

# Same-sex parented families in Australia

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This research paper reviews and synthesises Australian and international literature on same-sex parented families. It includes discussion of the different modes of conception or family formation, different family structures, and the small number of studies on bisexual and transgender parents. Particular attention is paid to research on the emotional, social and educational outcomes for children raised by lesbian and gay parents, and the methodological strengths and weaknesses of this body of work.

## KEY MESSAGES

- About 11% of Australian gay men and 33% of lesbians have children. Children may have been conceived in the context of previous heterosexual relationships, or raised from birth by a co-parenting gay or lesbian couple or single parent.
- Overall, research to date considerably challenges the point of view that same-sex parented families are harmful to children. Children in such families do as well emotionally, socially and educationally as their peers from heterosexual couple families.
- Some researchers have concluded there are benefits for children raised by lesbian couples in that they experience higher quality parenting, sons display greater gender flexibility, and sons and daughter display more open-mindedness towards sexual, gender and family diversity.
- The possible effect of important socio-economic family factors, such as income and parental education, were not always considered in the studies reviewed in this paper.
- Although many Australian lesbian-parented families appear to be receiving good support from their health care providers, there is evidence that more could be done to develop policies and practices supportive of same-sex parented families in the Australian health, education, child protection and foster care systems.
- Additional key messages, relating to specific family structures and psychosocial outcomes for children raised by lesbian and gay parents, are included throughout the paper.

Australian families have changed considerably in recent decades, and many children are now born to unmarried parents, and/or raised in families that do not conform to the two biological parent nuclear form (see Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray, 2010). One manifestation of this change is the increasing prevalence and visibility of same-sex parented families.

Over the past 10 years in many Australian states and territories, same-sex couple and parenting relationships have gained considerable legal recognition. These developments have ensued from community activism and the increasing social acceptability of same-sex couple relationships. For instance, reproductive medicine clinics in a number of states have extended their donor insemination and IVF services to lesbians and also changed their Status of Children legislation, to enable the legal recognition of lesbian co-parenting couples, irrespective of which partner gave birth. The *Federal Family Law Amendment (de facto Financial Matters and Other Measures) Act 2008* now enables cohabiting same-sex couples legal protection under the Family Law Act with regard to child and property concerns (Sifris, 2010). Civil union schemes exist in four Australian states and the ACT in addition to this federal recognition of same-sex cohabiting relationships (Richardson-Self, 2012).

American psychologist Frederick Bozett noted in 1987 that research into lesbian and gay parenting was preoccupied with “ethical consideration for the well-being of the child” (p. 171). This remains true in the early 21st century, despite the considerable inroads that have been made into the legal and social acceptance of same-sex relationships. Critics often argue that children’s wellbeing requires two resident opposite sex parents, and that same-sex couples of either sex cannot provide a supportive family environment (for summaries of the arguments see Clarke, 2001; Dempsey, 2006; Millbank, 2003; Patterson, 2007; Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Kane, 2007). Stereotypes of gay male sexuality would have it that gay men are uninvolved and uninterested in parenting or children (see Barret & Robinson, 2000; Bozett, 1987; Mallon, 2004), or that their sexual conduct is incompatible with forming or raising families with children (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Stacey, 2004). Such arguments are not based on a comprehensive assessment of the evidence for this claim and are usually informed by religious or ideological beliefs about what constitutes a family.

This research paper describes the diverse characteristics of same-sex parented families in Australia, their support needs and experiences, and the challenges they may face given the stigma and discrimination often attached to homosexuality and encountered by some same-sex couples. It also examines the international research into the wellbeing of children raised by lesbian and gay parents, commenting on the methodological issues associated with this body of research, and its relevance to Australian policy-makers.<sup>1</sup> Most studies to date indicate that children raised in same-sex parented families do as well emotionally, socially and educationally as their peers in comparable kinds of heterosexual families, although there are some differences between children raised in same-sex and other kinds of families beginning to be noted and more openly discussed.<sup>2</sup> These include benefits in the quality of parenting children receive when raised from birth by lesbian couples, greater gender flexibility, particularly for sons, and their greater acceptance of family diversity. Furthermore, although many lesbian-parented families appear to be receiving good service from their health care providers, there is evidence that more could be done to develop policies supportive of same-sex parented families in the education, child protection, and foster care systems.

## Diversity in Australian same-sex parented families

Same-sex attracted parents and their children are still a small minority of Australian children and parents. Children with lesbian or gay parents comprise 0.1% of all dependent children in the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013). In the 2011 Census, 33,714 same-sex couples were counted and 12% of these couples had dependent or adult children living with them, a figure slightly higher than the 11% of lesbian or gay parents counted in the 2001 Census (see ABS, 2002). The continuing stigma

1 While most of the research on the wellbeing of children growing up with lesbian and gay parents has been conducted overseas, a growing body of Australian research documents family formation practices, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) families’ interactions with the health, educational and community services system in Australia. The country of origin of the research is stated throughout this report.

2 For comprehensive earlier reviews of the international literature on lesbian and gay parenting by Australian scholars, see Millbank, 2003; McNair, 2004; and Short et al., 2007.

## Familial language used in this report

Language describing “non-heterosexual” family relationships is controversial and evolving, and there is no consensus on correct terminology (see Brown, 2008; Dempsey, 2012a; du Chesne & Bradley, 2007; Gabb, 2005; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). In this report, “same-sex parented families” is used when the point being made is relevant to all non-heterosexual families, and “lesbian-parented” or “gay-parented” when the point relates to families headed by female and male same-sex couples or sole parents, respectively.

