

## FAMILIES OF THE LESBIAN BABY BOOM: Children's Contact With Grandparents and Other Adults

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*In an exploratory study of 37 lesbian-mother families, the frequency of children's contact with adults in their extended family and friendship networks was found to counter stereotypes of such children as isolated from parents' families of origin. Children were more likely to have regular contact with relatives of the biological than nonbiological mother. Mothers rated those in regular contact with grandparents as having fewer behavior problems, and those in more regular contact with unrelated adults rated themselves more positively on general well-being.*

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Relatively little information about the family lives of lesbians and their children is available in either the professional literature or the popular media (Allen & Demo, 1996; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Laird & Green, 1996), but many stereotypes are prevalent. Because it is sometimes assumed that lesbians who are open about their sexual identity will be rejected by—and therefore estranged from—their families of origin, it is also assumed that children of lesbian mothers will have little contact with their grandparents or other relatives. Thus, one concern that has been voiced about children growing up in lesbian-headed homes is that they may be isolated in single-sex environments, without access to heterosexual adults who might serve as role models. In contrast to such stereotypes, anecdotal reports suggest that many lesbian mothers and their children are in active contact with networks of family and friends (Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991).

Systematic research on this matter has, however, been largely lacking.

Research on heterosexual families has shown that grandparents can be an important source of support, both for their children and their grandchildren (Zarit & Eggebeen, 1995). Grandparents and other relatives may provide child care, financial support, or other kinds of material and emotional support, especially to families with young children (Eggebeen, 1992; Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990; Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993; Zarit & Eggebeen, 1995). Thus, one of the main aims of the present study was to examine the extent to which children of lesbian mothers have access to and regular contact with grandparents and other family members.

In families headed by lesbian couples, many of whom have conceived children via donor insemination, both women may view themselves (and be viewed by children) as parents, even though only one is biologi-

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cally related to the children (Patterson, 1992, 1995a). Among the relatives of a mother who is not biologically linked with her child (here termed the "nonbiological mother"), there may, however, be some hesitancy about acknowledging kinship with the children (Laird, *in press*; Patterson, 1996). Whether focused on lack of biological connections or on lack of legal protections for family relationships, the negotiation of such issues is often a concern among the families of nonbiological lesbian mothers (Patterson, 1996). Thus, a second question addressed in the present study was: To what extent are children of lesbian mothers in contact with extended family members of biological versus nonbiological mothers?

An oft-remarked but little studied aspect of lesbian relationships is the tendency for former romantic partners to remain close friends after their romantic relationship has ended (Becker, 1988; Laird, *in press*; Weston, 1991). Some writers have suggested that, after breaking up with a partner or lover, many lesbians may prefer to remain in contact, if possible, rather than end their connections with one another altogether. If so, former partners or ex-lovers of lesbian mothers might be in contact with children of these lesbian mothers, as well. To examine the extent to which this type of contact occurs, assessment techniques were designed to identify mothers' former romantic partners among the adults with whom children had contact. In this way, an effort was made to evaluate the degree to which such individuals might be important members of children's social networks in these lesbian-mother families.

Another important question concerns the possible associations of children's contacts with grandparents and other adults, on the one hand, and children's adjustment, on the other. Research on children of heterosexual parents has revealed that contacts with grandparents and other supportive adults outside the home are associated with positive outcomes for children (Cherlin & Fur-

stenberg, 1992; Smith, 1995; Tinsley & Parke, 1984, 1987). A further aim of the present study was to assess the extent to which this holds true for children of lesbian mothers.

To address these issues, data were collected from a group of families in which children had been born to, or adopted early in life by, women who identified as lesbian. At the time of the interviews, the children were, on average, about six years old and had lived their entire lives in the care and custody of lesbian mothers. Previous work with this sample has revealed that the children's development was proceeding in normal fashion (Patterson, 1994), and that, in households headed by lesbian couples, the labor involved in household upkeep and child care was divided more evenly between the adults than is typical of families in which the parents are heterosexual (Patterson, 1995b). The central questions addressed here focus on the extent to which children had contact with grandparents and other adults outside their immediate households, and on the possible associations of any such contacts with children's mental health.

