preferred a more equitable division of child care than did fathers. For lesbian mothers, this desire was realized in their actual child-care arrangements, but this was not the case for heterosexual mothers.

Regardless of their actual labor arrangements, most parents reported feeling satisfied with their current division of labor. There was no significant difference between heterosexual and lesbian parents in this regard. Likewise, there were no significant differences between genetic and nongenetic parents in terms of their satisfaction with the division of child-care labor. It seems that regardless of how these couples actually divided labor they were satisfied with their arrangements.

Heterosexual and lesbian couples' scores on the LWMAT (Locke & Wallace, 1959) exceeded mean scores for similar populations, indicating high relationship satisfaction. In addition, heterosexual and lesbian couples reported high levels of love and low to moderate levels of conflict on the Partnership Questionnaire (Braiker & Kelley, 1979), suggesting that parents were generally satisfied with their relationships. Overall, lesbian and heterosexual couples reported similar levels of love, conflict, and satisfaction with their relationships.

### **Children's Adjustment**

To assess levels of children's social competence and behavior problems, we administered the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) and the TRF (Achenbach, 1991). These scales were particularly useful here because of their ability to discriminate between children in the clinical versus normative range of functioning for problems involving both internalizing (e.g., inhibited, overcontrolled) and externalizing (e.g., aggressive, antisocial, or undercontrolled) behavior. The CBCL is designed to be completed by parents, and in families headed by couples,

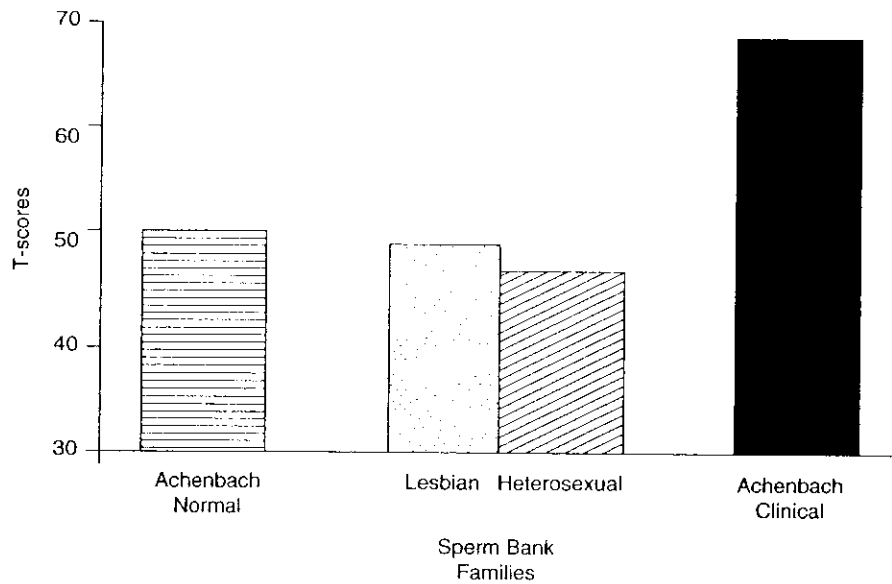


Figure 14.1. Children's total behavior problems (average of parent reports). Data from "Psychosocial Adjustment Among Children Conceived via Donor Insemination by Lesbian and Heterosexual Mothers," by R. W. Chan, B. Raboy, and C. J. Patterson, 1998, *Child Development*, 69, pp. 443–457.

each parent completed a CBCL for the target child. In addition, the CBCL scale measured social competence, whereas the TRF measured academic performance and adaptive functioning. The TRF utilized teacher reports. These scales were selected because they are widely used child assessment instruments for which national age and sex norms are available for both clinical and nonclinical populations. Moreover, sex- and age-specific raw scores can be converted to standard *t* scores that allow comparisons across age and gender groups.

Results showed that compared with a large group of normal children, children in this sample were well adjusted according to both their CBCL and TRF scores as reported by both parents and teachers. Children's average scores on the externalizing, internalizing, and total behavior problems scales fell well below clinical cutoffs (see Figure 14.1). Likewise, social competence, academic performance, and adaptive functioning scores for these children were well above clinical cutoffs. There was no significant difference in adjustment scores between children of lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents. Furthermore, there was also no difference in children's adjustment as a function of mothers' relationship status. We found that both parents and teachers reported that children conceived through donor insemination were well adjusted.

