

7 Gay father families



Research on the psychological development and well-being of children raised by same-sex parents has focused almost entirely on families headed by lesbian mothers, rather than gay fathers. As discussed in Chapter 2, children with lesbian mothers do not differ from children in traditional families with respect to psychological adjustment or sex-typed behavior. However, children with gay fathers are different from children with lesbian mothers in that they are raised by men, rather than women. As it is widely believed that mothers are better suited to parenting than are fathers, the findings from studies of lesbian mother families cannot necessarily be extrapolated to families headed by gay men. This chapter will explore whether children who grow up with gay fathers may be expected to differ from children with lesbian mothers, and will examine the findings of the small but growing number of studies that have investigated parenting and child development in gay father families.

Although gay men are often assumed to be uninterested in, or actively opposed to, becoming parents, an increasing number of gay men are raising children, and many young gay men now expect to raise children when they are older (D'Augelli, Rendina, and Sinclair, 2008). Using data from the Gallup Daily Tracking Study in 2012, it was estimated that 20 percent of gay men aged 50 or younger who were living alone or with a spouse or partner were raising children under 18 years old, and estimates from the American Community Survey showed that 10 percent of gay couples were raising children under the age of 18 (Gates, 2013).

Is it the case that mothers make better parents than do fathers? Research on fathering has shown that heterosexual fathers influence their children in similar ways to mothers (Lamb, 2010, 2013; Pleck, 2010). In terms of attachment, for example, an analysis of 14 different investigations of infants' attachment to their mothers and fathers, involving almost 1,000 families, found the proportion of children who were classified as securely attached to their father almost identical to the proportion classified as securely attached to their mother (van IJzendoorn and De Wolff, 1997). It also appears that the more fathers are involved with their infants, the more likely the infants are to form secure attachments to them. This was demonstrated in an early study by Cox, Owen, Henderson and Margand (1992), who investigated fathers' relationships with their babies – first when they were aged 3 months and again at the age of 1 year. The fathers who took delight in their 3-month-old infants and who were affectionate and encouraging to them were most likely to later have securely attached 1-year-olds. Since that time, many studies have shown that fathers and mothers influence children in similar ways, and that the aspects of parenting that matter most for children's psychological well-being, such as warmth, responsiveness and sensitivity, are the same for fathers as they are for mothers (Lamb, 2010, 2013; Lamb and Lewis, 2011; Pleck, 2010). From a detailed analysis of the research literature on fathering, Pleck (2010) established that it is the quality of fathers' relationships with their children – rather than their

male gender or their masculine behavior – that is important. It was also concluded that the influence of fathering on children is equivalent to, and interchangeable with, that of mothers (Pleck, 2010). As Lamb (2012) put it, most parenting skills are learned “on the job,” and when men spend more time on the job, they become as skillful as mothers. Although fathers interact differently with their children in some ways, particularly in terms of more boisterous play, there is no evidence that this has an adverse effect on children’s psychological adjustment (Lamb, 2012).

Might it be expected that gay fathers can provide as positive a parenting environment for children as families with mothers present? If there is nothing unique about mothering, then gay fathers who show warm, sensitive and responsive parenting should promote positive child development. However, mothers are still generally believed to be more nurturing than are fathers (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010). Moreover, the wider social environment can have a marked impact on children’s psychological well-being, and children with gay fathers may be exposed to greater prejudice and discrimination than are children with lesbian mothers, because gay father families possess the additional non-traditional feature of being headed by men (Golombok and Tasker, 2010). Regarding children’s gender development, it has been suggested that children with gay fathers may differ from children with lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents owing to the presence of two male parents and the absence of a female parent from the home. Goldberg, Kashy and Smith (2012) postulated that children with gay fathers may show less sex-typed behavior than do children with heterosexual parents as a result of coming from a less sex-typed family environment, and girls in gay father families may show less sex-typed behavior than do girls in lesbian mother families, due to the absence of a female role model.

ROUTES TO PARENTHOOD

Gay men may become fathers through several routes. Although a large number of gay men are fathers as a result of having had children

through heterosexual relationships, it is only in recent years that children have grown up in gay father families. A small proportion of previously married gay fathers are raising their children following divorce. However, by far the largest proportion of gay father families have been formed through adoption (Gates, 2013). In addition, some gay men co-parent with lesbian or heterosexual women. In these co-parenting arrangements, the child is usually raised in separate households, with varying degrees of involvement by gay fathers – ranging from occasional visits to shared parenting, with the child spending equal amounts of time in each family home. Finally, an increasing number of gay men are having children through surrogacy. The Ethics Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (2006) stated that requests for assisted reproduction should be treated without regard for sexual orientation, and, in the UK, gay couples who become fathers through surrogacy may become the joint legal parents of their child. Gay fathers usually opt for gestational, rather than genetic surrogacy, which involves both an egg donor and a surrogate mother.

A number of studies have examined what motivates gay men to bring up children, how gay men choose from among the various routes to parenthood and what factors influence their decisions. Goldberg, Downing and Moyer (2012) set out to examine motivations for parenthood in a qualitative study of 35 gay couples in the USA who had begun the process of adopting their first child. Many of their reasons for wanting to have children were identical to those of heterosexual couples: their valuing of family relationships, their enjoyment of children and their feeling that raising children is a natural part of life.

