Children in Lesbian-led Families:  
A Review

FIONA TASKER  
Birkbeck College, UK

ABSTRACT
There are an increasing number of children who are being brought up in lesbian-led families. Research on non-clinical samples of children raised in lesbian-led families formed after parental divorce, together with studies of children raised in families planned by a single lesbian mother or lesbian couple, suggest that growing up in a lesbian-led family does not have negative effects on key developmental outcomes. In many ways family life for children growing up in lesbian-led families is similar to that experienced by children in heterosexual families. In other respects there are important distinctions, such as different types of family forms and the impact of social stigma on the family, that may influence how clinicians approach therapeutic work with children in lesbian mother families.

KEYWORDS
assisted reproduction, family structure, lesbian mother, parent-child interaction, socio-emotional development

Introduction

Many clinicians who work with children probably have limited knowledge of families headed by a single lesbian mother or lesbian couple. However, there are a growing number of children who are being brought up in a diversity of lesbian-led families. Information about these children has increased in recent years through a number of research studies that are reviewed in this paper. In many ways family life for

______________________________

FIONA TASKER, Ph.D., is a Lecturer in Psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London. She completed her Ph.D. at the University of Cambridge, and was a postdoctoral research fellow at City University, London. Her previous publications include papers on children of divorce and children in lesbian and gay families. She is co-author of a book entitled: Growing up in a lesbian family: Effects on child development.

CONTACT: Department of Psychology, Birkbeck College, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX, UK.
children growing up in lesbian-led families is unremarkably similar to that experienced by children in heterosexual families. In other respects there are key differences that may influence how clinicians approach therapeutic work with children in lesbian mother families.

An accurate estimate of the number of children being brought up in lesbian-led families is not feasible given that it is still difficult for lesbians to be ‘out’ about their identity in many social situations. However, from the findings of large-scale surveys within the American lesbian and gay community it has been estimated that about one in five lesbians have children of their own (Bell, & Weinberg, 1978; Bryant, & Demian, 1994). It is also likely that many more lesbians are involved in parenting in some capacity, for example, through parenting their partner’s or ex-partner’s children.

Openly lesbian-led families are a relatively recent family form, dating back to the gay-liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Families with a homosexual parent have probably always existed, although those outside the family (and even possibly the children themselves) would not have known that the parents were other than the married couple they seemed. The marriage between Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson is just one example of a famous marriage within the British aristocracy that allowed both partners to have homosexual relationships yet remain together in a lasting relationship as parents to their children (Nicolson, 1973).

With the gay-liberation movement, the rising divorce rate and increasing opportunities for women to be economically independent of men it became possible for some lesbians to leave their marriages and contemplate living with another woman. For many of these women this was the realization of a long-felt attraction to women that had been kept hidden because of social pressures to marry or genuine feelings towards their husband (Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 1995). For other women feelings of lesbian attraction came unexpectedly only after the end of their marriages.

Back in the 1970s and early 1980s, if the father of the children contested custody and made known the mother’s lesbian relationship, lesbian mothers were unlikely to have their children live with them (Harne, & Rights of Women, 1997). In some cases even visiting arrangements between the lesbian mother and her son or daughter were hedged with restrictions, for example, concerning whether the mother’s girlfriend could be present (Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 1986). Little is known about the children whose mothers lost custody disputes. The loss of a previously close mother–child relationship may cause considerable distress to both mother and child, and a lack of contact may lead the child to develop concerns about their parent based on ignorance and prejudice.

Since the mid-1980s many more lesbian mothers have been awarded care and control of their children (Harne, & Rights of Women, 1997). These families confront many challenges similar to those faced in other post-divorce families headed by heterosexual mothers: coping with the child’s feelings of loss at the end of their parents’ relationship, adjusting to the departure of one parent from the family home, coping with the possible continuation of parental conflict, enduring the disruption of family routines, handling the loss of household income, managing children as a lone parent, organizing access to non-residential father and adjusting to stepfamily life (for useful reviews of these issues in heterosexual families see Frude, 1990; Gorell Barnes, Thompson, Daniel, & Burchardt, 1997; Robinson, 1991).

