



## EXAMINING THE RESEARCH LITERATURE ON OUTCOMES FROM SAME-SEX PARENTING

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The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) announced in early February, 2002 "a growing body of scientific literature demonstrates that children who grow up with 1 or 2 gay or lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, social, and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual."<sup>1</sup> Based on this, the AAP supports "legislative and legal efforts" to allow homosexuals to adopt their partner's children.<sup>2</sup>

However, the AAP received strong reaction from its membership. An email memo from the lead author of the AAP's *Technical Report* to select members of the Academy on the issue laments:

...the AAP has received more messages – almost all of them CRITICAL – from members about the recent Policy Statement on coparent adoption than it has EVER received on any other topic... This is a serious problem, as it means that it will become harder to continue the work we have been doing to use the AAP as a vehicle for positive change.<sup>3</sup>

### The Literature on Same-Sex Parenting

Concerning the Academy's conclusion on what parenting configurations yield positive results for children, there are a number of important points to consider.

*First*, we will examine problems and inconsistencies in determining what is best for

children in the AAP's *Technical Report* published in February, 2002.

*Second*, we will examine strengths of the comparative literature examining child well-being outcomes in same-sex and heterosexual parenting homes.

### 1) Reasons for Caution within the AAP's Own Report

There are a number of details in the AAP's own *Technical Report* that raise serious questions about their conclusion that "children who grow up with 1 or 2 gay or lesbian parents fare as well as in emotional, cognitive, social, and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual."<sup>4</sup>

Ellen Perrin, author of the AAP's *Technical Report*, was co-author of a 1994 study published in *Pediatrics in Review* entitled, "Children of Gay and Lesbian Parents." The study explained, "Unfortunately, the research to date has limitations, including small sample size, non-random subject selection, narrow range of socioeconomic and racial background, and lack of long-term longitudinal follow-up."<sup>5</sup>

The *Technical Report*, published eight years later, cautioned similar reservations, "The small and nonrepresentative samples studied and the relatively young age of most of the children suggest some reserve." This report recognized why these methodological limitations exist, "Research

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen C. Perrin, MD, "Technical Report: Coparent and Second-Parent Adoption by Same-Sex Parents," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 109 No. 2, (2002) p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> "Coparent or Second-Parent Adoption by Same-Sex Parents," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 109, No. 2, (2002) p. 339.

<sup>3</sup> Email memo from Ellen Perrin, MD to select AAP members, dated February 15, 2002.

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<sup>4</sup> Perrin, 2002, p. 341.

<sup>5</sup> M.A. Gold, E. Perrin, D. Futterman, S.B. Friedman, "Children of Gay or Lesbian Parents," *Pediatrics in Review*, 15 (1994) 354-358.

exploring the diversity of parental relationships among gay and lesbian parents is just beginning.”<sup>6</sup>

But these original and persisting methodological problems, rooted in the youth of the research, did not prevent the Academy from making a strong conclusion. Within sentences of the two previously-stated cautions, the Academy claims “the weight of evidence gathered during several decades using diverse samples and methodologies is persuasive in demonstrating that there is no systematic difference between gay and non-gay parents” in parenting outcomes.<sup>7</sup> It also raises questions of how a conclusion can be reached when the field of “research...is just beginning.”

However, to say outcomes from same-sex parents are similar to heterosexual parents is a very broad statement. There are many kinds of heterosexual parenting configurations and some are better than others at providing health and well-being benefits for children.

This is significant given the AAP *Technical Report* explains, “these [same-sex] families closely resemble stepfamilies formed after heterosexual couples divorce...”<sup>8</sup> The report also says that most children in homosexual and lesbian families come to that family via the divorce of their original heterosexual family. Given this, the report indicates, “the considerable research literature that has accumulated addressing this issue has generally revealed that children of divorced lesbian mothers grow up in ways very similar to children of divorced heterosexual mothers.”<sup>9</sup>

This raises the question, “What are the qualitative outcomes of heterosexual step- and divorced families and are they similar to intact, heterosexual families?”

