



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies**

## **Nonheterosexual Children of LGBTQ Parents**

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Although LGBTQ people have always been parents, it is only in the past few decades that they have been able to do so without fear of negative legal and social consequences. The children of LGBTQ people have been analyzed in social science research, and build their lives under the critical gaze of public opinion. LGBTQ parents experience pressure to ensure that their children are heterosexual and gender-normative, which have been presumed to be more optimal outcomes. This pressure has burdened these families to conform to societal heteronormative assumptions, and this has downplayed honest discourse regarding the complexity of children's developing gender identity and sexual orientation living in LGBTQ families. Although most children growing up in LGBTQ-parent families are heterosexual and gender-conforming, some children in these families are not. There is scant research on the LGBTQ children of LGBTQ parents, but the extant research reveals some interesting information about these "second generation" children.

### **Historical Context**

Throughout most of modern history, LGBTQ people have lived closeted lives, and those who had children—generally produced while in heterosexual relationships—kept their sexual orientation and gender identities hidden. It was only with the rise of the lesbian and gay civil rights movement that same-sex-headed families were able to be publicly out. In the past few decades, increasing numbers of same-sex couples have consciously chosen to become parents *after* coming out, which has led to a rise in the social acceptance of lesbian and gay male-headed families.

As the LGBTQ movement has grown, increasing numbers of transgender and queer parents have been able to claim their right publicly to build families. Transgender people—those whose gender identity or gender expression is different from their assigned sex at birth—can become parents before or after their transition. *Queer*, or *genderqueer*, is often used as an umbrella term for all people who step out of commonly expected and prescribed rules for gender expression and identity, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Queer people are increasingly claiming their right to become parents, which is reshaping the modern definitions of family outside of a heteronormative context. *Heteronormativity* is an ideology that assumes everyone is heterosexual and should express traditional gender conventionality. It assumes that heterosexuality and gender-conforming behavior are superior to other forms of sexual orientation or gender expression. All LGBTQ people are the recipients of institutionalized oppression due to their non-normative sexual orientation or gender expression, and these societal rules have historically limited LGBTQ ability to form families, as well as maintain custody of their children.

Prior to the 1970s, the prevailing bias of the judicial system was that homosexuality and transsexualism were inherently damaging to children because of the lack of traditional sex roles modeled for children. The assumption was that these so-called alternative family structures would create children who were confused about normative male or female roles, and they would likely become LGBTQ themselves; having an LGBTQ child was considered a parental "failure," and the courts were expected to assert social control to protect children.

In the 1970s—in the midst of both the women's and the gay and lesbian liberation movements—the question of whether LGBTQ parenting was inherently dangerous for

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children was challenged in the courts. Lesbian motherhood, and the right of lesbian mothers to retain custody of their children following a heterosexual divorce, became the focus of numerous legal cases, since it was believed that being reared in a home without a father was not “in the best interest of children.” In an era when women routinely won the right of full custody of their children following a divorce, lesbian mothers were losing every legal battle to retain custody of their children based solely on their sexual orientation. The lack of empirical evidence proving the supposedly negative effects on children of lesbian mothers became the impetus for a huge outpouring of social science research studies that eventually provided evidence-based support for the psychological stability of children reared by lesbian parents. These extensive court battles that lesbian mothers waged to retain custody of their children paved the way for other sexual-minority parents in the years that followed. Much of what is known empirically about LGBTQ parenting is derived from studies of lesbians and then generalized to gay male parents; few studies to date have focused on parenting by bisexual, transgender/transsexual, or queer people.

### **Research Findings and Controversies**

When the judicial system determined that lesbian parenting was not harmful to children, they based it on social science research that examined psychological adjustment, self-esteem, academic performance, and other issues of children reared in lesbian homes. The research unambiguously revealed that children of lesbian mothers do not show any signs of psychological problems; indeed, some results implied that many children reared in lesbian homes exhibit specific strengths compared with peers. This research has been instrumental in changing social policy for all LGBTQ people regarding child custody, access to reproductive technologies, and adoption and foster care placements, and has led to a “gayby” boom of LGBTQ parenting.

