

Greene, B. (1994). Ethnic minority lesbians and gay men: Mental health and treatment issues. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62*, 243–251.

Hare, J. & Richards, L. (1993). Children raised by lesbian couples: Does context of birth affect father and partner involvement. *Family Relations, 42*(3), 249–256.

Harry, J. (1983). Gay male and lesbian relationships. In E.D. Macklin & R.H. Rubin (Eds.), *Contemporary families and alternative life styles* (pp.216–234). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Huggins, S.L. (1989). A comparative study of self-esteem of adolescent children of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced heterosexual mothers. In F.W. Bozett (Ed.), *Homosexuality and the family* (pp. 123–135). New York: Harrington Park Press.

Human Rights Campaign. (2001, August 22). Gay and lesbian families in the United States: Same-sex unmarried partner households. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <http://www.hrc.org/Content/ContentGroups/FamilyNet/Documents/census.pdf>.

Kurdek, L. A. (1993). The allocation of household labor in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual married couples. *Journal of Social Issues, 49*(3), 127–140.

Kurdek, L., & Schmitt, J. (1987). Perceived emotional support from family and friends in members of homosexual married and heterosexual cohabiting couples. *Journal of Homosexuality, 14*(3/4), 57–68.

Laird, J. (1996). Family-centered practice with lesbian and gay families. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 77*(9), 559–572.

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. (n.d.). For families and friends. Retrieved September 1, 2003 from <http://www.pflag.org/support/family.html>.

Patterson, C.J. (1992). Children of lesbian and gay parents. *Child Development, 63*, 1025–1042.

Patterson, C.J. (1994). Children of the lesbian baby boom: Behavioral adjustment, self-concepts, and sex role identity. In B. Greene & G.M. Herek (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 156–175). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Patterson, C.J. (2002). Lesbian and gay parenthood. In M.H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Being and becoming a parent (Vol. 3)* (pp.317–338). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Paul, J.P., Hays, R.B., & Coates, T.J. (1995). The impact of the HIV epidemic on U.S. gay male communities. In A.R. D’Augelli & C.J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 347–397). New York: Oxford University Press.

Polikoff, N. (1990). This child does have two mothers: Redefining parenthood to meet the needs of children in lesbian-mother and other nontraditional families. *Georgetown Law Journal, 78*, 459–515.

Savin-Williams, R.C. (1990). *Gay and lesbian youth: Expressions of identity*. New York: Hemisphere.

Savin-Williams, R.C. (1994). Verbal and physical abuse as stressors in the lives of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: Associations with school problems, running away, substance abuse, prostitution, and suicide. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62*, 261–269.

Savin-Williams, R.C. (1998a). The disclosure to families of same-sex attractions by lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8*, 49–68.

Savin-Williams, R.C. (1998b). Lesbian, gay and bisexual youths’ relationships with their parents. In C.J. Patterson & A.R. D’Augelli (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities in families: Psychological perspectives*. (pp. 75–98). New York: Oxford University Press.

Savin-Williams, R.C., & Esterbger, K.G. (2000). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual families. In D.H. Demo, K.R. Allen, & M.A. Fine (Eds.), *Handbook of family diversity* (pp.197–215). New York: Oxford University Press.

Stacy, J. (2003). Gay and lesbian families: Queer like us. In M.A. Mason, A. Skolnick, & S.D. Sugarman (Eds.), *All our families: New policies for a new century* (pp. 144–169). New York: Oxford University Press.

### About the Jordan Institute

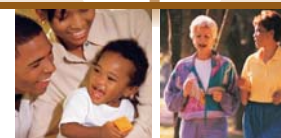
Created in 1996, the Jordan Institute for Families is the research, training, and technical assistance arm of the School of Social Work at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Jordan Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that develops knowledge and promotes practices and policies that build supportive families and stable communities.

Cutting across traditional disciplinary lines, the Jordan Institute is a conduit partnering scholars and researchers from complementary fields. This interdisciplinary approach leads to rich and relevant research and training and ensures that the Jordan Institute makes substantive and systemic contributions to policy and practice.

The Jordan Institute addresses family issues across the lifespan that threaten to undermine some families—such as poverty, abuse, mental illness, school failure, and substance abuse—as well as challenges that confront most families—such as providing for aging family members and caring for young children.