It is also important to note that “lesbian” and “gay” are not universally used as self-descriptors by women and men who are parenting in the context of a same-sex relationship or identity. The complex interconnection between sexual attraction, sexual behavior and a more overarching sense of sexual identity or orientation has long been noted in sexuality surveys since Alfred Kinsey’s formative work in US in the 1940s, including those conducted in Australia (e.g., Dempsey, Hillier, & Harrison, 2001; Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich, & de Visser, 2003). Some Australian same-sex attracted parents (indications are, a small minority) may consider themselves “bisexual” or refer to themselves as “queer” rather than “lesbian” or “gay” because they have sexual or romantic relationships with people of both sexes (see Power et al., 2010; Power, Perlesz, Brown et al., 2012). As there is very little research on experiences of parenting or outcomes for children of bisexual parents, bisexual parents are only explicitly mentioned in this report when they were included as a specific participant group in the research under discussion.

Terminology to describe mothers, fathers, parents and sperm donors in same-sex parented families is also contested. In families in which a lesbian couple co-parent, usually both women consider themselves to be mothers, irrespective of who gave birth to the children, while in some families, there is a clearer distinction between the mother (the woman who gave birth) and the “co-parent” or “non-biological” or “non-birth” mother. In this report, “lesbian co-parenting couples” is used or the terms “mother” and “co-parent” when distinguishing between the two women is relevant. “Anonymous sperm donor” or “known sperm donor” are the usual terms for describing biological fathers of children in planned lesbian parent families (although see Dempsey, 2012a) and in cases where these men have parental involvement in children’s lives (which is often not the case) they are referred to as “donor dads” or “co-parents”, depending on context.

“Transgender” describes people who have had hormone treatment or surgery to reconstruct their bodies, or those whose appearance, comportment and self-identification transgresses usual sex and gender categories in less permanent fashion (see Couch et al., 2007; Hines, 2006). Given there is very little literature on the family lives or children of transgender parents (for exceptions see Green, 1998; Hines, 2006; Riggs, forthcoming), transgender parents are only referred to when they were specifically included in the research under discussion.

attached to homosexuality, together with the manner in which parents in same-sex relationships were counted, makes it likely that this figure under-represents the total number of families, particularly sole parents (ABS, 2012). There is no population-based data available on numbers of bisexual or transgender parents, or children raised by bisexual or transgender parents.

Gay men are less likely than lesbians to be resident parents (ABS, 2012). It is much more common for female than male same-sex couples to have children living in the household (22% compared with 3%; ABS, 2012), a trend that is echoed in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community-based surveys conducted with women and men. In *Private Lives 2*—a recent national Australian survey of 3,835 LGBT people’s relationships, health and wellbeing—about 11% of gay male participants indicated that they were parents or step-parents, or had some other kind of parent-like relationship with children, as opposed to 33% of lesbian participants (Leonard et al., 2012). Considerably more bisexual men than gay men in the study reported having children (40% vs 11%), with bisexual men also more likely than bisexual women (40% vs 25%) to report having children.

Same-sex parented families are characteristically diverse with regard to mode of conception or family formation, and family structure (see Anderssen, Amilie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Gunn &

Surtees, 2009; Power et al., 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001). Some parents have children in heterosexual marriages or relationships, and then re-partner with someone of the same-sex, while others have children in the context of same-sex couple or single parent families. In intentionally planned lesbian or gay parented families, it is common for children to be conceived through assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as known or anonymous donor insemination (DI), in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and surrogacy. The children are usually biologically related to at least one of the parents, as is common in the case of a prior marriage or when ART procedures are used. Many transgender men and women became parents in the context of heterosexual relationships before making the decision to transition (see Green, 1998; Hines, 2006) although more recently, also post-transition. Riggs (forthcoming) argues that since reports of US-resident “pregnant man” Thomas Beatie appeared in the media in 2008, the visibility of transgender men having children post-transition has increased considerably.<sup>3</sup>

Same-sex attracted parents also have children through foster care and adoption (see Goldberg, 2010; Hicks, 2006; Riggs, Agoustinis, & Delfabbro, 2007) although in Australia the former is much more common than the latter. Many lesbians and gay men who become foster carers do so as a first option for starting a family rather than as “second best” alternative to biological reproduction (Hicks, 2005a; Mallon, 2004). Across Australia, some foster care agencies now actively recruit lesbian and gay carers (Riggs, 2011) and regularly advertise in the LGBT press. In cases where Australian lesbian or gay parents are raising adopted children, it is highly likely these children were adopted in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship due to the legal prohibition on same-sex adoption in Australian states and territories. Further to this, and for a range of reasons, very few Australian children become available for adoption beyond their families of origin (see Higgins, 2012).

The Work, Love and Play study (Power et al., 2010) of 445 Australian and New Zealander lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) parents is the largest in this country undertaken to date and found there are six major family types:

- a two-parent same-sex couple-based family;
- families in which a lesbian couple were the primary parents but a known sperm donor lived separately and had involvement in the children’s lives;
- families in which a lesbian or gay man were still co-parenting with an ex-heterosexual partner;
- separated same-sex families where women or men were co-parenting with their ex-same-sex partner;
- sole parent families; and
- multi-parent families, usually a gay male couple and a lesbian couple raising children together from birth across two households.

Despite the diversity, it is apparent that the two-parent, couple-based household family form still holds sway, and many same-sex parented families in Australia conform to this family structure (Power et al., 2010).

There are also differences in levels of education and labour force participation rates of same-sex couples compared to heterosexual couples in Australia. Data from the 2011 Census indicate that people in same-sex couples are more likely to hold a Bachelor degree or higher qualification (42% compared to 23% of people in heterosexual couples). More people in same-sex couples are participating in the labour force (89% compared to 69% of heterosexual couples) and are more likely to work in highly skilled occupations, such as professionals or managers (ABS, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Female-to-male transgender people may have fully functional female reproductive organs that enable them to become pregnant and give birth while also exhibiting the secondary sex characteristics of men. Similarly, male-to-female trans people may have breasts and other secondary sex characteristics of women, while electing not to have the kind of gender reassignment surgery that would remove their penis or testes (see Couch et al., 2007).

<sup>4</sup> It is possible that this finding in the Census data could relate to the stigmatisation of same-sex relationships. Same-sex couples with a high socio-economic status could be more comfortable disclosing their same-sex relationship in government data collections.