As part of a study of parenting and child development in adoptive gay father families in the UK (see below for further details), fathers were asked about their reasons for wanting to become parents and why they had opted for adoption in preference to surrogacy or co-parenting (Jennings, Mellish, Casey, et al., 2014; Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, et al., 2013). Many had thought that it would never

be possible for them to become parents, in spite of their strong desire to do so. As one father said, "I always presumed I'd be a dad, and one of the hardest things to come to terms with about being gay, was the assumption that I wouldn't have children." Unlike heterosexual adoptive parents, who often experienced years of unsuccessful infertility treatment before turning to adoption, adoption was often the first choice for gay men who wished to become parents. Some favored adoption for moral reasons: "Once we'd talked about being parents this was the only thing we were really interested in because we didn't want to create another child ... with children needing adoption that was the only thing ... that was the only option that we seriously considered really, we didn't want to do anything else." Another parent remarked, "Paying for a child just seems wrong, to be honest." Others had weighed up the advantages and disadvantages of adoption versus surrogacy and co-parenting and had decided upon adoption to avoid the potential complication of the involvement of other people in their children's lives:

We've come with a no for everything else, because surrogacy doesn't work for two men, in my opinion, because whoever the birth mother is, you can't just exclude them and then expect a child as they grow up to understand why that person has been excluded, it just doesn't work, so then you're involving that person and what level do you involve that person in? If we want to be the parents, then we want to be the parents, you know.

Co-parenting was considered a particularly unattractive option by some fathers, who gave examples of co-parenting arrangements that had broken down as circumstances changed or when the parents disagreed on how to parent. It was important to the adoptive gay fathers to have autonomy, as parents. Although some remained in contact with the child's birth family, this was viewed as less threatening than the involvement of surrogate mothers or co-parents. A further reason given by gay fathers for choosing adoption was that neither parent would be the genetic father. In this way, they could avoid an

imbalance between the biological and non-biological father in the nature of their relationships with their child and the possible problems that this could bring: "We wanted it to be equal ... I think in an argument you could potentially bring it up and some things you can't take back." Moreover, adoption is free of charge in the UK. This motivated some fathers to choose adoption in preference to international surrogacy, which was unaffordable for some.

Although gay men who become parents through adoption tend not to place great importance on biological links to their children, for other gay men, biological links to their children are considered essential. In a study of gay co-parents in Belgium, the wish for a genetically related child was the primary reason for parents to choose co-parenting as a route to fatherhood (Herbrand, 2008). These fathers wanted their children to be raised by both biological parents, albeit in different households. In cases in which the biological parents had a partner, only the biological mother and father were called "mum" and "dad."

The motivations of gay couples who had chosen surrogacy as a route to fatherhood were studied in Spain (Smietana, 2011). All of the fathers had undergone gestational surrogacy in the USA. Like gay fathers who had opted for adoption, those who had become parents through surrogacy sought to become the only legal and de facto parents of their children. They wished to create what they described as "normal families," in which they could live with their children and raise them together on a daily basis.

In a comparative appraisal of gay men's perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of the different routes to parenthood available to them (Smietana, Jennings, Herbrand, et al., 2014), it was concluded that biological parenthood was most important to those who opted for co-parenting, less so to those who chose surrogacy and not important to those who adopted. Surrogacy and adoption were considered to have several common advantages; they allowed both fathers to be the legal parents of their children, to be their primary caregivers and to live permanently with them. A further perceived

advantage of surrogacy was that it enabled fathers to raise their children from birth. These findings in Europe closely paralleled those of Goldberg's study of gay adoptive couples in the USA (Goldberg, 2012).

ADOPTIVE GAY FATHER FAMILIES

Heterosexual adoptive families

Although the aim of adoption is to improve the lives of children whose birth parents are unable to look after them, adoption is not without its challenges. As discussed in Chapter 4, adopted children are more likely than non-adopted children to experience psychological problems, which can make parenting more difficult for adoptive than for biological parents. Although it has been suggested that the higher levels of psychological difficulties shown by adopted children may simply reflect adopted parents' greater tendency to seek professional help, it has now been established that there is a genuine difference between the rates of psychological disorder shown by adopted children and their non-adopted peers (Brodzinsky, Smith, and Brodzinsky, 1998). This holds true not only in terms of the higher proportion of adopted children who are referred for psychiatric treatment relative to non-adopted children, but also in community studies, in which the rates of psychological disorder among adopted and non-adopted children in the general population are compared, irrespective of whether or not their parents have sought professional help (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). The psychological problems shown by adopted children are primarily behavioral, rather than emotional, in nature (Brodzinsky, Smith, and Brodzinsky, 1998), and include conduct problems such as hyperactivity, impulsivity, oppositional behavior and substance abuse, rather than anxiety or depression. Adopted children are also more likely than their non-adopted peers to show learning problems at school (Brodzinsky, Smith, and Brodzinsky, 1998). However, not all adopted children experience psychological problems. As discussed in Chapter 4, in a meta-analysis of studies that compared the psychological adjustment

and self-esteem of adopted and non-adopted children, Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2005, 2007), found no differences in self-esteem between the two groups of children. They also found the overall difference in adjustment problems between adopted and non-adopted children to be quite small, with the higher overall levels of adjustment problems shown by adopted children reflecting severe difficulties in a small proportion of adopted children rather than greater difficulties in the majority. It was concluded that the psychological adjustment of most adopted children fell within the normal range. It is interesting to note that children adopted from other countries showed fewer adjustment problems than did those adopted domestically. This was attributed to their lower likelihood of maltreatment in their early years.

