Lesbian Mothers and Their Children: Findings from the Contemporary Families Study

Megan Fulcher, Erin L. Sutfin
University of Virginia

Raymond W. Chan,
Migliara/Kaplan Associates

Joanna E. Scheib
The Sperm Bank of California

Charlotte J. Patterson
University of Virginia

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Parenthood is often considered to be the prerogative of heterosexual adults. In fact, however, substantial numbers of lesbian women 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 & 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).

The most visible group of non-heterosexual parents is lesbian mothers. Many lesbian mothers conceived and gave birth to children within the context of heterosexual relationships, but adopted a lesbian identity later in life (Kirkpatrick, 1996). More recently, observers have commented upon 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 & Redding, 1996), lesbian mothers have generally drawn more attention from researchers.

In the past, many lesbian women conceived children in the context of a heterosexual marriage and came out as lesbians after the dissolution of such relationships (Patterson, 1996). Although courts have sometimes denied these mothers custody because of concerns that the children may develop in atypical ways (see Patterson & Redding, 1996), a growing body of research indicates that children of lesbian mothers are developing normally (Green & Bozett, 1991; Patterson, 1995b, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Perrin, 2002). These children reported being close to their mother throughout divorce and coming-out transitions (O'Connell, 1990). Despite their relative lack of homophobia, young adult offspring of lesbian mothers are not more likely than
others to identify as lesbian or gay themselves (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). However, little research has been reported that focuses on children born to lesbian mothers (Patterson, 1992, 2000).

To determine if being raised by lesbian parents results in different outcomes for children, as has often been assumed in the legal system, researchers 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; McCandlish, 1987; Steckel, 1985, 1987, Patterson 1995a, 1995b, 2000; Patterson, Hurt & Mason, 1998; Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks & Bishop, 1996; Gartrell, Banks, Hamilton, Reed, Bishop & Rodas, 1999; Gartrell, Banks, Reed, Hamilton, Rodas & Deck, 2000). In an early study, McCandlish (1987) examined psychosocial development among young children born to five lesbian mother families and reported that the children’s development was normal in all respects. Steckel (1985, 1987) studied the progress of separation-individuation among three-year-old children born to eleven lesbian and eleven heterosexual couples. Using parent interviews, parent and teacher Q-sorts, and structured doll-play, Steckel compared independence, ego functions, and object relations among children in the two family types. The results revealed similarities in the development of the children in the two groups.

Flaks and colleagues (1995) compared social and personal development among fifteen three- to nine-year-old children born to lesbian couples via donor insemination with that among fifteen children from matched two-parent heterosexual families. There were similarities between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents across a wide array of assessments of cognitive and behavioral functioning. The only significant difference between the two groups was in the area of parenting skills and practices; lesbian couples revealed more parenting awareness skills than did heterosexual couples.

More recently Gartrell and colleagues (1995, 1999, 2000) have analyzed data from a
longitudinal study of 84 lesbian-headed families who conceived their children via donor insemination. To date, data have been reported by mothers during their pregnancy, when their child was a toddler and most recently when their child was five-years-old. Results revealed that these parents were highly motivated to have children and that they were aware of many of the potential problems that lesbian parents face, such as dealing with children's teachers (Gartrell et al., 1996). When the children were toddlers, couples reported sharing the responsibilities of parenthood evenly. They also reported that non-genetic mothers were as bonded with the toddlers as were genetic mothers (Gartrell et al.1999). By the age of five, the children were developing normally; and 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 adaptation of such families over time, yet many questions remain in need of study.

One important issue concerns parental division of family labor and partner’s 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). The division of labor is already specialized shortly after the birth of a child and remains specialized as the child grows older (Perry-Jenkins & Crouter, 1990). Mothers seem to be more involved in household and child-care duties while fathers are primarily responsible for bringing in income from paid employment (Belsky & Pensky, 1988). Wives report lower marital satisfaction than do their husbands. This dissatisfaction on the part of the wives may be a result of unequal division of household and child-care duties as well as of violated expectations of an egalitarian division of child-care that a woman may have held before the child’s birth (Hackel & Ruble, 1992).

Lesbian couples, on the other hand, are more likely to report dividing household and child-care labor equally between partners (Kurdek, 1993; Peplau & Cochran, 1990;). 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, than 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). Contact strengthens the quality of the grandparent/grandchild relationship (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). One predictor of children’s contact with grandparents is their parents’ relationship with the grandparents; children whose parents have positive relationships with their own parents have more contact with grandparents (Tinsley & Parke, 1984). Parents function as a “lineal bridge” (Hill, Foote, Aldous, Carlson, & MacDonald, 1970) between grandparents and grandchildren.