In recent years the options for lesbians to start a family have increased. Lesbian mothers may become parents through fostering or adopting a child. However, lesbians can only adopt as individuals and not as a couple and many feel that they have been discriminated against by agencies. When lesbians foster or adopt they often become

© 1999 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.
involved in parenting a child with special needs, who has been difficult to place elsewhere (Martin, 1993). However, most of the children in planned lesbian-led families probably will have been conceived through anonymous donor insemination (DI) at a fertility clinic or self-insemination, to a lesbian mother. Whether through a clinic or through self-insemination the level of planning involved in the conception will likely entail careful consideration of the implications of having a baby for household arrangements.

There are a number of clinics in the United States and the Netherlands that offer DI services to lesbians. In Britain after the Warnock report on the regulation of new reproductive technology, it was left to the discretion of individual clinics whether they were willing to provide DI for lesbians or single heterosexual women, although the Human Fertilization and Embryology Act (1990) states that: ‘A woman shall not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the welfare of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment including the need of that child for a father’. However, it is thought that most of the new generation of lesbian mothers in this country have opted to avoid fertility clinics and instead find a man who is willing to donate semen to use in self-insemination to achieve a pregnancy. The advantages of this as many lesbians see them are: being able to find a known donor who may or may not have contact with the child and not having to ‘account’ for their sexuality in order to obtain access to fertility treatment (Saffron, 1994). Sometimes the donor may be involved in co-parenting the child and this is one way in which gay men become parents.

Mothers and children in lesbian-led families also may have a wide support network of friends who may be called upon for emotional and practical support. This support system may be a particularly important resource, especially if the lesbian mother’s extended family have been critical in the past (Weeks, Donovan, & Heaphy, 1996; Weston, 1991). However, the non-biological mother in a lesbian couple has no legal recognition of her parenting role unless she applies for a residence order (Children Act, 1989) for this reason alone many non-biological mothers may feel marginalized or unrecognized in their parental role.

**Research findings on outcomes for children raised by lesbian mothers after parental divorce**

Research on children in lesbian-led families began to be published in the early 1980s. The first wave of research studies on lesbian parenting concentrated on the experiences of lesbian mothers who had children in the context of marriage and who subsequently identified as lesbian either before or after separating from the child’s father. The first phase of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families was begun by Golombok and colleagues at the Institute of Psychiatry (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). This study investigated four key developmental outcomes for children in lesbian-mother families: psychological adjustment, family relationships, gender development and peer relationships. When lesbian mothers had been refused custody of their children this was generally on the grounds of presumed difficulties in each of these areas for the sons and daughters of such mothers. Outcomes in these domains were also the main issues highlighted by developmental theories that stress the importance for children of being brought up together by their mother and father. For example, there is general agreement among different psychoanalytic schools that the presence of both parents is important for a heterosexual resolution of the Oedipal conflict, although the emphasis on the mother’s and father’s respective roles varies between different theories. According to social learning theories modelling adult behaviour (particularly modelling behaviour of a same sex adult) and reinforcement are seen as the two key processes through
which psychological development proceeds. Both these processes could be affected in children brought up in lesbian-mother households. The other main perspectives on socio-emotional and psychosexual development place less emphasis on parents as influences on psychological development and more importance on discourses prevalent in the wider cultural environment (social constructionist approaches), or the child's ability to integrate external information with his or her developing sense of self (constructivist or cognitive developmental approaches).

In common with other North American studies on children in lesbian-mother families (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoeffer, 1981; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981), the British study recruited a relatively small volunteer sample of lesbian mothers who had their school-aged children living with them. The study compared 37 school-age children living in lesbian-mother families with a group of children who were being brought up by single heterosexual mothers. Both groups of children were therefore growing up in father-absent households, enabling the research to distinguish the particular influence of growing up in lesbian-led household aside from the absence of an adult male role model. Also, both groups of children had experienced their mother and father's separation, consequently differences between groups in developmental outcomes would not reflect any general effects of parental divorce. The average age of the children at the time of the first wave of the study was 9½ years. Semi-structured interviews with a standardized coding scheme were used to collect details from the mothers and children on the family circumstances and developmental outcomes of interest. In each family the mother completed the Rutter A Scale to provide a standardized assessment of the child's psychological adjustment. The child's class teacher also completed the Rutter B Scale to provide an independent assessment of any emotional or behavioural difficulties the child might have.