#### METHOD

##### *Eligibility and Recruitment of Families*

Families were considered eligible to participate if they met each of three criteria. First, at least one child between four and nine years of age had to live 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 (San Francisco, Berkeley, San Jose) were included.

Recruitment began when the first author contacted friends, acquaintances, and colleagues to solicit their help in locating eligible lesbian-mother families. From names gathered in this way, the author telephoned each family, explained how she had obtained the family's name, described the study, and answered any questions about it. She then asked whether the family met the criteria for participation and, if so, whether

they would be willing to take part. When a family agreed, an appointment was arranged for the author to visit the family's home. This process involved between two and ten telephone conversations per family; in some cases, letters were also exchanged before an appointment was set up.

In all, contact was made with 39 eligible families, and 37 (close to 95% of those contacted) agreed to take part in the study. The high level of participation among eligible families reduces the likelihood that factors such as self-selection biases have affected results of this research.

#### *Participating Families*

Of the 37 participating families, 26 (70%) were headed by a lesbian couple, and 7 (19%) by a single mother living with her child. In 4 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). In this last group, one mother was out of town during the period of testing, and so did not participate.

Sixty-six mothers took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 28 to 53 years, with a mean of 39.6 years. Sixty-one (92%) described themselves as white or non-Hispanic Caucasian, two (3%) as African-American or black, and three (5%) as coming from other racial/ethnic backgrounds. Most were well-educated, with 74% having received college degrees and 48% having earned graduate degrees. The great majority of mothers (94%) had regular paid employment, and 54% said that they worked 40 hours or more per week, mostly in professional occupations (e.g., law, nursing). Thirty-four families (92%) reported family incomes over \$30,000 per year, and 17 families (46%) had incomes over \$60,000.

In each family, the oldest child who fit in the age range under study (4–9 years) was selected as the focal child. There were 19 girls and 18 boys, with a mean age of six years and two months. Thirty-four (92%)

of the children were born to lesbian mothers, and three (8%) had been adopted by lesbian mothers. Thirty (81%) of the children were described by their mothers as white or non-Hispanic Caucasian, three (8%) as Hispanic, and four (11%) as of some other racial/ethnic heritage.

For purposes of facilitating the statistical analyses and reporting of data, the biological or legal adoptive mother of the focal child was designated as the "biological mother." If, as in most families, there was another mother, she was designated for statistical and reporting purposes as the "non-biological mother." No statement about the relative importance or behavior of either woman was intended by these labels. Of the three adoptive families, two were headed by single mothers. In the remaining adoptive family, the legal adoptive mother was designated as the biological mother and the other as the nonbiological mother. Had the analyses been conducted without including the data from this family, the results would have been virtually identical to those reported below.

#### *Instruments*

*Contacts with grandparents and others.* As part of the family interview, lesbian mothers were asked to provide information about their children's contacts with grandparents and with all other adults outside the immediate household who were seen by the mothers as being important to the child. For each person named, mothers were asked to specify the relationship to the focal child, and to estimate the frequency of all forms of contact (visits, phone calls, cards, letters, etc.). Mothers were asked whether or not each "potential" grandparent (i.e., parents of the biological mother, nonbiological mother, and biological father or sperm donor, if known) was still living. The mothers were also asked specifically to indicate whether any adult they had mentioned as being in contact with the focal child was a former romantic partner or ex-lover of either mother.

*Behavior problems.* Children's adjustment was assessed by means of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), selected for its ability to discriminate between children in the clinical versus normative range of functioning for both internalizing (e.g., inhibited, overcontrolled) and externalizing (e.g., aggressive, antisocial, undercontrolled) behavior. All participating mothers completed this 118-item instrument, which records in a standardized format the behavioral problems of children 4–16 years of age. Each item is scored on a three-step scale (not true, somewhat/sometimes true, very/often true). Answers are tabulated to create subscales for internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems, and these are reported here as T scores. Extensive information on the reliability and validity of the CBCL scales is available (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983).