For more information about the Jordan Institute and its projects, please visit [www.jiforfamilies.org](http://www.jiforfamilies.org).

## FamilyTrends



Jordan Institute for Families | School of Social Work | University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

January 2004 Volume 1, No. 3

# Gay and Lesbian Families

## Families are Important

Families are not caste in molds. Families can be single parents raising children, gay or lesbian partners, a grandmother raising a grandchild, or a group of friends living together. By choice or by chance, families are the bonds we all form. Simple categories cannot house complex networks of relationships. Families have many variables. Using research literature, FamilyTrends describes different family forms and identifies characteristics common to certain family types. Because to really understand the needs of families—to shape policy and inform practice—we must begin by understanding families themselves.

## FamilyTrends Briefs

### About this Series

FamilyTrends Briefs is a series designed to inform practitioners, policy makers, and researchers about the varied family structures that exist today. Each brief focuses on a specific family form by highlighting strengths, vulnerabilities, and suggestions for practice and policy. References are provided for those wishing to seek further information.

The series has been researched, written and edited by the Jordan Institute for Families at the School of Social Work at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Although reference is made to North Carolina, FamilyTrends Briefs contains information universal in appeal and application.

Additional FamilyTrends Briefs are available at [www.familytrends.org](http://www.familytrends.org).

## Defined

It is hard to define precisely a lesbian or gay family. Most often, it is two people of the same sex living together with or without children. Other lesbian and gay families may include a single lesbian or gay adult raising a child alone or a child with a lesbian or gay parent but who lives with the other parent. Some families may have one or more member who is lesbian or gay, such as a sibling, child, aunt or uncle, or grandparent. Finally, families may include “fictive kin” or non-blood related family members who are lesbian or gay living in or out of the home (Allen & Demo, 1995).

How these families are formed is as varied as the types. Some lesbians and gay men have identified at an early age their sexual preferences (“coming out”) and have created a same sex partnership.

Others may develop a same sex relationship following a divorce or separation, and children from the previous union live in the new household (Laird, 1996). Harry (1983) estimated, after examining several studies about gay men, that 20% of gay men had been heterosexually married. For lesbians, that rate was 30%. Single or partnered lesbians or gay men may adopt children, provide a foster home for children or have children of their own through artificial insemination or surrogate mothers (Laird, 1996).

An important process unique to lesbian and gay families is “coming out.” Lesbian and gay children come out to their parents and extended families, and lesbian and gay parents come out to their children and extended families. In addition to coming out to one’s family, these members must also come out to friends and the larger community. This process can be scary due



to the uncertainty of the reactions of those close to the lesbian or gay man.

Friends are usually the first people that a lesbian or gay man comes out to, followed by families, if they find out at all (Savin-Williams, 1990). Most youths do not believe that their families will react positively to their coming out and thus put it off (Savin-Williams, 1994). The quality of the parent-child relationship before coming out has been shown to be the best predictor of the relationship following this disclosure (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Between 40 to 70% of lesbian and gay youth have come out to their mothers and 30 to 55% have come out to their fathers (Savin-Williams, 1998a). There appears to be a cohort effect in that each year more and more youth are coming out to their parents. This is due, in part, to the greater visibility of homosexuality and the likelihood that recent generations of parents know other lesbians and gay men (Savin-

Williams, 1998b). Savin-Williams (1990) discovered that those teenage lesbians whose parents were accepting of their sexual orientation were more at ease with their own sexual orientation. For lesbian and gay youth who are also a racial or ethnic minority, coming out to family members can produce a fear of humiliation or shame from not only parents but extended family members as well (Greene, 1994).

According to a study by Ben-Ari (1995), parents react initially to their child's coming with shock and feelings of guilt. Some parents react positively with immediate acceptance. The negative feelings were reported to subside within a month but the family still remained concerned over societal reactions to their children's sexual orientation, a lack of a future family life, and a fear of AIDS. Although there might have been an immediate deterioration of the relationship between the child and parent, significant improvement did occur over time.

Very little research has examined how parents come out to their children. One study found that one of the most difficult times for children to learn of their parents' sexual orientation is early adolescence (Patterson, 1992). More research needs to be conducted on how this coming out process affects families.