No statistically significant differences were found between the children in the lesbian- or heterosexual-mother families on any of the interview or questionnaire measures of the child's adjustment and the rates of difficulties for children in the lesbian-mother group were within the normal range reported for children in heterosexual two-parent families (Golombok et al., 1983). Data on the quality of family relationships experienced by the children in the two family forms revealed that interview ratings of maternal warmth were just as high for lesbian mothers as for single heterosexual mothers. Furthermore, children from lesbian-mother families were more likely than children from single heterosexual-mother families to have regular contact with their non-resident father. Given that in the mid-1970s, when the study took place, lesbian mothers were usually not awarded custody of their children, many of the lesbian mothers interviewed may have been particularly fortunate in being able to maintain a good parenting relationship with the child's father and so avoiding a custody dispute.

One concern commonly expressed in lesbian-mother custody cases was that children might be stigmatized because of their lesbian family background, and that this might itself have harmful effects. However, children in lesbian-led families were reported to have similar good peer relationships to the children in the heterosexual single-mother families (Golombok et al., 1983). Only two children in each group seemed to have definite difficulties in peer relationships involving some personal distress, social impairment or restricted activities.

In custody cases it was often argued that the gender development of children brought up by a lesbian mother would be atypical and that the children would grow up to be lesbian or gay themselves. The British study paid particular attention to the gender development of the children raised in lesbian-mother families. None of the boys or girls in the lesbian-mother group or single-heterosexual-mother group were confused about
their gender identity. Furthermore, no differences in gender role behaviour were found between the children in the two types of family. Both groups of boys and girls tended to show quite traditional gender-typed preferences for toys, activities and friendships (Golombok et al., 1983).

The results of the British study were similar to those found in other investigations of children brought up by lesbian mothers. On the basis of these studies a number of review papers were published which concluded that children in lesbian-led families are not disadvantaged by this experience (Falk, 1989; Gibbs, 1988; Golombok, & Tasker, 1994; Kirkpatrick, 1987; Knight, 1983; Patterson, 1992, 1995a; Tasker, & Golombok, 1991). Nevertheless early work on the developmental outcomes for children in lesbian-mother families left a number of issues largely unexamined. First among these were questions concerning the long-term developmental outcomes for children. Few of the children in any of the research samples had reached puberty, so a systematic assessment of sexual orientation was not possible in the majority of cases. A second concern was that although younger children might be relatively protected against peer stigma, teasing or bullying about their family background (or indeed their own sexuality) might be more of a problem for adolescent children. A further issue was the possibility that some effects of early upbringing on mental health could remain latent until adulthood, for example, Wallerstein suggests that there are ‘sleeper’ effects of parental divorce on adult mental health that remain dormant during childhood (Wallerstein, & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein, & Corbin, 1989). Finally, in the early studies of lesbian-mother families the children themselves had not been asked about their perceptions of growing up in a lesbian-led family. Other than limited information from clinical cases (e.g. Jarvaid, 1983; Lewis, 1980) little was known of what these children themselves thought about their families.

In order to examine these long-term outcomes a follow-up study was conducted in 1991–1992 with the children who had taken part in the original study conducted by Golombok and colleagues. For full details of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families see Tasker and Golombok (1997) *Growing up in a lesbian mother family: Effects on child development*. A total of 25 young adults from lesbian-mother families (eight men and 17 women) and 21 young adults from heterosexual-mother families (12 men and nine women) were interviewed in the longitudinal study (the average age of participants at follow-up was 23.5 years). These young people were interviewed using semi-structured interviews with a standardized coding scheme that covered the long-term developmental outcomes in the four key areas outlined previously: family relationships, mental health, peer relationships and psychosexual development.

Over the 14 years between the first phase of the study and the follow-up interviews the majority of mothers in both the original lesbian-mother and heterosexual-mother groups had developed new relationships. In the follow-up study nearly all the young people from both types of family could report on their experience of step-family relationships. Of the 21 young people in the original single heterosexual mother group, 20 reported that their mother had at least one new relationship and 18 reported that their mother’s new male partner moved in with or married their mother. Similarly, in 22/25 cases the young people from lesbian-mother families had lived for at least part of their childhood with their mother and her girlfriend.

