

Sexual minority families fare as well as, and in some ways better than, 'traditional' ones

Parents' sexual orientation not important determinant of children's development

Sexual minority families—where parental sexual orientation or gender identity is considered outside cultural, societal, or physiological norms—fare as well as, or better than, 'traditional' families with parents of the opposite sex, finds a pooled data analysis of the available evidence, published in the open access journal **BMJ Global Health**.

Parental sexual orientation isn't an important determinant of children's development, the analysis shows.

The number of children in families with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer parents has risen in recent years. But despite a shift in public attitudes, sexual minority parenting still provokes controversy, and whether parental sexual orientation affects family outcomes continues to be a matter of debate, say the researchers.

To strengthen the evidence, and find out if there were differences in outcomes between sexual minority and different sex (straight) parent families, they systematically reviewed 34 relevant studies published between January 1989 and April 2022, and carried out in countries where same sex relationships were legally recognised.

The studies were categorised into 11 main themes: children's psychological adjustment, physical health, gender role behaviour, gender identity/sexual orientation and educational attainment; parents' mental health and parenting stress; and parent-child relationships, couple relationship satisfaction, family functioning, social support.

A pooled data analysis of the results of 16 of the 34 studies showed that most family outcomes were similar between these two family types. And in some domains, such as child psychological adjustment—pre-schoolers, in particular—and child-parent relationships, these were actually better in sexual minority families.

“Growing up with sexual minority parents may confer some advantages to children. They have been described as more tolerant of diversity and more nurturing towards younger children than children of heterosexual parents,” explain the researchers.

But the analysis indicated that sexual minority parents didn't outperform different parental sex families on couple relationship satisfaction, mental health, parenting stress, or family functioning.

Risk factors for poor family outcomes for sexual minority families included experiencing stigma and discrimination, inadequate social support and co-habiting rather than married parents.

“Legal marriage confers a host of protections and advantages to the couples who marry and to their children,” note the researchers.

The results of the narrative synthesis (18 studies), showed that children who lived in sexual minority parent families were less likely to expect to identify as straight when they grew up than were children who lived in ‘traditional’ set-up families.

“There may be less gender stereotyping in minority parent families, and this effect may be positive,” suggest the researchers. “Exploration of gender identity and sexuality may actually enhance children’s ability to succeed and thrive in a range of contexts.”

They acknowledge various limitations to their findings, including that the included studies were limited to regions where same-sex relationships were legalised, and where the social climate for these families is generally favourable.

Most of the study participants were also from gay and lesbian households and it wasn’t possible to account for potentially influential demographic factors.

But the researchers conclude that children from sexual minority families are not at a disadvantage compared with children from different sex parent families.

“One contribution of this review is the recognition that parents’ sexual orientation is not, in and of itself, an important determinant of children’s development,” they write. “Another...is that there are significant risk factors often associated with the sexual minority experience and family functioning, such as stigma, poor social support and parenting styles.”

They add: “Policy-makers, practitioners, and the public must work together to improve family outcomes, regardless of sexual orientation.”