Why is it that adopted children are at risk for psychological problems? A number of factors associated with their pre-adoption experiences appear to be involved (Dozier and Rutter, 2008; Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). Even before birth, adopted children are often exposed to less favorable circumstances than are non-adopted children. Their birth mothers are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, live in poverty and experience high levels of stress, all of which may affect the developing fetus and result in poorer cognitive and behavioral outcomes for children. Adopted children are also more likely to have experienced physical or sexual abuse or neglect in their early years. Whereas maltreatment, in itself, can be severely damaging to psychological well-being, a further consequence is that these children may be placed in foster care and may be moved from one foster home to another. Although foster care can be advantageous – in that it removes children from a harmful family environment – the benefits depend not only on the quality of foster care that children receive, but also on the number of foster homes that they live in (Dozier, Zeanah, and Bernard, 2013). The greater the number of foster care placements that children experience, the less opportunity they have to form secure attachment relationships and the greater their risk of psychological disorder.

As many children enter their adoptive families with a history of traumatic early experiences, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to positive and negative outcomes for children in their new adoptive homes. Research on children who have spent their early years in institutions has not only demonstrated the advantages of adoption in terms of cognitive, emotional and social development, but has also shed light on the legacy of their adverse early life experiences (Bakermans-Kranenburg, McCreery, Dobrova-Krol, et al., 2012). A study of children who lived in severely deprived Romanian orphanages at the time of the Ceaușescu dictatorship and who were later adopted into families in the UK underlines the benefits of adoption for children who have experienced extreme adversity in their first years of life (Rutter, Beckett, Castle, et al., 2007). These children showed remarkable catch-up in physical, cognitive, language, socio-emotional and behavioral development. However, some continued to show significant psychological problems as they grew up, including autistic-like behavior, indiscriminate friendliness with strangers, hyperactivity and impaired cognitive development. Similar findings were reported from a study of children from Romanian orphanages adopted by Canadian parents (Chisholm, 1998; Morison, Ames, and Chisholm, 1995). It was concluded from these studies that adoption is immensely beneficial for children who have experienced early adversity, but that lasting psychological difficulties may remain.

In addition to the demands of raising children with psychological problems, adoptive parents are confronted by tasks that biological parents do not have to tackle (Brodzinsky, 2011). Although adoption used to be conducted in secrecy, it is now well-established that secrecy about children's adoption and lack of information about their birth family is associated with identity and mental health problems in adopted children (Brodzinsky, 1987, 2006; Treseliotis, 1973, 1984, 2000). Thus, adoptive parents are now encouraged to begin to talk to their children about their adoption from an early age. As first described by Kirk (1964), adoptive parents must acknowledge the

difference between adoptive parenthood and biological parenthood in order to communicate openly with their children about their adoption and promote positive family relationships. It was later advised that adoptive parents should neither overemphasize nor underemphasize these differences, but instead should acknowledge them and create a family environment that supports their children's curiosity about their origins and maintains open communication about adoption issues (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes, 2002). Adoptive parents face further challenges when their children reach adolescence. Greater conflict has been found between adoptive parents and adopted adolescents than between non-adoptive parents and non-adopted adolescents (Rueter, Keyes, Iacono, et al., 2009). Moreover, poor communication about adoption has been associated with more negative relationships between parents and adopted adolescents (Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes, 2002; Passmore, Foulstone, and Feeney, 2007; Rueter and Koerner, 2008).

A further issue that adoptive parents may have to consider is whether or not to maintain contact with their children's birth parents – an arrangement often referred to as “open adoption” – and the nature and extent of such contact. This may range from an exchange of letters once per year to frequent face-to-face contact. In a longitudinal study of the consequences of different types and levels of contact, parents and children in adoptive families who had contact with the children's birth family were found to be more satisfied than were those who did not. Moreover, satisfaction with contact arrangements – rather than whether or not contact took place – was found to be predictive of fewer behavioral problems in adopted adolescents (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, et al., 2013; Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, et al., 2011), although what constituted satisfactory contact changed over time (Grotevant, 2009). In this study, the children's birth mothers had voluntarily put them up for adoption as infants. Children removed from their birth family because of maltreatment may have different experiences (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, et al., 2013). A distinction has been made between “open adoption,” whereby there is

an exchange of information or contact between the adoptive and the birth family, and openness of communication about adoption within the adoptive family, irrespective of contact. Brodzinsky (2006) found open communication to be more predictive of adopted children's psychological well-being than whether or not the adoption was open. In line with this finding, Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) showed that contact is associated with more frequent adoption-related family conversations, which in turn is associated with adoptive identity development.

A key question regarding adoption is whether adopted children are less likely to form secure attachment relationships with their adoptive parents than are non-adopted children with their biological parents. It has been suggested that experiences of institutional care or maltreatment in birth families will decrease the likelihood of children forming secure attachment relationships with their adoptive parents. In order to examine this issue, a meta-analysis of observational studies of attachment security was conducted by van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg (2009). Children who had been adopted before the age of 1 year were found to be just as likely to be securely attached as were their non-adopted peers, whereas those adopted after their first birthday were more likely to show insecure attachment relationships. Two possible explanations for these findings were proposed. First of all, children who were placed with their adoptive parents before the age of 1 year may have experienced deprivation for a shorter period of time. Secondly, it may have been easier for younger children to form secure attachments with their adoptive parents because they received sensitive parenting in infancy, when attachments were still being formed. Irrespective of their age at the time of adoption, the adopted children showed higher rates of disorganized attachment, which was attributed to harmful experiences before the adoption took place.

