



## **LGBTQ+ Parents and Their Children**

**Rachel Farr**, University of Kentucky

Research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) parents and their children has found that both parents and children are generally well adjusted and that they do not differ in well-being or in multiple developmental outcomes from parents and children in the general population. However, while the legal climate in the United States for LGBTQ+ people and their families has improved in recent years, significant legal and practical difficulties remain, including greater poverty among, and pervasive stigma and discrimination toward, families headed by LGBTQ+ parents. Federal, state, and local laws are needed that reduce the likelihood of discrimination against these families, including in domains of housing, education, and parenting.

### **LGBTQ+ Parent and Children Well-Being**

There has been considerable controversy in recent years surrounding LGBTQ+ parent families in the US. Courts, legislators, and others have asked: Do LGBTQ+ people make good parents? How do their children “turn out”?

There has been considerable research with LGBTQ+ parents and their children over the past 30 years. These studies, though mostly focused on lesbian mothers and gay fathers, have shown them to be generally healthy and well adjusted, indistinguishable from heterosexual parents. In study after study, children with sexual minority parents have shown outcomes that are similar to those of their peers who have heterosexual parents. Research with transgender and gender minority parents and their children is currently less extensive than studies of lesbian and gay parents and their children, but findings from several studies run parallel in many ways to those about sexual minority parent families. Children of transgender parents have also been found to be well adjusted, and family processes have been found to be more important to individual and family outcomes than parents’ gender identity or expression.

### **Impacts of Legal, Political, and Social Climates**

It must be acknowledged that while families headed by LGBTQ+ parents are sometimes viewed as a homogeneous group, the reality is that they are quite diverse. Like other families, they vary in gender, race, ethnicity, education, geography, income, and pathway to parenthood. While studies of LGBTQ+ parents and their children show good adjustment overall, there are marked variations among the social and political environments in which they live.

Legal and policy climates vary across national and state boundaries, social conditions vary from one neighborhood to another, and attitudes vary from one family to another – and research has consistently shown that minority stressors, such as stigma and discrimination, have negative effects on LGBTQ+ family members and that those who live in supportive environments, and under supportive laws and policies, are more likely to thrive. For instance, in a study of more than 700 gay fathers, parents and their children were often found to face stigma and discrimination from religious institutions as well as from their families, friends, and neighbors. In this same study, fathers reported more obstacles to becoming parents when they lived in states with fewer legal protections.

Social environments also have an impact on the well-being of the children of LGBTQ+ parents; studies across the US, Canada, Italy, Australia, and the Netherlands have found that greater stigmatization was associated with greater behavioral and mental health challenges among adolescents, while children in families who live in less stigmatizing environments reported fewer worries and greater openness than those living in other contexts. The children of LGBTQ+ parents also fare better when they attend schools with supportive social climates, and when school curricula and policies are explicitly inclusive of them.

The legal and policy climate also contributes to structural inequalities for LGBTQ+ families – in many areas of the US, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is still legal in the areas of housing, insurance, education, and public accommodations. Employment discrimination and other structural inequalities can be linked to poverty among LGBTQ+ families as well; 22% of all LGBT adults are living in poverty; parents, women, people of color, and bisexual and transgender adults are all disproportionately affected. More children with same-gender parents live in poverty (20%– 24%) than do those with different-gender parents (12%).

## Recommendations

While the legal terrain for LGBTQ+ people in the United States has changed in significant ways in recent years, many concerns remain. LGBTQ+ people can have greater difficulty in accessing education, housing, employment, and in fostering or adopting children, and only 21 states and the District of Columbia have nondiscrimination laws that include both sexual orientation and gender identity; even in the limited number of states with nondiscrimination laws, religious exemptions still allow discrimination in some cases.

The single most important policy change that could improve the climate for LGBTQ+ parents and their children in the United States would be passage of a federal law to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression in housing, education, parenting, and other areas. In addition, the addition of supportive state laws and the elimination of religious exemptions that allow for continued discrimination against sexual and gender minorities would be valuable steps toward full equality. By taking such steps, the United States could create more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ parents and their children, and in this way, could improve their overall health and well-being.