

GAY FATHERHOOD: WHAT WE KNOW, AND WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

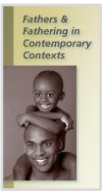
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Gay fatherhood research is a relatively new area of research. Studies conducted in the 1980s primarily focused on gay fathers who came out as gay after having children in heterosexual marriages. These early studies frequently examined fathers' coming out process to their children, and children's reactions. They found that most children did not reject their fathers after they came out; children who did struggle tended to be worried about peer acceptance. Adolescents appeared to struggle more than younger children, presumably because of the salience of peer acceptance during this developmental stage. In addition, adolescents were often navigating their own sexuality when they learned their fathers were gay, which may have complicated their reactions (Bigner, 2004; Bigner & Bozett, 1989; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a, 1989b).

More recent research on gay fathers has focused on planned gay father families – that is, families in which children were born or adopted into gay father households. These studies have focused on motivations for parenthood, barriers to parenthood, the transition to parenthood, and parent/child adjustment and outcomes. Studies of gay fathers' motivations for parenthood have found that, like heterosexual fathers, gay fathers tend to emphasize a love of children, a desire to care for and raise children, and their partner's desire for children as reasons for pursuing parenthood. However, unlike heterosexual fathers, gay fathers also emphasize a desire to raise a tolerant child (Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012). Research has documented the multisystemic barriers that gay men who wish to become parents must often navigate. For example, the legal system acts as a barrier, in that male same-sex couples are unable to jointly adopt a child in many states, forcing one man to adopt as a single parent, which can cause stress for couples. Researchers have also documented discrimination by adoption agencies and social workers (e.g., agencies may refuse to work with gay men or pressure gay men to closet their relationships in order to adopt) (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, in press; Hicks, 2006; Mallon, 2004).

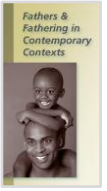
Regarding the transition to adoptive parenthood, research has found that there are few differences in the mental health outcomes of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adults. Mental health tends to decline among adoptive parents across the transition to parenthood, similar to heterosexual parents who are biological parents. Documented predictors of poorer mental health in lesbian/gay couples include: a) low social support from family, friends, and one's partner; b) perceptions of high levels of neighborhood and workplace homophobia; and c) living in states with an unfavorable legal climate related to gay adoption (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). Likewise, research has found that gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples demonstrate similar declines in their relationship quality across the transition to adoptive parenthood. Documented predictors of poorer relationship quality include: a) poorer mental health; b) poor coping skills; and c) dissatisfaction with adoption agencies (Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010). Research has also found that gay fathers and lesbian mothers tend to share child care and household labor more equally than heterosexual parents across the transition to adoptive parenthood (Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, in press). Also, several studies have found that gay men often report changes in their social network upon becoming parents (e.g., they spend less time with gay friends, and more time with heterosexual friends who are parents) (Bergman et al., 2010; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, in press; Mallon, 2004).



Some research has been conducted on parent and child outcomes in gay father families. In general, gay fathers appear similarly capable as other parents (both lesbian and heterosexual) in terms of parenting style, having low parenting stress, demonstrating high couple relationship adjustment, and showing supportive coparenting behaviors (Farr & Patterson, under review; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Johnson & O'Connor, 2004). Research indicates that children with gay fathers also develop similarly to children with heterosexual and lesbian parents in terms of behavioral adjustment and gender socialization (Farr et al., 2010), and they are no more likely to identify as gay in adolescence and adulthood (Bailey et al., 1995). More research on gay fathers is necessary, particularly with more diverse samples, and using more rigorous methods (e.g., longitudinal data). This research has important implications for policy, law, and practice, and suggests the need for laws that enable both fathers in couples to be legally connected to their children.

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