A major focus of the research involved examining the development of gender identity and sexual orientation for children reared in same-sex homes. The concern was whether lesbian mothers (and, by extension, other queer parents) would differ from heterosexual mothers in how they raised their children to social expectations regarding heterosexuality and gender-normative behavior. The research unequivocally affirmed that children of lesbian parents express traditional gender roles and behaviors, and are almost always heterosexual. Same-sex parenting had been justified based on scientific affirmations of heteronormativity, and LGBTQ parents have been “allowed” to parent in part because the research affirmed heterosexual and gender-conforming outcomes. That is, the children of LGBTQ parents would maintain the status quo by heterosexually marrying, and by raising children according to acceptable gendered standards. This has placed tremendous pressure on LGBTQ parents to raise children who are heterosexual and gender-normative, as well as on their children to be “normal.”

Given all that has rested on this research for LGBTQ parents, challenging these results has been politically complicated. Initially, the challenges came mostly from those who were opposed to LGBTQ parenting, based on their conservative values. More recently, meta-analyses and emerging research have continued to reexamine the initial questions of how having LGBTQ parents might influence child-rearing and identities of children reared outside of heteronormative presumptions. The assumption that healthy child development should be defined by heterosexual and gender-normative narratives is fraught with heteronormativity and based in false ideologies that being heterosexual, or demonstrating gender-conforming behavior, is a superior outcome. This assumption

is being challenged by the increasing visibility of LGBTQ children of LGBTQ parents.

### **LGBTQ Children of LGBTQ Parents**

There is scant research on nonheterosexual children of LGBTQ parents, although the literature on LGBTQ youth reveals that some have LGBTQ parents, and the research on LGBTQ parents suggests that some of their offspring are LGBTQ themselves. They are an understudied minority group within a minority group. However, studying this population is complicated, since outside of the neutrality of academia, and given the heterosexism of the culture at large, the results of these studies can negatively guide social policy and reverse the social acceptance of the diversity of family forms currently emerging.

There is no evidence to suggest that LGBTQ parents encourage nonheterosexual or gender-atypical behaviors in their children. Indeed, coming out may actually be more complicated for the LGBTQ children of LGBTQ parents. For example, LGBTQ parents may feel compelled to ensure that their children are heteronormative in the face of familial and social scrutiny. Same-sex parents who are raising gender-nonconforming children, or those that identify as transgender, may be as challenged as heterosexual parents. They may especially fear for their children due to their own traumatic history of being reared in far more homophobic times. They might also fear they will be blamed by their families and communities for their children's queer identities. The children reared in these homes may worry they are disappointing their parents and may feel the need to protect their family from judgment and therefore repress their own emerging identities. Research suggests that not all LGBTQ children see that their parents are resources (even if their parents are loving and supportive), and LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ parents may hide their sexuality from their parents in similar ways as do many LGBTQ youth with heterosexual parents. Sexuality and gender expression as they emerge in youth are a private matter; few teens want to be "like" their parents, and it can be presumed that this is also true for the LGBTQ children of LGBTQ parents.

If LGBTQ parents are able to step out of their own experiences and social pressures, they might serve as positive role models and protective buffers against societal heterosexism for their LGBTQ children. Perhaps, given their own experiences and the cultural influences in their lives, they might allow their children more freedom to "discover" their sexuality, outside of the heteronormative assumptions of much of society. They certainly are knowledgeable about coming-out processes and have not only access to LGBTQ cultural communities but also a unique understanding about the challenges their children might face. However, LGBTQ parents commonly have their own legacy of psychological pain, which may cloud their ability to be responsive to their children; indeed, they may project their own histories of pain and internalized homophobia onto their child.

The nature of homophobia and transphobia is such that it may be difficult for LGBTQ parents to celebrate having an LGBTQ child, although it seems that if "gay pride" has any meaning at all, it should be a natural reaction. There is enormous societal pressure on LGBTQ parents to produce heterosexual, gender-normative children and enormous expectations on their children to fulfill those social and parental expectations. Despite these challenges, LGBTQ children of LGBTQ parents—what some young people call "queerspawn"—exist, and nonbiased research into this emerging demographic is overdue.

**See also** [Adults With LGBTQ Parents](#); [Children With LGBTQ Parents, Gender Development and Identity](#); [Children with Transgender Parents, Psychosocial Outcomes](#); [Custody Issues in Transgender Parenting](#); [Heteronormativity](#); [Therapy With Children of LGBTQ Parents](#)

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### **Further Readings**

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