There are strong empirical indications they are not. Consider the following:

#### CHILDREN OF STEPFAMILIES

David Popenoe, the eminent Rutgers sociologist, explains,

Social scientists used to believe that, for positive child outcomes, stepfamilies were preferable to single-parent families. Today, we are not so sure. Stepfamilies typically have an economic advantage, but some recent studies

indicate that the children of stepfamilies have as many behavioral and emotional problems as the children of single-parent families, and possibly more. ...Stepfamily problems, in short, may be so intractable that the best strategy for dealing with them is to do everything possible to minimize their occurrence.<sup>10</sup>

A common finding is that stepparents provide less warmth and communicate less with their children than do biological parents.<sup>11</sup>

Children living in stepfamilies are also likely to have significantly greater “emotional, behavioral, and academic problems” than children living with their biological mother and father.<sup>12</sup>

Research on child-abuse indicates that preschool children who live with one biological parent and one stepparent are 40 times more likely to become a victim of abuse than children living with a biological mother and father.<sup>13</sup> Findings such as this led domestic violence researchers, Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, to conclude, “stepparenthood per se remains the single most powerful risk factor for child abuse that has yet been identified.”<sup>14</sup> Compared to children in biological homes and even single parent homes, “stepchildren are not merely ‘disadvantaged,’ but imperiled.”<sup>15</sup>

A recent study published in *Pediatrics* indicated that children residing in a home with a stepparent were 8 times more likely to die of maltreatment than children living with 2 biological parents.<sup>16</sup>

These factors indicate why an article in *Psychology Today* concluded; “stepfamilies are such a minefield

<sup>10</sup> David Popenoe, “The Evolution of Marriage and the Problems of Stepfamilies: A Biosocial Perspective,” in Alan Booth and Judy Dunn, eds., *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), p 5, 19.

<sup>11</sup> E. Thomson, S. McLanahan, & R. Curtin, “Family Structure, Gender, and Parental Socialization,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54 (1992): 368-378.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Zill, “Understanding Why Children in Stepfamilies Have More Learning and Behavior Problems Than Children in Nuclear Families,” in Alan Booth and Judy Dunn, eds., *Stepfamilies: Who Benefits? Who Does Not?* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), p. 98.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, “Child Abuse and Other Risks of Not Living with Both Parents,” *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 6 (1985): 197-210.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Homicide*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988), p. 87-88.

<sup>15</sup> Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, “Risk of Maltreatment of Children Living With Stepparents,” in R. Gelles and J. Lancaster, eds., *Child Abuse and Neglect: Biosocial Dimensions*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1987), p. 230.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Stiffman, et al., “Household Composition and Risk of Fatal Child Maltreatment,” *Pediatrics*, 109 (2002), 615-621.

<sup>6</sup> Perrin, 2002, p. 343.

<sup>7</sup> Perrin, 2002, p. 343.

<sup>8</sup> Perrin, 2002, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup> Perrin, 2002, p. 342.

of divided loyalties, emotional traps, and management conflicts that they are the most fragile form of family in America."<sup>17</sup>

Reasons for increased pathology in stepfamilies stem primarily from the lack of parental interest and care from non-genetically attached parents because humans tend to be "genetically selfish." Popenoe explains,

The reason why unrelated stepparents find their parenting roles more stressful and less satisfying than biological parents is probably due much less to social stigma and the uncertainty of their obligations, as to the fact that they gain fewer intrinsic emotional rewards from carrying out these obligations.<sup>18</sup>

#### CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

For the past thirty years, we have seen an unprecedented number of young people being raised by divorced parents. This has provided researchers with the opportunity to study a robust sample of young people experiencing parental divorce over a long period of time. Judith Wallerstein (UC Berkeley), and Mavis Hetherington (U of Virginia) are two scholars who have studied the impact of divorce on children since the early 70s. Their studies have been longer and deeper than any such work in the world. They both conclude that divorce impacts children more dramatically and for longer periods of times than most scholars and child psychologists ever imagined.