Researchers have also examined the parenting processes that promote well-being in adopted children. The Leiden Longitudinal Adoption Study, which investigated the development of children

who had been adopted from abroad within the first 6 months of life, provided an opportunity for examining the influence of adoptive parenting on the adjustment of children who had not experienced severe early adversity (Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2009). It was found that higher levels of maternal sensitivity in infancy and middle childhood were directly associated with more positive socio-emotional development in middle childhood (Stams, Juffer, and van IJzendoorn, 2002), and indirectly associated with more positive socio-emotional development in adolescence (Jaffari-Bimmel, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, et al., 2006). Maternal sensitivity was also associated with attachment security in adolescence (Beijersbergen, Juffer, and Bakermans-Kranenburg, et al., 2012) and early adulthood (Schoenmaker, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, et al., 2014). Furthermore, adoptive mothers' representations of their attachment relationships with their own parents appear to influence the security of attachment of their adopted children. In a study of adopted children who had experienced maltreatment in their early years, it was found that adoptive mothers' mental states regarding attachment, as assessed using the Adult Attachment Interview, influenced the attachment security of their adopted children, as assessed using a story-completion task designed to elucidate children's expectations of the relationship between parents and children (Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, et al., 2003). Specifically, children whose adoptive mothers were classified as secure by the Adult Attachment Interview were more likely to show representations of security on the story-completion task 3 months after placement. Thus, there is growing evidence that the nature of parenting in adoptive families plays a part in the well-being of adopted children.

From the perspective of adopted children, a key task is to develop an understanding of their adoption. Although children acquire a rudimentary knowledge of adoption in their preschool years, as mentioned previously, it is not until they reach the age of around 7 years that they show awareness of biological inheritance (Gregg, Solomon, Johnson, et al., 1996; Richards, 2000; Williams and Smith, 2010) and the meaning and implications of the absence

of a biological connection to their adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky and Pinderhughes, 2002; Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Brodzinsky, 1986; Brodzinsky, Singer, and Braff, 1984). A primary task for all adolescents is to develop a sense of identity; that is, to answer the question "Who am I?" As highlighted by Grotevant and Von Korff (2011), adopted adolescents are faced with the additional questions of "Who am I as an adopted person?", "What does being adopted mean to me?" and "How does this fit into my understanding of my self, relationships, family and culture?". For adopted adolescents, integrating the experience of being adopted into a life story is important for the development of a secure sense of identity (Brodzinsky, 2011; Dunbar and Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant, 1997, 1999; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, et al., 2000; Grotevant and Von Korff, 2011). As part of this process, they may search for information about their birth family and try to contact them. The development of a coherent adoptive identity is considered an influential factor in the psychological well-being of adopted adolescents, with problems in adoptive identity development often resulting from a lack of information about themselves and their origins. However, there is much variation in the extent to which being adopted is central to an adolescent's identity (Grotevant and Von Korff, 2011). Thus, searching for birth relatives may be important to some but viewed as irrelevant by others. Adolescents who are highly preoccupied with their adoption have been found to report greater alienation from their adoptive parents (Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy, 2002), although the direction of effects is unclear.

Although there is strong evidence that adoption benefits children whose birth parents are unable to raise them – and many children are in need of adoptive families – there has been considerable objection to the idea of gay men becoming adoptive parents. It has been argued that this would add a further layer of complexity to an already risky situation. Adoption is difficult – why make it even more so? But, is it the case that children adopted by gay fathers experience greater problems than do children adopted by lesbian mothers

or heterosexual parents? Are gay fathers less competent parents? Although research on gay father families is still very new, empirical studies of parenting and child development in gay father families have begun to address these questions.

Studies of adoptive gay father families

Studies of the functioning of adoptive gay father families began to appear in 2005. A series of papers was based on a group of gay and lesbian parents with adopted children of early school age (Erich, Leung, and Kindle, 2005; Erich, Leung, Kindle, et al., 2005; Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg, 2005) and a group of gay and lesbian parents with adopted adolescents (Erich, Hall, Kanenberg, and Case, 2009; Erich, Kanenberg, Case, et al., 2008). These papers described positive family functioning and well-adjusted children in lesbian and gay families. A survey of adoptive gay and lesbian parents similarly reported high levels of social support and appropriate parenting skills (Ryan, 2007; Ryan and Cash, 2004). A further survey used the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2000) to compare the emotional and behavioral problems of large samples of both preschool and school age children with either gay, lesbian or heterosexual adoptive parents, and found that children's psychological problems were not contingent on parental sexual orientation (Averett, Nalavany, and Ryan, 2009). While providing the first insights into the functioning of gay and lesbian adoptive families, the parents in these studies were volunteers recruited through gay and lesbian support groups and internet sites, the children spanned a wide age range, data were obtained by self-report questionnaires only and the findings were not presented separately for gay father and lesbian mother families. Thus, the conclusions that can be drawn from these studies are limited.

The first controlled study of parenting and child development in a systematic sample of gay father families was carried out in the USA (Farr, Forssell, and Patterson, 2010a, b). Twenty-nine families headed by gay couples, 27 families headed by lesbian couples and

50 families headed by heterosexual couples were recruited from five private domestic adoption agencies situated in different geographical locations where adoption by same-sex parents was legally recognized. The different family types were similar in terms of demographic characteristics, although the gay fathers were more likely to have adopted sons whereas the lesbian mothers were more likely to have adopted daughters, and the gay and lesbian parents were more likely than the heterosexual parents to have adopted a child transracially. The children were aged between 1 and 6 years, with an average age of 3 years. All had been adopted at birth or in the first few weeks of their life, and none had experienced prior placements. Parents completed questionnaire measures of relationship satisfaction, stress associated with parenting and the effectiveness of their disciplinary techniques, and no differences were found between family types for any of these measures. Child adjustment was assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2000), as administered to parents, as well as the companion Caregiver-Teacher Report Form. No differences were found in children's behavioral or emotional problems between the gay father families and the other family types, whether assessed by the parents or the children's caregivers or teachers.