The majority of interviewees who had grown up in a lesbian family from an early age reported a gradual awareness of their mother’s lesbian identity. This often began with the realization that unlike most of the children they knew their father did not live with them and their mother had a close relationship with another woman. When they recollected their childhood and adolescence only a few of the group could remember a precise moment when they first discerned that their mother had a lesbian relationship. Children
did not seem to be aware of the sexual component to their mother’s lesbian relationship until after they had begun to understand sexual relationships more generally. Even though they may have noticed that their mother and her girlfriend shared a bed, this did not necessarily signify the relationship as a sexual one.

When asked about their relationship with their step-parent, compared with young adults from heterosexual families those from lesbian families reported more positive relationships with their mother’s female partner, both currently as adults and during adolescent years. The mother’s female partner could perhaps more easily be added to the family constellation alongside their mother, possibly in the role of a ‘second mum’. It makes an interesting comparison to contrast this finding with those from studies examining heterosexual stepfamilies where it is often concluded that stepmothers have more difficulty than stepfathers in being accepted into the family by their stepchildren. This is thought to reflect the greater demands on stepmothers compared with stepfathers given women’s traditional responsibilities for family relationships (Gorell Barnes et al., 1997; Smith, 1990). However, it seems that when the step-parent is able to work alongside existing family relationships conflict may be avoided, as was the case for most of the lesbian partners in the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families.

Exactly how the mother’s girlfriend fitted into their family varied considerably according to the reports of different interviewees. In many cases the mother’s girlfriend took on a traditional ‘motherly’ role in the child’s life, and occasionally was more involved in daily childcare than the child’s mother herself. In other cases the mother’s girlfriend acted as a secondary adult resource to be drawn upon, and sometimes she was in the young person’s view an intermediary ‘big sister’ in the family. Within lesbian-mother families it may be the lack of outside definition of parenting roles for lesbian partners that makes it easier for both mother’s partner and child to negotiate a relationship which suits them and the home context. In contrast, within heterosexual stepfamilies part of the difficulty of the step-parenting role is often the role prescription of ‘replacing’ the absent parent (Robinson, 1991; Smith, 1990).

Generally young people from lesbian families also reported good relationships with their mother and their non-resident father. Both groups of young adults from lesbian and heterosexual family backgrounds were asked how they felt about their mother’s identity currently and as they remembered feeling during their secondary school years. In adulthood young people who had been brought up by lesbian mothers were significantly more likely to be proud of their mother’s sexual identity compared with young adults raised by heterosexual mothers. While they were not as a group more negative about their family identity, young adults who did describe adolescent feelings of opposition or embarrassment about having a lesbian mother were those who also reported less positive family relationships, for example, those who did not have a close relationship with their mother or those whose mothers did not have a satisfying stable relationship. Furthermore, adolescent difficulties in coming to terms with having a lesbian mother were particularly associated with being teased at school about their own sexuality, and were compounded if they felt that their mother had not been aware of, or sympathetic, to this. Possibly the negative response of others had a corresponding negative effect on the child’s own attitudes toward their family, or those children who were less happy at home attracted more negative attention from their peers. Within the lesbian-mother group, no gender or social class differences were apparent with regard to acceptance/rejection of family identity during adolescence.

Were children from lesbian-mother families more likely to be bullied or isolated at school compared with other children? Children may be teased or bullied for all sorts of reasons, but the follow-up study showed that young people from lesbian families were
not more likely than those from heterosexual backgrounds to report being 'picked-on' generally during their time at school. However, there was a non-significant trend indicating that young people brought up by a lesbian mother were more likely than those from heterosexual families to remember having been teased about their own sexuality. This appeared to be particularly true for boys from lesbian families. This may reflect the fact that children from lesbian families are indeed more likely to be teased about being a lesbian or gay themselves, or it may be that they are more sensitive to playground name calling and remember instances of this because it resonates with their family background.

