Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents

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1. Introduction

What kinds of home environments are best able to support children's psychological adjustment and growth? This question has long held a central place in the field of research on child development. Researchers in the United States have often assumed that the most favorable home environments are provided by white, middle-class, two-parent families, in which the father is paid to work outside the home but the mother is not. Although rarely stated explicitly, it has most often been assumed that both parents in such families are heterosexual.

Given that smaller numbers of American families fit the traditionally normative pattern (Hernandez, 1988; Laosa, 1988) today than in earlier years, it is not surprising that researchers have increasingly challenged implicit or explicit criticism of home environments that differ from it by virtue of race, ethnicity, income, household composition, and/or maternal employment (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Hetherington & Arasteh, 1988; Hoffman, 1984; McLoed, 1990; Spencer, Brokkins, & Allen, 1985). Together with the authors of cross-cultural and historical studies (Cole, 1988; Elder, 1986; Rogoff, 1990), these researchers have emphasized the variety of pathways through which healthy psychological development can take place, and the diversity of home environments that can support such development.

In this chapter, I describe recent research from the social sciences on the personal and social development of children with lesbian and gay parents. Beginning with estimates of the numbers of such children, I then...
outline sociocultural, theoretical, and legal reasons that justify attention to their development. With this material as background, I then review research evidence on sexual identity, personal development, and social relationships among children of lesbian and gay parents. I first describe research on children of divorced lesbian and gay parents; I then examine research on children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers, describing in some detail the findings from my own Bay Area Families Study. In the final section, I draw a number of conclusions from the results of research to date and offer suggestions for future work.

2. Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children

Interest in children of lesbian and gay parents has emerged from a number of directions (Allen & Demo, 1995; Laird, 1993; Patterson, 1992). For lesbians and gay men, especially those who may be parents themselves, or who may be considering parenthood, it is valuable to learn about issues and challenges that are common to lesbian and gay parents and their children. Information about the psychosocial development of children with gay or lesbian parents may also be of interest to clinical psychologists and others who are concerned with processes of coping with prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

In addition to those just mentioned, there are at least three other perspectives from which interest in children of lesbians and/or gay men has emerged. First, the phenomenon of openly gay or lesbian parents bearing and/or raising children represents a sociocultural innovation that is unique to the present historical era; as such, it raises questions about the impact of cultural change on children. Second, from the standpoint of psychological theory, children of lesbian or gay parents pose a number of significant questions for existing theories of psychosocial development. Finally, both in adjudication of child-custody disputes and in administration of adoption and foster-care policies, the legal system in the United States has frequently operated under strong assumptions about difficulties faced by children of lesbians and gay men, and there are important questions about the veridicality of such assumptions. Before reviewing the results of empirical research, I briefly discuss key issues from each of these three perspectives.

2.1. Social and Cultural Issues

Although same-sex attractions and sexual activities have undoubtedly existed throughout history, the emergence of large numbers of openly self-identified gay men and lesbians is a recent phenomenon. Although the beginnings of homophile organizations date to the 1950s and even earlier (D'Emilio, 1983; Faderman, 1991), the beginnings of contemporary gay liberation movements are generally dated to police raids on the Stonewall bar in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City in 1969, and to resistance shown by members of the gay community to these raids (Adam, 1987; D'Emilio, 1983). In the years since these events at the Stonewall, more and more lesbians and gay men have abandoned secrecy, come out of the closet, and joined the movement for gay and lesbian rights (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988).

With greater openness among lesbian and gay adults, a number of family forms have emerged in which one or more of a child’s parents identify themselves as lesbian or gay (Allen & Demo, 1995; Baptiste, 1987; Martin, 1993; Weston, 1991). Most are families in which children were born in the context of a heterosexual relationship between the biological parents (Falk, 1989). These include families in which the parents divorce when one or both parents come out as lesbian or gay, and families in which one or both of the parents comes out as lesbian or gay and the parents decide not to divorce. The gay or lesbian parent may be either the residential or the nonresidential parent, or children may live part of the time in both homes. Gay or lesbian parents may be single, or they may have same-sex partners who may or may not take up stepparenting relationships with the children.

In addition to children born in the context of heterosexual relationships between parents, both single and coupled lesbians are believed increasingly to be giving birth to children (Benkov, 1994; Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Martin, 1989, 1993; Patterson, 1994b; Pies, 1985, 1990; Steckel, 1985). The majority of such children are believed to be conceived through donor insemination (DI). Although DI techniques have been known for many years, it is only in recent years that they have become widely available to unmarried heterosexual women and to lesbians (Martin, 1989, 1993; Pies, 1985, 1990). Lesbians who seek to become mothers may also do so by becoming foster or adoptive parents (Laird, 1993; Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994b, 1995c).

A number of gay men have also sought to become parents after coming out (Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Bozett, 1989; Patterson & Chan, 1996; Ricketts, 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990). Options pursued by such gay men include adoption and foster care of children to whom the men are not biologically related (Patterson, 1995c). Through DI or through sexual intercourse, gay men may also become biological fathers of children whom they intend to coparent with a single woman (whether lesbian or heterosexual), with a lesbian couple, or with a gay male partner (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994b).
Thus, many children today are being brought up in a diverse array of lesbian and gay families, most of which did not exist as recently as 50 years ago (Allen & Demo, 1995; Benk, 1994; Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Patterson, 1995a; Weston, 1991). Of the different types of families, those of divorced lesbian mothers living with their children, and those of nonresidential gay fathers, are probably the largest groups. In addition, the numbers of families in which children are now being conceived by lesbian mothers using DI are unprecedented. The birth and upbringing of children in such families provides a unique opportunity to observe the formation, growth, and impact of new family forms.

Although it is widely believed that family environments exert significant influences on children who grow up in them, authoritative scholarly treatments of such influences have rarely considered children growing up in families with lesbian and/or gay parents (e.g., Jacob, 1987; Parke, 1984). Even treatments of nontraditional family forms (e.g., Lamb, 1982) have generally failed to consider lesbian and gay parents and their children. Given the many new family forms among lesbian and gay parents, and in view of their apparent vitality, the experiences of children with gay and/or lesbian parents would seem, however, to be a topic deserving of study. Indeed, newer treatments of parenting and of parent–child relationships are beginning to recognize the existence of lesbian and gay parents and their children (Bornstein, 1995; Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994; Lamb, in press).

To the extent that parental influences are seen as critical in psychosocial development, and to the extent that lesbians and/or gay men may provide different kinds of influences than heterosexual parents, then the children of gay men and lesbians can be expected to develop in ways that are different from children of heterosexual parents. Whether any such differences are expected to be beneficial, detrimental, or nonexistent depends, of course, upon the viewpoint from which the phenomena are observed. For instance, some feminist theorists have imagined benefits that might accrue to children growing up in an all-female world (e.g., Gilman, 1915/1979). Expectations based on many psychological theories are, however, more negative.

2.2. Theoretical Issues

Theories of psychological development have traditionally emphasized distinctive contributions of both mothers and fathers to the healthy personal and social development of their children. As a result, many theories predict negative outcomes for children who are raised in environments that do not provide these two kinds of input (Nungesser, 1980). An important theoretical question thus concerns the extent to which such predictions are sustained by results of research on children of gay and/or lesbian parents.

For instance, psychoanalytic theory places heavy weight on the Oedipal drama, in which children experience very different reactions to their mothers and to their fathers (Bronfenbrenner, 1960). From the psychoanalytic perspective, healthy psychological development is believed to require the child’s eventual resolution of Oedipal issues. Factors that inhibit or distort this process are therefore thought to be detrimental to the child’s development. Recent writers in the psychoanalytic tradition (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Dinnerstein, 1976) also emphasize different influences of male and female parents in the socialization of children. From psychoanalytic perspectives, then, when one or more parents are either absent and/or homosexually oriented, disruptions of personality development for their children could be anticipated.

From the point of view of social learning approaches to personality development (e.g., Huston, 1983), children are seen as learning distinctive lessons from the examples and the rewards offered by both male and female parents. For example, fathers are thought to model and reward masculine behavior among sons, and mothers to model and reward feminine behavior among daughters. Predictions based on social learning suggest negative outcomes for children brought up in families that do not provide conventional models or rewards for the acquisition of sexual identities.

There have been significant challenges to these theoretical positions, especially from cognitive developmental theory (Kohlberg, 1966) and from gender schema theory (Bem, 1983), neither of which in principle requires that a child’s home environment include both heterosexual male and heterosexual female parents in order to support favorable development. Advocates of cognitive developmental and gender schema theory have not, however, discussed the assumption that children’s development is best fostered in families that contain both male and female parents, nor have they challenged the premise that development is optimal in families where the parents are homosexual.

