

## Socio-emotional development of children of same-sex parents: achievements and future lines of research\*

### El desarrollo socioemocional de los hijos de padres del mismo sexo: logros y líneas futuras de investigación

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#### Abstract

The influence of parents's sexual orientation in children development has brought special attention in recent years. Research that has explored the effect of family structure in children socio-emotional development have not identified significant differences between offspring of heterosexual- and lesbian-parent whereas interpersonal and social factors have shown a close relation with respect to children social performance. Although outcomes in this field are promising, they remain not conclusive. The majority of the studies have been conducted using cross-sectional designs, samples from non-representative population, measurements focused on psychological difficulties, so forth. General conclusions about socio-emotional development of children of same sex parents are presented, as well as methodological recommendations for future research in this area.

**Keywords:** Same-sex parents, offspring, socio-emotional development, parenting, family structure.

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## Resumen

La influencia de la orientación sexual de los padres en el desarrollo de sus hijos ha traído atención especial en los últimos años. La investigación que ha explorado el efecto de la estructura familiar en el desarrollo socioemocional de los individuos no ha identificado diferencias entre los hijos de padres heterosexuales y aquellos criados por madres lesbianas, mientras que los factores interpersonales y sociales han mostrado una relación cercana con el desenvolvimiento social. Aunque los resultados en este campo son prometedores, estos aún no son concluyentes. La mayoría de los estudios han sido de tipo transversal, con muestras de poblaciones no representativas, medidas centradas en dificultades psicológicas, entre otros. Se presentan algunas conclusiones generales con respecto al desarrollo socioemocional de los hijos criados por familias homoparentales, así como algunas recomendaciones metodológicas para futuras investigaciones en esta área.

**Palabras clave:** padres del mismo sexo, hijos, desarrollo socioemocionales, paternidad, estructura familiar.

The American Psychology Association (APA, 2005) acknowledged that any scientific evidence had found disadvantage of children of sex-same parents respect to children of heterosexual parents. However & Marks (2012) pointed that the studies in the APA report lacks of cultural and socio-demographic diversity, representative samples, longitudinal data, intact families in the comparison groups, and studies with strong statistical power. The report also lacks of systematic analyses that allow identifying the strength and scope of the studies presented on it. Thus, the debate around the role of parents sexual orientation in the general development of their offspring is still in the spotlight.

From a behavioral perspective the socio-emotional development is defined as the social competence (functioning) of children when interacting to peers and adults, which is fundamental for psychological adjustment (Foster & Ritchey, 1979). Different researchers have explored the role of the structure and contextual features of heterosexual families in children social development. Studies found that single-mother families and never-married single-mothers are in disadvantages relative to married families in household aspects, which is tied to children's behavioral problems (Thomson, Hanson & McLanahan, 1994). Further, contextual factors such as conflict, aggression, emotionally detached interactions (Repetti, Taylor & Seeman, 2002), in-

effective communication styles, and lack of parenting direction (Denton & Kampfe, 1994) are related to social difficulties in short and long term.

In the context of families headed by same-sex parents few investigations have explored the role of structural and contextual features in the socio-emotional development of their children. This brief review presents some convergent and divergent points of same-sex families compared to heterosexual families in the social-emotional development of their offspring. Likewise, contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research in this field are presented.

### Socio-emotional development of children of same-sex parents: empirical evidence

Multiple studies have investigated whether the structure of same-sex families are better predictor of offspring socio-emotional development than contextual and interactional variables. Farr & Patterson (2013) analyzed the predictive relation of co-parenting (child-care labor) in social adjustment (externalizing, internalizing, and general behavior problems) of children's (13 to 72 months) of same-sex couples (lesbian and gays) and heterosexual couples in a cross-sectional research.

This study assessed parents and caregivers (or teachers) about child adjustment using self-report scales, and observations of parent-children interactions while they were playing. Researchers did not find a significant correlation between parents verbal report about co-parenting satisfaction and parenting observations. Results found that parental sexual orientation was not significantly associated to externalizing problems.

Lesbian parents and gay parents reported more cooperative child-care than heterosexual parents, who reported more specialization. However, no significant association was identified between children's adjustment and child-care labor. Further, less satisfaction about the child-care arrangement was significantly related with reports of children externalizing problems. A predictive negative relation between supportive division of labor and child externalizing problems was identified while competition and dissatisfaction with child-care arrangement predicted positively offspring externalizing difficulties. In sum, no predictive relation was found between parents sexual orientation and children socio-emotional development.

Two studies explored the psychological adjustment of children of lesbian-parents. Wainright, Russell & Patterson (2004) found non-significant differences in psychological adjustment, family and relationship processes, and romantic attraction between offspring of same and different-sex couples in a cross-sectional study. Similarly, Wainright & Patterson (2008) did not identify a significant relation between peer relations and family type, nor a significant association between peers report of social functioning and family structure. Both studies found that quality of the interaction adolescent-parent, care received from adults, and peers regard were associated to social functioning and psychological adjustment rather than parents sexual orientation. Wainright & Patterson (2008) also identified that the involvement on activities with the mother predicted offspring popularity and number of friends.

A national longitudinal study in the United States of America explored the psychological adjustment of offspring of lesbian-parents (Gartrell & Bos,

2010). They compared self-report of mothers and children that assessed behavioral problems and social adjustment of them at 10 and 17 years old. Lesbian mothers rated girls and boys social competence higher than the comparison group (thus data were subtracted from the Achenbach 17 year old maternal-report); they also reported lower behavioral problems (e.g. aggression) than the standard group. About the relation between internalizing and externalizing problems with social stigma, mothers who identifying that their children were stigmatized rated higher levels of psychological difficulties of their offspring. However, when comparing adolescents who identified that they had experienced stigmatization with those who did not, no significant differences in internalizing and externalizing problems were identified.