Although the gay father families did not differ from the lesbian mother or heterosexual parent families in family functioning or child adjustment, parents who reported greater happiness with their partners, less parenting stress and the use of more effective disciplinary techniques had children with higher levels of adjustment, regardless of parents' sexual orientation. An internet survey of 230 adoptive gay fathers by the same research team examined the factors associated with raised levels of parenting stress among gay men (Tornello, Farr, and Patterson, 2011). In line with the findings of research on heterosexual adoptive parents, gay adoptive fathers with less social support, older children and children who had been adopted at older ages reported more parenting stress. An additional stressor for gay fathers was a less positive identity as a gay man, with fathers who were more sensitive to stigmatization reporting greater parenting stress.

A study of adoptive gay father families was also carried out in the UK, where gay and lesbian couples can become the joint legal parents of their adopted children (Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, et al., 2014). Unlike the USA, where inter-country adoption and transracial adoption are common, more than 95 percent of the children adopted in the UK are adopted from social care, and transracial adoption is discouraged. Forty-one two-parent gay adoptive families, 40 two-parent lesbian adoptive families and 49 two-parent heterosexual adoptive families participated in the study. The families were recruited through adoption agencies that placed children with same-sex parents. The children were aged between 3 and 9 years, and all had been placed with their adoptive families for at least 1 year. As in the study by Farr, Forssell and Patterson (2010a), there was a preponderance of boys adopted by gay fathers and a preponderance of girls adopted by lesbian mothers. A further difference between family types was that the children adopted by gay fathers were older at the time of adoption and had been placed with them for a shorter period of time. Reflecting the difficult backgrounds of the children in the study, around one-third of their birth mothers had experienced mental health problems, more than one-third had been exposed to domestic violence and more than one-third had abused alcohol. In addition, more than one-third of the birth fathers had been convicted of criminal behavior. Regarding the children, two-thirds had experienced neglect, more than one-third had experienced emotional abuse and more than 15 percent had experienced physical abuse. There were no significant differences between family types in the proportion of children who had experienced each of these adversities.

Each parent completed questionnaire measures of anxiety, depression and stress associated with parenting. They also participated in a standardized interview assessment of parenting quality that produced variables relating to warmth, sensitive responding, enjoyment of play, amount of interaction, quality of interaction, frequency of conflict, level of conflict, disciplinary indulgence and disciplinary aggression. Children's adjustment was assessed using the

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1994, 1997, 2001), which was administered to parents and teachers. In addition, each parent and the child took part in an observational assessment of parent–child interaction. Where differences were identified between the gay father families and the lesbian mother or heterosexual parent families, these indicated more positive functioning in the gay father families. The gay fathers showed lower levels of depression and stress associated with parenting than did the heterosexual parents. In terms of parenting, gay fathers showed higher levels of warmth, higher levels of interaction and lower levels of disciplinary aggression, as assessed by interview, and higher levels of responsiveness, as assessed by direct observation, than did the heterosexual parents. With respect to child adjustment, conduct problems (as rated by parents) were greater among children in heterosexual than in gay and lesbian families. In all family types, the children showed higher rates of psychological disorder than did non-adopted children, as would be expected with adopted children. Regardless of family type, and in line with the findings of Farr, Forssell and Patterson (2010a), parenting stress was found to predict children's conduct problems, with higher levels of parenting stress associated with higher levels of conduct problems. In addition, disciplinary aggression was marginally predictive of children's conduct problems.

The more positive outcomes for gay father families in terms of parental well-being and parent–child relationships may be associated with the characteristics of the parents or the children. As adoption by gay couples is a relatively new phenomenon in the UK that has attracted much controversy, it seems likely that the screening process is especially stringent for gay couples who wish to adopt; this should result in even higher levels of psychological well-being and commitment to parenting among adoptive gay fathers than among adoptive lesbian or heterosexual parents. It is also conceivable, as a result of concerns regarding adoption by gay men, that children with higher levels of psychological problems would be least likely to be placed with gay couples.

The lower levels of child externalizing problems among children with gay fathers found in the above study suggest that this may be the case. However, the children adopted by gay fathers had been adopted at an older age and placed with the adoptive family for a shorter time, and both of these factors have been associated with greater adjustment problems (Dozier and Rutter, 2008; Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). Moreover, from the available data on the children's pre-adoption history, it appears that the children who had been placed with gay fathers were no less likely to have experienced serious adversity such as neglect or emotional or physical abuse, than had children placed with lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents. Neither were their birth mothers less likely to have experienced mental health problems, domestic violence or alcohol abuse, or their fathers less likely to have been convicted of criminal behavior. Although research in the USA provides some indication that the most difficult children tend to be placed with same-sex parents (Brodzinsky and Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2011; Brooks and Goldberg, 2001; Matthews and Cramer, 2006), this does not currently appear to be the case in the UK – perhaps because almost all adoptions involve children who have experienced adversity in their early years. It appears, therefore, that, rather than adopting less difficult children, gay fathers provide a highly positive parenting environment for their adopted children.

A study that took a different perspective compared the brain activity of heterosexual mothers, heterosexual fathers and adoptive gay fathers, all of whom had young babies (Abraham, Hendler, Shapira-Lichter, et al., 2014). The parents' brain activity while watching a video of themselves interacting with their baby was measured by an MRI scan. Whereas the heterosexual mothers showed heightened activity in areas of the brain associated with emotion processing and the heterosexual fathers had increased activity in areas associated with cognitive processing, the gay fathers showed increased activity in both of these regions. These findings add to the emerging body of research on the psychobiology of fatherhood (Ehlert, 2014)

and suggest that gay fathers who are primary caregivers may respond similarly to both heterosexual mothers and fathers.