*Child self-concept.* Children's self-concept was measured using the Well-Being scale from Eder's (1990) Children's Self-View Questionnaire (CSVQ), designed especially to assess psychological concepts of self among children 3–8 years of age, and to assess different dimensions of children's views of themselves. The Well-Being scale focuses on the degree to which children feel joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves. Eder (1990) has provided information on validity and test-retest reliability of the scale. In this study, hand puppets were used (rather than the large puppets and puppet stage described by Eder); the CSVQ was administered individually to participating children, and their answers were tape-recorded for later scoring.

#### *Procedure*

When the first author arrived at the family's home for her appointment, she explained the study, answered any remaining questions, and asked for written consent from the mother or mothers present; verbal assent was also obtained from children.

The visit began with a semistructured family interview, which involved a number of questions about family background (education, occupation, etc.) and family history (e.g., circumstances surrounding focal child's birth or adoption), and about contacts with grandparents and other adults outside the household. This was followed by an individual interview with the focal child, during which the CSVQ scale was administered. During the time that the interviewer was with the focal child (usually in the child's room), mothers were asked to fill out a number of questionnaires, including the CBCL. In families headed by a couple, both women were asked to complete the questionnaires without discussing them. The visits lasted between 90 and 150 minutes per family.

#### RESULTS

Study findings will be presented with respect to children's contacts with grandparents and other adults; frequency of contact with relatives of biological mothers compared to relatives of nonbiological mothers; and the extent to which contacts with adults outside the household are associated with children's adjustment. The make-up of children's households (one versus two parents) was not found to relate significantly to contacts with grandparents or other adults, nor to children's adjustment; thus, the data will be reported without reference to this variable.

#### *Contacts With Grandparents and Others*

As expected on the basis of anecdotal reports (Laird, 1993, *in press*; Lewin, 1993), most children were described by their mothers as being in regular contact with grandparents and other adults outside of their immediate households. As shown in TABLE 1, the great majority of children were reported to have at least annual contact with grandparents, and many had monthly or more frequent contacts. A few parents reported that children were in at least annual contact with the mother ( $N=4$ ) or fa-

Table 1  
PERCENT AND FREQUENCY OF CHILDREN'S  
CONTACT WITH OUTSIDE ADULTS

RELATIONSHIP	YRLY MNTHLY	
Grandparents		
Biol. mother's mother (N=33) <sup>a</sup>	97%	67%
Biol. mother's father (N=24) <sup>a</sup>	92%	58%
Nonbiol. mother's mother (N=27) <sup>a</sup>	74%	30%
Nonbiol. mother's father (N=21) <sup>a</sup>	67%	24%
Unrelated grandmother figure (N=37) <sup>a</sup>	22%	11%
Unrelated grandfather figure (N=37) <sup>a</sup>	14%	5%
Other Relatives		
Biological mother's relatives		
Female (N=37)	32%	24%
Male (N=37)	32%	22%
Nonbiological mother's relatives		
Female (N=27)	33%	15%
Male (N=27)	7%	0%
Unrelated Adults		
Unrelated female friends (N=37)	95%	89%
Unrelated male friends (N=37)	65%	62%
Female ex-romantic partners (N=37)	32%	22%
Male ex-romantic partners (N=37)	5%	0%

<sup>a</sup>Sample sizes for these percentages are calculated to represent number of families with one or more living grandparents (or stepgrandparents) with whom child might be in contact; e.g., the 37 biological mothers had 33 living mothers (or stepmothers) but only 24 living fathers (or stepfathers). No data were collected on deaths of other family members (e.g., aunts and uncles).

ther (N=1) of their biological father or sperm donor; since none of these contacts was said to occur on a monthly or more frequent basis, they will not be considered further in this report.

Although not as common as contact with grandparents, there was at least sporadic contact with other relatives (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins). For example, 32% of children were described as being in at least annual contact with female relatives of their biological mother, and 33% with female relatives of the nonbiological mother. None was said to be in contact with other relatives of biological fathers or sperm donors.