In short, psychoanalytic and social learning theories of personal and social development during childhood emphasize the importance of children having both heterosexual male and heterosexual female parents, and they predict generally negative outcomes for children whose parents do not exemplify these qualities. Although cognitive developmental theory and gender schema theory do not require such assumptions, proponents of these views have not challenged them. As a result, these perspectives on individual differences in personal and social development are commonly believed to predict difficulties in development among children of lesbian
and gay parents. Empirical research with such children thus provides an opportunity to evaluate anew these theoretical assumptions.

2.3. Legal and Public Policy Issues

The legal system in the United States has long been hostile to gay men and to lesbians who are or who wish to become parents (Brantner, 1992; Cain, 1993; Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989, 1994; Hitchens, 1979/1980; Kleber, Howell, & Tibbets-Kleber, 1986; Patterson & Redding, in press; Polikoff, 1990; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990; Rivera, 1991). Because of judicial and legislative assumptions about adverse effects of parental homosexuality on children, lesbian mothers and gay fathers have often been denied custody and/or visitation with their children following divorce (Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson & Redding, in press; Rivera, 1991). Although some states now have laws stipulating that sexual orientation is not relevant to determinations of parental fitness in custody disputes, in other states, parents who admit a gay or lesbian sexual orientation are presumed to be unfit as parents (Brantner, 1992; Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990). In addition, regulations governing foster care and adoption in many states have made it difficult for lesbians or gay men to adopt children or to serve as foster parents (Patterson, 1995c; Ricketts, 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990).

One issue underlying both judicial decision making in custody litigation and public policies governing foster care and adoption has been questions concerning the fitness of lesbians and gay men to be parents (Falk, 1989, 1994). In particular, courts have sometimes assumed that gay men and lesbians are mentally ill and hence not fit to be parents, that lesbians are less maternal than heterosexual women and hence do not make good mothers, and that lesbians' and gay men's relationships with sexual partners leave little time for ongoing parent-child interaction (Patterson & Redding, in press).

Although systematic empirical study of these issues is just beginning, results of research to date have failed to confirm any of these fears. The idea that homosexuality constitutes a mental illness or disorder has long been repudiated both by the American Psychological Association and by the American Psychiatric Association (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988). Lesbians and heterosexual women have been found not to differ markedly either in their overall mental health or in their approaches to child rearing, nor have lesbians' romantic and sexual relationships with other women been found to detract from their ability to care for their children (Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson, 1995d). Research on gay fathers has been similarly unable to unearth any reasons to believe them unfit as parents (Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bozett, 1980, 1989; Patterson & Chan, 1996). Studies in this area are still rather scarce, and more information would be helpful. On the basis of research to date, though, negative assumptions about lesbian and gay adults' fitness as parents appear to be without foundation (Cramer, 1986; Crawford, 1987; Falk, 1989, 1994; Gibbs, 1988; Patterson, 1995a, 1995d).

In addition to judicial concerns about gay and lesbian parents themselves, there are three major kinds of fears about the impact of lesbian or gay parents on children that are reflected in judicial decision making about child custody and in public policies such as regulations governing foster care and adoption policies. I outline each of the areas of concern here; in the review of empirical literature which follows, I describe research findings relevant to each of these issues. For further discussion of these issues, see Patterson (1995c) and Patterson and Redding (in press).

The first area of judicial concern is that development of sexual identity will be impaired among children of lesbian or gay parents (Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson, 1992, 1995a). For instance, it is feared that children brought up by gay fathers or lesbian mothers will show disturbances in gender identity and/or in gender-role behavior. It is also feared that children brought up by lesbian mothers or gay fathers will themselves become gay or lesbian, an outcome that the courts view as undesirable.

A second category of judicial concern about the influences of lesbian or gay parents on their children involves aspects of personal development other than sexual identity. For example, courts have expressed fears that children in the custody of gay or lesbian parents will be more vulnerable to mental breakdown, and/or that they will exhibit more adjustment difficulties and behavior problems. It is also feared that these children will be less psychologically healthy and/or less well adjusted than children growing up in homes with heterosexual parents.

A third category of specific fears expressed by the courts is that children of lesbian and gay parents may experience difficulties in social relationships. For example, judges have repeatedly expressed concern that children living with lesbian mothers may be stigmatized, teased, or otherwise traumatized by peers. Another common fear is that children living with gay or lesbian parents may be more likely to be sexually abused by the parent and/or by the parent's friends or acquaintances.

Because such negative assumptions have often been explicit in judicial determinations when child custody has been denied to lesbian and gay parents, or when visitation with gay or lesbian parents has been curtailed (Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson & Redding, in press), and because such as-
sumptions are open to empirical test, they provide an important impetus for research. Given the enormous significance of custody determinations in the lives of lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children, it is essential that evidence regarding oft-expressed judicial assumptions be examined with care.

2.4. Summary

There are thus a number of perspectives from which interest in lesbian and gay parents and their children has emerged. In the next sections, I review the available research findings on children of lesbian and gay parents. I first describe research on children who were born in the context of heterosexual relationships between parents. In the majority of these families, the parents were married at the time of children’s birth or adoption, then divorced after one or both parents came out, and for this reason, I refer to them as divorced lesbian and gay parents and their children. A review of research on children of divorced lesbian and gay parents is followed by a description of work on children born to or adopted early in life by parents who had already identified as lesbian or gay.

3. Children of Divorced Lesbian and Gay Parents

Much of the impetus for early research on children of lesbian and gay parents has been generated by judicial concerns about the psychosocial development of children residing with gay or lesbian parents. Research in each of these three areas of judicial concern, namely, children’s sexual identity, other aspects of children’s personal development, and children’s social relationships, will be summarized here. For other recent reviews of this material, see Cramer (1986), Crawford (1987), Falk (1989, 1994), Gibbs (1988), Green and Bozett (1991), Patterson (1992, 1995a), and Tasker and Golombek (1991).

Reflecting issues relevant in the largest number of custody disputes, most of the research compares development of children with custodial lesbian mothers to that of children with custodial heterosexual mothers. Since many children living in lesbian mother-headed households have undergone the experience of parental divorce and separation, it has been widely believed that children living in families headed by divorced but heterosexual mothers provide the best comparison group. Although some studies focus exclusively on children of gay men or lesbians (Green, 1978; Paul, 1986), most compare children in divorced lesbian mother-headed families with children in divorced heterosexual mother-headed families.

3.1. Sexual Identity

Following Money and Ehrhardt (1972), I consider research on three aspects of sexual identity here: gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation. Gender identity concerns a person’s self-identification as male or female. Gender-role behavior concerns the extent to which a person’s activities, occupations, and the like are regarded by the culture as masculine, feminine, or both. Sexual orientation refers to a person’s attraction to and choice of sexual partners (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual). To examine the possibility that children in the custody of divorced lesbian mothers or gay fathers experience disruptions of sexual identity, I describe research findings relevant to each of these major areas of concern.

Research on gender identity has failed to reveal any differences in the development of children as a function of their parents’ sexual orientation. In one of the earliest studies, Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) compared the development of 20 elementary-school-aged children of lesbian mothers to that of 20 same-aged children of heterosexual mothers. In projective testing, as expected, most children in both groups drew a same-sex figure first. Of those who drew an opposite-sex figure first, only 3 (1 with a lesbian mother, and 2 with heterosexual mothers) showed concern about gender issues in clinical interviews. Similar findings have been reported in projective testing by other investigators (Green, 1978; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986). Studies using more direct methods of assessment (e.g., Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983) have yielded similar results. No evidence for difficulties in gender identity among children of lesbian mothers has been reported.

Research on gender-role behavior has also failed to reveal difficulties in the development of children with lesbian or gay parents. Green (1978) reported that 20 of 21 children of lesbian mothers in his sample named a favorite toy consistent with conventional sex-typed toy preferences, and that all 21 children reported vocational choices within typical limits for conventional sex roles. Results consistent with those described by Green have also been reported for children by Golombok et al. (1983), Hoeffer (1981), and Kirkpatrick et al. (1981); and for adult daughters of lesbian mothers, by Gottman (1990). In interviews with 56 children of lesbians and 48 children of heterosexual mothers, Green et al. (1986) found no differences with respect to favorite television programs, television characters, games, or toys. These investigators did, however, report that daughters of lesbian mothers were more likely to be described as taking part in rough-and-tumble play or as playing with “masculine” toys such as trucks or guns, but found no comparable differences for sons. In all of these studies,
the behavior and preferences of children in unconventional families were seen as falling within conventional limits.