### Key messages: Diversity in Australian same-sex parented families

- About 11% of Australian gay men and 33% of lesbians have children, based on data from a recent lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community survey of 3,853 people.
- Children may have been conceived in the context of previous heterosexual relationships, or raised from birth by a co-parenting gay or lesbian couple or single parent.
- In intentionally planned lesbian or gay parented families, it is common for children to be conceived through assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as donor insemination (DI), in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and surrogacy. The children are usually biologically related to at least one of the parents.
- Lesbian and gay parents also have children through foster care and adoption, although in Australia gay and lesbian couples or singles are still not eligible to adopt children.
- Despite the diversity, many same-sex parented families in Australia conform to the two-parent, couple-based household family form, although a small number of multi-parent families exist.
- People in same-sex couples are more highly educated and are more likely to be in highly skilled occupations than people in heterosexual couples.

## Lesbian-parented families

Far more published research exists on the characteristics and experiences of lesbian parented families than families parented by gay men (see Andersson et al., 2002; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Patterson, 2007; Short et al. 2007; Tasker & Patterson 2007). This reflects the greater likelihood of lesbians, as women, being resident parents.

Equity in divisions of paid work and domestic labour between mothers and co-parents has been found to be the rule rather than the exception in lesbian-parented families (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Perlesz et al., 2010; Reimann, 1997; Sullivan 1998). Data from the 2011 Census indicate that in female same-sex couples, 59% of partners engaged in the same amount of unpaid domestic work such as housework, food preparation, laundry and gardening, compared to 38% of partners in opposite-sex couples (ABS, 2013). Dunne (2000) emphasised that it is the lack of “gendered scripts” in lesbian relationships that leads to greater egalitarianism in relation to the sharing of economic resources and domestic duties including child-rearing. Perlesz et al. (2010) compared the divisions of labour of 317 cohabiting Australian and New Zealander lesbian and gay parents who took part in the Work, Love and Play study with 958 cohabiting heterosexual parents taking part in the Australian Negotiating the Life Course study. They found that lesbian couples, some of whom had had children in heterosexual relationships and some of whom had raised children together from birth, divided their household labour more equally than the heterosexual couples. Lesbian couples in the study also divided their parenting tasks more equitably than the Negotiating the Life Course comparison group.

Lesbian co-parenting couples display a range of parenting strengths. In a recent meta-analysis conducted in the US, Crowl, Ahn, and Baker (2008) found that on average, parents of children in planned lesbian-parented families reported higher quality relationships with their children than parents in comparable heterosexual families.<sup>5</sup> Lesbian co-parenting couples have been found to have greater parenting skills and to devote more time to parenting than matched samples of heterosexual couples. Several studies comparing donor-conceived children parented by heterosexual and lesbian couples found that the lesbian couples had greater parental awareness and problem-solving capacity, had higher quality interactions with children, were more available to them, and demonstrated more respect for children’s independence (Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, & 2007; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, van Hall, Golombok, 1997; Flaks, Ficher,

5 Meta-analysis is a technique researchers can use once numerous published studies of the same phenomenon become available. It is useful for alleviating the problem of inconclusive results in individual studies. Meta-analysis enables researchers to group together findings from a number of studies and apply statistical tests to see if the results found in the individual studies still hold. Also, the advantage of a meta-analysis is that the larger size of the pooled data set lends more evidence to any conclusions drawn in the smaller studies (see Allen & Burrell 1996; Marks, 2012; Schumm, 2012).

Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997). Lesbian co-parenting couples in other studies of donor-conceived children have been found to spend more time with their children than their heterosexual counterparts. This includes time spent in imaginative play, and on shared interests or activities (Golombok et al., 1997; Golombok et al., 2003; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). In the Avon Longitudinal Study of Children in the UK lesbian mothers tended to engage in less smacking than the heterosexual mothers in the study (Golombok et al., 2003). A study by Johnson and O'Connor (2002) in the US found that the lesbian (and gay male) parents reported less use of corporal punishment and more use of reasoning techniques with children than a normative sample of American parents. It is important to acknowledge, however, that some of the research literature on parenting has compared lesbian couples with heterosexual couples without taking into account differences in levels of parental education, social class and household income (e.g., Bos et al., 2007; Crowl et al., 2008). It is possible that the differences in the demographic characteristics of lesbian couples compared to heterosexual couples may explain any differences observed between the two groups.

Although most lesbian couples form two-parent families, there are a number of ways in which they involve the biological father and/or other men in their family lives (see Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Dempsey, 2006; Goldberg, 2010; Goldberg & Allen, 2007; McNair, Dempsey, Wise, & Perlesz, 2002). Some lesbian parents either choose not to or cannot involve the biological father in their families, yet value the contribution of other male friends and family members (see Dempsey, 2006; Donovan & Wilson, 2008; Short, 2007). McNair and colleagues (2002) found that known sperm donors were preferred by Australian lesbian mothers for a range of reasons, including (at that time) limited legal access to clinical donor insemination, wanting children to have access to knowledge about their biogenetic paternity, the desire to give a male friend the chance to have children in their lives, or belief in the importance of male role models for children (see also Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Goldberg & Allen, 2007; Ryan-Flood, 2005). Other lesbian mothers believe it is important for their children to have contact with men rather than the biological father per se (see Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005; Goldberg & Allen, 2007). Women's fathers, brothers and heterosexual or gay male friends are known to be valued as "male role models" for children, due to lesbian parents' desire for children to have access to diverse adult male and female social networks (Borthwick & Bloch, 1993; Gartrell et al., 1996; Goldberg & Allen, 2007; Wakeling & Bradstock, 1995).