As with lesbian mother families, a question that is frequently asked in relation to gay father families is whether the children will show less sex-typed behavior than their peers with heterosexual parents. In order to examine this question, children's sex-typed behavior has been measured using the *Preschool Activities Inventory*, which is completed by parents (Golombok and Rust, 1993a, b). This questionnaire is designed to assess gender role behavior within, as well as between, sexes; that is, to differentiate between boys who show high levels of typically masculine behavior from those who do not, and between girls who show high levels of typically feminine behavior from those who do not. Goldberg, Kashy and Smith (2012) studied a subsample of adoptive families with children aged between 2 and 4 years, all of whom had lived with their adoptive parents for at least 2 years. Thirty-four gay father families, 44 lesbian mother families and 48 heterosexual parent families took part. The girls in the gay father families were found to be no less feminine, and the boys no less masculine, than their counterparts in lesbian mother and heterosexual parent families, and both the girls and the boys showed behavior that was typical of their gender. Similarly, in the study by Farr, Forssell and Patterson (2010b), the children of gay fathers were found to show typical gender development, and no differences were identified between the children of gay fathers and the children from the other family types for either boys or girls. The study by Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, et al. (2014) also found typical gender role behavior among the children of gay fathers, with no differences in sex-typed behavior between children with gay fathers and children with lesbian or heterosexual parents, for either boys or girls.

It is often assumed that gay couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to play an equal part in looking after their children, as they are less susceptible to pressure to conform to prescribed gender roles. The extent to which gay couples share parenting, and whether gay fathers share parenting more or less than do lesbian or

heterosexual couples, was studied by Farr and Patterson (2013) as part of their study of parenting and child development in adoptive gay father families (described above). Each parent completed questionnaire measures of the division of childcare labour in their family. The gay couples, like the lesbian couples, were more likely to report sharing parenting tasks evenly than were the heterosexual couples, and most parents in all three family types were satisfied with their childcare responsibilities. The parents and children also took part in an observational assessment of family play (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, and Frosch, 2001), which was coded to produce ratings of supportive interactions (including pleasure and cooperativeness) and undermining interactions (including displeasure and competition). Gay couples were rated as the least supportive in the family play task, but were less undermining than were the heterosexual couples. The extent to which the couple shared parenting was unrelated to child adjustment. Instead, children's behavior problems, as assessed by the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Rescorla, 2000), were associated with dissatisfaction with the division of childcare responsibilities and an undermining style of parental interaction – particularly competition between the parents – irrespective of parental sexual orientation. In the UK study, only one-fifth of the gay and lesbian couples shared childcare evenly, which suggests that they were less egalitarian than were couples in the USA (Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, et al., 2013).

An important issue for children adopted by gay parents is what, when and whom to tell about their family. Unlike children who are adopted by heterosexual parents, they not only have to explain that they were adopted but they also have to explain that they have gay fathers. In the UK study of 3- to 9-year-old children, nearly all of the parents had spoken to their children about their adoption (Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, et al., 2013). The conversations that gay fathers had with their children about adoption were similar to those held by the lesbian and heterosexual adoptive parents:

We use the word “adoption.” We haven’t gone into detail about what that means. You know, we’ve said you were inside mummy Lorraine’s tummy and she loves you very much but she wasn’t able to look after you, so then you went to Jill who was her foster carer, and then you came to live with us. We wanted a little girl and we decided we could look after you. So we talk about it in those terms. She doesn’t fully understand what adoption means, but she knows she has a mummy Lorraine and she talks about her from time to time.

Most of the gay fathers had also spoken to their children about having two dads, often in the context of the many different kinds of families that exist:

We just say it’s normal. And we give examples of the fact that children live in all sorts of families, one of my nieces live with our – with her gran. Four of our nieces and nephews are dual heritage and they’re Muslim and we’re not. You know, diversity is everywhere, you can’t escape it and actually why would you want to? Embrace it because it makes family life more rich. And so we’ve always kind of talked on the fact that there’s nothing two dads can’t do that a mum and a dad can do or two mums can do. Just it might be done slightly differently.

As another father put it:

Well we’ve just explained things, that there are different relationships, that some ... some people have mothers and fathers, some people have mothers ... have two mothers, and some people have two fathers and so on, so we talk about different family relationships.

A small minority of fathers said that their children had been faced with homophobic comments from their peers at school, such as: “You’re different ‘cause you’ve got two dads”; “It’s stupid and nasty to have two dads”; and “I’m going to get my dad to come and

shoot your dad!". Although the majority of their children's friends were accepting, they were often curious and asked questions about the family:

We go camping quite a lot in the summer, so the kids are in and out of everybody's tent. So you'll quite often get other kids, and usually one of those kids go: "Where's [child]'s mum?" "Well he doesn't actually have one here." "Why not?" "Well she's not around. He's got two dads." And you can see these kind of kids going, "What? I'm sorry, I don't get that," and then, you know sometimes they'll want to know more, because kids are great in that respect. They just come out and tell you as it is, so you just answer them. You know, in honesty. That's always been our thing. Honesty and it's served us well so far. I think if you're honest and upfront, people can't really argue with you. Or they find it very hard to argue with you.