Rees (1979) administered the Bern Sex-Role Inventory to a group of young adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers and a same-aged group of youngsters with heterosexual mothers. Although children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers did not differ on masculinity or on androgyny, adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers reported greater psychological femininity than did their same-aged peers with heterosexual mothers. This result would seem to run counter to expectations based on stereotypes of lesbians as lacking in femininity. Overall, research has failed to reveal any notable difficulties in the development of sex-role behavior among children of lesbian mothers.

A number of investigators have also studied sexual orientation, the third component of sexual identity. For instance, Huggins (1989) interviewed 36 youngsters who were between 13 and 19 years of age; half were the offspring of lesbian mothers, and half had mothers who were heterosexual in their orientation. No child of a lesbian mother identified as lesbian or gay, but one child of a heterosexual mother did; this difference was not statistically significant. Similar results have been reported by Golombok and her colleagues (1983), Gottman (1990), Green (1978), Paul (1986), and Rees (1979), and by Tasker and Golombok (1995); some children of lesbian mothers have identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, but their numbers did not exceed expectations based on presumed population base rates. Studies of the offspring of gay fathers have yielded similar results (Bozett, 1980, 1982, 1987, 1989; Miller, 1979; Patterson & Chan, 1996).

Despite the consistency of the findings, this research can be criticized on a variety of grounds. For instance, many lesbians do not self-identify as such until adulthood (Brown, 1995; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995); for this reason, studies of sexual orientation among adolescents may count as heterosexual some individuals who will come out as lesbian later in life. Concern has also been voiced that in many studies comparing children of divorced heterosexual mothers with children of divorced lesbian mothers, lesbian mothers were more likely to be living with a romantic partner; in these cases, maternal sexual orientation and household composition variables have been confounded. Although these and other methodological issues still await resolution, it remains true that no significant problems in the development of sexual identity among children of lesbian mothers have yet been identified.

3.2. Other Aspects of Personal Development

Studies of other aspects of personal development among children of gay and lesbian parents have assessed psychiatric and behavior problems (Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981), personality (Gottman, 1990), self-concept (Huggins, 1989; Puryear, 1983), locus of control (Puryear, 1983; Rees, 1979), moral judgment (Rees, 1979), and intelligence (Green et al., 1986). As was true for sexual identity, studies of other aspects of personal development have revealed no significant differences between children of lesbian or gay parents and children of heterosexual parents.

3.3. Social Relationships

Studies assessing potential differences between children of lesbian and gay versus heterosexual parents have sometimes included assessments of children's social relationships. Because of concerns voiced by the courts that children of lesbian and gay parents might encounter difficulties among their peers, the most common focus of attention has been on peer relations. Studies in this area have consistently found that school-aged children of lesbian mothers report a predominantly same-sex peer group, and that the quality of their peer relations is described by their mothers and by the investigators as good (Golombok et al., 1983; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986). Anecdotal and first-person accounts describe children's worries about being stigmatized as a result of their parents' sexual orientation (Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Rafkin, 1990), but available research provides no evidence for the proposition that the development of children of lesbian mothers is compromised by difficulties in peer relations. In fact, a recent study of adult children of divorced lesbian mothers found that they recalled no more teasing by peers during childhood than did adult children of divorced heterosexual parents (Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Research has also been directed toward description of children's relationships with adults, especially fathers. For instance, Golombok et al. (1983) found that children of lesbian mothers were more likely than children of heterosexual mothers to have contact with their fathers. Most children of lesbian mothers had some contact with their father during the year preceding the study, but most children of heterosexual mothers had not; indeed, almost a third of the children of lesbian mothers reported at least weekly contact with their fathers, whereas only 1 in 20 of the children of heterosexual mothers reported this. Kirkpatrick and her colleagues (1981) also reported that lesbian mothers in their sample were more concerned than heterosexual mothers that their children have opportunities for good relationships with adult men, including fathers. Lesbian mothers' own social networks have been found to include both men and women, and their offspring as a result have contact with adults of both sexes. Hare and Richards (1993) reported that the great majority (90%) of children living with divorced lesbian mothers in their sample also had contact with their fathers. Overall, results of the meager research to date suggest that
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small sample size and absence of conventional statistical tests, Huggins's finding should be interpreted with caution. In view of the judicial attention that lesbian mothers' romantic relationships have received during custody proceedings (Falk, 1989; Hitchens, 1979/1980; Kirkpatrick, 1987), however, it is surprising that more research has not examined the impact of this variable on children.

Rand, Graham, and Rawlings (1982) found that divorced lesbian mothers' sense of psychological well-being was related to the extent to which they were open about their lesbian identity with employers, ex-husbands, and children. In this sample, a mother who felt more able to disclose her lesbian identity was more likely also to express a greater sense of well-being. In light of the consistent finding that children's adjustment in heterosexual families is often related to maternal mental health (Rutter, Izard, & Read, 1986; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975), one might expect factors that enhance mental health among lesbian mothers also to benefit the children of these women.

Another area of great diversity among families with a gay or lesbian parent concerns the degree to which a parent's sexual identity is accepted by other significant people in children's lives (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). Huggins (1989) found a tendency for children whose fathers were rejecting of maternal lesbianism to report lower self-esteem than those whose fathers were neutral or positive. Due to small sample size and absence of conventional statistical tests, however, this finding should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive. Huggins's results raise questions about the extent to which reactions of important adults in a child's environment can influence responses to discovery of a parent's gay or lesbian identity.

Effects of the age at which children learn of parents' gay or lesbian identities have also been a topic of study. Paul (1986) reported that those who were told either in childhood or in late adolescence found the news easier to cope with than did those who first learned of it during early to middle adolescence. Huggins (1989) reported that those who learned of maternal lesbianism in childhood had higher self-esteem than did those who were not informed until adolescence. Some writers have suggested that early adolescence is a particularly difficult time for children to learn of their parents' lesbian or gay identities (Baptiste, 1987; Lewis, 1980).

As this brief review reveals, research on diversity among families with gay and lesbian parents is just beginning (Freiberg, 1990; Martin, 1989, 1993; Patterson, 1995a). Existing data favor early disclosure of identity to children, positive maternal mental health, and a supportive milieu, but the available data are still limited. No information is as yet available on differences stemming from race or ethnicity, family economic circum-

3.4. Diversity among Children with Divorced Lesbian or Gay Parents

Despite the tremendous diversity of gay and lesbian communities (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988), research on individual differences among children of divorced lesbian and gay parents is as yet very limited. Here I focus on the impact of parental psychological and relationship status, as well as on the influence of other stresses and supports.

One important dimension of variability among gay and lesbian families concerns whether the custodial parent is involved in a romantic relationship, and if so what implications this may have for children. Pageleow (1980), Kirkpatrick et al. (1981), and Golombok et al. (1983) all reported that divorced lesbian mothers were more likely than divorced heterosexual mothers to be living with a romantic partner. Huggins (1989) reported that self-esteem among daughters of lesbian mothers whose lesbian partners lived with them was higher than that among daughters of lesbian mothers who did not live with them. This finding might be interpreted to mean that mothers who are high in self-esteem are more likely to be involved in romantic relationships and to have daughters who are also high in self-esteem, but many other interpretations are also possible. In view of the
stances, cultural environments, or related variables. Because none of the published work has employed observational measures or longitudinal designs, little is known about behavior within these families or about any changes over time. It is clear that much remains to be learned about differences among gay and lesbian families and about the impact of such differences on children growing up in these homes.

4. **Children Born to or Adopted by Lesbian Mothers: The Bay Area Families Study**

Although many writers have recently noted an increase in childbearing among lesbians, research with these families is as yet very new (Patterson, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995c; Polkoff, 1990; Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Riley, 1988; Weston, 1991). In this section, I summarize the research to date on children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers. Although some gay men are also undertaking parenthood after coming out (Patterson & Chan, 1996), no research has yet been reported on their children.

In one of the first systematic studies of children born to lesbians, Steckel (1985, 1987) compared the progress of separation-individuation among 11 preschool children born via DI to lesbian couples with that among 11 same-aged children of heterosexual couples. Using parent interviews, parent and teacher Q-sorts, and structured doll-play techniques, Steckel compared independence, ego functions, and object relations among children in the two types of families. Her main results documented impressive similarity in development among children in the two groups. Similar findings, based on extensive interviews with five lesbian-mother families were also reported by McCandlish (1987).