## Nationwide

The exact prevalence of lesbian and gay families is very difficult to determine. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) (2001), a lesbian, gay and bisexual advocacy group, estimates the total U.S. lesbian and gay family population to be 601,209, a 314% increase from 1990. These numbers are based on the 2000 U.S. Census Data. They estimate that this number is undercounted by 62%. This undercounting can be attributed to confusion over how to fill out the Census information and is compounded by the fact that the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask about sexual orientation on their form. Estimates are created by the reported gender and number of the members of the households on the Census forms. Prior to 1990, forms marked "married" with the same gender had been thrown out. Prejudice and discrimination can also inhibit people from filling out the forms (HRC, 2001).

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) (n.d.), a support and advocacy group, state that 1 in 10 people in the U.S. and world are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They also estimate that 1 in 4 families has a member who is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Allen and Demo (1995) site reasons for the inaccuracy of demographic numbers for lesbian and gay families: various definitions of sexual orientation, the tendency for researchers to exclude lesbians and gay males as research subjects, and the consistent exclusion of bisexuality. They note that homophobia in society can also create barriers to lesbian and gay disclosure.

## North Carolina

The Human Rights Campaign (2001) estimates the gay and lesbian population in North Carolina to be 16,198. This is a 720% increase from 1990. The Chapel-Hill, Durham, and Raleigh area and the High Point/Greensboro area have higher populations of lesbians and gay men.

## Strengths and Challenges

Lesbian and gay families operate in much the same way as other families. Work on boundary issues, emotional relationships, divi-

sion of labor, childrearing, financial issues and levels of intimacy are all situations that face these families (Laird, 1996). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) studied heterosexual married couples, heterosexual cohabitating couples, and lesbian and gay partnered couples. They found similarities among the families with respect to problem solving, values, negotiation of issues and problems between the couples, although lesbian and gay couples shared more leisure activities than heterosexual couples. Green, Bettinger, and Zacks (1996) compared results from their study of lesbian and gay couples to comparable studies and found that lesbian couples had the highest rates of cohesion, followed by gay men, while heterosexual couples had the lowest rates of cohesion. In addition, lesbian and gay couples scored higher on flexibility and as high or higher on satisfaction with the relationship. Regarding household chores and tasks, lesbian and gay couples were balanced in the share of the workload as compared to heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1993). Among lesbian couples, regardless of who was the birth mother, there was a greater sharing of parenting responsibilities between the parents (Hare & Richards, 1993).

Lesbian and gay families often create their own extended family through other homosexual and heterosexual friends. This extended network can provide more support than their families of origin (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1987). Research has shown that some lesbian couples have a greater number of men participating in their children's lives than single, heterosexual mothers (Hare & Richards, 1993). Gay partners deal more frequently with the stress of HIV/AIDS in their personal and extended relationships (Paul, Hays, & Coates, 1995).

Children of lesbian and gay parents are well adjusted and appropriate. Patterson (1994) found that children of lesbian mothers behaved normally, had average competence levels and expressed appropriate sexual identity. These families are also more likely to appreciate diversity, question traditional stereotypes and have flexibility and creativity in creating healthy family bonds (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000). Children of lesbian and gay parents lack the language and the norms needed to express the roles of all the members of their family. Some children may be embarrassed to bring friends home from school (Laird, 1996), while other children may not be permitted to visit their home (Stacey, 2003). Children of lesbian and gay parents may experience more stress in their everyday lives, but they are better able to handle and acknowledge the positive and negative aspects of their experiences than other children. They also had a greater sense of well being as compared to same age children of heterosexual parents (Patterson, 1994). Children with lesbian mothers had higher rates of self-esteem when their fathers were positive or neutral about the lifestyle of their mothers (Huggins, 1989).

## Implications for Policy and Practice

Before working with lesbian and gay families, it is important for the practitioner to explore her or his own feelings, attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality (Erera & Fredriksen, 1999). The practitioner needs to realize that lesbian and gay families seek help for the same issues that concern other families, such as relationship issues (including blended families), mental illness, crises or com-

munity relations. However, the process of coming out and a homophobic society complicate these concerns (Laird, 1996).

Some lesbian and gay families may not have family role models to follow, so they must create their own traditions, symbols and meaning. These new customs could be a blend of traditions from their own families of origin or the creation of a completely new tradition (Laird, 1996).