Because the family structure variables, parental sexual orientation, and relationship status were not related to children's adjustment in this sample, efforts to predict adjustment focused on other variables. Generally, we report the associations of family interactions and processes with children's adjustment across family types except when interactions are revealed between family type and children's adjustment. We turn next to results from these analyses.

### **Child and Parental Adjustment**

Children's adjustment was significantly associated with parental adjustment. When parents reported more parenting distress and more dysfunctional parent-child interactions on the parenting stress index, children were described as showing more behavior problems. When genetic mothers reported dysfunctional interactions with their children, those children had more reported internalizing problems. Likewise, genetic mothers' reports of greater parental distress and dysfunctional interactions were associated with more reports of their children's externalizing and total behavior problems. A similar pattern emerged for nongenetic parents' reports of parental stress and dysfunctional interactions, which were also associated with children's externalizing and total behavior problems. Teachers' reports of children's behavior problems were most associated with the nongenetic parents' reports of parental distress. There was no relationship between parents' depressive symptom scores and children's behavior scores, probably because parents in this sample showed very few depressive symptoms.

There were also significant associations between children's adjustment scores and parental reports of relationship satisfaction. When couples in this sample reported higher relationship satisfaction and love, their children were less likely to show adjustment problems. For example, when genetic mothers reported higher global relationship satisfaction and higher levels of love in their couple relationship, their children showed better adjustment. Nongenetic parents' reports of relationship satisfaction and love were also associated with lower levels of children's reported behavior problems. Genetic mothers who reported higher levels of conflict with their partners also reported that their children had more behavior problems. Thus, when parents reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction and love, and lower levels of parental conflict, they also reported that their children had fewer behavior problems.

### **Division of Labor and Children's Adjustment**

We also assessed the relationship between parents' division of labor, their satisfaction with the division of labor, and their children's adjustment.

Overall, nongenetic parents' reports of greater satisfaction with the couple's division of household labor were associated with lower externalizing behavior problems in their children, as reported by their teachers. However, some associations differed according to parental sexual orientation.

In families headed by heterosexual couples, when fathers reported greater satisfaction with the division of family decision making but lower levels of satisfaction in the division of household tasks, mothers reported lower levels of externalizing problems in their children. In lesbian-headed families, the associations among division of labor and children's adjustment were more complicated. Genetic mothers' reports of greater satisfaction with the division of household labor and family decision making were associated with lower reported levels of externalizing behavior on the part of their children. Nongenetic mothers who reported greater satisfaction with division of family decision making also reported lower levels of externalizing behavior by their children. Finally, in lesbian-headed families, when nongenetic mothers actually participated in more child-care tasks, the children were reported by genetic mothers to have fewer externalizing problems. These complicated associations between division of labor and children's adjustment were mediated by parents' satisfaction with the couple relationship. This mediation makes clearer the paths of influence, and we examine such associations next.

#### **Relationship Satisfaction, Division of Labor, and Children's Adjustment**

We were interested in whether associations between parental division of labor and children's adjustment might be mediated by parents' relationship satisfaction. The results indicated that in lesbian-headed families, nongenetic mothers' reports of their satisfaction with the division of family decision making were associated with their reports of higher relationship satisfaction and with the description of their children as having fewer externalizing behaviors. Furthermore, the results showed that this association was mediated by nongenetic mothers' satisfaction with the couple relationship. When effects of relationship satisfaction and division of family decision-making satisfaction were considered simultaneously, only parents' relationship satisfaction remained predictive. Thus, the associations between parental division of labor and children's adjustment were mediated by parents' relationship satisfaction. When parents reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction, children were described as showing fewer externalizing behaviors (see Figure 14.2). We conclude that parental satisfaction is more highly associated with child outcomes than any specific division of labor. This finding is consistent with others in the literature (based on studies that included only heterosexual families) showing that associations between