### Key messages: Lesbian-parented families

- Lesbian co-parenting couples tend to divide their household labour and child care responsibilities more equitably than heterosexual couples. This includes lesbian couples parenting children conceived in previous heterosexual relationships as well as couples who have raised children together from birth.
- Lesbian co-parenting couples display a range of parenting strengths, for example, less authoritarian parenting styles, and report higher quality relationships with their children than matched samples of heterosexual parents. They also tend to spend more time with their children.
- An important limitation of the literature to date is that some samples were not matched on education and income and therefore demographic factors may explain differences found between lesbian and heterosexual couples.
- With regard to family formation in planned lesbian-parented families, known or identifiable sperm donors are often preferred by Australian lesbian mothers. This is for a range of reasons including: wanting children to have access to knowledge about their biogenetic paternity, the desire to give a male friend the chance to have children in their lives, or belief in the importance of male role models for children.

## Families parented by gay men

Gay fatherhood research prior to the late 1990s tended to be US-based and emphasised the experiences of divorced gay fathers who had had children in heterosexual marriages, mostly with regard to issues

associated with disclosing their gay relationships or identity to children, and their perceptions of children's adjustment to their homosexuality (see Barret & Robinson, 2000; Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Bozett, 1987; Miller, 1979). Since the early 2000s, the focus of research into gay male parenting has become more international and shifted towards documenting the increasing compatibility between "coming out" as gay and becoming a parent through adoption, surrogacy, co-parenting and "donor dad" arrangements with lesbian couples (e.g., Berkowitz, 2007; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Dempsey, 2006, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Power, Perlesz, McNair et al., 2012b; Riggs 2008a, 2008b; Stacey, 2004, 2006; Weeks et al., 2001). The increasing social acceptability of gay relationships, coupled with social shifts in definitions of appropriate families and indeed the "baby boom" among lesbian couples has facilitated gay men's "procreative consciousness" (Berkowitz, 2007; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007), or awareness that parenting can be rewarding and compatible with living an openly gay life.

Australian gay men's pathways to parenthood are diverse, although relatively limited compared to their counterparts in the US. Some continue to become parents in the context of heterosexual relationships (see Higgins, 2004; Power, Perlesz, McNair et al., 2012) and others through foster and permanent care (Riggs, 2007, 2011), known sperm donation (Dempsey, 2010, 2012a,b; Riggs, 2008a, 2008b; Ripper, 2008) and surrogacy (Dempsey, 2013, forthcoming; Rudruppa, 2011; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). Australian gay men's history of involvement in known sperm donation for lesbian friends and acquaintances dates from at least the 1980s (see Borthwick & Bloch, 1993; Dempsey, 2005; van Reyk, 1995; Wakeling & Bradstock, 1995) and some men have developed paternal or parental relationships with children conceived in this way (see Dempsey, 2010, 2012a, 2012b; van Reyk, 2004). Since the early 2000s, it has become popular for Australian gay men to form families through surrogacy, particularly commercial surrogacy arrangements in the US and India (see Dempsey, 2013, forthcoming; Millbank, 2011; Stethoscope Research 2012; Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). In the US, adoption is a well documented path to parenthood for gay men (Goldberg, 2010; Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012; Mallon, 2004) although Australian laws prevent this. In the Work, Love and Play study (Power, Perlesz, McNair et al., 2012), of the 88 gay and bisexual men who described themselves as "actively involved" in parenting a child, 39% had become parents in a previous heterosexual relationship, 23% were parenting children conceived through surrogacy with their male partners, 19% had become parents through known sperm donation to lesbian couples or singles, and 11% were foster parents or permanent carers.

Similarly to studies on lesbian-parented families, the strengths of gay fathers as parents have been noted. Just as co-parenting lesbian couples have been found to share housework and parenting more equitably than heterosexual couples, indications are that gay male couples tend to be more like their lesbian than heterosexual peers in this regard. Stacey (2004) found the gay male couples in her study did not privilege paid work over homemaking, and that the partners who worked outside the home tended to see this as a compromise that took them away from the children. In Johnson and O'Connor's (2002) study of gay and lesbian parents in the US, the male couples were more compatible in their parenting styles and parented more equitably than comparable samples of US-resident heterosexual couples. They also displayed more authoritative than authoritarian parenting styles when compared to heterosexual peers. Although there are far fewer studies to date of co-parenting gay male couples or single parent families than planned lesbian-parented families, indications are the way two men parent together is closer to lesbian couples and heterosexual women's approach than the greater detachment from children's daily care characteristic of fathers in conventional nuclear families (Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Mallon, 2004; Stacey, 2006). It should be acknowledged, however, that socio-economic differences such as income and education were not always taken into account in these studies.

Several studies of gay fathers have also noted higher self-esteem (Bergman et al., 2010; Sbordone, 1993; Schacher et al., 2005) and fewer negative attitudes about homosexuality than men who are not parents (Sbordone, 1993). It is also apparent that having children is a great source of personal fulfillment and pride for gay men, that brings with it greater connectedness to their own parents and other members of their family of origin (Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010; Bergman et al., 2010; Power, Perlesz, McNair et al., 2012).

### Key messages: Families parented by gay men

- Gay men's pathways to planned parenthood are more restricted in Australia than in the US and UK due to their inability to adopt children and the prohibition on commercial surrogacy. Many gay fathers are divorced men who continue to co-parent with their ex-wife. Some Australian gay men become sperm donors for lesbian friends and acquaintances, and maintain non-resident involvement with the children. A newer group of gay fathers have formed families through commercial and altruistic surrogacy abroad, and this mode of family formation has become increasingly popular in the past 5 years.
- Although there are far fewer studies to date of co-parenting gay male couples or single parent families than planned lesbian-parented families, indications are that two men parenting together have more equitable divisions of domestic and parental labour than exists in heterosexual couple families; however some studies have not taken socio-economic differences into account.
- Gay male parenting has also been linked to higher self-esteem for the men involved than that of their childless gay male peers, and improved social and emotional relationships with their families of origin.

