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Children of Lesbian Mothers: from the 1970's to the new millennium

Leading Comment

Mooney-Somers, J. & Golombok, S. (2000)

Introduction

In both the popular and academic media, lesbian and gay parenting is the issue of the moment. Recent examples include the case of two gay men fathering twins with a surrogate mother in the US; the results of a study of gay fathers by Gill Dunne at the London School of Economics (Guardian, January 12, 2000); and comments from Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, President of the Family Court, on the appropriateness of lesbian women and gay men as adoptive or foster parents (Guardian, October 16, 1999). These examples show that current debates focus on gay fathers, assisted reproduction and fostering/adoption. Does this mean that the concerns first raised in child custody disputes in the 1970's - that children raised in lesbian mother families would be at risk for psychological problems and atypical gender development – have been laid to rest?

Psychological problems

Concerns about the psychological well-being of children of lesbian mothers were based on the widely accepted view that some childhood experiences carry a risk of psychiatric disorder. This is predominately an argument about social acceptance; because lesbianism is not socially acceptable, the children of lesbian mothers will experience social disapproval. Thus, they will be likely to experience teasing and bullying by peers, which in turn may cause them to become socially withdrawn. Ultimately, it has been argued, the child will be unable to form and maintain friendships, an ability that has been shown to be important for self-esteem and psychological well-being in later life.

The principal British study of lesbian mother families (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983), initiated in the late 1970's, addressed this issue by investigating a volunteer sample of lesbian mothers and a matched comparison group of single heterosexual mothers, all with school age children. The two types of family were alike in that the children were raised by women without the presence of a father, but differed in the sexual orientation of the mother. This allowed the consequences of the mothers' sexual orientation on their children's development to be examined without the potentially confounding effect of the presence of a father in the family home. As in the custody cases, all of the children in the study had been born into a heterosexual household, and later experienced parental separation. It was found that the children of lesbian mothers were no more likely to be teased or bullied, or to experience psychological difficulties, than those of single heterosexual mothers. In addition, no differences were found between children from the two family types with respect to the quality of their friendships.

In the US, at around the same time, several studies of children of divorced lesbian mothers were also carried out. The earliest was Green's (1978) investigation of 37 children aged 3-20 years old. Following this, controlled studies were published by Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith (1986) who looked at 58 children aged 3-11 years, and Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy (1981) who examined 20 children aged 5-12 years. The findings of the US and UK studies were strikingly similar, leading to the conclusion that growing up in a lesbian family did not have an adverse effect on children's social or emotional development.

Nevertheless, a shortcoming of this body of research was that the long-term effects of being raised in a lesbian mother family were not examined, and it was argued by some that children of lesbian mothers would experience psychological problems when they grew up. In order to address these potential ' sleeper effects ', the children in the UK study were followed up fourteen years later, at an average age of 23 ½ years. It was found that these young adults continued to have good mental health, and were no more likely to have sought professional help for anxiety, depression or stress-related problems than their counterparts from heterosexual homes (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Whereas the early studies examined lesbian mothers who had their children while married, more recent studies have looked at the outcomes for children raised in a lesbian family right from the start, i.e. children born to women who had come out as lesbian before becoming mothers. Many of these children had been conceived by donor insemination. The first study of children born to lesbian mothers was conducted by Steckel (1985,1987) in the US, who found that children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers were more similar than different. Subsequent studies, also carried out in the US, produced comparable findings: Patterson (1994) showed that the 37 4-9 year old children in her study all performed within the normal range for behavioural adjustment; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua & Joseph (1995) found no differences in cognitive functioning or behavioural adjustment in their comparison of 15 lesbian families with 15 heterosexual families; and in an investigation of 55 families headed by lesbian mothers, Chan, Raboy & Patterson (1998) demonstrated that parental sexual orientation was unrelated to children's performance on measures of social competence and behavioural adjustment.

Two investigations of children raised by lesbian mothers from birth have also been conducted in Europe. In the UK, Golombok & Tasker (1994) studied a group of 30 children aged between 3-8 years (most of whom had been conceived through donor insemination) in comparison with matched samples of 42 single heterosexual mother families and 41 two-parent heterosexual families with a child conceived through donor insemination. The children in the lesbian mother families were found to have good psychological adjustment, and to be no more likely to experience emotional or behavioural problems than children from the other family types. In addition, there was no difference between the different groups of children in how accepted they felt by their mother or by peers, although the father-absent children were slightly less confident about their physical skills and cognitive abilities. Similar findings were reported by Brewaeyts, Ponjaert, Van Hall & Golombok (1997) in a comparison between 30 lesbian mother families with a child conceived by donor insemination and 68 heterosexual two-parent families in Belgium. Thus it seems that there is no additional risk to children's psychological adjustment of being raised in a lesbian family from the start.

