



Fact Sheet

Working With LGBTQ Families: A Fact Sheet

By Renata Moreira, Executive Director, Our Family Coalition & Polly Pagenhart, Policy and Communications Director, Our Family Coalition

Common Terms and Definitions (Glossary)

- *Cisgender*: a person whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex. The prefix “cis” means “on this side of.”
- *Gender expression*: how we “present” or express our gender externally, in and to the world. For most, this outward expression also aligns with who we internally know or feel ourselves to be. For many, however – particularly for gender “expansive,” “creative,” or “non-normative” people – it may not.
- *Gender identity*: our deeply held, internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; who we know ourselves to be internally. As with gender expression, this can – but often does not – align with how we present ourselves externally to the world.
- *LGBTQ*: refers to sexual or affectional orientation; an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer/questioning.
- *Transgender*: a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex. The prefix “trans” means “across, beyond, or on the other side of.”

Overall Statistics

Among adults ages 18 and older, 3-4% identify as LGBTQ.¹ Among LGBTQ Americans, over one-third have been parents and as many as six million U.S. children and adults may have an LGBTQ parent.² Among LGB people under age 50 who live alone or with a spouse or partner, nearly half of women (48%) are currently raising a child under age 18, as are one-fifth of men (20%) and nearly as many transgender respondents (18%).^{3,4}

LGBTQ Family Facts

Some LGBTQ families are “planned,” yet many emerge by other means. “Unplanned” or unintentional LGBTQ families form via previous heterosexual relationships before one or more partners has come out, or by unintentional pregnancies of younger LGBTQ individuals engaging in risky behaviors, often due to stress associated with their sexual minority status.

“Planned” or “intentional” LGBTQ families are formed by three primary means:

1. Adoption or foster-adoption by a single LGBTQ parent or a couple;
2. Surrogacy, by which a single LGBTQ parent or a couple engage a gestational surrogate to bear a child with biological ties to them; or
3. Alternative or assisted conception – also referred to as “Alternative Reproductive Technologies” or ART – in which donor sperm is used, and conception is assisted by the prospective parent, a partner, or a medical professional.



Connections to children’s biological origins vary widely. Some LGBTQ families use “open” adoption; some do not. Sperm or egg donors may be “personally known,” “identity-release” (willing to be contacted upon the child’s reaching maturity), or entirely anonymous. Emotional ties with those in contact with donors, surrogates, or birth parents are equally varied. Some families share active caregiving roles, and use parental names (such as “donor dad”); others define donors as “extended” or “special” family, referring to them accordingly (such as “special uncle”). The growing availability of donor sibling registries online gives donor-conceived children opportunities to trace and often connect directly with their donors and their “donor siblings.”

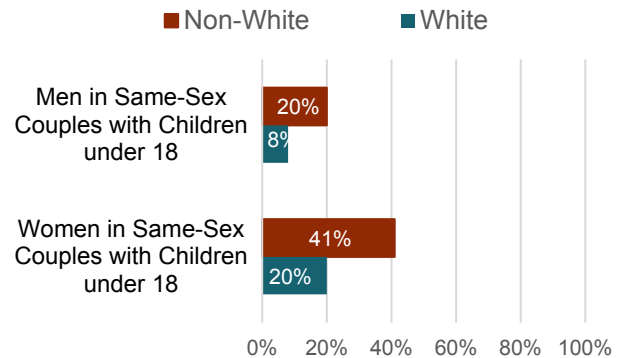
In 2016, the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a service of the Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, published a bulletin specifically for working with LGBTQ families in foster care and adoption that can be found at:

https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_profbulletin.pdf.

In terms of regional differentiation, LGBTQ families can be found in virtually every county in the United States, and are in the greatest *number* in metropolitan coastal cities. But they are in higher *concentrations* relative to the general population in Southern, Mountain West, and Midwest regions of the country. In Alaska, Idaho, Mississippi, Montana, and Wyoming, about one quarter of families are headed by same-sex parents.⁵

LGBTQ identity also appears across all racial and ethnic identities, and LGBTQ adults across all racial and ethnic groups are raising children. But parenting is more prevalent among same-sex coupled people of color: whereas 20% of white women in same-sex couples are raising children, 41% of non-white women are. Less than 10% of white men in same sex-couples are raising children, while more than 20% of non-white men in same-sex couples are raising children.⁶

Racial Differentiation in Same-Sex Parenting



Finally, regarding socio-economic differentiation, LGBTQ adults earn less on average than their counterparts in the general population. This is due to the fact that LGBTQ parents are more likely to have characteristics associated with a greater likelihood of being in poverty; they are proportionately more likely to be female, younger, and racial or ethnic minorities when compared to non-LGBTQ people in the same cohort. LGBT adults raising children are twice as likely as comparable non-LGBT individuals to report household incomes

near the poverty threshold; median annual household incomes run 14% lower than those of comparable different-sex couples.⁷

