

sandbox

## The Gay Science

### What do we know about the effects of same-sex parenting?

By Ann Hulbert

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First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage: So far, the gay marriage debate has been about rights and romance and, of course, religion. Advocates and opponents alike have been notably quiet about a fourth "R"—raising children. But when the rhetoric heats up, we'll doubtless hear plenty from each side about the research on same-sex parenting and its effects on kids. What's surprising is that both camps have converged lately on a very basic point: The existing science is methodologically flawed and ideologically skewed. Don't count on that consensus, however, to dampen the feud.

You wouldn't guess from the current "expert" position on homosexual child-rearing that the data are in any doubt. Two years ago, the American Academy of Pediatrics put its imprimatur on the stance adopted by the [American Psychiatric Association](#) in 2000. An article in *Pediatrics* pronounced that "a growing body of scientific literature demonstrates that children who grow up with 1 or 2 gay and/or lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, social, and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual."

But behind the scenes, skeptics have emerged—and from an unexpected quarter. It's hardly startling to find conservative family-values crusaders and opponents of gay marriage balking at the verdict and challenging the validity of several decades' worth of data. As one of the most sober of them, Steven Nock of the University of Virginia, wrote in an [affidavit](#) in last year's Ontario Superior Court gay marriage case, "not a single one of those studies was conducted according to generally accepted standards of scientific research." What's jarring is to hear champions of family diversity and gay marriage chiming in. Who would have predicted this camp would come up with the most incisive critique of the claim that research has proved there are no differences between kids raised by gay and straight parents?

Whenever advocates shoot down findings that work in their favor, the result carries extra credibility. In this case it helps, too, that the professor stepping forth to do so, Judith Stacey, is a well-known sociologist whose strident advocacy of "alternative" families has made her a nemesis of traditionalists. Stacey's stringent assessment of 21 of the better studies on gay child-rearing, in an article titled "(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" cut through the ideological static that such a charged area of research almost inevitably generates. (Co-authored with Timothy J. Biblarz, it appeared in the *American Sociological Review* in 2001.)

Stacey readily concurred with the traditionalist critics' charge that scholarship in the still-fledgling field of gay parenting has been conducted almost entirely by researchers sympathetic to gay concerns. This is precisely why she set out to subject the studies to a "heightened degree of critical scrutiny." She focused in on the difficulties that have stymied good, systematic work. For starters, when the first small studies comparing children of hetero- and homosexual parents came out in the late 1970s, it was impossible to obtain representative samples—and it still is. After all, nobody really knows how big the population of homosexual-headed families with kids is or what it looks like. (The general demographic profile of such households is only beginning to emerge. [Data from the 1990 Census](#) suggested that 27 percent of lesbians in same-sex couples had given birth to children; between 5 percent and 17 percent of gay male households included kids. Estimates of the number of kids of gay and lesbian parents range from 6 million to 10 million, according to a group called [COLAGE, or Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere](#).) Partly because researchers are dealing with subjects who have not exactly clamored to be counted and measured, samples have been small and anything but random—they consist of adults and children who get referred or recruited. The resulting data have been heavily slanted to well-educated white families and overwhelmingly to lesbian parents rather than gay men with kids.

The problems don't stop there. A chunk of the gay-parenting literature dates to the 1980s, when researchers drew mostly on children born in heterosexual marriages that dissolved before or after a parent came out. (It was a decade during which studies of divorced- and single-parent families in general multiplied.) With this "transitional generation," it's impossible to disentangle the effects of parents' sexual orientation from those of divorce, of the revelation of homosexuality, and of re-partnering. And whatever impact social stigma had then, it's surely changed somewhat now that same-sex parenthood is more visible.

Finding suitable control groups is tricky, too. In the past, children of divorced single mothers have often served as the point of comparison, even though once-married lesbian mothers are more likely than their heterosexual peers to be living with new partners. Only in the 1990s have some (small) studies matched up children of homosexual and heterosexual donor-insemination couples. Given the limitations of such shaky cross-sectional research, longitudinal studies would be very useful—especially since there's so much interest in developmental issues, including the evolution of kids' gender identities and sexual orientations when they grow up with gay parents. Almost nobody, however, has tracked gay and lesbian families over time.

But Stacey's boldest move is to challenge not just the methodology but the fundamental assumption that has informed the bulk of gay parenting studies: the idea that it would be damning to discover that kids of gay parents deviated *in any way* from kids growing up with moms and dads. [As other critics have pointed out](#), the defensive goal of proving sameness is almost a guarantee of weak science. (The hypothesis that both groups of kids are alike is hard to rule out, but that doesn't mean you've established that there are no

differences.) That "heterosexist" bias, Stacey argues, has also encouraged researchers to fudge results, anxiously claiming homogeneity where there's actually some variety. Why, she asks, buy into the view that "*differences indicate deficits*"?

Her question is a good one to guide future work. But right now, it seems to be inspiring yet more dubious science, as the admittedly weak evidence is now sifted for indications that gay parents and their kids do in fact diverge from heterosexual families—and in advantageous ways. Dip into a recent book called *The Gay Baby Boom*, by Suzanne M. Johnson and Elizabeth O'Connor, and you'll find the muddled data often summoned as proof of the distinctiveness of gay child-rearing, rather than its equivalence to the heterosexual version. Out comes a portrait of egalitarian, consistent, harmonious, and "authoritative" (warm but not lax) lesbian co-parenting that moms and dads might learn from. (Dads, it seems, tend to lag on parenting skills tests.)

Digging around in the existing data on kids of gay parents leads the authors and others to similarly rosy speculations that these children are unusually open-minded. Some studies, for example, show boys playing less aggressively and behaving more "chastely" as youths, while girls' early interests are more androgynous and their adolescence evidently somewhat more sexually adventurous. On the hot topic of sexual orientation, the only long-term study of lesbian-headed families reports 64 percent of the young adult children saying they've *considered* same-sex relationships (compared to 17 percent with heterosexual parents)—although the percentage of those who *identify* themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual is the same in both groups.

From the perspective of sympathizers with the gay marriage cause, the bottom line of this turn-of-the-millennium revisionism is very upbeat: Kids of gays and lesbians are now judged to fare as well as *or better* than children of heterosexuals—especially, advocates note, when you factor in the prejudice and other pressures that such kids may face. The fact that they hold their own with children from more conventional families is read as an augury of unusual resilience (and some studies even report finding them more emotionally expressive). But you can bet that [Focus on the Family](#) and other conservatives are likely to take a rather dimmer view of this latest twist on the data. What pro-gay scholars hail as signs of empathetic flexibility are the kind of gender-bending proclivities that provide grist for more antigay alarm. The idea of "androgynous" parenting, together with tolerance of fluid notions of sexual identity, comes awfully close to the specter of queer parents spawning queer kids that haunts right-wing child-rearing expert/political advocate James Dobson and his followers, among others.

But wait: All the evidence—as both sides acknowledge—is seriously flawed and doesn't begin to supply anything like solid support for either the hopes of gay family harmony or the fears about scarred children and skewed parenting. And until gay couples are allowed to marry, there can't possibly be decent studies of whether the honorable estate confers the same benefits on kids whose parents are the same sex as it does on those who have a mom and a dad. In the meantime, it's quite clear that the absence of good science won't—

and shouldn't—settle a fraught debate. What will help clarify it are experiences like mine, watching my sister and her partner sharing the hard work and the happiness of raising their daughter. I can't think of a better argument for gay marriage than that.

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