Lately, countries from different latitudes have become actively involved on the study of the social functioning of children in families headed by same-sex parents. Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power & Davis (2014) conducted a cross-sectional research in offspring of lesbian-parents, where did not find significant difference between children in the Australian Study of Child Health in Same Sex-Parents (ACHESS) and the normative population in Australia. Nonetheless, parents in the ACHESS that perceived stigma rated their children worse in indicators of physical activity, mental health and family cohesion, and emotional symptoms. This bring special attention about the role of stigma in offspring of same-sex parents and how it could affect children development in the long run.

Another cross-sectional research was led in UK with families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents (all residentially stable). Interestingly, they did not identify significant differences between lesbian and gay-parents, but between heterosexual and gay-parents, these last rated better in the quality of child-parent interactions: amount of the interaction, warmth expressions, and parent responsiveness. Despite, family type did not predict child externalizing problems, the outcomes revealed significant differences among parents report of externalizing problems, where conduct problems and hyperactivity were more frequent in children of heterosexual-parents than

those of gay and lesbian-parents. Teachers did not report sig differences in children social adjustment regarding to type of family, however.

Finally, two studies conducted in Spain explored the socio-emotional functioning of children of same-sex parents. On the one hand, one study explores the general adjustment of offspring of lesbian and gay-parents, finding average scores in social competence, high scores of self-esteem, scores out of the problem ranges for social and behavioral problems, average-peers evaluation in social competence and Social connectedness, and high scores of friendship experience and satisfaction (González, Morcillo, Sánchez, Chacón & Gómez, 2004). On the other hand, another study explored the role of six-type of families: traditional, single-parent, step-families, adoptive, same-sex parent and multiple-birth. Initial examinations found that children of families headed by same-sex parents, reported significantly less behavioral problems (internalizing and externalizing difficulties) than other families, and kids of stepfamilies reported higher rates of behavioral problems. However, when controlling for contextual and demographic variables, differences among families were not significant. They found that same-sex parent had the highest level of education in the sample, while reconstituted families reported the lowest level; also, gay and lesbian families informed a higher income than single-parent families (Oliva, Arranz, Parra & Olabarrieta, 2014). This exposed the role of the socio economical status, to improve conditions that enriches children context for a better social adjustment.

## Discussion

Studies exploring the socio-emotional development of children of same-sex parents have found that families functioning is the highest predictor of offspring emotional and social adjustment, not family structure (e.g. parents sexual orientation). So far there no any significant differences between children of families headed by same-sex parents and those headed by different-sex parents has have been identified, as stated by the APA report (2005).

Factors such as co-parenting satisfaction (Farr & Patterson, 2013), quality of the interaction child-parent, parenting distress, care from adults and peers, and sharing activities with the caregivers are positive indicators of socio-emotional development in children and adolescents of lesbian parents in the United States of America (Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2008). Likewise, researchers also found similar patterns of socio-emotional repertoires in children nurtured by single lesbian-mothers and lesbian couples in Australia (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power & Davis, 2014). Despite, most of the research about the influence of same-sex parenting in children socio-emotional development lack of diversity in their samples, where data have been collected from medium to high income White-Caucasian families headed by lesbians, which might have produced selection biases in these studies.

Some other studies have explored the role of parents sexual orientation in children development, implementing methodological strategies to control confounding artifacts relative to sample and subject participants role. For example, Oliva, Arranz, Parra & Olabarrieta (2014) included six-types of family structure from diverse socio economical status, increasing the diversity of the sample. Likewise, Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Tasker & Lambs (2014) study, conducted in the United Kingdom, heterosexual-, gay-, and lesbian-parents to reduce sample biases, as well as implementing different assessment strategies to increase the reliability of the data. Although Oliva et al. (2014) found similar outcome to those reported by researchers in USA and Australia, Golombok et al. (2014) identified better social development of children of gay-parents compared to those in families headed by heterosexual-parents, results that had not been found before. This latter showed the importance of increasing the diversity in population, including children of gay, bisexual and transgender-parents when studying effects of same sex parenting in socio-emotional development.

Moreover, all the studies reviewed presented relied on self-report as the main source of information, which may be affected the reliability of the data

by producing subject biases (e.g. subject role). Indeed, Farr & Patterson (2013) identified that parents reports were different from those obtained by the observation of child-parent interactions. Future studies will require to implement using methods that control biases produced by the assessment, whereby observational methods and third individual reports are urged to enhance the reliability of the data. Additionally, most of those studies have evaluated socio-emotional development as the absence of social and psychological difficulties. Such approach is unevenly adequate for assessing socio-emotional development, which involves the social competence of children in the interaction with peers and adults (Foster & Ritchey, 1979). Further research would need to implement assessments of individuals social functioning as the main indicator for socio-emotional development, instead.

The extended use of cross-sectional research in the former studies in socio-emotional development of children of same-sex parents have been limited the scope of the outcomes in this field. Longitudinal and cross-sequential studies need to be performed to establish the progression of the social functioning of these individuals across lifespan (i.e. young adults and middle-age adults), and might also contribute to identify cohort effects in this population.

Ultimately, at a time when science and general society inquire answers about the role of parents sexual orientation in children socio-emotional development, empirical evidence shows that children and adolescents of same-sex parents develop similar social competence than offspring of heterosexual parents, and nurturing family predicts better social competence than the family structure. Nonetheless, to extend the knowledge in this field is necessary implementing other methodologies that provide information about the influence or not of sex parents in offspring social development in the long run.

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