In her 30-year study, Hetherington found "divorce is usually brutally painful to a child" and that 25% of adult children of divorce continue to have "serious social, emotional, and psychological problems" whereas only 10% of adult children from intact families who had such problems.<sup>19</sup>

When Wallerstein began her 25-year study in the early 1970s, she assumed, along with most scholars, that divorce was a short-lived bump in the road for children. They would recover and move on with their lives. However, she found "divorce is a long-term crisis that was affecting the psychological profile of an entire generation."<sup>20</sup> She reported that almost half the children she observed were "worried, underachieving, self-deprecating, and sometimes

angry." Wallerstein explains these children "spoke of divorce as having cut their life short."<sup>21</sup>

Specifically, Wallerstein warns that,

Children in postdivorce families do not, on the whole, look happier, healthier, or more well adjusted even if one or both parents are happier. National studies show that children from divorced and remarried families are more aggressive toward their parents and teachers. They experience more depression, have more learning difficulties, and suffer from more problems with peers than children from intact families. Children from divorced and remarried families are two to three times more likely to be referred for psychological help at school than their peers from intact families. More of them end up in mental health clinics and hospital settings. There is earlier sexual activity, more children born out of wedlock, less marriage, and more divorce. Numerous studies show that adult children of divorce have more psychological problems than those raised in intact marriages.<sup>22</sup>

If children raised in same-sex households look like children raised in step- and divorced families, as the AAP *Technical Report* asserts, there is little research to indicate that this is a healthy picture for children. Research indicates the picture is deeply negative and in some measures, life threatening. The policy changes the AAP is advocating will serve to increase these types of child-rearing situations and are therefore contrary to their mission of attaining "optimal physical, mental, and social health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents and young adults."<sup>23</sup>

#### **2) Research Comparing Same-Sex and Traditional Parenting Homes**

Research comparing outcomes in child well-being in same-sex parenting homes and traditional mother/father parenting homes is notoriously inconclusive. Consider the following surveys of the current literature:

- Drs. Robert Lerner and Althea Nagai, both professionals in the field of quantitative analysis, conducted a study for the *Marriage Law Project* in Washington DC, looking at 49

<sup>17</sup> "Shuttle Diplomacy," *Psychology Today*, July/August 1993, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Popenoe, 1994, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> E. Mavis Hetherington, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*, (W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Wallerstein, et al., *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, (Hyperion, 2000), xxvii.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Wallerstein, "The Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 30 (1991) 349-360.

<sup>22</sup> Wallerstein, 2000, p. xxiii.

<sup>23</sup> As stated on the masthead of *American Academy of Pediatrics'* website, <http://www.aap.org/>

empirical studies on same-sex parenting. They found no basis for the conclusion that children raised by homosexual parents look just like those raised by heterosexual parents. Why? As Lerner and Nagai explain, “The studies on which such claims are based are all gravely deficient.” They found at least one fatal research flaw in each of the studies examined. Most had very small and unrepresentative study samples with missing or inadequate comparison groups. Most of the research subjects volunteered for the studies and some participants were allowed to recruit other participants. Authors of 48 of the 49 studies wished to influence public policy in support of homosexual families. Lerner and Nagai conclude, “For these reasons, the studies are no basis for good science or good public policy.”<sup>24</sup>

- Steven Nock, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and a member of the editorial board of *Journal of Marriage and Family*, was asked to review the body of comparative literature for the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. Nock arrived at a conclusion similar to Lerner and Nagai’s. His affidavit states, “...[the current literature on lesbian mothering] is inadequate to permit any conclusions to be drawn. None had a probability sample. All used inappropriate statistics given the samples obtained. All had biased samples. Sample sizes were consistently small... I do not believe this collection of articles indicates that lesbian and heterosexual mothers are similar. In fact, from a scientific perspective, the evidence confirms nothing about the quality of gay parents.”<sup>25</sup>

Nock continues, “From a sound methodological perspective, the results of these studies can be relied on for one purpose – to indicate that further research...is warranted. ...The only acceptable conclusion at this point is that the literature on this topic does not constitute a solid body of scientific evidence.”<sup>26</sup>

- Another recent study in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, analyzing the current research on homosexual parenting, finds “a persistent limitation of these studies, however, is that most rely on small samples of White, middle-class, previously married lesbians and their children. As

a result, we cannot be confident concerning the generalizability of many of the findings...”<sup>27</sup>

- The *American Sociological Review*, in a study examining the current body of research, explains it is currently “impossible to fully distinguish the impact of parent’s sexual orientation on a child.” They explain most homosexual child-rearing homes didn’t start out fresh from birth, but are clouded by the dynamics of divorce, re-mating and step-parenting issues that are problematic in themselves and separate from issues related to gender of the parents. While the authors of this study are sympathetic with homosexual parenting, they “disagree with those who claim that there are no differences between the children of heterosexual parents and children of lesbian parents...”<sup>28</sup>