Well-Being of Children in LGBTQ-Headed Families

The consensus of studies shows no ill effects of LGBTQ parents. The American Psychological Association (APA) and other health professional and scientific organizations have decisively concluded that there is no scientific evidence for the notion that parenting effectiveness is related to parental sexual orientation, and that LGBTQ parents are just as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children.⁸ As far back as 2004, the APA resolved to oppose “any discrimination based on sexual orientation in matters of adoption, child custody and visitation, foster care, and reproductive health services.”⁹

Children raised by LGBTQ parents show no difference in their adult sexual orientation or gender identity than children of heterosexual parents.¹⁰ Gender identities of children raised by LGBTQ parents are normative, with one distinction. Boys raised in LGBTQ families show a wider range of gender expression than those raised in cisgendered/heterosexual families, with equal amounts of masculinity, but greater amounts of femininity.^{11,12}

In fact, there are positive influences of LGBTQ parents and caregivers. Some studies show children raised in LGBTQ families are statistically less subject to abuse by an adult than their peers in heterosexual families, due to the fact that the overwhelming percentage of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are heterosexual men, who are not present in LGBTQ families.¹³ Counter to stereotypes, gay men are shown to be no more likely than heterosexual men to perpetrate child sexual abuse.¹⁴

There is, however, a persistence of bullying and bias based on parents’ sexual and gender

identities. Children raised by LGBTQ parents do experience the negative impacts of social stigma. Insults or slights directed at parents are absorbed intimately by young children. One study noted that half of children of lesbian parents had experienced some sort of harassment by the age of 17, usually in school environments, usually from peers. This stigmatization is a measurable source of stress, though arguably of resilience as well.¹⁵



Issues Affecting LGBTQ-Headed Families

The legal recognition LGBTQ-headed families secured by the 2015 Supreme Court marriage equality decision—while providing critical legal and financial stability to children in these families—by no means ensured complete protection. The rights of non-birth LGBTQ parents continue to be debated in many states. Family stability is further undermined by the fact that LGBTQ parents or caregivers may still be legally fired or denied housing for being LGBTQ in over half the states in the United States.¹⁶ As recently as 2017, over 25 states considered bills legalizing discrimination against LGBTQ people in a wide range of services, including as being placements for adoptive and foster children. Recent studies show that a majority of Americans hold favorable or approving attitudes about LGBTQ people, but a very sizeable

minority continue to disapprove, or even consider being gay to be a sin.¹⁷ This legal vulnerability and widespread social stigma has a stressful impact on the children of LGBT adults, no matter how hard their parents may try to protect them.



Socio-economic differences magnify stressors felt in LGBTQ-headed families. Negative impact is particularly concentrated in low-income families, who often must rely on state or federal health care, job support, or housing support services. When in the eyes of public or private support agencies, LGBTQ family status is either not recognized or considered a marked disadvantage—as is the case in a number of states—and parents and caregivers are far less likely to seek out and receive necessary supports which causes the entire family to suffer as a result.

Reception by and cultural competence of caregivers, educators, faith communities, and medical professionals is important for LGBTQ families. Daycare, preschool, and elementary schools are among the most influential on young children and their families. Children and their peers develop understanding of social structures and the ways their families conform to or differ from the “norm” when they learn about and see other families, school curricula, and surrounding popular culture. Supportive, understanding professionals in these spaces go

a long way to easing the stressors, especially in the early years of parenting, as does any LGBTQ family imagery. Along with Pre-K care facilities and schools, faith communities and medical professionals have an enormous impact on a family’s sense of support and belonging.

When LGBTQ parents and caregivers openly discuss children’s origins and their family’s unique structure in age-appropriate ways and from the start, these things simply become a part of the defining fabric of the family. Fewer than half (46%) of U.S. children are currently living in a home with two married heterosexual parents in their first marriage.¹⁸ So children growing up in LGBTQ families often have family circumstances similar to their peers in divorced families, families with adopted children, families formed with some medical support or intervention, interracial families, kinship care families, and so on.

- Our Family Coalition developed a resource for creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for children of LGBTQ families targeted toward teachers and school administrators. It can be found in English and Spanish at: <http://www.ourfamily.org/resources/education>
- The Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s Welcoming Schools developed a checklist for creating a welcoming and inclusive school environment for children. To download it, see: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/pages/checklist-for-a-welcoming-and-inclusive-school-environment/>

Some Ways to Support LGBTQ Parents, Caregivers, and Their Children

Ensure your references to family member roles and names are inclusive. This first and simple

step is among the most important to LGBTQ family members: It indicates you recognize and fundamentally understand them. Until a client shares how they name themselves or you ask them, use “parent” rather than “mother” and “father,” or “caregiver” when the adult is not in a parental role.



