CHAPTER 37
Adolescents with Lesbian or Gay Parents
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How does parental sexual orientation affect adolescent development, if at all? This question has been posed in the context of legal and policy matters such as foster care, adoption, and custody proceedings and also from a conceptual standpoint. Some scholars argue that parental sexual orientation may affect adolescent issues such as exploration of sexuality and entrance into a larger peer group. Awareness of these discussions and of relevant empirical findings may help pediatricians who work with adolescents.

Families of adolescents with lesbian or gay parents may have been formed in a number of ways. Some adolescents began life in the context of a heterosexual marriage that later dissolved when one or both partners identified themselves as lesbian and/or gay. Other adolescents may have been conceived and born to parents already identified as lesbian or gay. Still others may have been adopted by lesbian or gay parents or they may be living with lesbian or gay foster parents. Thus, the families of adolescents with lesbian or gay parents are themselves a diverse group.

In the United States today, the legal environments of families with lesbian and gay parents are also varied, and these variations may have an impact on adolescents’ social experiences. In some parts of the country, an adolescent’s same-sex parents may be legally married or may have completed adoptions that provide legal recognition of both parents. In other parts of the country, these options may not be available. To some degree, the social experiences of youth may reflect their legal and policy climates. For example, it is possible that children of married same-sex parents might experience less stigma than children of unmarried same-sex parents, or that children with legal connections to both parents might cope better with dissolution of their parents’ relationship.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH

Substantial literature on the development and adjustment of children with lesbian and gay parents has emerged over the past 25 years. Both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, in the United States and abroad, have found that children of lesbian and gay parents are well adjusted and develop in ways similar to other children. Many areas have been studied, including adjustment at home, at school, with peers, and in other domains. In all of these areas, the strength of parent-child relationships has been a more important predictor of adjustment than parental sexual orientation.

Many mainstream professional organizations recognize the strength of these findings in official statements. For instance, after a careful review of the research findings, the American Psychological Association, has gone on record opposing “any discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care and reproductive health services.” After its review of research in this area, the American Academy of Pediatrics, similarly recognized “that a considerable body of professional literature provides evidence that children with parents who are homosexual can have the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual.” These and other mainstream professional groups, including the American Bar Association, the Child Welfare League of America, and the National Association of Social Workers, have based their policies on findings from social science research suggesting that parental sexual orientation is not a good predictor of parenting ability or child adjustment.

The fact that youngsters with lesbian or gay parents appear to be developing in positive ways should not suggest that they never experience difficulties. Like other members of stigmatized minority groups, the offspring of lesbian and gay parents sometimes encounter antigay bigotry and discrimination. This experience is likely to be more common in some environments than in others, but evidence for the impact of such experiences on overall adjustment is lacking.

Most studies to date have focused on young children, with less research conducted on adolescent offspring of lesbian or gay parents. Some writers argue for caution when generalizing the results of research conducted with young children to adolescents. Because adolescence is a time when personal identity, peers, and dating are likely to be salient, this is a key period to examine development of youth with nonheterosexual parents.
2 Family Relationships

A small body of research focuses on the development of adolescent offspring in families headed by lesbian couples. Some studies compare adolescents with lesbian mothers to those with heterosexual mothers. For example, Huggins\(^8\) reported a study of 18 adolescents with divorced heterosexual and 18 with divorced lesbian mothers in which she found no differences in adolescent self-esteem as a function of mothers’ sexual orientation. No reliable differences have been reported between adolescents reared by lesbian parents and those reared by heterosexual parents. It should be noted that there is research on children of gay fathers, which are generally consistent with the findings for children of lesbian parents, but to date there has been no published research on adolescents raised by gay fathers.

Some studies have focused on individual differences among those with lesbian or gay parents. For instance, O'Connor\(^9\) studied 11 young men and women who were the offspring of divorced or separated lesbian mothers. Her participants expressed strong loyalty and protectiveness toward their mothers, but some also described worries about losing friends or being judged by others because of their mothers’ sexual orientation. Gershon, Tschann, and Jemerin\(^10\) studied self-esteem, perception of stigma, and coping skills among 76 adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers. They reported that among adolescents with lesbian mothers, those who perceived more stigma related to having a lesbian mother had lower self-esteem in a number of areas, such as social acceptance and self-worth.

Tasker and Golombok’s\(^11\) longitudinal study included a slightly older population, consisting of 23 young adult offspring of lesbian mothers and a matched group of 23 young adult offspring of heterosexual mothers. In this generally well-adjusted sample, young men and women reared by lesbian mothers were no more likely than those reared by heterosexual mothers to experience depression or anxiety or to have sought professional help for psychiatric problems. They reported having close friendships during adolescence and were no more likely to remember peer group hostility than those from other families.

The Tasker and Golombok study also focused on the development of sexual identity. These authors distinguished among sexual attractions (ie, to whom is a person sexually attracted), sexual behaviors (ie, with whom a person participates in sexual activities), and sexual identity (ie, identification as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Tasker and Golombok’s results showed that although offspring of lesbian mothers were no more likely to report same-sex sexual attractions than those from heterosexual families, they were more likely to have been involved in a same-sex sexual relationship. The offspring of lesbian mothers were, however, no more likely than those with heterosexual mothers to identify themselves as lesbian or gay. As intriguing as they are, these results were derived from a small, nonrepresentative sample, so they should be considered preliminary in nature.