They explain there are indications that problems of gender identity and sexuality might be greater for children raised by homosexual parents than any of the studies recognize.<sup>29</sup> Specifically, this ASR study reports 64% of young adults raised by lesbian mothers reported considering having same-sex relationships. Only 17 percent of young adults in heterosexual families reported the same thing.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

There are compelling reasons for caution in concluding that children in same-sex parenting homes show outcomes just like children in traditional mother/father homes. The Academy’s *Technical Report* unwittingly communicates caution given the methodological problems in the research as well as the conclusion that children from same-sex parenting homes “closely resemble stepfamilies” and “are very similar to children of divorce.”<sup>31</sup> Research is very clear that the best course of action for accomplishing the AAP’s mission of optimal health for all children is to *reduce*, rather than *increase*, the prevalence of families producing these kinds of outcomes.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Lerner, Ph.D., Althea Nagai, Ph.D. *No Basis: What the Studies Don’t Tell Us About Same Sex Parenting*, Washington DC; Marriage Law Project/Ethics and Public Policy Center, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Affidavit of Steven L. Nock, *Halpern et al., v. The Attorney General of Canada*, Ontario Superior Court of Justice, March 2001, Court File No. 684/00, par. 130-131.

<sup>26</sup> Nock, 2001, par. 140,141.

<sup>27</sup> David Demo and Martha Cox, “Families with Young Children: A Review of Research in the 1990s,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62 (2000), p. 889.

<sup>28</sup> Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz, “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” *American Sociological Review*, 66 (2001) 159-183.

<sup>29</sup> Stacey and Biblarz, 2001, p. 167.

<sup>30</sup> Stacey and Biblarz, 2001, p. 170.

<sup>31</sup> Perrin, 2002, pp. 341,342.

In addition, other studies show that the current research comparing outcomes of children in same-sex and traditional father/mother homes is young, plagued with fatal methodological problems, and therefore, inconclusive.

We also have a recent past that can be instructive and we should learn from it. The current research on same-sex and mother/father parenting is much like the available research in the early 70s on divorce outcomes for children. At that time, the research was minimal and large assumptions were made that children would be unaffected. With that, America entered head-long into a divorce revolution that is unprecedented in history. Of this, Judith Wallerstein observes:

We made radical changes in the family without realizing how it changes the experience of growing up. We embarked on a gigantic social experiment without any idea about how the next generation would be affected. If the truth be told, and if we are able to face it, the history of divorce in our society is replete with unwarranted assumptions that adults have made about children simply because such assumptions are congenial to adult needs and wishes.<sup>32</sup>

We now know that children of divorce are deeply and negatively impacted from childhood and this follows them into adulthood. It is unwise to embark on another historically unprecedented and unproven social experiment with our children fueled by adult desire.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the ideal of normalizing same-sex parenting is indeed historically and culturally radical. For all the diversity seen in various cultures and time-periods, we have never seen any culture adopt same-sex models of parenting as normative or even tolerable.

Margaret Mead, in her work *Male and Female*, illustrates the cultural universality of the mother/father parenting dyad:

When we survey all known human societies, we find everywhere some form of the family, some set of permanent arrangements by which males assist females in caring for children while they are young. ...In most societies there is the assumption of permanent mating,

the idea that the marriage should last as long as both live....<sup>33</sup>

Famed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, in *Sex, Culture and Myth* observes,

In all human societies the father is regarded by tradition as indispensable. The woman has to be married before she is allowed legitimately to conceive ... This is by no means only a European or Christian prejudice; it is the attitude found amongst most barbarous and savage people as well... The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological side of kinship is that no child should be brought into the world without a man — and one man at that — assuming the role of sociological father, that is, of guardian and protector, the male link between the child and the rest of the community. (T)his generalization amounts to a universal sociological law....<sup>34</sup>

With something so critical as the health and well-being of future generations on the line, we need more compelling reasons than we have at present to so dramatically depart from the model of raising our young that has been the generalized norm for all human civilizations throughout time.

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<sup>32</sup> Wallerstein, 2000, p. xxii.

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1949), p. 188, 195.

<sup>34</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex, Culture and Myth*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), p. 63; cited in Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Family and Nation*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1986), p. 169-170.