Steckel (1985, 1987) did, however, report some suggestive differences between groups. Children of heterosexual parents saw themselves as somewhat more aggressive than did children of lesbians, and they were seen by both parents and teachers as more bossy, domineering, and negative. Children of lesbian parents, on the other hand, saw themselves as more lovable and were seen by parents and teachers as more affectionate, more responsive, and more protective toward younger children. In view of the small sample size and the large number of statistical tests performed, these results must be considered suggestive rather than definitive. Steckel’s work is, however, the first to make systematic comparisons of development among children born to lesbian and to heterosexual couples.

More recently, Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, and Joseph (1995) compared social and personal development among fifteen 3- to 9-year-old children born to lesbian couples via DI with that among 15 children from matched, two-parent heterosexual families. Across a wide array of assessments of cognitive and behavioral functioning, there were notable similarities between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents. The only significant difference between the two groups was in the area of parenting skills and practices; lesbian couples revealed more parenting skills than did heterosexual couples.

In this context, I designed the Bay Area Families Study to contribute to understanding of children born to lesbian mothers. In this section, I describe the study itself and its principal results to date; they fall into four major areas. First, I describe demographic and other characteristics of the participating families. Next, I describe assessments of the adjustment of both mothers and children, relative to normative expectations based on large comparison samples drawn from the population at large. In families that were headed by lesbian couples, the study also examined key facets of couple functioning (e.g., relationship satisfaction, division of labor), and I report normative findings in this area. The study also explored individual differences in children’s adjustment, and their correlates, and I present these findings next. Finally, the study examined the degree to which children in participating families have contact with grandparents and other members of the extended family, and I present these findings as well. Although I 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, but additional details and commentary are available elsewhere (Patterson, 1994a, 1995b, 1995f; Patterson & Kosmitzki, 1995). There were no significant sex differences in the data presented here, so my presentation does not consider this variable.

4.1. **Description of Participating Families**

Families were eligible to participate in the Bay Area Families Study if they met each of three criteria. First, at least one child between 4 and 9 years of age had to be present in the home. Second, the child had to have been born to or adopted by a lesbian mother or mothers. Third, only families who lived within the greater San Francisco Bay Area (e.g., San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose) were considered eligible.

Recruitment began when I contacted friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who might be likely to know eligible lesbian-mother families. I described the proposed research and solicited help in locating families. From names gathered in this way, I telephoned each family to describe the study and ask for their participation. In all, I made contact with 39 eligible families, of whom 37 participated in the study. Thus, approximately 95% of the eligible families who were contacted did take part. Participation in-
volved a single home visit during which all of the data reported here were collected.

Twenty-six of the 37 participating families (70%) were headed by a lesbian couple. Seven families (19%) were headed by a single mother living with her child. In four families (11%), the child had been born to a lesbian couple who had since separated, and the child was in de facto joint custody (i.e., living part of the time with one mother and part of the time with the other mother). In this last group of families, one mother was out of town during the period of testing, and so did not participate.

Sixty-six lesbian mothers took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 28 to 53 years, with a mean age of 39.6 years of age. Sixty-one (92%) described themselves as white or non-Hispanic Caucasian, two (3%) as Afro-American or black, and three (4%) as coming from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Most were well educated; 74% had received college degrees, and 48% had received graduate degrees.

The great majority of mothers (94%) were employed on a regular basis outside the home, and about half said that they worked 40 hours or more per week. Most (62%) of the women were in professional occupations (e.g., law, nursing), but others were in technical or mechanical occupations such as car repair (9%), business or sales such as real estate (9%), or in other occupations such as artist (14%). Only four mothers were not employed outside the home. Thirty-four families reported family incomes over $30,000 per year, and 17 families reported incomes over $60,000 per year.

In each family, the focal child was between 4 and 9 years of age (mean age, 6 years and 2 months); there were 19 girls and 18 boys. Thirty-four of the children were born to lesbian mothers, and three had been adopted. Thirty of the children were described by their mothers as white or non-Hispanic Caucasian, three as Hispanic, and four as some other racial/ethnic heritage.

Some additional descriptive information was also collected. Mothers were asked to explain the circumstances surrounding the child's conception, birth, and/or adoption. Mothers were also asked about the child's biological father or sperm donor, the degree to which the mother had knowledge of his identity and/or contact with him, and the degree to which the focal child had such knowledge and/or contact. In addition, mothers were asked to give the child's last name and to explain how the child had been given that name.

The mothers' accounts of the conception, birth, and/or adoption of their children made clear that, in general, the focal children were very much wanted. The average amount of time that it took for biological mothers to conceive focal children after they began to attempt to become pregnant was 10 months. Adoptive mothers reported that, on average, the adoption process took approximately 12 months. In the great majority of cases, these lesbian mothers had devoted considerable time and effort to making the birth or adoption of their children possible.

There was tremendous variability in the amount of information that families had about the donor or biological father of the focal child. In 17 families (46%), the child had been conceived via DI with sperm from an anonymous donor (e.g., sperm that had been provided by a sperm bank or clinic). In these cases, families had only very limited information (e.g., race, height, weight, hair color) about the donor, and none knew the donor's name. In 10 families (27%), the child was conceived via DI, with sperm provided by a known donor (e.g., a family friend). In 4 families (11%), children were conceived when the biological mother had intercourse with a man. In 3 families (8%), the child was adopted. In the 3 remaining families, some other set of circumstances applied, or the parents acknowledged that the child had been born to one of the mothers, but preferred not to disclose any additional information about their child's conception.

Mothers reported relatively little contact with biological fathers or donors. Most of the families (62%) reported no contact at all with the biological father or donor during the previous year. Only 10 families (27%) had had two or more contacts with the biological father or sperm donor during the previous year.

Given that many families did not know the identity of the child's sperm donor or biological father, and that most currently had little or no contact with him, it is not surprising that the donor or biological father's role with the child was described by mothers as being quite limited. In the majority of families (60%), mothers reported that the donor or biological father had no special role vis-à-vis the child; this figure includes the families in which the sperm donor had been anonymous. In a minority of families (35%), the biological father's identity was known to parents and children, but he took the role of a family friend rather than that of a father. There were only two families in which the biological father was acknowledged as such and in which he was described as assuming a father's role.

Questions about selection of the child's last name are of particular interest in families headed by lesbian couples. In this sample, the majority of children—26, or 70%—bore the last names of their biological or adoptive mothers; this figure includes children in 4 families in which all family members (i.e., both mothers and all children) shared the same last name. In 7 families, children had been given hyphenated last names, created from the two mothers' last names. Finally, in 4 families, children had some other last name.

Thus, the families who participated in the Bay Area Families Study were mostly white, well educated, and relatively affluent. Almost every
mother was employed, many in the professions. Most children had been conceived via donor insemination, and most had little or no contact with the sperm donor or biological father.

4.2. Mental Health of Mothers and Their Children

For purposes of presentation, I will refer to the biological or legal adoptive mother in each family as the "biological mother," and the other mother, if any, as the "nonbiological mother." In what follows, I describe first the assessment procedures and results for mothers and then turn to those for children (see Patterson, 1994a, and Patterson & Kosmitzki, 1995, for details).

4.2.1. Assessment of Maternal Self-Esteem and Adjustment

Maternal self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1979). This scale consists of 10 statements, with four response alternatives, indicating the respondent's degree of agreement with each statement. Results were tabulated to obtain total scores, based upon the recommendations contained in Rosenberg (1979).

Maternal adjustment was assessed using the Derogatis Symptom Checklist—Revised (SCL-90-R; Derogatis, 1983), which consists of 90 items addressing a variety of psychological and somatic symptoms. Each respondent rated the extent to which she had been distressed by each symptom during the past week (0 = Not at All, 4 = Extremely). Nine subscales (i.e., anger/hostility, anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, obsessive-compulsiveness, paranoid ideation, phobic anxiety, psychoticism, and somatization) were scored, as well as a global severity index (GSI), which summarized the respondent's overall level of distress.

4.2.2. Results for Maternal Self-Esteem and Adjustment

Total scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were calculated for each mother, following the method described by Rosenberg (1979). The means for both biological and nonbiological mothers were almost identical, and both were well within the range of normal functioning. These results (see Table 1) indicate that lesbian mothers who took part in this research reported generally positive views about themselves.