Most of the children were also described as being in regular contact with adults, both male and female, who were not their relatives. For instance, almost every child was reported as having monthly or more frequent contact with unrelated adult women, and the majority were also described as having such contacts with unrelated adult men (see TABLE 1). These adults included parents' friends and neighbors, friends' parents, and others.

Among the unrelated adults with whom children had contact, a handful of older people were described as acting in the role of grandparent figures with children in this sample. Four children were described as having contact with at least one such female adult (here termed a "surrogate grandmother"); of these, two also had contact with at least one such male adult (termed a "surrogate grandfather"). Most of the children who were described as having contact with surrogate grandparents were also in regular contact with parents of at least one mother. Only in one family did contact with surrogate grandparents occur in the absence of contact with parents of at least one mother. Thus, in general, children's contacts with surrogate grandparent figures seemed to supplement existing ties, rather than substitute for missing ones.

Data on unrelated adults with whom children had contact also include separate analyses of those who were described as former romantic partners of the children's mothers. Consistent with expectations based on mothers' current sexual identities, the great majority of these individuals (85%) were women. Approximately one child in three was described as having at least occasional contact, and one in five as having regular contact, with a woman who had once been (but was no longer) a romantic partner of the child's mother.

As shown in TABLE 2, on average, children were described as having monthly or more frequent contact with approximately

Table 2  
ADULTS OUTSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD:  
MONTHLY OR MORE FREQUENT CONTACT

RELATIONSHIP	M	SD	RANGE
All Adults	6.1	2.9	0-13
Related Adults	2.1	1.6	0-6
Unrelated Adults	4.0	2.7	0-11
Women	4.3	2.2	0-9
Men	1.8	1.3	0-5
Related Women	1.3	1.3	0-5
Related Men	0.8	0.7	0-2
Unrelated Women	3.0	2.1	0-8
Unrelated Men	1.0	1.0	0-4
Relatives of Biological Mother	1.6	1.5	0-5
Relatives of Nonbiol. Mother	0.5	0.8	0-2

six adults outside their households, among whom there were roughly twice as many nonrelatives as relatives,  $t(36)=3.50, p<.01$ . Like other children in the United States today (Smith, 1995), children in the present sample were described as having contact with more adult women than adult men; they saw approximately four women and two men (both relatives and nonrelatives) on at least a monthly basis,  $t(36)=7.27, p<.01$ .

Taken together, the data in TABLE 2 suggest a composite picture in which children had monthly or more frequent contact with a grandmother and grandfather, three unrelated women, and one unrelated man. In a typical case, the unrelated adults might include another child's mother and father (who might also be friends of the child's parent or parents), and two adult women who were friends of the parent(s). In short, children had access to and regular contact with a variety of adults.

Among relatives seen frequently by children in two-parent families, more were relatives of biological than nonbiological mothers,  $t(28)=4.35, p<.01$ . On average, children had contact with one or two of their biological mother's relatives—typically grandparents—on a monthly or more frequent basis. Only one out of two children saw even a single relative of their nonbiological mother on such a regular basis. This difference is examined in greater detail below.

#### *Contacts With Relatives of Biological and Nonbiological Mothers*

In families headed by two mothers, children were described as more likely to be in contact with parents of their biological rather than their nonbiological mother. After correcting for cases in which a grandparent had died, 20 of 27 children (74%) had annual or more frequent contact with their nonbiological mother's mother, but 32 of 33 children (97%) had annual or more frequent contact with their biological mother's mother. Results for grandfathers were comparable. On the biological mother's side, the majority of children were de-

scribed as being in regular (i.e., at least monthly) contact with grandparents, compared to less than one-third on the nonbiological mother's side (see TABLE 1).

In a similar vein, children in two-parent families were described as more likely to be in regular contact with other relatives of the biological mother, compared with relatives of the nonbiological mother. For instance, 32% of children were described as in occasional (and 22% in regular) contact with male relatives of the biological mother. In comparison, only 7% of children were described as being in occasional contact with male relatives of the nonbiological mother (other than grandfathers), and none of these contacts was said to be regular. The findings with respect to female relatives were along the same lines, with children reported as experiencing more frequent contact with female relatives of the biological than the nonbiological mother (see TABLE 1).