## Transgender parents

As Biblarz and Savci (2010) pointed out, transgender people undergo a change in their gender identification, which conceivably raises quite different issues for parent, child and family relationships than lesbian or gay sexuality. A need for recognition of the desired gender status as opposed to the gender nominated on original birth certificates is a key issue of concern to transgender people (see Couch et al., 2007; Hines, 2006). As Couch et al. (2007) pointed out, transitioning, or the act of masculinising or feminising one's body to bring it into line with the desired gender identity (often but not always through hormone treatment and/or gender reassignment surgery) is an important part of the transgender experience. This perhaps explains why exploration of the health and legal or social discrimination issues faced by transgender individuals, rather than their familial or parental relationships, predominate in the published literature.

It is clear that transgender parents face discrimination and lack of acceptance from family members, including their children, as a consequence of transitioning. Green (1998), who has interviewed numerous transgender parents over time at a gender reassignment clinic in London, commented that partners of transgender parents may feel such abandonment and hostility towards their ex-partner that they oppose them having any contact with children. In the *TranZnation* report (Couch et al., 2007), the largest study of the health and wellbeing of transgender Australians and New Zealanders ever undertaken, the 253 participants were not asked if they had children, or how parenting related to their health and wellbeing. However, comments about family relationships were contributed in "open" qualitative responses made about health and wellbeing. Participants reported being "sent to Coventry" by their spouses or ex-spouses and children due to inability to accept or understand the desire to transition. There were also instances where spouses or ex-spouses refused to allow them to have contact with young children. A few participants, notably those whose gender transitions took place later in life, reported that most of the discrimination they had experienced came from other family members, including adult children.

Hines (2006), in a qualitative study of the family and relationship practices of 30 transgender men and women in the UK, found that complex decisions about the timing of gender transitions are negotiated in a context that takes into account existing family commitments, partner relationships, and likely effects on children. When and how to tell children about the forthcoming gender transition were uppermost for the parents in the participant group. Hines saw parallels here with lesbian and gay parents who have conceived their children in prior heterosexual relationships and are faced with the prospect of how and when to "come out" to children. Divorce or partnership breakdown often results when transgender parents make the decision to transition, and this can lead to difficult parenting relationships, particularly if the child or children live with the other parent. Hines (2006) found that the transgender parents interviewed in her study also emphasised the importance of maintaining positive relationships with their



children's other parent, and expressed the view that good relationships with ex-partners made it easier for their children to cope with the gender transition.

Hines (2006) also emphasised the importance participants placed on helping their children come to terms emotionally with the physical changes in their parents undergoing a gender transition. Strategies transgender parents described included being open and honest with children in response to their questions and concerns about the gender transition, and using first names or nicknames rather than insisting their children shift from calling them "mummy" to "daddy" or vice versa. Hines' participants' experiences indicated that children of parents who transition from female to male rather than from male to female may find it easier to adapt because their parent was already perceived as quite androgynous before the transition. Hines speculated this could relate to the greater cultural acceptance of female androgyny as opposed to male femininity.

### Key messages: Transgender parents

- Transgender parents face discrimination and lack of acceptance from family members, including their children, as a consequence of transitioning. This may include banishment by their spouses or ex-spouses and children due to inability to accept or understand the desire to transition, or situations in which ex-spouses refuse to allow them to have contact with young children.
- How and when to tell children about the gender transition is a key theme in qualitative research with transgender parents.
- Transgender parents who had children prior to their transition emphasised the importance of maintaining positive relationships with their children's other parent, and expressed the view that good relationships with ex-partners made it easier for their children to cope with the gender transition.

## Children's wellbeing in same-sex parented families

To date, there has been far more research conducted on the wellbeing of children raised by lesbian parents than children raised by gay male, bisexual or transgender parents. Studies conducted prior to the late 1990s focused on same-sex parented children conceived in the context of heterosexual relationships (see Andersson et al, 2002; Barret & Robinson, 2000; Tasker, 2005; Tasker & Patterson, 2007, for reviews). A considerable body of literature comparing children raised in planned lesbian-parented families with samples of heterosexual families now exists (see Anderssen et al., 2002; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Crowl et al., 2008; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). At the time of writing, there were no known published comparative studies of children's development or wellbeing in families created by gay men through surrogacy, and only one comparing children in families with known "donor dads" with children from heterosexual parented families (Bos, 2010). Furthermore, no comparative research of this kind has been conducted in Australia or New Zealand.

One study into the health and wellbeing of children in Australian LGBT parented families has recently commenced and only preliminary data and information about the study were available at the time of writing (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power, & Davis, 2012, Crouch, 2013). The Australian Study of Child Health in Same-Sex Families (ACHESS) based at the University of Melbourne has collected data on 500 children aged 0–17 years from 315 LGBT parents. The study is based on self-report data from parents and children, and utilised the Child Health Questionnaire and the Infant and Toddler Quality of Life Questionnaire. For 80% of the children a female parent completed the survey, 18% were completed by a male parent, and 2% were completed by an other-gendered parent. On measures of general health and family cohesion children aged 5 to 17 years with same-sex attracted parents had significantly better scores when compared to Australian children from all other backgrounds and family contexts. For all other health measures there were no statistically significant differences. These preliminary findings indicate Australian children with same-sex attracted parents are developing well.

To turn now to closer analysis of the literature comparing children in same-sex parented families with children raised in other kinds of families, this body of literature arises from a range of largely unsubstantiated concerns about the effect of parental sexual orientation on children's development or welfare (see Bozett, 1987; Clarke, 2001; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). There are several kinds of concerns guiding the literature: those relating to children's family relationships; their psychological adjustment; their experiences with peers, particularly with regard to teasing or bullying; and concerns about their sexuality or gender identity. Further to this, a number of studies also consider how well lesbian- and gay-parented children fare educationally. Each of these themes are discussed in turn. In the final section of this part of the report The New Family Structures Study published in the US in 2012 is discussed, given this is the only study to date reporting harms to children raised in same-sex parented families.