Support groups, including parenting groups, can be extremely helpful in working with lesbian and gay families. A safe space to disclose and discuss issues is extremely therapeutic and useful. These groups can also provide information on policies regarding adoption and children, information on rearing children, and supportive resources, such as doctors and clinics (Patterson, 2002).

More research should study how lesbian and gay couples navigate family life with its stresses and protective factors. This includes additional research on the children of lesbian and gay couples and their strengths and challenges. Insight into these processes can assist practitioners in supporting these families (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000).

## Policy

There are few laws or judicial cases that are supportive or work towards the promotion of lesbians and gay men. In fact, they are not even seen as a legal family (Stacey, 2003).

Same sex couples are denied the right to a legal marriage. With this denial, they lose many other legal rights and privileges. If their partner is sick or disabled, they might be unable to be part of the decision making for their partner's future. Some are denied parental rights such as adoption and custody, since they are not deemed a legal parent. And the denial of economic rights includes taxes, government benefits and some health insurance plans. Lesbian and gay couples are not even allowed the benefit of getting a divorce, a legal and emotional end to a relationship (Chambers, 1996). Lastly, marriage is a symbolic, ceremonial event that lesbian and gay couples are denied (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000). If lesbian and gay marriage were legitimized and made legal, "child custody, adoption, fertility services, inheritance, and other family rights that lesbians and gay men currently suffer could also become subject to legal challenge" (Stacey, 2003, p.155).

Polikoff (1990) points out that the law states that children must have a parent of both sexes and these parties carry all the legal rights and responsibilities. This can prevent those parents who have been with the children from birth from having any legal relationship with the child. Gay male fathers are less likely to live in the same household as their children, since they are often not given custody over their children following a separation or divorce (Bigner & Bozett, 1990).

## Conclusion

Lesbian and gay families experience many of the same challenges that other families do, but they often face these challenges within

the contexts of critical societal views and the complex process of "coming out." Because gay and lesbian families do not have role models, they create their own traditions, frequently including other homosexual and heterosexual friends in their "extended family." Changes in laws and policies about same-sex couples can help make child custody and adoption easier, as well as give same-sex partners economic and legal rights. Overall, more research is needed on the challenges and strengths of lesbian and gay families in order to develop effective practices and policies for working with this family form

## References

Allen, K.R., & Demo, D.H. (1995). The families of lesbians and gay men: A new frontier in family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 111–127.

Bignet, J.J., & Bozett, F.W. (1990). Parenting by gay fathers. In F.W. Bozett & M.B. Sussman (Eds.), *Homosexuality and family relations* (pp. 155–176). New York: Harrington Park Press.

Ben-Ari, A. (1995). The discovery that an offspring is gay: Parents', gay men's, and lesbians' perspectives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30, 89–112.

Blumstein, P. & Schwartz, P. (1983). *American couples: Money, work, sex*. New York: William Morrow.

Chambers, D.L. (1996). What if? The legal consequences of marriage and the legal needs of lesbian and gay male couples. *Michigan Law Review*, 95, 447–491.

Cohen, K.M., & Savin-Williams, R.C. (1996). Developmental perspectives on coming out to self and others. In R.C. Savin-Williams & K.M. Cohen (Eds.), *The lives of lesbians, gays and bisexuals: Children to adults* (pp. 113–151). New York: Harcourt Brace.

Erera, P.I., & Fredricksen, K. (1999). Lesbian stepfamilies: A unique family structure. *Families in Society* 80(3), 263–270.

Green, R.J., Bettinger, M., & Zacks, E. (1996). Are lesbian couples fused and gay male couples disengaged? Questioning gender straightjackets. In J. Laird & R.J. Green (Eds.), *Lesbians and gays in couples and families: A handbook for therapists* (pp. 185–227). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

## Annotated Bibliography

For more information on these and other references on this topic, please visit the Annotated Bibliography section of the FamilyTrends website ([www.familytrends.org](http://www.familytrends.org)). This section summarizes the research literature and other helpful sources for a particular FamilyTrends Brief. Journals for Social Work, Psychology, Marriage and Family, Public Policy and other similar disciplines are referenced. This list will be updated periodically in order to capture the most recent literature.