Overall, there was a greater likelihood of children being in contact with grandparents and other relatives of the biological rather than the nonbiological mother. Children were more likely to have at least monthly contact with one or more grandparents,  $\chi^2(1)=6.66, p<.01$ , and with other relatives,  $\chi^2(1)=4.90, p<.05$ , on the biological as compared to the nonbiological side of their family.

#### *Adjustment as a Function of Contact*

Children who were described by their mothers as being in regular contact with more grandparents were also described as having fewer behavior problems. To examine this issue, the numbers of grandparents, other relatives, and unrelated adults with whom a child was said to have at least monthly contact were combined, so that each child had a summary score in each of these three categories. Pearson correlations were then computed for each of these summary scores with CBCL scores for internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problems. None of the correlations for other relatives

and for unrelated adults was significant, but significant findings did emerge for grandparents.

According to the biological mother's report of child behavior problems, more frequent contact with grandparents was associated with fewer internalizing behavior problems,  $r(N=37)=-.39, p<.05$ , and tended to be associated with fewer total behavior problems,  $r(N=37)=-.29, .05<p<.10$ ; there were no significant associations for externalizing behavior problems. Similarly, the nonbiological mother's report of child behavior problems revealed that greater contact with grandparents tended to be associated with fewer internalizing behavior problems,  $r(N=27)=-.35, .05<p<.10$ , and was significantly associated with fewer total behavior problems,  $r(N=27)=-.37, p<.05$ . Again, the results for externalizing problems were not significant. Thus, children who had more frequent contact with grandparents were described by their mothers as having fewer behavior problems.

Also examined were correlations of summary scores for contacts with grandparents, other relatives, and unrelated adults with children's self-reports of well-being on the CSVQ. Although no significant correlations emerged for contacts with grandparents or other relatives, there was an association between frequency of contact with unrelated adults, on the one hand, and children's self-reported well-being, on the other,  $r(N=36)=.37, p<.05$ . Children whose mothers described them as being in frequent contact with many adult nonrelatives reported experiencing greater feelings of well-being.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The children of lesbian mothers in this study were generally described as having regular contacts with several different adults, in addition to members of the children's own households, and as having occasional contacts with an even larger circle. These adults included grandparents, other relatives, and unrelated people (e.g., family

friends), both male and female. The findings are not consistent with stereotypes of lesbian mothers and their children as isolated from kinship networks, or as living in single-sex social worlds. The results do, however, confirm earlier anecdotal reports (Laird, *in press*; Lewin, 1993; Weston, 1991) of considerable social contact between children of lesbian mothers and their grandparents and other adults.

Among children's adult contacts, those with relatives of their biological mothers were found to be more frequent than those with relatives of nonbiological mothers. Children were more likely to be in contact with their grandparents, as well as with other adult relatives, on the biological rather than the nonbiological side. Although the precise meaning of this finding is by no means clear, several interpretations can be considered.

One possibility is that different patterns of contact between lesbian biological and nonbiological mothers and their families of origin pre-date the birth of children, and influence couples' choices about which partner should become pregnant and bear children. For example, a woman who enjoyed close relations with her parents and other relatives might be more likely to believe that she could count on them for support and assistance after the birth of a child. In contrast, a woman whose family relationships had been more distant or troubled might be less confident that she could count on their help during the early years of parenting. Such differences within a lesbian couple could help to shape decisions about which partner would seek biological parenthood. To the extent that this might be the case, the children's greater contact with relatives of their biological mothers would result from longstanding patterns of family interaction.

As might be anticipated from assumptions of this type, nonbiological mothers in this sample were reported to be living further away from their own mothers than were the biological mothers. Consistent with

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findings about grandparents' contact with grandchildren (*Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1992; Tinsley & Parke, 1984*), the greater geographical proximity of biological mothers and their own mothers did translate into somewhat greater contact with grandchildren in this sample, although the association was not significant. Probably because the study measures of contact included letters and telephone calls, as well as face-to-face visits, and because the sample was relatively affluent, geographical proximity of grandparents and their grandchildren was not a good predictor of the amount of contact between them.