## Parent–child and family relationships

Children in lesbian- and gay-parented families generally report harmonious relationships with their parents, whether or not they were born to heterosexual couple parents who subsequently divorced, or in the context of a planned same-sex family (Brewaeys et al. 1997; Bozett, 1987; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Harris & Turner, 1986; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Wainright et al. 2004). Wainright et al. (2004), in a randomly sampled representative survey of 44 young people raised in lesbian or gay parented families in the US, found the teenagers described relationships with their parents as warm and caring. Other studies have also found that lesbian-parented children reported more warmth from and interaction with their parents than their peers raised in heterosexual couple families (Golombok et al., 1997; Golombok et al., 2003). Children who are parented by lesbian couples display greater security of attachment to parents (Golombok et al., 1997, 2003), are more likely to perceive their parents as available and dependable (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004), and are more likely to discuss sexual and emotional issues with parents (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). Some studies have considered the family relationships of children of divorced gay fathers. Bigner and Jacobsen (1989, 1992) surveyed gay and heterosexual divorced fathers who were members of parenting groups. In responses to their inventory of parenting practices, the authors found the gay fathers were more responsive to their children's needs than the heterosexual fathers, and reported more use of reasoning strategies with children.

There is some suggestion that children raised from infancy by lesbian couples in the UK may be more likely than children of heterosexual couples to experience their parents' separation (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Gartrell et al. (2005, 2006) also commented on the higher than average separation rate among the lesbian couples in the US based National Longitudinal Study of Lesbian Families. Researchers comment that more studies are needed in order to confirm this finding, and speculate that it could be due to the relative lack of institutional support for lesbian co-parenting relationships (see Biblarz & Stacey, 2010).

Historically, many lesbians and gay men have had difficult relationships with or been rejected by their families of origin because of their sexuality (Carrington, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991). However, the transition to parenthood is often reported to bring new parents closer to their families of origin, and children appear to have good access to grandparents. Gartrell et al. (1996) found that lesbian parents in the National Longitudinal Lesbian Families Study reported strong social support from their parents. Most grandparents were very happy about having grandchildren, and grandparents' openness about their daughters' lesbian-parented families increased over time (Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000, 2006). Goldberg (2007) also found that both partners in lesbian couples received increased support from their own parents in the transition to parenthood. In a study that explicitly compared the amount of contact that children had with grandparents in different family types, parental sexual identity did not make a difference to the amount of contact children had with their grandparents (Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 2002). A recent study of gay men creating families through commercial surrogacy in the US found that the transition to parenthood brought them closer to their other family members, particularly mothers, and that grandparents take a keen interest in their grandchildren (Bergman et al., 2010).

## Methodological issues and studies of children's wellbeing

Evaluating the effects of family structures upon children's wellbeing and development is complicated, particularly when the population of interest is a very diverse, stigmatised, numeric minority. Some questions have been asked about the methodological rigor of research studies on the wellbeing of children raised in same-sex parented families, by scholars who (implicitly or explicitly) have political or moral objections to same-sex parenting (see Marks, 2012; Regnerus, 2012; Schumm, 2012) and by those who do not. For instance, Tasker and Patterson (2007), two respected psychologists who support the rights of lesbian and gay parented families and have published widely on various aspects of the wellbeing of children raised by lesbian and gay parents, commented that the field would benefit from a wider variety of data collection methods. They noted that most of the data collected about children raised in lesbian and gay parented families comes from self-reports by their parents, supplemented with psychometric testing of children by the research team. Few studies have been blind, or made use of psychometric tests administered independently of the researchers. That said, many researchers emphasise the importance of contextual, qualitative studies in learning about the family experiences and processes in same-sex parented families from the point of view of parents, children and other family members (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Dempsey, 2012b; Goldberg, 2010; Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011; Lindsay et al., 2006; Riggs, 2007).

Researchers in this field have noted a range of limitations with regard to how their samples of participants are drawn. Although this is beginning to change, many studies are based on small and homogenous samples of highly educated and middle-class participants. Many of the comparative studies conducted to date on children or young adults raised in same-sex parented families are based on volunteer samples of participants rather than random samples. This means that it is unknown how representative and generalisable the studies' results are. Further to this, many researchers in this field note that their participants were mostly white and well educated, which does not reflect the likely socio-economic, ethnic and racial diversity of the same-sex parenting population. That said, it is important to emphasise all research designs have limitations and not to dismiss the cumulative findings from many small scale or volunteer sample studies, as some critics of this literature attempt to do (see Marks, 2012; Regnerus, 2012; Schumm, 2012). Amato (2012) indeed pointed out that if there were noteworthy harms accruing to children resulting from parental homosexuality per se, which is often the concern of those scholars who criticise research designs and methodology, these would be revealed in research on high socio-economic, ethnically homogenous samples of parents and children.

Some randomly sampled nationally representative data projects now include questions that enable the identification of gay, lesbian and bisexual respondents. These include the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and other health-oriented surveys in the US (see Biblarz & Savci, 2010) and The Avon Longitudinal Study of Children in the UK (see Golombok et al., 1997, 2003; Golombok & Badger, 2010; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). There have now been several randomly sampled comparative studies published on educational outcomes for children from same-sex and heterosexual families (Potter, 2012; Rosenfeld, 2010), and also social outcomes (Regnerus, 2012; Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Even the critics concede it is extremely difficult to use random, representative samples of same-sex families in comparative or other kinds of research. For instance, Schumm (2012) noted that large random samples are extremely expensive and often appear not to yield sufficient numbers of same-sex parents for quantitative analysis.

Well-designed longitudinal research, which enables following the same families over a number of years, can provide valuable data on how lesbian and gay parented children fare over time. The National Longitudinal Lesbian Families Study (NLLFS) in the US (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2006; Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006;) utilises in-depth interviews, and standard measures of child development to chart the wellbeing of children raised from birth by lesbian mothers. Gartrell and colleagues recruited 154 prospective lesbian mothers to their study between 1986 and 1992, and have followed them from conception until early adulthood. The study is ongoing, with a 93% retention rate to date.