In addition to their contact with grandparents, children can have social networks that include many different adults both within and outside the family. Members of children’s social networks serve as resources by providing attention, positive feedback and serving as role models. Indeed, the more time children spend with adults to whom they are related, the more favorable their school performance is likely to be (Cochran & Riley, 1988).

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 to those being raised by heterosexual daughters (Saffron, 1996; Patterson, 1996). The fear is that the “lineal bridge” between grandparents and grandchildren may be weakened or broken by strained
relationships between lesbian mothers and their parents. This assumption leads to concern that children of lesbian mothers will have less contact with relatives and hence be deprived of the benefits of contact with grandparents. Some anecdotal reports suggest that such stereotypes are incorrect (Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991), but empirical research has been limited.

Additional questions about children growing up with lesbian parents center on development of gender roles (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Particularly in legal settings (e.g., in the context of custody proceedings), concerns have been voiced about an assumed lack of male role models among children of lesbian mothers (Patterson & Redding, 1996), and about the impact of this possibility on children's gender role development becoming delayed or confused. Thus, studies of children’s social networks should examine the extent to which adult men are among the social contacts of children with lesbian versus heterosexual parents.

In order to examine this and other related issues, Patterson designed the Bay Area Families Study (Patterson, 1994). This study involved four- to nine-year-old children who were conceived or adopted by a lesbian mother or mothers. If two children in a family met the age criteria, the older became the target child. Thirty-seven families took part in the study. Twenty-six were headed by lesbian couples, while seven children were being raised by single lesbian mothers, and four were being raised jointly by lesbian parents who had been, but were no longer a couple. Thirty-four of the children had been born to lesbian mothers and three had been adopted. Participating children included nineteen girls and eighteen boys. Sixty-six lesbian mothers participated in the study. They were primarily Caucasian and most had received a college degree. 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, Hurt, & Mason, 1998).

The results of this study revealed several important findings. Based on results from
standardized assessments, both mothers’ and children’s average levels of adjustment fell within the normal range for all measures (Patterson, 1994, 2001). Both genetic and non-genetic mothers had generally positive views about themselves as reported on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979) and reported very few psychological and somatic symptoms as measured by the Derogatis Symptom Checklist (SCL-90-R, Derogatis, 1983). These lesbian parents reported average scores for internalizing or externalizing behavior problems as reported on the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) that fell well within the range of normal scores based on a population of children with heterosexual parents. The children also reported normal self-concepts and gender-role behavior.

The second main finding was that the lesbian couples who took part in this study reported that they divided household labor and child care in a relatively even manner (Patterson, 1995a). Results showed that genetic mothers reported somewhat more involvement with child-care, while non-genetic mothers reported spending more hours per week in paid employment, but the division of labor among these couples was more egalitarian than that reported by heterosexual couples in other studies (e.g., Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

The 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). Grandparents who were genetically related to the children (i.e., parents of genetic mother) were in more frequent contact with grandchildren than were grandparents who did not share a genetic link (i.e., parents of non-
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 (e.g., Flaks, et al, 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Steckel, 1985, 1987), 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 based on 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, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998b; Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998a; Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, in press) 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 via 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, and 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 and according to 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 association 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 below, but additional details and commentary are available elsewhere (Chan et al., 1998b; Chan et al., 1998a; Fulcher et al., in press). 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.

Efforts were made to contact all eligible families. One hundred and eight (55.4%) of the 195 families that had been deemed eligible on the basis of sperm bank records were successfully contacted. Eighty of the families that we were able to contact (74.1%) agreed to participate in the
Contemporary Families Study

Mothers were classified as lesbian versus heterosexual and coupled versus single based on their self-reported identities at the time of data collection. Families headed by couples and by lesbian mothers were more likely to participate than those headed by single mothers or heterosexual parents. No other significant differences (such as child's age or gender) between participating and non-participating families emerged. We examined the reasons given by families who refused to participate; most families reported that they were too busy to participate, the next most common reason given was the wish for privacy.

The final sample, then, 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 genetic mothers averaged 42 years of age. There were 26 girls and 54 boys. Some of the targeted children had siblings. If two children in the family met our requirements, the older one became the target child in the study. The families were primarily Caucasian. 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 non-genetic 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. 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 (PSI/SF; Abidin, 1995). This short form includes 63 items on 5-point 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 (CES-D; Radloff, 1997). On this 20 item self-report measure, respondents indicate how often they felt or behaved in a certain way on a 3-point scale (e.g. “I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing”). Higher scores indicate the more depressive symptoms.