Many of the parents made a point of trying to instill confidence in their children and prepare them for negative remarks from peers:

Among his circle of friends there is no issue, but you know, we are also conscious of the fact that not everybody in the wider world sees the world exactly in the same way. So I think part of it is making him feel comfortable with it so that if somebody ever threw it back at him in a mean way, hopefully it would be like water off a duck's back and he would say, "Yeah, I'm aware of that, what else have you got to say to me?" You know, that sort of attitude. So giving him a little bit of resilience around both the adoption process and having two dads.

A qualitative study of older children aged 13 to 20 years in the USA explored how adopted adolescents with gay and lesbian parents disclosed information about their family (Gianino, Goldberg, and Lewis, 2009). The young people found it more difficult to say that they had gay or lesbian parents than to say that they had been adopted. Early adolescence was the time when they were most scared

and least likely to tell others that their parents were gay or lesbian. They did not want to be seen as different and were anxious about being teased or bullied. By middle and late adolescence, most had disclosed to friends whom they thought would be accepting and whom they felt they could trust. A particular fear was that their peers would assume that they were also gay and would reject them as a result. It was important to the young people to be in control of whom to tell about their gay parents, and when. As found in the UK study discussed above (Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, et al., 2013), parents held conversations with their children to help prepare them for disclosure.

Gay fathers' experiences of the adoption process in the UK varied enormously (Mellish, Jennings, Tasker, et al., 2013). Whereas some had nothing but praise for the adoption agencies, many encountered difficulties that they perceived to be related to their sexual orientation, and a minority received explicitly negative responses from adoption agency staff. For example, one gay father described having the phone slammed down on him when making an initial enquiry. The staff member asked him what his wife's name was, to which he answered, "Matt": "[The adoption agency member said] 'Y'what? Nat?' I'm like, 'No, not Nat, Matt.' I mean, I ended up literally spelling it out, 'M-A-T-T,' and I went, 'It's a bloke,' and beep, phone went down." Similarly, the experiences of gay men who wished to adopt in the USA ranged from extremely negative, whereby adoption agencies refused to consider them, to highly encouraging and supportive (Goldberg, 2012; Hicks, 2006; Matthews and Cramer, 2006). A further barrier was that some states did not allow same-sex couples to adopt children jointly.

SURROGACY

Of all the new family forms discussed in this book, gay father families with children born through surrogacy and egg donation deviate most from the traditional nuclear family. Such families combine several controversial pathways to parenthood. They differ from the traditional family with respect to the sexual orientation of the parents, the

gender of the parents and the children's conception through assisted reproduction, involving both surrogacy and egg donation. Children growing up in gay father families formed through surrogacy may have two fathers and two "mothers" – a genetic father, a social father, a genetic mother and a gestational mother – but no mother in the family home. It is surprising that these families have generated relatively little outrage in the popular press. The announcement in 2010 by the world-famous singer Elton John and his partner David Furnish that they had become the parents of a baby boy born through surrogacy was greeted with congratulations rather than condemnation. Whether because of their celebrity status or as a result of more accepting public attitudes toward new family forms in the new millennium, reaction to the birth of baby Zachary, whose conception had involved IVF, an egg donor and a surrogate mother and who would be raised by two fathers (one of whom was genetically unrelated to him) was exceptionally subdued compared to the furor caused by the birth of Louise Brown to a married heterosexual couple whose own gametes had been used in her conception little more than 30 years previously.

Although limited as yet, the research described above on adoptive gay father families shows that children can flourish in this family environment. But what about children in gay father families that have been formed through surrogacy? Adopted children can learn about their birth parents and the reason for their adoption, and may remain in contact with their birth parents as they grow up. The background of children born to gay fathers through surrogacy is somewhat different. How might they feel about their family and the circumstances of their birth? Will they wish to have a relationship with one or both of the women who helped create them? Will they view their surrogate or their egg donor as their mother? How will they relate to each of their two fathers, one of whom is their genetic parent and the other who is not? Although some of these questions have begun to be addressed in heterosexual families created through surrogacy (see Chapter 5), the reactions of children who have a mother and a father may not be the same as that of children who have two fathers.

A question often asked about gay parents who have children through surrogacy is how they decide who will be the biological father. In a study of 37 gay couples who attended a fertility clinic in Canada, three-quarters had used the sperm of both partners to fertilize the donated eggs, and one embryo from each man had been transferred to the surrogate (Grover, Shmorgun, Moskovstev, et al., 2013). Thus, the majority of prospective fathers decided to leave this to chance. In the majority of cases, only one child resulted from the pregnancy; however, when twins were born, they were genetic half-siblings. In contrast, in an investigation of 15 gay couples seeking gestational surrogacy at a clinic in the USA, 80 percent chose one partner to provide the sperm (Greenfeld and Seli, 2011). In six of these couples it was agreed that the older partner should donate, in two couples the man who did not already have children was chosen, two couples selected the partner who had the greater desire for biological parenthood and two opted for the partner with "better genes." The remaining three couples used one embryo created from the sperm of each partner.

In their analysis of how egg donors were chosen, Greenfeld and Seli (2011) found that the most commonly requested characteristics were that the donor be tall, attractive and educated, and physically resemble the non-genetic father. Grover, Shmorgun, Moskovtsev, et al. (2013) examined whether the gay couples in their study preferred a known or an anonymous egg donor. The majority chose an anonymous donor who was open to being contacted by the child after the age of 18.