## Psychological adjustment and cognitive development

Three meta-analyses (all conducted in the US) have now been published that consider whether and how the sexual orientation and/or gender of parents is associated with particular aspects of children's development (Allen & Burrell, 1996, 2002; Crowl et al., 2008). All have concluded that being raised in a lesbian- or gay-parented family has negligible influence on children's psychological adjustment. "Psychological adjustment" encompasses children's emotional wellbeing, their capacity to adhere to socially defined standards of appropriate behaviour, the quality of their relationships with peers, the degree of stigmatisation they experience, their self-esteem, and overall mental health. Allen and Burrell, in 1996 and again in 2002, found no statistical differences between the lesbian- or gay- and heterosexual-parented children on any measures with regard to children's psychological adjustment, whether the data included was based on parents' reports, teachers' reports of children's behaviour, or reports from the children themselves. The authors concluded each time there was no reason for US courts to continue their bias against same-sex parents. In 2008, Crowl and colleagues investigated children's psychological and cognitive adjustment across 19 different studies. These authors also found no differences between children raised in lesbian- or gay-parented and heterosexual-parented families with regard to psychological adjustment or cognitive development. In these studies, however, other demographic differences between same-sex and heterosexual families, such as income and education levels, were not always taken into account.

Family processes such as the level of conflict between the parents and the relative equity of their divisions of labour are known to be associated with children's wellbeing. As mentioned earlier, planned lesbian parent families with young children are known to have more egalitarian divisions of parenting and household labour than matched samples of heterosexual couple families (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Patterson et al., 2004; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2003) although birth mothers tend to assume more caring responsibilities than co-parents (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Patterson, 1995). Two studies have found an association between this more equitable division of child care among lesbian parents and higher scores on measures of children's psychological adjustment (Chan et al., 1998; Patterson, 1995). Chan et al. (1998) additionally found that neither the number nor gender of parents influenced children's psychological adjustment. What was important for all family types were family processes such as parenting stress, conflict, and relationship dissatisfaction. High stress, conflict and relationship dissatisfaction were associated with increased behavioural problems among the children.

Longitudinal studies have also followed the psychological adjustment of young people approaching adulthood who were raised in lesbian-parented families. In the National Longitudinal Lesbian Families Study in the US, the young people being followed have now reached early adulthood. Their psychological adjustment throughout early childhood was found to be similar to normative samples of American children raised in all kinds of heterosexual families (Gartrell et al., 1999, 2000, 2005, 2006). Gartrell and Boss (2010) recently reported that the 17-year-old young people in the study continued to display healthy psychological adjustment. According to their mothers' reports, the 17-year-old daughters and sons of lesbian mothers rated significantly higher in social and total competence and significantly lower in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive, and externalising problem behavior than their age-matched peers raised in heterosexual-parented families in a normative sample of American youth. Golombok and Badger (2010), in a recent publication from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Children in the UK, reported that the young adults raised from birth by lesbian couples and single mothers had higher psychological adjustment scores than the children in the study raised in conventional nuclear families.

A small number of studies have also compared adopted children's development in heterosexual and same-sex parented households and found negligible differences based on parental sexual orientation. Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2010) in the US compared 105 lesbian, gay male and heterosexual couple families with adopted children on a range of measures. There were no inter-country adoption children in the study but some trans-racial adoptions, and all of the children studied were adopted as infants. Children's psychological adjustment along with the adults' parenting approach, parental stress and couple relationship adjustment were not significantly associated with the sexual orientation of the

adults (see also Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005). Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau (2012), also in the US, compared the cognitive and emotional development over time (at 2, 12 and 24 months after placement) of adopted children who had previously been in foster families and who were being raised in heterosexual or same-sex parented families. Children in both household types displayed considerable gains in their cognitive development after adoption in both kinds of households, in spite of the fact that the lesbian and gay parents in the study were raising children who were considered “higher risk” prior to their adoptions. The authors concluded that adoption had been a great success for these children regardless of parental sexual orientation.

## Social and peer relationships

Children raised in same-sex parented families generally report good social networks and friendships, and peer relationships that follow typical patterns. Most school-aged children report they have mainly same-sex best friends and wider friendship networks (Golombok et al., 1983; Green 1978; Patterson 1994). Children’s peer relationships tend to be positive (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Golombok et al., 1983, 1997). Gartrell et al. (2012) found that 17-year-olds raised from birth by lesbian parents reported numerous close friendships that had lasted for a number of years. Most of the 78 young people in this study felt comfortable with bringing friends home and informing their friends of their parents’ sexuality.

Although relationships with friends are generally good, children raised in lesbian- or gay-parented families are known to worry about being teased, harassed or bullied, particularly by peers in the school environment. Indications are that teenagers are more concerned about this than younger children. Fear of losing friends because of parental sexuality or being judged negatively by others have been reported in studies of the teenaged children of lesbian mothers (Gartrell et al., 2005; Lindsay et al., 2006; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) and children are known to use selective disclosure strategies with regard to telling people about their parents’ sexuality (Bozett, 1987 ; Lindsay et al., 2006; Ray & Gregory, 2001). In Ray and Gregory’s Australian study of children and young people raised in lesbian-parented families, primary school aged children reported more teasing and bullying than the high-school-aged children. The 5- to 8-year-old children were found to be less aware of the potential for homophobic bullying or teasing than older children. Whereas the 5- to 8-year-olds were often open about having two mothers with peers at school, teenagers raised in lesbian-parented families were more guarded about providing this information. Although some were simply sick of having to explain their family configuration to others, other children expressed they were fearful of being bullied. Lindsay et al. (2006) found that teenaged children of lesbian parents used a process of trial and error to decide how to manage information about their parents’ sexuality. Those who had overtly experienced discrimination, teasing or bullying were more likely to adopt selective or private strategies but could try a more open strategy at a later date.

