Introduction

Does having same-sex parents affect a child’s social and emotional development? This topic is important to study because in our more open minded and tolerant society, increasing numbers of people are coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). It’s estimated that approximately 18 million Americans identify with the LGBT community (GLAAD); with this number continuously growing, so is the number of same-sex relationships. Even though our society is more tolerant than it was even just 30 years ago, there are still many obvious laws discriminating against same-sex couples. Same-sex marriage is only legal in six states, with two more starting on January 1, 2012, and civil unions legal in five (NCSL). Another huge area of discrimination against same-sex couples is in the adoption and foster care systems. Florida is the only state with a specific gay adoption ban, both against couples and individuals. However, same-sex couples and even gay individuals have many hoops to jump through in order to adopt a child; and they will often face discrimination within the system even in the states that don’t have a ban against gay adoption (NOLO). So, what’s the big deal? Why are there so many forces acting against gay couples from marrying and from becoming parents? The largest concern seems to be the notion that if a child has gay parents then that will rub off and make the child gay as well; that a child with gay parents will grow up emotionally scarred and forever damaged from having two moms or two dads. Is there any weight in this argument? Does a parent’s
sexual orientation have any effect on their child’s orientation? Does growing up with same-sex parents have negative effects on children, or could it provide them with an open-minded and accepting attitude that extends into all other areas of life?

Research

GROWING UP WITH A LESBIAN OR GAY PARENT: Anna Fairtlough

This article provided unique, first hand insight from 67 different kids, both boys and girls, who all grew up with either gay or lesbian parents. The article separated the children's perspectives based upon their reactions, either: positive, somewhat negative, neutral, or ambivalent. Almost 50% of the responses were positive—that having a gay parent was a really great thing and that it gave them advantages that kids of heterosexual couples didn’t seem to experience; “many of these young people expressed respect for their lesbian or gay parent” (524). Many children in this group felt that their parent was easier to talk to and was more open-minded and accepting than some heterosexual parents of their peers. Some of the children from the ‘positive’ group recognized that their parent had “an enhanced ability to empathize with others, including their children” (524); this quality most likely stems from the parent’s experience as a minority who faced discrimination and hardship. A surprising aspect addressed by a lot of these kids was the culture and community they were raised in and that they valued “the exposure to different types of people” (524). Overall, these children felt good about their parent’s sexuality and the only issue with their upbringing was other people’s reactions to it. The next highest percentage was from the ‘ambivalent’ group. Fairtlough found that 40% of the kids were ‘ambivilent’ had mixed feelings about the experience, and that “typically they represented their story as a journey with their reactions changing over time” (524). The neutral category was the
group of kids who didn’t really care either way; their parent’s sexuality wasn’t a good thing or a bad thing, and that it didn’t much impact their life. The ‘somewhat negative’ category made up less than 5% of the overall group and expressed no positive feelings about how they were parented and only expressed distain towards their parents. However, none of these children blamed their negative experience on their parent’s sexuality directly.

Fairtlough quotes a boy, Michael, who successfully summarizes the overall attitude of the ‘somewhat negative’ group: “Though my mother was a lesbian, her lesbianism had nothing to do with the way she raised me. She wasn’t there for me when I needed discipline or parental support... lesbianism was the excuse... but not the cause” (525). Fairtlough mentions that an issue that stretched across the board and reached all but four of the children was the shared experiences of discrimination. A startling 88% of the children had had significant negative experiences with homophobia. These experiences generally came in three specific areas: the general or institutional, the family, and peers or friends (525).

These experiences of homophobia came in many different forms and varying levels of intensity. Judgments, comments, or jokes made from peer groups or outside professionals was a common experience amongst the kids, but more disturbing is the homophobia they experienced from their family members: “These included rejection, unpleasant comments, the use of religion as a weapon, and actual or threatened use of the court welfare system to limit contact or challenge custody” (526). Fairtlough makes an interesting point which really displays an imbalance that gay couples still face: “Many children of divorced parents have to negotiate hostility, blame and anger. However, in these situations one parent appeared to abuse the power they had from being heterosexual” (526). This article was full of varying perspectives, opinions and experiences- all of which could agree upon this
child’s quote: “I learnt that people could and would be cruel. I had to learn to protect my mother and myself from the harsh reality of the world’s prejudice” (526).

LESGIAN AND GAY PARENTING: American Psychological Association, Gary W. Harper, Robin A. Buhrke, Beth Doll

Children, regardless of having same-sex or heterosexual parents, are all different. What separates these two groups however, is how society and people react to them.

“Unlike heterosexual parents and their children, however, lesbian and gay parents and their children are often subject to prejudice because of their sexual orientation that can turn judges, legislators, professionals, and the public against them, sometimes resulting in negative outcomes, such as loss of physical custody, restrictions on visitation, and prohibitions against adoption” (2). Same-sex couples have an extra layer of complication in their relationship because of how involved the legal system is in the relationship. Because there aren’t two biological parents involved, one of the parents (the non-biological one) must be an adoptive parent. This requires jumping through a system of hoops and dealing with prejudices along the way. These prejudices are based upon stereotypes and old ideas that have been proven to not exist: “beliefs that lesbian and gay adults are not fit parents likewise have no empirical foundation” (5). The sexual orientation of the adult does not affect their ability to be a good parent. It’s true that some homosexual adults would not make good parents, but the same goes for some heterosexual adults; the point is that this ability to be a good parent has nothing to do with the sexual orientation of that adult. The abilities of lesbian couples and gay couples to be successful parents is not hampered by their sexual orientation; “lesbian and heterosexual women have not been found to differ markedly either in their overall mental health or in their approaches to child rearing” (5).
The differences within the homes of homosexual couples and heterosexual couples are hardly measurable and the only significant differences that children may experience while growing up are in their exposure to the negative reactions of the situation from other people. In fact, “results of research suggest that lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive home environments for children” (5). Society, not the same-sex couple’s ability to successfully raise a child, is what is creating negative experiences for the children who grow up in household of gay parents.