Gender development

Concerns about the gender development of children of lesbian mothers are based on the premise that in order to develop appropriate gender identity and gender role behaviour, a child must have a male and a female role model. These role models must also display the appropriate gender role behaviour for their sex. A commonly expressed view is that children of lesbian mothers will grow up to be confused about their gender identity, show behaviour that is inappropriate for their gender, and possibly identify as homosexual, an outcome that is often considered undesirable by courts of

law. This begs the question, "To what extent can parents influence the gender identity and gender role behaviour of their child?"

The answer is contingent on which psychological perspective is taken (see Golombok & Fivush, 1994). From a psychoanalytic perspective, the significant process is the resolution of the Oedipal conflict, and it is only after this occurs that healthy psychological development can be achieved. In contrast, classical social learning theory proposes that the key processes at work are differential reinforcement and modelling, whereby gender appropriate behaviour is reinforced by the parents and the child also models the behaviour of the parent of the same sex. However, contemporary social learning theorists argue that rather than modelling the same-sex parent, children model the gender stereotypes that are pervasive in their social world. The cognitive developmental approach places even less emphasis on the role of parents in their children's gender development, proposing that children actively seek out gender-related information for themselves, and adopt behaviours that they perceive to be appropriate for their sex. It is gender stereotypes rather than parents that are the source of this information, and thus the socio-cultural environment is considered to have primacy.

According to both psychoanalytic and traditional social learning theorists, the absence of a male parent, and the presence of female parents who do not conform to the traditional female role, is likely to result in atypical gender development for the child. However, both contemporary social learning theorists and cognitive developmental theorists place greater weight on the role of gender stereotypes than on the role of parents in children's development of gender identity and gender role behaviour. From this perspective, children's gender development may be affected only to the extent that having a lesbian mother results in greater exposure to non-traditional stereotypes.

Empirical investigations of the gender development of children raised by lesbian mothers have largely focused on the gender identity and gender role behaviour of school age children. The early British study (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983) found no evidence of gender identity confusion for any of the children studied; none of the children wished to be the other sex, or consistently engaged in cross-gender behaviour. In terms of gender role, no differences were found between children in lesbian and heterosexual families, for either boys or girls, in the extent to which they showed behaviour that was typical of their sex. Daughters of lesbian mothers were no less feminine, and the sons no less masculine, than the daughters and sons of heterosexual mothers. Similarly, in the US, both Kirkpatrick et al (1981) and Green et al (1986) found no evidence of gender identity confusion among children of lesbian mothers, and no differences in gender role behaviour as assessed by toy, television character and game preferences when the sons and daughters of lesbian and heterosexual mothers were compared.

One interesting, and possibly related, finding is that lesbian mothers are often particularly careful to ensure that there are male role models in their child's life. Brewaeys et al (1989) points to various studies showing that lesbian mothers encourage their children to develop relationships with men (Kirkpatrick et al 1981), or actively seek male role models (Mandel & Hotvedt 1980; Lewin 1981 (as cited in Brewaeys, 1989)). Indeed, Hare & Richards (1993) found that 90% of children of divorced lesbian mothers had contact with their fathers, and Golombok et al (1983) showed that children of divorced lesbian mothers had more contact with their fathers than children of divorced heterosexual mothers.

By following up the children in the original British study, it was possible to examine the sexual orientation of these young people in adult life (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Young adults who grew up in a lesbian family were more likely to have experienced a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender than those raised by heterosexual mothers. However, in terms of sexual identity as heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or gay, the large majority

(92%) of young adults raised by lesbian mothers identified as heterosexual. It seems, therefore, that mothers' sexual orientation has little impact on the sexual orientation of their daughters and sons.

Conclusion

The evidence from 25 years of research suggests that a mother's sexual orientation is not, in itself, an important variable in determining the psychological well-being, or gender development, of her children. It seems that whether their mother is lesbian or heterosexual matters less for children's psychological adjustment than the quality of relationships in the family home and, contrary to the assumptions of traditional psychoanalytic and social learning theories, parents have little influence on the gender development of their children.

So is there any more to be said about this issue as we enter the new millennium? One outstanding criticism of the existing research is that, with the exception of Brewaeys et al's (1995) investigation of children born to lesbian mothers by donor insemination, only volunteer samples have been studied. Thus it may be the case that mothers whose children are experiencing difficulties are under-represented in the research. Two ongoing studies of general population samples, one of teenage children in the US by Charlotte Patterson and colleagues, and the other by the present authors in collaboration with the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood in the UK, will confirm whether the findings of research carried out to date can be extended to the general population of lesbian mother families. If so, these results will have important implications for the development of social policy relating to child custody, fostering and adoption, and access to assisted reproduction procedures.

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