Another possibility is that differential patterns of contact between children and the relatives of their biological and nonbiological mothers emerge not from longstanding family patterns but from the relatives' ideas about how cultural concepts of kinship should be applied to lesbian mothers and their children. Even if her parents feel some discomfort about a daughter's lesbian identity, most probably regard her biological child as a grandchild. However, if a child is the biological offspring not of their daughter, but of her lesbian partner, some grandparents may experience greater hesitation about assuming any kind of relationship indicative of kinship. In this case, even if both members of a lesbian couple had equally close relationships with their relatives before the arrival of a child, a birth to one of them might set in motion processes that would result in the child's having greater contact with relatives of the biological parent.

The current data are not sufficient to allow an informed choice among these and other possible interpretations. Should the present findings be replicated in other samples, assessments of some relevant family variables could be helpful in evaluating possible interpretations. Longitudinal research that follows lesbian women, their children, and members of their families of origin, assessing relationships and interactions over time, would also be useful in dis-

entangling some of the many factors involved. The construction and practice of kinship among lesbian mothers, their children, and their families of origin remain topics in need of further study.

The present results do, however, highlight some intriguing characteristics of the social networks of children with lesbian mothers. First, as one might expect in a sample in which many women had given birth to children conceived with sperm from anonymous donors (*Patterson, 1994*), it was rare for children in this study to be in contact with the relatives of their biological fathers or sperm donors. Only a handful of children were said to have any contact at all with their father/donor's relatives, and none was described as seeing them on a regular basis.

Another characteristic of adults with whom children had contact was that, contrary to stereotypes, they were probably about evenly split between lesbian/gay and heterosexual individuals. Study participants were not asked for the sexual orientation of each adult with whom their children had contact, but they were asked to estimate the percentage of their friends who identified as lesbian or gay—and both biological and nonbiological mothers put the figure at 60%. If the majority of family members (e.g., grandparents) can safely be assumed to be heterosexual, and if the majority of unrelated adults are said to be lesbian or gay, then the overall distribution of sexual orientation across all adults with whom these children have regular contact is likely to be relatively even.

A third notable characteristic of the social networks of these children was that they included a sizable number of women who were described as former romantic partners of the children's mothers. This finding is consistent with many anecdotal reports and commentaries suggesting that, long after the break-up of a romantic relationship, members of lesbian couples may remain close friends (*Becker, 1988; Laird, 1993, in press; Weston, 1991*). Indeed, the present



data suggest that such former romantic partners sometimes become important adult figures for one another's children.

A fourth characteristic of the findings is that children were described as having regular contact with adult men outside their households. Although not generally in regular contact with their biological fathers or sperm donors, even when their identities were known, most children did have regular contact with at least one grandfather and one unrelated man, typically a friend of their mother or mothers. Thus, while it was rare for adult men to be living in their households, it was not at all unusual for the children of lesbian mothers in this study to be in regular contact with adult males.

Consistent with expectations based on earlier research (Smith, 1995; Tinsley & Parke, 1984, 1987), this study also found significant associations between contacts with adults outside the household and children's adjustment. Specifically, according to mothers' reports, children who were in regular contact with grandparents were less likely to have behavior problems, especially those associated with internalizing. In addition, contacts with unrelated adults (e.g., family friends) were significantly associated with children's sense of well-being in this sample. Causal factors underlying such associations remain to be identified.

Finally, several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the research is exploratory in nature. The data were collected from a small, relatively homogeneous group of mainly middle-class families, living in a single geographical area; the degree to which these findings may be representative of other families headed by lesbian mothers is unknown. Moreover, data for this study were drawn from interviews and questionnaires administered to mothers and to children; no observational data were available. Similarly, the present study was not able to assess the quality of children's contacts with adults. Although these and other methodological features of the present work limit its gener-

alizability, the study brings to light findings that call into question common stereotypes and suggest directions for future research.

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