For the Derogatis SCL-90, nine subscale scores and one GSI for each mother were computed, and then average scores on each measure both for biological and nonbiological mothers were calculated (Derogatis, 1983). Mean scores for biological and nonbiological mothers were virtually identical for most subscales as well as for the GSI, and they were all well within a normal range (see Table 1). None of the scores deviated substantially from the expected mean, indicating that lesbian mothers' reports of symptoms are no greater and no smaller than those expected for any other group of women of the same age. Thus, the results for maternal adjustment revealed that lesbian mothers who took part in the Bay Area Families Study reported few symptoms and good self-esteem.

4.2.3. Assessment of Children's Adjustment

To assess levels of child social competence and of child behavior problems, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) was administered (Patterson, 1994a). The CBCL was selected because of its ability to discriminate children in the clinical versus normative range of functioning for both internalizing (e.g., inhibited, overcontrolled behavior) and externalizing (e.g., aggressive, antisocial, or undercontrolled behavior) problems, as well as in social competence. It is designed to be completed by parents. In the present study, all participating mothers completed this instrument.

Norms for the CBCL (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) were obtained

| Table 1 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Means and T-Scores of SCL-90-R Subscales and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale for Biological and Nonbiological Mothers** |
| **Biological mothers** | **Nonbiological mothers** |
| Mean | T-score | Mean | T-score |
| SCL-90-R subscales | | | |
| Anger/hostility | .36 | 55 | .31 | 52 |
| Anxiety | .29 | 52 | .24 | 51 |
| Depression | .40 | 53 | .43 | 53 |
| Interpersonal sensitivity | .33 | 53 | .36 | 54 |
| Obsessive-compulsiveness | .31 | 50 | .51 | 54 |
| Paranoid ideation | .32 | 52 | .25 | 52 |
| Phobic anxiety | .01 | 44 | .12 | 53 |
| Psychoticism | .11 | 53 | .11 | 53 |
| Somatization | .29 | 50 | .32 | 50 |
| Global severity index (GSI) | .34 | 53 | .38 | 55 |
| Rosenberg Self-Esteem | 16.00 | | | 16.10 |

*T-scores based on norms of nonpatient group according to Derogatis (1983). T-scores for Rosenberg scale were not available. Reprinted from Patterson and Kosmitzki (1995).
from heterogeneous normal samples of two hundred 4- to 5-year-old, and six hundred 6- to 11-year-old children, as well as from equivalent numbers of children at each age who were drawn from clinical populations (e.g., those receiving services from community mental health centers, private psychological and psychiatric clinics or practices, etc.). For purposes of the present research, mean scores reported by Achenbach and Edelbrock (1983, pp. 210–214) were averaged across 4- to 5- and 6- to 11-year age levels to provide estimates of average scores for social competence, internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems among normative and clinical populations at the ages studied here. To assess the extent of their resemblance to normal and clinical populations, then, scores for children in the current sample were compared with these figures.

Assessment of children's self-concepts was accomplished using five scales from Eder's Children's Self-View Questionnaire (CSVQ: Eder, 1990). These scales, designed especially to assess psychological concepts of self among children from 3 to 8 years of age, assess five different dimensions of children's views of themselves. The aggression scale assessed the degree to which children saw themselves as likely to hurt or frighten others. The Social Closeness scale assessed the degree to which children enjoy being with people and prefer to be around others. The Social Potency scale assessed the degree to which children like to stand out and/or be the center of attention. The Stress Reaction scale assessed the extent to which children said they often felt scared, upset, and/or angry. Finally, the Well-Being scale assessed the degree to which children felt joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves. Using hand puppets, the CSVQ was administered individually to participating children, and their answers were tape-recorded for later scoring.

Children's sex-role behavior preferences were assessed in a standard, open-ended interview format, such as that employed in earlier research on children of divorced lesbian mothers (e.g., Golombok et al., 1983; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986). The interviewer explained to each child that she was interested in learning more about the friends and other children that he or she liked to play with, and about his or her favorite toys and other things. She then asked each child to name the friends and other children he or she liked to play with. Following this, each child was asked to name his or her favorite toys, favorite games, and favorite characters on television, in movies, or in books. The interviewer wrote down each of the children's responses. Children's responses were also tape-recorded, and the interviewer's notes were later checked for accuracy against the audiotapes.

After testing had been completed, each child's answers for each of four topics (peer friendships, favorite toys, favorite games, and favorite characters) were coded into one of four categories with regard to their sex-role relevant qualities. The four categories were Mainly same-sex (e.g., a boy reports having mostly or entirely male friends), Mixed sexes (e.g., an even or almost-even mix of sexes in the friends mentioned by a child), Opposite sex (e.g., a girl reports having mostly or entirely male friends), and Can't tell (e.g., an answer was unscorable, or not clearly sex-typed—for instance, children saying that playing Chutes and Ladders was one of their favorite games). Because children's play groups are known to be highly sex-segregated at this age, children were expected to give mainly Same sex answers to these questions.

4.2.4. Results for Children's Adjustment

As expected, social competence among children with lesbian mothers was rated as normal (see Figure 1). Scores for children of lesbian mothers were significantly higher than those for Achenbach and Edelbrock's (1983) clinical sample, but were not different from those for the normal sample. This was true for reports given by both mothers in the lesbian-mother families (Patterson, 1994a).
Results for behavior problems revealed the same pattern. For internalizing (see Figure 2), externalizing (see Figure 3), and total behavior problems, scores for children of lesbian mothers were significantly lower than those for children in the clinical sample, but did not differ from those in the normal sample. This was true of reports given by both mothers in the lesbian mother families. Overall, then, the behavior problems of lesbian mothers’ children were rated as significantly smaller in magnitude than those of children in the clinical sample, and as no greater than those of children in the normal sample.

On three scales of the Edel CSVQ, there were no significant differences between the self-reports of children of lesbian as compared to those of Edel’s (1990) heterosexual mothers. Specifically, there were no significant differences between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers on self-concepts relevant to Aggression, Social Closeness, and Social Potency. Children of lesbian mothers in the present sample did not see themselves as either more or less aggressive, sociable, or likely to enjoy being the center of attention than did children of heterosexual mothers in Edel’s sample.

On two scales, however, differences did emerge between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers (see Figure 4). Specifically, children of lesbian mothers reported greater reactions to stress than did children of heterosexual mothers, and they also reported a greater overall sense of well-being than did children of heterosexual mothers. In other words, children of lesbian mothers said that they more often felt angry, scared, or upset, but also said that they more often felt joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves than did children of heterosexual mothers.

The aspect of children’s sexual identity studied here was that of preferences for sex-role behavior. As expected (Green, 1978), most children reported preferences for sex-role behaviors that are considered to be normative at this age (see Table 2). For instance, every child reported that his or her group of friends was mainly or entirely made up of same-sex children. The great majority of children also reported favorite toys and favorite characters (e.g., from books, movies, or television) that were of the same sex. In the case of favorite games, a number of children mentioned games that were not clearly sex-typed (e.g., board games such as Chutes and Ladders), and hence were not categorizable; however, the great major-
ity mentioned games that are generally associated with their own rather than with the opposite sex. In short, preferences for sex-role behavior among the children of lesbian mothers studied here appeared to be quite typical for children of these ages.

4.3. Couple Functioning

Couple functioning was assessed among the 26 participating families that were headed by a lesbian couple (Patterson, 1995b). In this section, the assessment instruments are described first, followed by results for the couples who took part in the study.

4.3.1. Assessment of Couple Functioning

To assess division of labor as well as satisfaction with role arrangements in each family, an adapted form of the Who Does What? for parents of 5-year-olds (Cowan & Cowan, 1990, 1992) was administered to each adult respondent (Patterson, 1995b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children's Sex-Role Behavior*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer friendships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly same sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed sexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly opposite sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not clearly sex typed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reprinted with permission from Patterson (1994a).

The instrument began with 13 items concerning the division of household labor (e.g., planning and preparing meals, cleaning up after meals). Respondents were asked to decide for each item How it is now and How I would like it to be on a scale of 1 to 9, in which 1 meant She does it all and 9 meant I do it all. These are referred to as the “real” and “ideal” divisions of labor, respectively. At the bottom of that page, each respondent was asked to indicate how satisfied overall she was with “the way you and your partner divide the family tasks,” and with “the way you and your partner divide the work outside the family”; in each of these two cases, scores ranged from 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied).

The next page contained 12 items about family decision making (e.g., decisions about major expenses, deciding which friends and family to see). Respondents were again asked to indicate the real and ideal division of labor. At the bottom of this second page, each respondent was asked to indicate on a 5-point scale how satisfied overall she was with “the way you and your partner divide family decisions.”