RESEARCH BASED ON REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLES

Review of earlier research indicated a need to study a more comprehensive set of outcomes for adolescents who live with same-sex parents. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (known as Add Health) provided an opportunity for such research. The Add Health study assessed adolescent adjustment in a nearrepresentative sample of American adolescents. Assessments focused on many topics, including aspects of adolescents’ psychosocial well-being, school functioning, romantic relationships and behaviors, risky behaviors such as substance use, and peer relations. This study also examined family and relationship variables, including parents’ assessment of the quality of the parent–teen relationship as well as adolescents’ perceptions of parental warmth, care from adults and peers, integration into the neighborhood, and autonomy. The Add Health database thus afforded a broad overview of adolescent adjustment.

A series of studies by Patterson and her colleagues\(^12,13,14\) drew upon data from Add Health to assess adjustment among adolescent offspring of same-sex parents and to explore individual differences in adjustment and behavior within this group. The sample included 88 families, half of whom were headed by mothers with female partners and half of whom were headed by other-sex couples. This group of families was demographically similar to the population from which it was drawn. Thus, research compared adolescents living with same-sex couples to a matched group of those living with other-sex couples on a broad range of outcomes.

Findings revealed that adolescents living with same-sex couples were no different in their overall adjustment than those living with other-sex couples. For instance, on self-report measures of well-being, such as measures of self-esteem, there were no reliable differences between those living with same-sex couples and those living with other-sex couples. On measures of depression and anxiety, there were likewise no differences. Adolescents’ self-reported adjustment did not vary as a function of family type.\(^12\)

Relationships within the family were also unrelated to family type.\(^12\) For instance, adolescents were asked to report on the warmth and closeness of their relationships with parents, and no differences in this regard
emerged between those living with same-sex couples and those living with other-sex couples. The same kinds of results were obtained from parental reports on the closeness of their relationships with adolescents. In short, no differences in the qualities of family relationships were attributable to family type.12

Peer relations—especially romantic relationships—are particularly important in adolescence, and data revealed no differences in this regard between those living with same-sex and other-sex couples.14 For instance, adolescent reports about closeness and other qualities of peer relationships were unrelated to family type. Similarly, peer reports on the popularity of adolescents in the study were unrelated to family type. An adolescent’s likelihood of participating in a romantic relationship in recent months or of becoming sexually active were likewise unrelated to family type. The likelihood of peer victimization was also unrelated to family type.15 In summary, peer relations were not significantly associated with family type in this sample.14

The Add Health data also explored questions about substance use and delinquent behavior. Results showed that adolescents living with same-sex couples were no more and no less likely than those living with other-sex couples to report using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs. Self-reported delinquent behavior such as vandalism and shoplifting was also unrelated to family type in this sample. Overall, the similarities in adjustment among adolescents living with same-sex and other-sex couples were remarkable.

If parental sexual orientation is not a good predictor of adolescent outcomes, what is a strong predictor? A substantial body of research indicates that parenting style influences effectiveness of parents’ efforts to socialize both children and adolescents.15 In particular, a warm, accepting style of parenting is related to optimal outcomes for adolescents, especially if it is combined with appropriate limit-setting and monitoring of adolescent behavior. An association between parental warmth and positive outcomes has been found for adolescents from a wide variety of ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structure backgrounds,15 and by researchers working with a variety of methodological approaches.

As expected on the basis of earlier research with children, adolescent adjustment was strongly related to qualities of parent–adolescent relationships in the Add Health sample.12,15,14 For example, adolescents who described closer relationships with their parents were less likely to be depressed, and they did better in school.12 Those describing closer relationships with their parents were also more likely to report having strong friendships with peers and were described by others as being more central to peer networks.14 They were less likely to report using tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana or engaging in delinquent behavior.15 Overall, the qualities of adolescent relationships with their parents were strongly associated with many important outcomes, and adolescent behavior and adjustment were much more closely associated with the qualities of family relationships than with family type.

**CONCLUSION**

Research results to date provide no evidence that parental sexual orientation has a measurable impact on child or adolescent development. In fact, when considering youth development, research findings suggest that qualities of relationships adolescents enjoy with their parents are more important than parental sexual orientation.

Some might be tempted to dismiss the results reported in this research with the saying that “one cannot prove the null hypothesis.” In other words, one cannot prove that adolescents with lesbian or gay parents are identical to those with heterosexual parents. To react in this way, however, would be to miss the central message of the research findings. Whether or not a measurable impact of parental sexual orientation on adolescent development is ultimately identified, the main conclusions from research to date will remain. Whatever associations between adolescent outcomes and parental sexual orientation exist, they seem less important than those between adolescent outcomes and qualities of family relationships.

These conclusions have important ramifications for policy and legal issues currently the subject of vigorous public debate.1 For instance, as the American Academy of Pediatrics has recognized, findings provide no support for those who would make lesbian or gay adults ineligible to become adoptive or foster parents. Similarly, results of research provide no empirical rationale for depriving lesbian mothers or gay fathers of custody or visitation when these are contested on grounds of parental sexual orientation.1 As the research findings are increasingly made available to legislators and judges by way of policy statements, amicus briefs, and related strategies, they are also becoming part of the public discourse on these issues.

Findings of this research are also of great interest from a theoretical standpoint. If adolescents with same-sex parents fare as well as those with other-sex parents, as appears to be the case, then traditional ideas about gender development may need to be reconsidered. Data on adolescents with lesbian and gay parents suggest that it is the quality of parenting rather than the gender or sexual orientation of parents that is significant for youngsters’ development.5
Family Relationships

In summary, it does not appear that the development of adolescents with lesbian or gay parents is disadvantaged in significant ways. Pediatricians should be sensitive to discrimination and other issues that can accompany minority status, but they should not assume that any problems experienced by an adolescent stem from parental sexual orientation.

REFERENCES