Over half of the young people from lesbian families were able to inform at least one close friend about their family relationships who did not react negatively or tell others. Furthermore, young people from lesbian backgrounds were no more likely to report difficulty in bringing friends home than those from heterosexual families. Peer-group stigma was related to the way in which the young person, their mother and her partner dealt with the more immediate contact the child’s peers had with the family, and did not appear to be influenced directly by other aspects such as their mother’s involvement in lesbian or feminist politics. Most lesbian mothers were vigilant to the possibility of prejudice, helped their children to avoid homophobia, and were sensitive to any concerns their daughter or son had about school friends finding out. Children were then able to use different strategies to deal with homophobia (ranging from not telling others about this private family matter, disclosing only to trusted friends or challenging prejudice when they felt safe to do so). However, about a third of the young people from lesbian families did think that their mother had been too open about her sexual identity in front of their school friends on one or more occasions during their childhood, marking their concern about peers unwittingly finding out about their family background.

Another important set of findings from the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families is that children from lesbian families continue to have good mental health in adulthood. Young adults from lesbian-mother families were no more likely than those from heterosexual family backgrounds to have sought professional help for mental-health problems, likewise they were no more likely to have high anxiety or depression scores at the time of the follow-up interviews. Congruent with the results of previous research on the effects of parental mental health on children’s own adjustment (Rutter, & Quinton, 1984) those young adults who had experienced mental-health problems from either type of family background were most likely to be those whose mothers reported poor mental health at the time of the original study. This was irrespective of maternal sexual orientation, and no influences of family relationships on the later mental health of young adults from lesbian families were observed.

The last part of the follow-up study interview took a detailed psychosexual history from each of the young people interviewed. Sexual orientation was considered along four main dimensions: sexual attraction and fantasies (including early crushes), consideration of the possibilities of lesbian or gay relationships, sexual experience and sexual identity. No differences were found between the proportions of young adults from lesbian and heterosexual families who reported feelings of attraction towards someone the same sex as themselves. However, those who had grown up in a lesbian family were more likely to consider the possibility of having lesbian or gay relationships and indeed to do so. Five of the young women and one of the young men from lesbian-mother families had themselves had a same gender relationship. Nevertheless all of the children in lesbian-led families had also experienced heterosexual relationships, and the vast majority of young adults brought up by a lesbian mother identified as heterosexual (only two young women identified as lesbian and none of the young men identified as gay or bisexual).

Those young people from lesbian-led families who were most likely to show an interest
in same-gender relationships were those whose mothers had previously reported in the first phase of the longitudinal study that they were more open within the home about having lesbian relationships, or that they had no preference for their child’s future sexual orientation. Reflecting on their own sexual history in the follow-up study interviews many of the young people from lesbian-led families felt that they could make more informed choices about sexual relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, because of greater openness and acceptance in their family. However, a few remembered feeling ‘worried’ during early adolescence that they might develop a crush on a same sex friend, a feeling that generally resolved one way or another as the young person became more aware of their own sexual identity.

In the follow-up study it appeared that young women from lesbian-mother families were more likely to have considered or have had a same-gender relationship compared with their peers from heterosexual mother families. However, women from lesbian backgrounds were apparently no more likely than women from heterosexual homes to report being attracted to other women. For those who do experience same-gender attractions, perhaps the more obvious parallel with their mother’s lesbian lifestyle for daughters could explain why daughters rather than sons may be more willing to enter into same-gender relationships. However, the greater proportion of women than men who reported consideration of, and involvement in, same-gender relationships may simply reflect the higher representation in the sample of women compared with men from lesbian-mother families.

A major strength of the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families is the use of prospective data gathered from interviews with mothers prior to long-term outcomes being known. The young adults interviewed did not select themselves into the sampling frame for the study, but were invited to participate because of their earlier inclusion as children. Interview data is always open to criticisms of bias owing to self-presentation effects, although the semi-structured interview schedule facilitated the in-depth exploration of any initially superficial or apparently contradictory answers. Any major negative or positive long-term effects on child development should have been identified. However, given the small sample size, relatively subtle differences between the two types of family may have been missed. The small sample size restricted the investigation of possible gender and social-class differences between young women and men brought up in lesbian and heterosexual homes. Similar procedures were used to recruit the heterosexual single-mothers to control for self-selection biases and both groups reflected a fair diversity of families nationwide, although the study was not able to effectively sample different ethnic minority groups. As the control group consisted of young adults brought up by heterosexual single parents, it could be argued that participants from both types of family may be ‘atypical’ in comparison to their counterparts raised in heterosexual homes with both mother and father present. This possibility cannot be refuted conclusively, but results from the study were placed in the context of established population norms where these were available (Tasker, & Golombok, 1997).