CHILDREN OF LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS: Charlotte J. Patterson

Patterson starts her study by making the point that the question: “does parental sexual orientation affect child development?” is usually addressed in a legal context but that she was also trying to address a theoretical aspect: “does healthy human development require that a child grow up with parents of each gender?” (241). In all of her research she found that no, parental sexual orientation does not affect child development and that no, a healthy child does not need a parent of each gender. In her research she accessed the Sperm Bank of California and studied families who had used the sperm bank and who had children that were at least 5 years old. What is special about her research is that in all of the 80 families she studied- both homosexual couples (55) and heterosexual couples (25) - is that one parent was a biological parent and one was not. She found that “children of lesbian and heterosexual parents showed similar, relatively high levels of social competence, as well as similar, relatively low levels of behavior problems on the parent form of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) [...] and their [the child's teachers] reports agreed with those of parents. Parental sexual orientation was not related to children’s adaptation” (242).

Patterson concludes her article with a point that seems to be ignored by the majority of
society which is that: "findings suggest that parental sexual orientation is less important than the qualities of family relationships. More important to youth than the gender of their parent’s partner is the quality of daily interaction and the strength of the relationship with the parents they have" (243). Children are naturally kind and accepting and when raised in a household with two loving moms or two caring dads, they won’t know or care about the difference of their situation until someone negatively comments on it. As long as the parents provide a supporting, loving household for their child to grow up in, the sexual orientation of the parents has little to no effect on the happiness and health of the child. CHILDREN OF SAME GENDER PARENTS: Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski

Paccione discusses several different experiments in which many aspects of family life are compared between children of homosexual couples and of heterosexual couples. Things such as: family functioning, gender preferences, gender related activities and friendships, and even toy selection were all categories that were compared. What was found was that “children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers did not systematically differ from other children in any of these areas [...] In fact, scientific evidence demonstrates that children of gay and lesbian parents thrive as well as children in heterosexual parental relationships” (5). Paccione also makes sure to mention that the difference research has shown between children of homosexual couples to those of heterosexual couples is that the likelihood that they will be teased or bullied by their peers is greater. This harassment and prejudice is frequently the source of anger and sadness for the children who experience it. The importance of having a supportive home environment and being emotionally, socially, and physically attentive to a child’s needs is found to be significantly more important to the health of that child than the sexual orientation of its parent(s).
Conclusion

Does having same-sex parents affect a child’s social and emotional development? In all of the articles that I found and read, both scientifically based and first-hand accounts, there was not a single piece of evidence that suggests that a parent’s sexual orientation has any effect on the development of their child. The children of homosexual couples are just as likely to be happy and healthy as the children of heterosexual couples. Someone’s ability to be a good, or bad, parent is not based in their sexuality: sometimes heterosexual people don’t have good parenting techniques and the same goes for some homosexual people. So, all of the laws that discriminate against gay couples in the foster care, adoptive and legal systems have no weight behind them. There is no evidence supporting that homosexual couples are not able to be good parents that raise happy kids. In fact, their kids might even be more open minded and accepting than the kids of heterosexual couples. There is a huge range of research that supports this conclusion, and it’s amazing and depressing that our legal system doesn’t represent the evidence that has years of support backing it.

The biggest issue that I have with the research I found was that the only significant differences between the two different groups of children was the way that other people reacted to their situation. The children of homosexual couples feel anger and sadness because they are teased, discriminated against, and even bullied/harassed by peers and professionals. It’s upsetting to me that in our “progressive” country we still have such extreme prejudices and issues with discrimination. The results I found in this study were what I had expected, however, I hadn’t really thought about how much children of same-sex couples would be discriminated against. I knew bullying and prejudice would be an issue, but I was sad to discover that it is as extreme and potentially detrimental as it is.
Same Sex Parents, By Adrienne Bisharat

Why it is relevant
This topic is important to study because in our more open minded and tolerant society, increasing numbers of people are coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT). It’s estimated that approximately 18 million Americans identify with the LGBT community. There are still many obvious laws discriminating against same-sex couples. Laws and prejudices against same-sex couples adopting or becoming foster parents are very much alive and thriving.

My question
Does having same-sex parents affect a child’s social and emotional development?

What I learned
• In Florida, it is illegal for same-sex couples and homosexual individuals to adopt.
• Same-sex couples are heavily discriminated against in the legal systems especially when involving an issue of child custody
• Children with same-sex parents are just as likely to be happy and healthy as kids who were raised by a heterosexual couple
• In fact, kids who are raised in a same-sex household are likely to be more open-minded, accepting and understanding of differences than children raised in a heterosexual home.
• The sexual orientation of the parents is less important to the child than the type of daily interactions with those parents.
• Children are likely to grow up happy and healthy when they are provided with a safe and supportive home environment that tends to their social, emotional and physical needs.

Conclusion
In all of the articles that I found and read, both scientifically based and first-hand accounts, there was not a single piece of evidence that suggests that a parent’s sexual orientation has any effect on the development of their child. The children of homosexual couples are just as likely to be happy and healthy as the children of heterosexual couples.

References