The third page contained 20 items about child-care responsibilities (e.g., playing with our child, disciplining our child, picking up after our child). Respondents were again asked to indicate the real and ideal divisions of labor for each item.

The fourth page contained four questions about overall evaluations of child-care responsibilities. Respondents were asked to rate their own and their partner's overall involvement with their child on a scale running from No Involvement, to Shared Involvement, to Sole responsibility. Respondents also were asked to rate their satisfaction with their own and with their partner's involvement in child care responsibilities, from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied.

To assess satisfaction with couple relationships, the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) was administered to all adult respondents. The Marital Adjustment Test is a 16-item instrument designed to
record in a standardized format the overall satisfaction of spouses with their heterosexual marriages. A handful of small changes in wording (e.g., substituting the word partner for the word spouse) made the instrument more suitable for use with lesbian couples. Scoring was accomplished using the methods described by the authors.

4.3.2. Results for Couple Functioning

The actual and ideal reported participation of biological and nonbiological mothers in each of three domains of family work was compared (Patterson, 1995b; see Table 3). Results showed that biological and nonbiological mothers did not differ in their evaluations of ideal distributions of labor in the three domains; most believed that tasks should be shared relatively evenly in all domains. In terms of the actual division of labor, biological and nonbiological mothers did not differ in their reported participation in household labor or family decision making. In the area of child care, however, biological mothers reported themselves as responsible for more of the work than nonbiological mothers. Thus, although lesbian mothers agreed that ideally child care should be evenly shared, they reported that in their families, the biological mother was actually more responsible than the nonbiological mother for child care.

To assess satisfaction with division of labor, comparisons between actual and ideal divisions of labor were made (see Figure 5). Results showed that biological mothers reported that ideally they would do fewer household tasks and less child care. Nonbiological mothers did not report feeling that they should be significantly more involved in household tasks, but did agree that an ideal allocation of labor would result in them doing more child care. There were no effects for family decision making. Thus, the main result was that both mothers felt that an ideal allocation of labor would involve a more equal sharing of child care tasks between them.

Each respondent also had been asked to provide a global rating of each mother's overall involvement in child care activities. Biological mothers reported on this measure that they were more involved than nonbiological mothers. Reports of the nonbiological mothers were in the same direction but did not reach statistical significance. Global judgments thus confirmed the more detailed reports described earlier in showing that, if anyone, it is the biological mother who takes more responsibility for child care.

### Table 3

**Parent Reports of Actual and Ideal Division of Family Labor**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of labor</th>
<th>Report of biological mother</th>
<th>Report of nonbiological mother</th>
<th>t(25)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household tasks</td>
<td>M 5.33</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .59</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-care tasks</td>
<td>M 5.70</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>3.92*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .90</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>M 5.14</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .65</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household tasks</td>
<td>M 5.10</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .56</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-care tasks</td>
<td>M 5.20</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .63</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>M 5.02</td>
<td>4.97</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD .25</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Scores of 1 indicate that She does it all, scores of 5 indicate that We both do this about equally, and scores of 9 indicate that I do it all. To protect alpha levels against inflation due to multiple comparisons, the Bonferroni correction has been applied to all t-tests. Reprinted with permission from Patterson (1995b).*

*p < .01.*
In interviews, parents were asked to give estimates of the average number of hours both biological and nonbiological mothers spent in paid employment each week. Results showed that biological mothers were less likely than nonbiological mothers to be working 40 hours per week or more in paid employment (see Figure 6). Thus, whereas biological mothers reported greater responsibility for child care, nonbiological mothers reported spending more time in paid employment.

There were no differences between relationship satisfaction reported by biological and nonbiological mothers (see Table 4). Consistent with expectations based on earlier findings with lesbian mothers (Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992), lesbian mothers reported feeling very satisfied in their couple relationships. Overall satisfaction with division of family labor was also high, and there were no significant differences between biological and nonbiological mothers in this regard.

4.4. Parental Division of Labor, Satisfaction, and Children’s Adjustment

The study also assessed the strength of overall association between the three measures of child adjustment on the one hand and the four measures of parents’ division of labor and satisfaction with division of labor on the other (Patterson, 1995b). Results of multivariate analysis showed a significant association between the two sets of variables. Parent reports of division of labor, satisfaction with division of labor, and measures of child adjustment were significantly associated with one another. When biological mothers did less child care and when nonbiological mothers did more and were more satisfied, children’s adjustment was rated as being more favorable.

In this study, then, both children and mothers reported more positive adjustment in families in which the nonbiological mother was described as a relatively equal participant in child care, and in which the biological mother was not described as bearing an unequal burden of child care duties. In other words, the most positive outcomes for children occurred in families that reported sharing child-care tasks relatively evenly between parents.

4.5. Contacts with Members of Extended Family

One common stereotype about lesbian mothers and their children is that they are isolated from extended family networks. In particular, because it is sometimes assumed that lesbian women who are open with
parents or siblings about their sexual identities will be disowned or rejected by—and therefore estranged from—their relatives, it is sometimes expected that children of lesbian mothers will have little or no contact with their grandparents, aunts, or uncles. One concern that is sometimes expressed about children growing up in custody of lesbian mothers, then, is that they may be isolated in a single-sex home, without access to heterosexual adults, both male and female, who might serve as role models for them.

To evaluate these possibilities, lesbian mothers were asked to provide information about their children's contacts with grandparents and with any other adults outside the immediate household who were seen by the mothers as being important to their children (Patterson et al., 1995). For each person named, mothers were asked to give the person's relationship to the focal child and an estimate of the person's frequency of contact with the focal child, including visits, telephone calls, cards, and letters.

Results showed that, contrary to the stereotypes, most children were in relatively active contact with grandparents and with other members of their extended families. For instance, mothers reported that more than 60% of children had contact with at least one grandmother, and more than 50% of children had contact with at least one grandfather, once a month or more often. Similarly, mothers reported that many children had such contact with at least one additional adult relative (usually, an aunt or an uncle) and most had such contact with parents' adult friends, both male and female. Clearly, then, the results suggested that children were in active contact with both male and female grandparents and other relatives.

4.6. Summary and Discussion of Bay Area Families Study

The Bay Area Families Study was designed to examine child development and family functioning among families in which children were born or adopted after their mothers had acknowledged lesbian identities. Although findings from this study should be regarded as preliminary in a number of respects, four principal results have emerged to date. The first major finding was that, according to the standardized assessment techniques used here, both mothers' and children's adjustment fell clearly within the normative range. 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, 1994; Patterson, 1992, 1995d), 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 country, however, the result is worthy of atten-

tion. The present study found not only that lesbian mothers' adjustment and self-esteem were within the normative range, but also that social and personal development among their children were proceeding quite normally.

Although psychosocial development among children of lesbian versus heterosexual parents was generally quite similar, there were nevertheless also some differences among children in the two groups, most notably in the area of self-concept. Even though their answers were well within the normal range, children of lesbian mothers reported that they experienced more reactions to stress (e.g., feeling angry, scared, or upset) and also a greater sense of well-being (e.g., feeling joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves) than did the children of heterosexual parents studied by Eder (1990).

The best interpretation of this difference is not yet clear. One possibility is that children of lesbian mothers report greater reactions to stress because they actually experience more stress than do other children. In other words, children of lesbian mothers may actually encounter more stressful events and conditions than do children with heterosexual parents (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1993; O'Connell, 1993). If so, then their more frequent reports of emotional responses to stress might simply reflect the more stressful nature of their experience. From this viewpoint, however, it is difficult to account for the greater sense of well being reported by children of lesbian mothers.

Another possibility is that, regardless of actual stress levels, children of lesbian mothers may be more conscious of their affective states in general and/or more willing to report their experiences of negative emotional states. If, as some have suggested (e.g., Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Rafkin, 1990), children in lesbian homes may have more experience with the naming and verbal discussion of feelings in general, then they might exhibit increased openness to the expression of negative as well as positive feelings. In this view, the greater tendency of lesbian mothers' children to admit feeling angry, upset, or scared might be attributed not as much to differences in experiences of stress as to a greater openness to emotional experience and expression of all kinds.

Consistent with this latter interpretation, children of lesbian mothers in the present study reported greater feelings of joy, contentedness, and comfort with themselves than did children of heterosexual mothers in Eder's (1990) sample. Although these findings do not rule out the possibility that children of lesbian women do indeed experience greater stress, they do suggest that these children may be more willing than other children to report a variety of intense emotional experiences, whether positive or negative. Because this study was not designed to evaluate alternative
interpretations of these differences, however, clarification of these issues must await the results of future research.

