

# Do Gay Parents Influence the Sexual Preferences of Children?

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Gay parenting is at least a "cousin" to the contentious and current issue of gay marriage. Numerous professional organizations have expressed a common theme: The sexual orientation of parents makes no difference in the sexual orientation of children, nor does the orientation of parents have any impact on any indicators of child welfare.

For instance the technical report of the American Academy of Pediatrics supporting gay couple adoption reads: "No differences have been found in the...sexual orientation of adults who had a divorced homosexual parent (or parents), compared with those who had divorced heterosexual parents."

## Revisiting Some of the Research

Examining the research on this question, I have recently reread a study germane to the relationship between gay parents and the sexual preferences of children. While the study is somewhat dated, the results are still worth reviewing due to their relevance to current questions being debated in the culture.

The research by Susan Golombok and Fiona Tasker was reported in a 1996 issue of *Developmental Psychology*. These authors studied 25 children of lesbian single mothers and 21 children of straight single mothers beginning when the children were in elementary school and then again in young adulthood.

Specifically, the authors were wondering if being raised by lesbian mothers would increase the likelihood of children identifying as lesbian. This study has been widely quoted to prove that children raised by gay parents are not more likely to become gay themselves.

The authors acknowledge their results demonstrate that young adults are more likely to consider trying out and actually engaging in homosexual relationships. However, they say their analysis of the results do not support the idea that the actual sexual orientation of children is significantly different based on having a lesbian mother.

## Looking Behind the Numbers

In looking again, I come to a somewhat different understanding of the findings. The authors reported the sexual orientation of the children studied in two different ways. They reported the number of children who labeled themselves bisexual or lesbian and then they reported the Kinsey rating of the participants. Kinsey ratings range

from 0 to 6 with 0 being exclusively heterosexual and 6 being exclusively homosexual. Generally, ratings of 2 through 4 are considered descriptive of bisexuality.

When documenting the self-labels of the participants, they found two out of 25 children raised by lesbian mothers to be bisexual or gay. None of the children raised by straight single mothers self-identified as gay or bisexual. Statistically, this difference is unrelated to the sexual orientation of the mother.

However, when the Kinsey ratings are examined, there are four participants with Kinsey ratings of 2 or higher, thus indicating at least bisexual levels of same-sex attraction. There is no explanation in the article for this discrepancy in the report.

This suggests the need for a re-examination of the differences between groups. If one asks the question: "Does having a lesbian mother make one more likely to experience same-sex attraction?" then one may reanalyze the Kinsey ratings to answer that question. Indeed, there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups when one compares ratings of same-sex attraction.

What does this mean? Of course, one always wants more research to answer any question of this sort, but the data from this study suggests that having a lesbian mother does relate to a greater likelihood of children experiencing same-sex attraction themselves.

Thus, the same study often used to say sexual preferences aren't impacted by parenting actually points to the *opposite* conclusion.

## Is a Higher Rate of Homosexuality Problematic?

Is this finding a bad thing? I suppose that is a matter of perspective. Whether policy concerning gay parenting would be changed by a re-examination of the relationship between parenting and sexual orientation is a matter of how one values the potential increase in same-sex or bisexual orientation in the culture. However one feels about the matter, it seems that the conventional wisdom concerning the relationship between gay parents and the sexual preferences of children should be revisited. ■

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