As in most longitudinal studies there was some attrition of the original sample: 62% of children in the original study were seen at follow-up. Did the study lose participants from the sample who were less well adjusted as children? There were no differences between follow-up study participants and non-participants in age and gender of children, mother’s social class and psychiatric history, or on the quality of the mother’s relationship with her child, children’s peer relationships, children’s gender role, or children’s psychological adjustment. However, non-participants from both types of family tended to have been more likely than participants to have experienced a period of separation from their mother during childhood. In the lesbian-led family group, children whose
mothers reported more interpersonal conflict with her partner were less likely to participate at follow-up. Similarly, children who were reported to be unaware of their mother's lesbian relationship at the time of the initial study were less likely to participate again. This suggests that children who participated at follow-up might have experienced better family relationships during childhood compared with non-participants, but that in other respects the sample composition remained unaffected.

The findings from the British Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Mother Families reveal that children from lesbian-mother families do just as well as children from comparable families both during childhood and in the longer term. However, these findings may be specific to the experiences of children who spent the initial part of their childhood in heterosexual homes before their mother identified as lesbian. The transition from a heterosexual family to a lesbian family may be a difficult one for a child to adjust to as they see their father leave, their mother explore the possibilities of relationships with other women, and they try to build a relationship with their mother’s new partner. The visibility of the lesbian family, and the potential for attracting prejudice, may also be influenced by the mother’s late entry into lesbian relationships. A further question left unanswered by the study is the relative importance of early experience in a heterosexual family, experience that some developmental theories would claim as formative. For instance, the long-term implications for sexual orientation may be different for children who have been born into lesbian-led families. As the mothers of the young people in the follow-up study all had earlier relationships with men, it could be argued that they were bisexual rather than lesbian women. Furthermore, the large majority of these children had known their father and many had kept in contact with him after their parents had separated. Alternatively, the young person’s knowledge that their mother’s sexual identity changed over the course of her life may lead them to think that sexual attraction, relationships and identity are not fixed.

**Research findings on outcomes for children raised in planned lesbian-led families**

There is a new generation of children who are growing up in families planned by lesbian mothers. To investigate the developmental outcomes for children raised in planned lesbian-led families a second national British study was designed to examine these issues (Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Tasker, & Golombok, 1998). Thirty children from planned lesbian-led families (15 of whom were in two-parent lesbian-mother families) participated in this study along with 42 children of single heterosexual mothers, 41 children of two heterosexual parents who had been born without the aid of fertility treatment and 43 families led by a heterosexual couple who had a child conceived by DI via a fertility clinic. The children were aged between 3 and 9 years (mean age 6 years). Of the children in lesbian-led families 22 were conceived through self-insemination, four were conceived through anonymous DI via a clinic, three were conceived by their mother in a heterosexual relationship that finished before or shortly after the child’s birth, and one child was adopted at 1 month old. The criteria for inclusion in the lesbian-mother family group was that the child had been brought up in a lesbian household since before his or her first birthday.

