

27. Divorced Lesbian and Gay Parents: What is in the Children's Best Interest?

Buxton, A. P. (1999). The best interest of children of gay and lesbian parents. In R. M. Galatzer-Levy & L. Kraus (Eds.), *The scientific basis of child custody decisions* (pp.319-359). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

This paper reviews 25 years of research about lesbian and gay (LG) parents and their children as related to controversies over custody and visitation. As a whole, findings demonstrate that the sexual orientation of divorced LG parents does not have adverse effects on children.

When an LG parent comes out to their spouse or children (given that the lesbian or gay sexual orientation of that parent was not known or disclosed previously), the aftermath may be devastating to the couples' relationship and confusing to the children. However, research indicates that in general, children adjust more favorably to the parent coming out if it is done earlier rather than later.

Fear of losing custody is a substantial stressor for LG parents. These parents feel their children are a major focus of their lives and that being a parent is far more important than their sexual orientation. Additional stress may arise for LG parents and their children as a result of experiencing stigmatization and anti-gay prejudice.

Despite controversy, there is little evidence to substantiate claims that LG adults are incapable of being parents. No study has found that LG adults suffer disproportionately more mental health problems than other adults. Furthermore, studies suggest that heterosexual and LG parents are more similar than different in their attitudes about parenting and childrearing. LG couples tend to be more egalitarian in their division of labor than heterosexual couples. Regarding outside sources of childcare, all couples similarly make use of social support systems (i.e. partners, relatives, and friends). The post-divorce home environments of LG parents appear much like those of heterosexual parents—regarding presence of partners, adult friends and blended families. Post-divorce, both heterosexual and LG parents have similar contact with their children. Research indicates that when post-divorce family dysfunction occurs, it is predominantly the result of factors unrelated to the parent's sexual orientation.

Furthermore, findings suggest that relationships between LG parents and children are as high-quality and supportive as those between heterosexual parents and their children. Children of LG parents are no more likely to become LG themselves and they are as psychologically well-adjusted as children of heterosexual parents. Children of LG parents demonstrate typical gender identity development and gender role behavior. Parents' sexual orientation also does not appear to have any detrimental effect on their children's ability to form peer relationships.

In conclusion, given findings from the past 25 years of research, post-divorce custody decisions should center on the fitness of the parent, regardless of the parent's sexual orientation.