Maternal self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1977). 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, based upon 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 to 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 non-genetic fathers and non-genetic 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

In order to get an overall indication of couple functioning, we assessed couples’ division of labor and marital satisfaction. The measures of couple functioning were only given to mothers 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 Who Does What? was used (Cowan & Cowan, 1990). 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 in order 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, while 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, two instruments were used. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) was used to indicate overall relationship quality, while 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?”). In order to make the instrument suitable for use with lesbian couples as well as with heterosexual couples, minor wording changes were made. 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 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 (See Figure 1). Lesbian genetic mothers reported doing almost the same amounts of child-care (M = 5.5, SD = .9) as their partners (M = 4.9, SD = .5), reflecting equality in the division of labor. Lesbian parents also divided time spent on work outside the home about equally. Lesbian non-genetic 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, with average scores from 4.5 to 5.3. However, for child-care, the results indicated an unequal distribution of labor. Mothers reported doing more child-care (M = 6.6, SD = 1.1) and fathers reported doing less child-care (M = 3.8, SD = 1.0). Indeed, heterosexual mothers reported doing more child-care than lesbian genetic mothers, and heterosexual fathers reported doing less child-care than lesbian non-genetic 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 (average scores of 5.5 for ideal vs. 6.6 for actual score). 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 (average scores of 3.8 for ideal vs. average scores of 4.0 for actual scores). On the other hand, in addition to reporting the practice of equal child-care, both lesbian genetic mothers (M=5.3, SD=.6) and their partners (M=5.0, SD=.3) 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
Regardless of their actual labor arrangements, most parents reported feeling satisfied with them, with average scores ranging from 3.8 to 4.4. There was no significant difference between heterosexual and lesbian parents in this regard. Likewise, there were no significant differences between genetic and non-genetic parents and 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, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL, Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) and the Teacher Report Form (TRF, Achenbach, 1991) were administered. These scales were particularly useful here because of their ability to discriminate children in the clinical versus normative range of functioning for both internalizing (e.g., inhibited, over-controlled behavior) and externalizing (e.g., aggressive, antisocial, or under-controlled behavior) behavior problems. The CBCL is designed to be completed by parents, and, in families headed by couples, both parents 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 non-clinical 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 to 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 Externalizing, Internalizing, and Total Behavior Problems
scales fell well below clinical cutoffs (See Figure 2). Likewise, Social Competence and 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 via donor insemination were well adjusted.

Because 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. In particular, we examined the associations of family interactions and processes with
children’s adjustment across family types. We turn next to results from these analyses.

**Child and Parental Adjustment**

Children’s adjustment was significantly associated with parental adjustment (see Table 1).
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. Genetic
mothers’ reports of parents’ dysfunctional interactions with their offspring were related to
children’s internalizing problems. Likewise, genetic mothers’ reports of parental distress and
dysfunctional interactions were associated with externalizing and total behavior problems. Non-
genetic parents’ reports of parental stress and dysfunctional interactions were also associated with
children’s externalizing and total behavior problems. Teachers’ reports of children’s behavior
problems were most associated to the non-genetic 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 significant associations between children’s adjustment scores and parental
reports of relationship satisfaction (see Table 1). 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, their children
showed better adjustment. In addition, when genetic mother reported higher levels of love in their
couple relationship, their children were less likely to exhibit behavior problems. Non-genetic
parents’ reports of relationship satisfaction and love were also associated with lower levels of
reported behavior problems. Genetic mothers who reported higher 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, satisfaction with the
division of labor and children’s adjustment. Overall, non-genetic parents’ reports of greater
satisfaction with the couple’s division of household labor were associated with children’s lower
externalizing behavior problems 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’ reports of children’s externalizing problems were lower. 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 reports of children’s lower levels of externalizing behavior. Non-genetic mothers’ reports of greater satisfaction with division of family decision-making were associated with their own reports of lower levels of children’s externalizing behavior. Finally, in lesbian-headed families, when non-genetic mothers actually participated in more child-care tasks the children were reported by genetic mothers to have fewer externalizing problems. These associations were mediated by parents’ satisfaction with the couple relationship 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, non-genetic 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 non-genetic 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 division of labor and children’s adjustment were mediated by parents’ relationship satisfaction. When parents report higher levels of relationship satisfaction children were reported to show fewer externalizing behaviors (see Figure 3). 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 studying only heterosexual families which show that associations between children’s outcomes and parental division of labor are mediated by parents’ level of marital satisfaction (e.g. Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

Insert Figure 3 about here

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 non-genetic grandparents were identified by the child’s genetic mother as the non-genetic parent’s parents. 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 non-genetic 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 described above.