The lesbian-mother group and the single heterosexual mother group were both collected as volunteer samples, whereas the other two groups were recruited from hospital and clinic records as part of a larger study on children of new reproductive technologies (Golombok, Cook, Bish, & Murray, 1995). The research design enabled comparisons to examine the possible influences of father absence, by examining differences between
children in father-present two-parent heterosexual families and children in lesbian-led
families or with a single heterosexual mother (Golombok et al., 1997). It also set up
comparisons between children in the different types of two-parent family where the
second parent was female or male (lesbian couple families versus two-parent heterosexual
families) while controlling for other confounding factors, such as the absence of a genetic
relationship with the second parent and the use of fertility treatment (Tasker, & Golom-
bok, 1998). Semi-structured interviews were administered to the birth mothers in each
type of family to collect data on family relationships and the child’s well-being. All
mothers, and where appropriate each child’s class teacher, completed the Rutter A and B
Scales respectively to assess any emotional or behavioural difficulties the child might have.
A battery of tests were also administered to the child including the Pictorial Scale of
Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (Harter, & Pike, 1984)
to examine self-esteem, the Separation Anxiety Test (Klagsbrun, & Bowlby, 1976) to
examine attachment, and the Family Relations Test (Bean, 1976; Bene, & Anthony, 1985).

Results from the mothers’ interview data, and findings from the Rutter A and B Scales,
show that children in lesbian-led families, and families with a single heterosexual mother,
had similar high levels of psychological adjustment and were no more likely than children
in father-present households to have emotional or behavioural problems (Golombok et
al., 1997). How did the children themselves feel about their abilities? The Pictorial Scale
of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance enabled the child to rate him or herself
according to their confidence in their cognitive or academic abilities (cognitive compe-
tence scale), confidence in their physical skills and athletic abilities (physical competence
scale), confidence in their relationships with other children (peer acceptance scale) and
confidence in their relationship with their mother (maternal acceptance). No differences
were found in children’s ratings of maternal or peer acceptance across the different family
groups. However, children in father-absent families generally were less confident about
their physical skills and cognitive or academic abilities compared with children in father-
present families, although no differences were observable between children in lesbian
households and single heterosexual-mother families (Golombok et al., 1997). These find-
ings may indicate that fathers are important in these particular respects in terms of the
child’s developing sense of self-esteem. However, as the child’s confidence in his or her
own abilities is in part influenced by their perception of other children’s and adults’
approval, it could be that their lower perception of cognitive and physical competence
results from a growing sense of social disapproval of their family background.

In terms of the quality of family relationships, children in both types of father-absent
households, and particularly those in the lesbian-mother family group, benefited from
closer relationships with their birth mother as assessed by the interview ratings of mater-
nal warmth and mother–child interaction (ratings of the extent to which the mother
enjoyed playing and spending time with her child and took responsibility for caregiving)
compared with children in heterosexual two-parent families. Furthermore, results from
the Separation Anxiety Test revealed that children from both types of father-absent
families showed greater security of attachment than children whose father lived with
them (Golombok et al., 1997).

Comparisons between children in two-parent lesbian-led families and children who
were naturally conceived (or conceived via DI) by heterosexual couples were used to
assess the involvement of the non-biological mothers or the father in the child’s life. The
interview data indicated that co-mothers in lesbian-led families played a more active role
in daily caregiving than did most fathers in heterosexual families, although this differ-
ence was often less pronounced in heterosexual families where the child had been
conceived by DI. However, results from the birth mother’s interview data and the child’s
own reports of the closeness of co-mother or father–child relationship on the Family Relations Test showed that family relationships were equally warm and affectionate across all three types of family (Tasker, & Golombok, 1998).

The results from the British study of planned lesbian-led families and from that of similar investigations in the United States (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Patterson, 1994, 1995b) and in Belgium (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, van Hall, & Golombok, 1998) indicate that children born to lesbian mothers do not differ in either psychological adjustment or gender development compared with children in heterosexual families. One study of children aged around 7 years conceived by DI to single or two-parent, lesbian or heterosexual families found that neither family structure nor parental sexual orientation influenced children’s psychological adjustment (Chan et al., 1998). Irrespective of family structure or parental sexual orientation increased levels of parenting stress, parental conflict and relationship dissatisfaction were associated with increased behavioural problems among the children concerned.

Conclusions

There are many family forms in which lesbian parenting occurs. Children may be parented by a single lesbian mother or by a couple, while additional parenting may be provided by ex-partners and friends. Published research on children in lesbian-led families to date has been limited to considering children and young adults in post-divorce lesbian-mother families and pre-school or elementary-school-age children in planned lesbian-mother families. Findings from the existing research studies indicate that while there is obviously variation among children in lesbian-led families, as a group they are just as likely as children with heterosexual parents to show good adjustment on the various developmental outcomes assessed. This general conclusion is perhaps particularly relevant to clinicians, who are by the very nature of their work more likely to see children from lesbian families who are referred with problems than children without difficulties. Non-referred children from lesbian-led families may provide some useful insights into how children may cope with the possibility of stigma and the processes that operate within a different family form.