A second main finding was that lesbian couples who took part in this study reported that they divide various aspects of the labor involved in household upkeep and child care in a relatively even manner. The fact that lesbian mothers in this sample reported sharing many household and family tasks is consistent with, and expands upon, earlier findings on the division of household labor among lesbian and gay couples. For instance, Kurdek’s (1993) study of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples without children found that lesbian couples were the most likely to share household responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry. In the present study, results showed that lesbian couples with children not only reported sharing such household tasks but also reported enjoying equal influence in family decision making. Thus, even under pressure of child-rearing responsibilities, lesbian couples seem to maintain relatively egalitarian divisions of household responsibilities. In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled lesbian couples without children.

On the other hand, there were also some indications of specialization in the allocation of labor among lesbian couples who participated in this study. Consistent with patterns of specialization in heterosexual families (Cowan & Cowan, 1992), biological mothers reported greater involvement with child care, and nonbiological mothers reported spending more time in paid employment. In accommodating to the demands of child rearing, it would appear that lesbian couples who took part in this research specialized to some degree with regard to their engagement in child care versus paid work. In this way, lesbian couples with children resembled heterosexual couples with children.

It is important, however, not to overemphasize the similarities between division of labor in lesbian and heterosexual families. In an unpublished dissertation, Hand (1991) compared division of labor among lesbian and heterosexual couples with children under the age of 2 years. Consistent with the present findings, she found that household tasks and decision making were shared evenly by both lesbian and heterosexual couples with children, and that biological lesbian mothers reported greater involvement in child care than did nonbiological mothers. She also found, however, that both biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers were more involved in child care than were heterosexual fathers. Thus, even though differences between biological and nonbiological lesbian mothers were significant, both in the present study and in the study by Hand (1991), they were much less pronounced than the differences between husbands and wives in the matched group of heterosexual families studied by Hand (1991). These results are depicted in Figure 7. As can be seen in the figure, division of the labor involved in child care was more pronounced among heterosexual than among lesbian couples.

The third major result documented significant associations between division of labor among lesbian couples and psychosocial outcomes for mothers and their children. When lesbian couples shared child care more evenly, mothers were more satisfied and children were more well-adjusted. Thus, even within the context of largely egalitarian arrangements, more equal sharing of child care was associated with more positive outcomes among both lesbian mothers and their children.

Mothers’ ratings of their children’s behavior problems were significantly associated with assessment of the parents’ division of labor as well as with nonbiological mother’s satisfaction with the allocation of tasks. Especially striking was the extent to which the nonbiological mother’s satisfaction with child-care arrangements was associated with children’s self-reports of well-being. Even within this well-adjusted nonclinical sample, children with mothers who shared child-care tasks evenly, and who expressed satisfaction with this arrangement, appeared to enjoy the most favorable adjustment.
That equal sharing of child care was associated with favorable adjustment among children is a result very much in concert with ideas proposed by Okin and by other scholars working from a feminist perspective (e.g., Hochschild, 1989; Okin, 1989). These writers have suggested that models of fairness in division of labor at home are important influences on children’s development, and that children who observe equal division of responsibilities between their parents may enjoy developmental advantages. Although this is by no means the only possible interpretation of the present findings, these results are certainly consistent with such a view.

One possible pathway through which benefits of equality in parents’ division of labor might accrue to children involves parental satisfaction with their couple relationships. Given the egalitarian ideals expressed so clearly by lesbian couples who took part in this research, higher relationship satisfaction was expected among those who succeeded—by equal division of labor—in putting these ideals into action. Whether by its association with the relative absence of conflict between parents or with other aspects of parenting behavior (Belsky, 1984), satisfaction was expected to mediate connections between division of labor and child adjustment. Contrary to expectations, however, no consistent association emerged among relationship satisfaction and the other study variables. In retrospect this may have been due to the global nature of the assessments of relationship satisfaction used here. Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, and Stangor (1988) have reported that some aspects of marital satisfaction are more tied to division of labor than others. Future research employing more detailed measures of potential mediators will, it is hoped, explicate more clearly pathways that link parental division of labor and child adjustment.

Although questions about causal linkages are of great interest, one should keep in mind that the present data are correlational in nature and therefore cannot support causal inferences. Are happy, well-adjusted lesbian families more likely to divide labor evenly? Or does the equal division of labor among lesbian couples with children lead to better adjustment and satisfaction with domestic arrangements? Or both? The present study was not designed to examine such possibilities, and the present data do not allow for their evaluation. Future work employing other kinds of research designs will be needed to disentangle causes and consequences in these domains.

The fourth major finding concerned children’s contact with grandparents and other adult members of their extended families. Common stereotypes suggest that lesbian mothers who disclose their sexual identities to family members may be rejected for that reason, and hence that they and their children may be estranged to some extent from members of their extended families. In contrast to such expectations, results from the Bay Area Families Study suggested that most children were in relatively active contact with at least some of their grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Far from being isolated from lesbian mothers’ families of origin, then, the results suggested that children were actively engaged in relationships with grandparents and other relatives of both sexes.

A number of limitations of this research should be acknowledged. This research relied on mothers’ and children’s reports as sources of data. The study included no observational assessments, and so the correspondence between parental reports about division of labor and the actual division of labor cannot be determined. Likewise, assessments of children’s adjustment completed by independent observers would have been a valuable addition to the study. On the other hand, the use of well-known and widely used instruments such as the Locke–Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and the Achenbach and Edelbrock Child Behavior Checklist enhances the degree to which the present results can be compared with those of other researchers.

Some concerns relevant to sampling issues should also be acknowledged. Most of the families who took part in the Bay Area Families Study were headed by lesbian mothers who were white, well educated, relatively affluent, and living in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. For these reasons, no claims about representativeness of the present sample can be made. The reliability and generalizability of findings would likely be enhanced by the participation of more diverse samples of lesbian families over longer periods of time.

In summary, the Bay Area Families Study was designed to study child development, maternal mental health, and family functioning among the families of the lesbian baby boom. Results to date suggest that maternal mental health is good and that child development is proceeding normally. Lesbian couples described equal sharing of many household and decision-making tasks involved in their lives together, but they also reported that child care and paid employment were specialized to some degree. The more evenly they shared child care, the more satisfied mothers reported feeling, and the better adjusted were their children. In addition, children were reported to be in relatively active contact with their grandparents and with other adult members of their extended families.

5. Conclusions

Overall, results of research on children of lesbian and gay parents suggest that such children develop in a normal fashion. Despite strong legal presumptions against lesbian and gay parents in a number of juris-
attributed to this fact. Thus, studies of divorced lesbian and gay parents and their children, although suggestive from a theoretical point of view, are not likely to be definitive with regard to the theoretical significance of parental sexual orientation on human development.

More likely to have definitive theoretical implications are studies of children born to (or adopted early in life by) lesbian or gay parents. In the Bay Area Families Study, for example, most children had little or no contact with the sperm donor or biological father who had made their conception possible; about half of the children did not even know this man's identity (Patterson, 1994a). In these families, then, children have lived their entire lives in custody of lesbian mothers; no heterosexual parent has ever lived in the child's household. To the extent that normal development can be observed within this group of children, then, it cannot be attributed to any social influences from heterosexual parents.

To the extent that the findings from initial studies of children born to lesbian parents (e.g., Flaks et al., 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1994a, 1995b, 1995f; Patterson & Kosmitzki, 1995; Steckel, 1985, 1987) replicate in future research and are extended into adolescent and adult development, they will suggest that important revisions of well-known theories of psychological development may be necessary. If development of children born into lesbian-mother homes is normal, then traditional emphases on contributions of a heterosexual male parent to socialization may need to be reconsidered. If contributions of heterosexual male and female parents are not essential to satisfactory psychosocial development, then it will be necessary to consider alternative formulations.

A number of different approaches might be examined. For example, it might be argued that certain kinds of family interactions, processes, and relationships are beneficial for children's development, but that parents need not be heterosexual to provide them. In other words, variables related to family processes (e.g., qualities of relationships) may be more important predictors of child adjustment than are variables related to family structure (e.g., sexual orientation, number of parents in the home).