Secondly, seek to understand how “out” they are, and respect their comfort level. More LGBTQ people are coming out at a younger age, and images of LGBTQ life in mainstream culture are becoming less difficult to find. Still, levels of social acceptance and support vary widely between urban and rural communities, as well as across different racial, ethnic, and faith communities. Individual circumstances vary as well: some people planned their families as LGBTQ-identified young adults; others have “come out” later in life and are only beginning to develop networks of support and self-acceptance. Simple questions such as, “Are you okay with me sending materials to your home?” or “How much do you talk about your family structure with your child’s teacher?” can open up these topics in a non-judgmental way and indicate you appreciate their delicacy.

Further, find out how each family approaches family or LGBTQ-centered holidays and celebrations. Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are often celebrated in schools and places of worship. If they include no images of lesbian, gay, or transgendered parents, children raised by such parents can feel isolated or unvalued.

Asking LGBTQ families how they approach such holidays provides them both respect and visibility.

LGBTQ Pride Month in June presents an opportunity to elevate the visibility of LGBTQ-headed families. This supports children in these families and is a wonderful opportunity to educate their peers. Regions with well-developed LGBTQ family supports may also offer LGBTQ family-friendly areas as part of municipal LGBTQ Pride celebrations.

Lastly, continue to inform yourself about issues affecting their families. LGBTQ legal rights and social recognition continue to change rapidly. Knowing how protected or at-risk a family is will help you support them effectively and ensure they are able to take steps to optimize their family’s legal stability. Finally, small but meaningful steps – such as using inclusive language in agency paperwork and inclusive images of families in agency literature – will go a long way to help LGBTQ families trust that they are in good hands.



Suggested Further Reading

Books

- Family Pride: What LGBT Families Should Know About Navigating Home, School, and Safety in Their Neighborhoods, by Michael Shelton (Beacon Press, 2013)
- *LGBT Families*, by Nancy Mezey (SAGE Publications, 2014)

Websites

- American Psychological Association: Lesbian and Gay Parenting: <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/parenting.aspx>
- Family Equality Council: <http://familyequality.org>
- Our Family Coalition: <http://ourfamily.org>
- Welcoming Schools: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/>

References

1. Gates, G. J., & Newport, F. (2012, October 18). Special report: 3.4% of U.S. adults identify as LGBT. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/158066/special-report-adults-identify-lgbt.aspx>.
2. Gates, G. J. (2013, February). LGBT parenting in the United States. Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law. Retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Parenting.pdf>
3. Ibid.
4. Grant, J. M., Mottet, L.A., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J. L., & Keisling, M. (2011). Injustice at every turn: a report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Retrieved from http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/ntds_full.pdf
5. Gates, G. J. (2013, February).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. American Psychological Association (2012, June 11). APA on children raised by gay and lesbian parents. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/news/press/response/gay-parents.aspx>
9. American Psychological Association. Sexual Orientation, Parents, & Children [Policy]. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/parenting.aspx>
10. Bos, H., Goldberg, N., Van Gelderen, L., & Gartrell, N. (2012). Male role models, gender role traits, and psychological adjustment. *Gender & Society*, 26(4), 603-638.
11. Bos, H., & Sandfort, T. G. M. (2009). Children's gender identity in lesbian and heterosexual two-parent families. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2807026/>
12. Goldberg, A.E., & Garcia, R.L. (2016). Gender-typed behavior over time in children with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(7), 854-865.
13. Gartrell, N. K., Bos, H. M. W., & Goldberg, N. G. (2011). Adolescents of the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Sexual Orientation, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Risk Exposure. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(6), 1199-1209. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-010-9692-2>
14. Ibid.
15. Van Gelderen, L., Gartrell, N., Bos, H., & Hermanns, J. (2009). Stigmatization and resilience in adolescent children of lesbian mothers. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 268-279.
16. Movement Advancement Project. (n.d.). Non-Discrimination Laws. Retrieved from http://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws
17. Pew Research Center. (2013, June 25). How LGBT adults see society and how the public sees them. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/25/how-lgbt-adults-see-society-and-how-the-public-sees-them/>
18. Pew Research Center. (2014, December 22). Fewer than half of U.S. kids today live in a 'traditional' family. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/22/less-than-half-of-u-s-kids-today-live-in-a-traditional-family/>

Used our Product?
Please tell us how. Email:
info@HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org
Reference Product #89
www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org

This product was produced by ICF with funding provided by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Grant: 90FH0003. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.