An important factor for the children concerned is whether they have been brought up in a lesbian-led family from their earliest memories. Reviewing the story of how they were born, and whether their family has changed may be particularly important for children in planned lesbian-led families when age-appropriate explanations need updating, or changing family circumstances require a reconsideration of these issues. Research suggests that lesbian parents tend to be more open with their children about the way in which they were conceived compared with heterosexual parents with children conceived by DI (Brewaeys, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, van Steirteghem, & DeVroey, 1993; Cook, Golombok, Bish, & Murray, 1995; Gartrell et al., 1996). Developing different ways of explaining and distinguishing biological and social relationships when these do not coincide are likely to be an important part of greater openness, yet research has so far not focused on how lesbian mothers best broach this subject.

It is important for the clinician to assess carefully the assignment of parental responsibilities within the child’s family, and to recognize that in many lesbian-led families those who the child considers as parents may not themselves share an intimate relationship. As in heterosexual stepfamilies, one difficulty the lesbian-led family may face could reside within the discrepant definitions of parental responsibilities both between different family members and with others outside the family. The research findings reviewed
previously suggest that greater recognition needs to be given to the strength of the child’s relationship with the co-mother in planned lesbian-led families, and with the mother’s lesbian partner in post-divorce lesbian mother families. The longevity of family relationships is likely to be a major factor influencing the strength of particular affinities. Just as in heterosexual families the end of a lesbian couple relationship, or the beginning of a new relationship, may create the need for redefinition of parental responsibilities and explanations of family relationships for children with lesbian mothers. The difficulties of defining relationships may be further complicated because of the stigma attached to lesbian relationships and the need for the child and his or her family to state relationships in a way that enables them to cope with any prejudice encountered.

One aspect that children in different types of lesbian-led families will have in common is the potential experience of prejudice. If the children are aware of their mother’s sexuality, they will also have to contend directly with the frequently made heterosexist assumption that all families have heterosexual parents. Following on from this, children are often making decisions about whether it is safe to ‘come out’ about their family. Feeling in control of the situation and feeling confident about their decision, whatever course is pursued, may be important factors for coping with any prejudice encountered. Decisions about letting others know about family relationships may be more difficult for the child to make if there is a lack of clarity within their family about who family members are, or uncertainty within the family as to how to make careful judgements about informing people outside the family circle. Consequently, it is important to consider the resources that other family members have in dealing with prejudice, and it may be useful for the clinician to discuss these issues within a family session. Knowledge of other children with lesbian mothers may also be potentially useful to the child in helping to break down feelings of isolation and difference, in addition to giving examples of possible ways of dealing with any prejudice encountered. Reassurance both from within their family and from others outside it would seem to be important in clarifying and affirming family relationships for children.

The child’s experiences of coping with prejudice will likely be influenced by the wider context she or he lives in, for example, the quality of relationships they have with their extended family and their ethnicity, social class, and rural or urban locality. As yet research has not explored how these factors might help or hinder children’s coping skills. Different ethnic and religious groups will have different attitudes toward lesbians and may be more or less tolerant of diversity in family life. Furthermore, children from marginalized ethnic groups may have had previous experience of dealing with prejudice that could make it either easier or more difficult to cope with homophobia.

It is important to consider both the similarities with heterosexual families and the different context of family life for lesbian parents and their children. Potential difficulties in defining family relationships in the face of heterosexist definitions may be an issue for children, and their parents, in lesbian or gay family forms. Nevertheless the research findings reviewed seem to suggest that some family processes, such as the effects of parenting stress, parental conflict and parental mental illness, have similar consequences for children across different types of family form, irrespective of parental sexual orientation. It is vital not to overlook possible problems in other aspects of the child’s life through focusing inappropriate attention on the lesbian family context.

**References**

TASKER: CHILDREN IN LESBIAN-LED FAMILIES