A possible analogy in this regard is provided by research on the impact of parental divorce on children. Although early studies of children's reactions to divorce focused on variables related to household composition and family structure (e.g., divorced vs. nondivorced families), more recent research has highlighted the important contributions of variables related to family processes and interactions (e.g., conflict, warmth). For instance, a number of investigators (e.g., Emery, 1982; O'Leary & Emery, 1984) have argued that child behavior problems associated with parental divorce are best understood as the result of interparen-
tual conflict rather than changes in household composition or structure as such. Research on divorcing families has thus suggested the preeminence of process over structure in mediating outcomes for children.

Applied to the present concerns, this perspective suggests the hypothesis that structural variables such as parental sexual orientation may be less important in mediating child outcomes in lesbian and gay families than qualities of family interactions, relationships, and processes. Many theoretical perspectives are compatible with an emphasis on function. For instance, attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1985a, 1985b; Bowlby, 1988) emphasizes the functional significance of sensitive parenting in creating secure relationships, but does not require any particular family constellation or structure. Similarly, self psychology (Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1984) describes the significance of mirroring and idealizing processes in human development, but does not require that they occur in the context of any specific family structure. Theoretical perspectives such as attachment theory and self psychology would seem to be compatible with an emphasis on functional rather than structural aspects of family life, and hence to provide promising interpretive frameworks within which to conceptualize further research in these directions.

To evaluate the impact of both process and structural variables on child outcomes in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual families, research would need to assess variables of both types. Research with other kinds of nontraditional families (Eiduson & Weisner, 1978; Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990) has demonstrated the potential utility of this approach. Most research on lesbian and gay families, however, has focused on structural rather than process variables (e.g., on comparisons between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers rather than on the qualities of interactions and relationships within these families). An adequate evaluation of the significance of process versus structure in lesbian and gay families therefore awaits the results of future research.

An alternative theoretical response might be to shift the focus of attention away from parental influences on children's development. As Maccoby (1990) has proposed, important forms of learning (e.g., behavior considered appropriate for members of each sex) may be less dependent on parental input than traditionally believed. Other social influences, such as those of peers, should also be considered. It will also be important to identify and acknowledge contributions of genetic influences (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). By investigating the impact of new family forms on the development of children who are growing up in them, it seems likely that research on children of lesbian and gay parents will provide opportunities to broaden understanding of human development.

Results of research on children of lesbian and gay parents also have significant implications for public policies governing child custody, foster care, and adoption in the United States (Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson, 1995c; Patterson & Redding, in press; Polikoff, 1986, 1990). Unless and until the weight of evidence can be shown to have shifted, there is no empirically verifiable reason under the prevailing "best interests of the child" standard (Reppucci, 1984; Rivera, 1991) to deny or curtail parental rights of lesbian or gay parents on the basis of their sexual orientation, nor is there any empirically verifiable reason to believe that lesbians or gay men are less fit than heterosexuals to serve as adoptive or foster parents (Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Patterson, 1995c; Ricketts, 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990). Existing research evidence provides no justification for denial of parental rights and responsibilities to lesbians and gay men on the basis of their sexual orientation.

Indeed, protection of the best interests of children in lesbian and gay families increasingly demands that courts and legislative bodies acknowledge realities of life in nontraditional families (Falk, 1994; Patterson, 1995c; Patterson & Redding, in press; Polikoff, 1990). Consider, for example, a family created by a lesbian couple who undertake the conception, birth, and upbringing of their child together. Should this couple separate, it is reasonable to expect that the best interests of the child will be served by preserving the continuity and stability of the child's relationships with both parents. In law, however, it is generally only the biological mother who is recognized as having parental rights and responsibilities. From a legal standpoint, the nonbiological mother is generally considered a stranger, with no legal rights or responsibilities with respect to the child. When courts and legislatures fail to acknowledge facts of children's lives in nontraditional families, they experience great difficulty in serving the best interests of children in these families (Polikoff, 1990).

A number of approaches to rectifying this situation have been proposed. For instance, a small number of families have obtained second-parent adoptions (Patterson, 1995c; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990), in which a nonbiological parent legally adopts a child without the biological parent giving up his or her legal rights and responsibilities; this avenue is not, however, available in most states. Others (e.g., Polikoff, 1990) have advocated legislative reform, including changes in the standards for legal designation as a parent. As the number of lesbian and gay families with children increase, pressures for legal and judicial reform seem likely to increase.

As this review has revealed, most of the existing research has focused primarily on comparisons between children of gay or lesbian parents and those of heterosexual parents. It has taken this approach in order to address what can be considered heterosexist and/or homophobic questions
Heterosexism reflects the belief that everyone is or ought to be heterosexual. Homophobic questions are those that are based on prejudice against lesbians and gay men, and are designed to raise the expectation that various negative outcomes will befall children of gay or lesbian parents as compared to children of heterosexual parents. Examples of such questions that were considered earlier include the following: Won't the children of lesbians and gay men have difficulty with sexual identity? Won't they be more vulnerable to psychiatric problems? Won't they be sexually abused? Now that research has begun to provide negative answers to such heterosexist and/or homophobic questions, the time has come for child development researchers to address a broader range of issues in this area (Allen & Demo, 1995; Laird, 1993; Patterson, 1995a, 1995d).

Many important research questions can stem from a more positive approach to the concerns of gay and lesbian communities. Such questions may raise the possibility of various desirable outcomes for children of gay and lesbian parents. For instance, won't these children grow up with increased tolerance for viewpoints other than their own? Won't they be more at home in the multicultural environments that almost all people increasingly inhabit? A number of children of lesbian mothers have reported that they see increased tolerance for divergent viewpoints as a benefit of growing up in lesbian mother families (Rafkin, 1990), but systematic research in this area is still lacking. Alternatively, these approaches may suggest study of the great diversity among gay and lesbian families. For example, how does growing up with multiple gay and lesbian parents differ from the experience of growing up with a single parent or with two parents who are a gay or lesbian couple? It will be helpful in future research to explore ways in which family processes are related to child outcomes in different kinds of lesbian and gay families (Allen & Demo, 1995; Laird, 1993; Patterson, 1995a, 1995d).

A few studies that provide information relevant to issues of diversity among children of gay and lesbian parents have already been reported. Results of work with families headed by divorced lesbian mothers suggest that children are better off when their mothers have high self-esteem and are currently living with a lesbian partner (Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, 1987). Research and clinical reports suggest that children in such families also appear to show more favorable adjustment when their fathers and/or other important adults accept their mothers’ lesbian identities, and perhaps also when they have contact with other children of lesbians and gay men (Huggins, 1989; Lewis, 1980). In addition, there are indications that those who learn as children that they have a gay or lesbian parent experience less difficulty in adapting to this reality than do those who are not told until adolescence (Paul, 1986). In one study, young children whose lesbian parents shared child care relatively evenly were better adjusted than those whose parents reported less egalitarian arrangements (Patterson, 1995b). Such findings are best regarded as preliminary glimpses of a territory in need of further exploration.

As a number of writers have pointed out (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1995a, 1995d), much remains to be done to understand differences between and among gay and lesbian families, and to comprehend the impact of such differences on children and youth. It would be valuable to know more about the economic, religious, racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in gay and lesbian families, and about the ways in which parents and children in such families manage the multiple identities available to them. It would be helpful to learn more about different kinds of parenting experiences—such as noncustodial parenting, nonbiological parenting, coparenting, multiple parenting, adoption, and foster care—and about their likely influences on the children involved. Studies are also needed to explore the nature of stresses and supports encountered by children of lesbian and gay parents—in the parents’ families of origin (e.g., with grandparents and other relatives), among parents’ and children’s friends, and in their larger communities. Research is needed about the ways in which effects of heterosexism and homophobia are felt by parents and children in lesbian and gay families, and about the way in which they cope with ignorance and prejudice that they encounter.

To address these issues most effectively, future research should be conducted from an ecological perspective and should, where possible, employ longitudinal designs. Studies of development over time, especially during middle and later childhood and adolescence, are badly needed. Research should seek to assess not only child adjustment over time, but also the family processes, relationships, and interactions to which child adjustment may be linked. Family processes, in turn, should be viewed in context of the prevailing ecological conditions of family life.

In conclusion, it would seem that research on children of gay and lesbian parents, although still quite new, is well under way. Having begun to address heterosexist and homophobic concerns represented in psychological theory, judicial opinion, and popular prejudice, researchers are now in a position also to explore a broader range of issues raised by the emergence of and increased openness among lesbian and gay parents and their children. Research in this area has the potential to contribute to knowledge about nontraditional family forms and about their impact on children, encourage innovative approaches to the conceptualization of human development, and inform legal rulings and public policies relevant to children of gay and lesbian parents.
6. References


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