Although there has been a dramatic rise in the number of gay men having children through surrogacy, the creation of gay father families through assisted reproductive technologies is such a recent phenomenon that, as yet, there has been little research done on children born in this way. In the first study, 40 couples who had become fathers through gestational surrogacy in the USA were interviewed about their experiences of parenthood (Bergman, Rubio, Green, et al., 2010). The fathers were financially wealthy, although many had

experienced a drop in income after becoming parents due to giving up work or working fewer hours. Their children ranged in age from 2 months to 8 years. The fathers reported parenting to be a very positive experience. They felt proud to be parents and valued themselves more. One of the most striking findings was that having children had brought them closer to their own, as well as to their partner's, parents, many of whom were excited to become grandparents. Most had lost friendships with their gay friends who were not parents. However, they had built new friendship with other parents, both heterosexual and gay.

Little is known about the quality of parenting in gay father families created through surrogacy or about the development of children who grow up in them. Currently, the first study to investigate the quality of parent-child relationships and the adjustment of children born to gay couples through surrogacy is focusing on families with children aged between 4 and 8 years living in the USA (Golombok, Blake, Slutsky, et al., unpublished data). As was found in relation to adoptive gay fathers, many fathers with children conceived through surrogacy thought that parenthood would never be possible for them because they were gay:

It has always been something that I thought would never happen to me ... It was always kind of a sadness. You know, I grew up in the generation of gay men [who felt] that marriage and family was not an option. It was just a reality that it wouldn't happen. And like now, all my dreams have come true. It's incredible.

Preliminary findings from the study indicate that the families often maintain a relationship with the surrogate mother and, sometimes, with the egg donor, as well:

So we chose people who were open to having a possible relationship ... whatever that might be, just you know, really whatever was organic, felt natural, so we keep in touch with the egg donor ... but have more of an interaction with the carrier.

Like we see her about once a year ... we've gone there, they've come here ... We enjoy that.

Although gay surrogacy families seem more likely to stay in touch with their surrogate than with their egg donor, this is not always the case:

He is too young to really get where babies come from. And he hasn't even really been curious about it or asked about it. We plan to share everything with him and let him know there are no secrets at all. But I kind of, although the surrogate is so important, I kind of tend to favor more the genetic connection. So if anything, I'd be more interested in him having a relationship with the egg donor rather than the surrogate.

Gay fathers cannot hide their children's origins and generally speak openly with them about their conception and their family structure. As one father said:

We're gay men, we came out at a certain point and we've learned to live our lives with truth and what we've learned about that is, if you tell them the truth from the beginning they won't resent it and also then they won't ever feel betrayed that somehow you didn't tell them the truth. So telling them that empowers them because it gives them their story. We didn't want there to be any big surprises. It is what it is. Even now, they understand that a man and a woman have to be involved and there is no woman here. So, for us, it's just who we are. It's what our value system is and we tell them the truth. That's important to us.

And as another father described:

We don't want to have secrets and we just think like if something's taboo that it just backfires on parents ... so that he has to go in this like soul searching like who am I where am I from like my parents lied to me, you know. So we'll

be very proud to tell him and I think it will also show him eventually he'll realize how hard we fought for him. And how difficult it was, how expensive it was, how many people were involved ... how like it happened way before all these laws like, he'll grow up not knowing that there are all these laws against getting married and having kids and so I think if we start that earlier then when he's older he'll be like wow that's really cool and my fathers did that back before it was like normal.

Conversations with their young children about their non-traditional family structure tend to focus on the many different families that exist today. As one father reported:

There was a period when they were really starting to get into the family structure of who has two moms, who has two dads, who has a mom and a dad, who has one mom who has one dad, whose parents are divorced. I mean we went through all those permutations. And that was, I don't know, six or nine months ago and there was a period of intense kind of scrutiny around every family and now it's kind of moved on.

Another father described his son's response:

Now it is just a matter of fact. It is a fact to him. He will have the conversation with kids. He'll say like, "I have two daddies." Or "I have a Daddy and a Papa." And like they'll say, "Where is your mommy?" And he'll say, "I don't have a Mommy. I have a Daddy and a Papa."

Many of the fathers in the study faced set-backs during the surrogacy process, but all persevered and not one regretted their decision. One father captured the sentiments of the others like this:

I think that it is a leap of faith. You really have to trust and it is important to find the right people and everything like that. But it really is a leap of faith and it is one that I thank God for

every day. I wish it was more available to people. I'm just, over the moon.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from the few empirical studies conducted so far show that gay fathers provide a supportive family environment for their children and that their children flourish. Whereas Farr, Forssell and Patterson (2010b) reported no differences in parenting or child adjustment between adoptive gay fathers and either adoptive lesbian mothers or adoptive heterosexual parents, Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, et al. (2014) reported more positive parenting and child adjustment in adoptive gay father families. The discrepancy between the two studies may have resulted from the larger sample or the use of more in-depth measures of the quality of parent-child relationships in the UK study, or the more recent introduction of gay adoption in the UK resulting in particularly stringent screening of prospective adoptive parents. The lack of difference in sex-typed behavior between children with gay fathers and children with heterosexual parents for either boys or girls is consistent with previous research on children with lesbian mothers. In spite of these findings, it is important to stress that little, as yet, is known about the development and well-being of children in adoptive gay father families as they reach adolescence and beyond. Moreover, the available findings come only from studies of adoptive gay father families. Investigations of parenting and child development in gay father families created through surrogacy have only just begun. It is noteworthy that gay fathers are more likely to adopt boys, whereas lesbian mothers are more likely to adopt girls. Whether this results from a tendency for adoption agencies to gender-match children to same-sex parents, or from same-sex parents' preference for a child of the same gender as themselves, is not known. Anecdotal evidence favors the former explanation, as same-sex parents appear not to express a strong preference regarding the gender of their child.