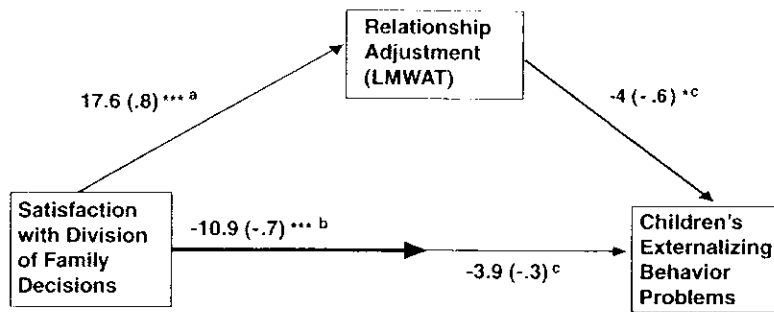


Figure 14.2. Mediation model of parental relationship satisfaction, division of labor, and children's adjustment in lesbian-parented families. Regression coefficients are given in the form  $B(\beta)$ . LMWAT = Locke–Wallace Marital Adjustment Test. From "Division of Labor Among Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents: Associations With Children's Adjustment," by R. W. Chan, R. C. Brooks, B. Raboy, and C. J. Patterson, 1998, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 12, 414. Copyright 1998 by the American Psychological Association. <sup>a</sup>Model 1: Relationship adjustment regressed on satisfaction with division of decision making,  $R^2 = .66$ ,  $F(1, 17) = 30.5$ ,  $p < .001$ . <sup>b</sup>Model 2: Children's externalizing behavior problems regressed on satisfaction with division of decision making,  $R^2 = .56$ ,  $F(1, 17) = 20.3$ ,  $p < .001$ . <sup>c</sup>Model 3: Children's externalizing behavior problems regressed on relationship adjustment and satisfaction with decision making,  $R^2 = .68$ ,  $F(2, 17) = 15.9$ ,  $p < .001$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

children's outcomes and parental division of labor are mediated by parents' level of marital satisfaction (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Thus, our main finding was that parents' higher levels of satisfaction in the couple relationship were associated with lower levels of behavior problems in their children.

### Children's Contacts With Grandparents and Other Adults

During the initial telephone interview, information about contact with grandparents and other adults was collected from the child's genetic mother. Mothers reported the amount of contact the target children had with grandparents. Genetic grandparents were identified by the child's genetic mother as her parents, and nongenetic grandparents were identified by the child's genetic mother as parents of the nongenetic parent. Contact was defined as a visit, a telephone call, a card, or e-mail. Contact scores ranged from 1 to 7 (1 = no contact; 2 = less than once a year; 3 = once a year; 4 = every other month; 5 = once a month; 6 = once a week; and 7 = daily contact). If the mother did not list nongenetic grandparents, because she was single or not in contact with a former partner, the family was not included for these comparisons. Data for children whose grandparent had died were not considered in the comparisons for that grandparent. Parents also listed up to five adults, in addition to parents and grandparents, who were seen as

“important” in the child’s life. The adult’s gender and relationship to the child (e.g., parent’s friend, relative, neighbor, child-care provider, or coach) was recorded as well. Each of these adults was also scored for contact using the scale previously described.

Most parents reported that their children were in at least monthly contact with their grandparents. There were no significant differences in amount of contact between grandparents and children of lesbian parents versus children of heterosexual parents. Among couples, this was true for both genetic grandparents and for nongenetic grandparents. However, children of both lesbian and heterosexual parents were in more frequent contact with their genetic grandparents than with their nongenetic grandparents.

The amount of contact between children and other adults also did not differ according to parental sexual orientation. Children of lesbian parents had contact with as many adult relatives as did children of heterosexual parents. Contrary to stereotypes, children of lesbian parents had contact with as many adult men as did children of heterosexual parents. Children of lesbian parents did, however, have significantly more contact with unrelated women than did children of heterosexual parents. Overall, the amount of contact with adults outside the home was similar among children of lesbian and heterosexual parents.

## OVERVIEW OF RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Contemporary Families Study was designed to examine child development and family functioning among families headed by lesbian and heterosexual parents who conceived their children through donor insemination. This sample allowed us to compare parents and children in families headed by lesbian and heterosexual parents, taking into account that only one parent was genetically related to the child.

Our first major finding was that both parents’ and children’s average levels of adjustment fell clearly within the normative range in both family types. This finding is consistent with results from earlier studies of lesbian parents and their children (Flaks et al., 1995; Steckel, 1985, 1987). Furthermore, there were no significant differences in children’s or parents’ adjustment scores according to parental sexual orientation. Considering that this result is consistent with findings from other research on lesbian women in general (Gonsiorek, 1991), lesbian mothers in particular (Falk, 1989; Patterson, 1992), children of divorced lesbian and gay parents (Patterson, 1992), and children born to lesbian mothers (Flaks et al., 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Steckel, 1985, 1987), this outcome was not surprising. Particularly in light of judicial and popular prejudices against lesbian and gay families that still exist in many parts of the United States, however, the result is

worthy of attention. The present data revealed not only that lesbian mothers' adjustment and self-esteem were within the normative range but also that their children's development was proceeding in normal fashion.