Most parents reported that their children were in at least monthly contact with all of 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 non-genetic grandparents. However, children of both lesbian
and heterosexual parents were in more frequent contact with their genetic grandparents than their non-genetic 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 via 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 is 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 earlier studies of lesbian parents and their children (Steckel, 1985; 1987; Flaks, 1995). 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 the findings of 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 if not most 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
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 any specific
arrangements.

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 via 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. Secondly, 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, representative, and that employ 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 via 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, 1995). It would be interesting then to examine the development of gender-role behavior among 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 (Patterson & Friel, 2001), 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 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 research on lesbian mother and their children (Gartrell et al., 2000; Patterson, 2000; Perrin, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Golombek, 1995) in revealing that these families can provide supportive environments in which children can grow and develop.
References


Patterson, C.J. (1996). Contributions of lesbian and gay parents and their children to the


Table 1 Pearson Correlations of Child Adjustment and Parental Adjustment Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents’ Adjustment</th>
<th>Biological Mothers’ Reports (CBCL)</th>
<th>Other Parents’ Reports (CBCL)</th>
<th>Teachers’ Reports (TRF)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Int*</td>
<td>Ext</td>
<td>TP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting distress (PSI: PD)</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.47***</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child dysfunctional interactions (PSI: P-CDI)</td>
<td>0.45***</td>
<td>0.49***</td>
<td>0.59***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life stress (PSI: LS)</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressive symptoms (CES-D)</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>0.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem (Rosenberg)</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test</td>
<td>-0.35*</td>
<td>-0.37*</td>
<td>-0.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braiker-Kelley: Love</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braiker-Kelley: Conflict</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.62***</td>
<td>0.54***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Nonbiological parents’ report: Parenting distress (PSI: PD) | 0.14 | 0.37* | 0.28 | 0.26 | 0.48*** | 0.39** | 0.12 | 0.33* | 0.22 |
| Parent-child dysfunctional interactions (PSI: P-CDI) | 0.28 | 0.40** | 0.36* | 0.27 | 0.51*** | 0.44** | -0.06 | 0.03 | 0.08 |
| Life stress (PSI: LS) | 0.11 | 0.05 | 0.20 | 0.10 | 0.10 | 0.16 | 0.15 | 0.02 | 0.04 |
| Depressive symptoms (CES-D) | 0.23 | 0.32* | 0.37* | 0.01 | 0.10 | 0.12 | 0.04 | 0.12 | 0.07 |
| Self-esteem (Rosenberg) | -0.14 | -0.33* | -0.29 | 0.03 | -0.09 | -0.07 | 0.19 | -0.11 | -0.09 |
| Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test | -0.27 | -0.45** | -0.42* | -0.45* | -0.58*** | -0.34*** | -0.15 | -0.22 | -0.11 |
| Braiker-Kelley: Love | -0.07 | -0.24 | -0.27 | -0.24 | -0.63*** | -0.52** | -0.31 | -0.31 | -0.39* |
| Braiker-Kelley: Conflict | 0.08 | 0.35* | 0.25 | 0.25 | 0.35* | 0.55*** | 0.23 | 0.34 | 0.26 |

*Int = Internalizing, Ext = Externalizing, TP = Total Problems
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Note: ns are given in parentheses.

Data from Chan, R. W., Brooks, R. C., Raboy, B., & Patterson, C. J. (1998). Division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual parents: Associations with children’s adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology, 12*, 402 - 419. *Who Does What?* is on a 9-point scale, where 1 = my partner does it all, 5 = we do this about equally, and 9 = I do it all.
Figure 2: Children's Total Behavior Problems (Average of Parent Reports)

Figure 3: Mediation Model of Parental Relationship Satisfaction, Division of Labor, and Children's Adjustment in Lesbian and Heterosexual Parented Families.

Pictorial representation of the mediational model. Regression coefficients are given in the form $B[\beta]$.  

Model 1: Relationship adjustment regressed on satisfaction with division of decision-making, $R^2=.66$, $F(1, 17)=30.5$, $p<.001$.  

Model 2: Children’s externalizing behavior problems regressed on satisfaction with division of decision-making, $R^2=.56$, $F(1, 17)=20.3$, $p<.001$.  

Model 3: Children’s externalizing behavior problems regressed on relationship adjustment and satisfaction with division of decision-making, $R^2=.68$, $F(2, 17)=15.9$, $p<.001$.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001