The second major finding was that both lesbian and heterosexual parents expressed high satisfaction and high levels of love within their couple relationships. There were no differences in satisfaction or warmth between heterosexual and lesbian couples. Although both lesbian and heterosexual parents reported relatively equal contributions to paid labor, household chores, and family decision making, differences did emerge in the division of labor involved in child care. Lesbian couples divided child care more evenly than did heterosexual couples. In families headed by heterosexual parents, mothers reported doing more child care than did their husbands. This is consistent with previous findings on child-care arrangements among heterosexual couples (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Perry-Jenkins & Crouter, 1990). Parents in both family types reported satisfaction with division of child care; however children's adjustment was more strongly related to partners' satisfaction with division of labor than to their reports of actual division of labor. Therefore, in well-functioning families it may be more important for children that parents negotiate a division of labor that is satisfactory to both parents than that they adhere to an egalitarian arrangement.

Another principal finding emerging from these data was that family process variables such as parental adjustment and couple adjustment were more strongly related to children's outcomes than were family structural variables such as parental sexual orientation or relationship status. The family process variables showed the same pattern of associations in families headed by lesbian and heterosexual parents. For example, regardless of parental sexual orientation, elevated parenting stress was associated with more externalizing behavior problems among children. Parents in both family types who reported being less happy with their relationship also reported having children with more behavior problems. Patterns of family interaction were clearly related to children's outcomes, regardless of parental sexual orientation.

Finally, we found that children of lesbian and heterosexual parents who conceived through donor insemination were described by their parents as being surrounded by networks of supportive adults. Children of lesbian and heterosexual parents were described as being in equal amounts of contact with their grandparents. The lineal bridge between child and grandparent seemed to function without regard to parental sexual orientation. Our results suggested that grandparents were not less willing to invest time in grandchildren born in the context of a lesbian relationship than in those born in the context of a heterosexual one. Children were also said to have similar amounts of contact with other adults in addition to grandparents, regardless



of parental sexual orientation. The only significant difference was that children with lesbian parents were in regular contact with more unrelated women than children with heterosexual parents. In short, consistent with earlier findings (Patterson et al., 1998), our results showed that children of lesbian parents in this sample were not living in isolation, nor were they lacking adult male role models.

There are several limitations of our study that must be considered when interpreting the results. First, the Contemporary Families Study was cross-sectional in design and so does not afford us the opportunity to examine children's development across time. Second, because lesbian parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to participate, our sample may be more representative of these families. Finally, the measures used here relied on self-reports or reports from parents or teachers. Future studies that are longitudinal in design and use representative samples and observational measures may be better able to clarify causal questions.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results of the Contemporary Families Study have afforded some insight into families formed by lesbian and heterosexual parents who conceived through donor insemination. The study also raises many questions for further research. Questions about children's development over time would clearly benefit from longitudinal research. Questions about the role of reproductive technology could be clarified by research on lesbian and heterosexual families formed in other ways (e.g., through adoption). Questions about broader aspects of children's social worlds might also be addressed through research on other aspects of children's social development.

Lesbian-parented families may offer the opportunity for a more detailed examination of parents' role in children's gender role knowledge and stereotyping flexibility. It has been reported that heterosexual fathers' attitudes about children's sex-typed behavior are more conservative than those of mothers; fathers' attitudes and behavior have also been found to be more predictive of children's sex-typed behavior than those of mothers (Fagot & Leinbach, 1995). It would be interesting to examine the development of gender role behavior among children born to lesbian mothers who grow up without paternal influence (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

In an age in which children are being conceived and raised in families that are growing increasingly diverse, it is important to examine the role that family constellations play in children's development. The family structural variables studied here (e.g., number of parents and parental sexual orientation) were not associated in this sample with children's adjustment or with their frequency of contact with important adults such as grandparents. It

was family process variables, such as parental relationship satisfaction, that were associated with children's adjustment. Overall, results of the Contemporary Families Study were consistent with those of other studies on lesbian mothers and their children (Gartrell et al., 2000; Patterson, 2000; Perrin, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1995) in revealing that these families can provide supportive environments in which children can grow and develop.

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