Despite fears and some negative experiences of bullying, teasing or harassment, it appears children raised in lesbian-parented families do not seem unduly vulnerable to experiencing difficult relationships with peers or bullying, although the US evidence is mixed. Comparative research has consistently found that children with lesbian mothers are only modestly more likely than their peers with heterosexual parents to be teased about their family composition or parents’ sexuality (see Bos & van Balen, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002). Rivers, Poteat, and Noret (2008) in the UK and Wainwright and Patterson (2006) in the US found that teenagers raised in same-sex parented families were no more likely to have experienced serious bullying or victimisation than their peers in conventional families. Conversely, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) report in the US indicated relatively high levels of reported bullying and harassment (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). The 588 LGBT parents and their 154 children in this study reported multiple forms of verbal and/or physical abuse, exclusion from representation in classrooms or requests not to talk about same-sex parented families, and generalised victimisation/harassment. Just over half of the children (51%) reported experiencing at least one form of abuse or discrimination, with 15% of this coming from teachers, the remainder from other students. van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, van Rooij, and Hermanns (2012), also in the US, reported that those teenagers in lesbian-parented families who had experienced bullying or teasing displayed considerable resilience and used a broad range of coping skills, more

often adaptive (e.g., optimism, confrontation or seeking support from others) than maladaptive (e.g., depression or avoidance).

The country in which children are raised appears to have a bearing on the likelihood of experiencing bullying or teasing. In the first cross-cultural study of the wellbeing of same-sex parented children raised in the US and The Netherlands (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008), the US-resident lesbian-parented children were significantly more likely than the Dutch children to report teasing by peers, and the US children were also less likely to disclose their family configuration to others than the Dutch children. The authors speculated these differences were due to the greater social acceptance of same-sex relationships in The Netherlands, which was the first country in the world to legalise gay marriage in 2001. Crouch et al. (2012) recently calculated that children's wellbeing scores on comparable measures are higher in European countries than the US, indicating that the prevailing socio-cultural climate of support for same-sex relationships may have some bearing on child wellbeing, indicating that the prevailing socio-cultural climate of support for same-sex relationships has some bearing on child wellbeing.

## Educational achievement and school performance

With regard to academic performance, the evidence is that lesbian- and gay-parented children perform as well as or better than their peers raised in heterosexual couple families. Wainwright et al. (2004) found that 44 young people with lesbian parents felt more connected to schools than those with heterosexual parents, and had similar grade point averages and levels of behavioural problems in the school environment. Gartrell and Bos (2010) reported similar findings to Wainwright and colleagues regarding school behaviour of both groups of young people, but higher than average academic achievement among the young men and women raised in lesbian-parented families (see also MacCallum & Golombok, 2004, in the UK). Rosenfeld (2010), also in the US, compared matched random samples of lesbian- and gay-parented and heterosexual-parented children, controlling for parental education, income and household stability of the parents and found no differences between the two groups with regard to children's progress in primary school. As some other studies that compare children's outcomes in same-sex and heterosexual couples do not adjust for differences in financial resources and education, this finding can be considered particularly important.

Potter (2012) set out to test whether the reported similar or better levels of academic achievement noted among the children and young people in lesbian-parented families held in data gathered from a large, random and nationally representative US sample of 19,043 children. His results indicated initially that the 158 children in same-sex parented families scored lower than their peers with heterosexual, married parents. However, when Potter controlled for experience of family transitions (i.e., parental divorce or separation), the disadvantages noted in the same-sex parented group disappeared. In other words, the disadvantages were better explained by family transitions the children had experienced rather than being raised in a same-sex parented family per se. This is in keeping with other American studies on children's academic achievement, which have found that children from single-parent, divorced or step-parented families do not do as well educationally as their peers with two continuously married parents (see Amato, 2005; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Raley & Wildsmith, 2004). These poorer levels of school performance are believed to stem from disruption and insecurity during the period of parental separation and re-partnering, rather than family structure per se (see Potter, 2012).

## Sexual and gender identity and behaviours

A popular belief among people who object to same-sex parents is that they will raise gay, lesbian or gender non-conforming children (see Barret & Robinson, 2000; Clarke, 2001; Goldberg, 2007; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). From this point of view, homosexuality or gender non-conformity is a deficit, and if these traits are more prevalent in same-sex parented children it constitutes evidence of harm. At the same time, various psychoanalytic and other social constructionist theories of sexuality and gender development emphasise parental sexuality and gender relations as pivotal influences on growing

children's sexuality and gender identity (see Hicks, 2005a, b; Goldberg, 2007; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). It is not unreasonable to expect that the sexual orientation or gender of parents would make a difference to how children express some gendered behaviours and view gender relations, and their degree of tolerance or acceptance of unconventional sexualities or gender. Lesbian and gay parents may indeed seek to challenge prevailing stereotypes of deeply etched gender differences between boys and girls in their parenting practices.

Research to date has considered a range of different aspects of children and young people's gender and sexuality such as their self-identification as male or female; the extent of their preferences for stereotypically masculine or feminine activities and toys; and their sexual orientation, or the extent to which they identify as heterosexual, gay, lesbian or bisexual. It has also documented same-sex parented young people's sexual attractions and behaviours, as distinct from their overarching sexual identity. This is important, as sexual fluidity, or same-sex as well as heterosexual attraction and behaviour, is well documented among young people under 25, particularly young women (see Dempsey et al., 2001; Diamond, 2009). With regard to self-identification as male or female, there is no evidence that children of lesbian mothers are more unhappy with their gender or experience more gender dysphoria than their heterosexual counterparts (see Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981). Male to female transgender parents were included in Green's studies, although none of the above studies were of children of gay fathers. Similarly, the children raised by same-sex parents appear no more likely to describe themselves as conclusively lesbian, gay or otherwise homosexual. Numerous studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s compared the sexual orientations of children of lesbian and gay male parents with those of heterosexual parents (Bailey et al., 1995; Bozett, 1980, 1987, 1989; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). All studies (some based on reports by the parents, and some on self-report by the young people) found that most young people raised by heterosexual and lesbian, gay or transgender parents identify as heterosexual.

Some differences have been found in the sexual and gendered behaviour of lesbian parented, as opposed to heterosexual parented young people. Tasker and Golombok (1997) found that the young adult daughters of lesbian parents were more likely to have experienced an attraction or sexual relationship with a member of the same sex. Bos et al. (2007) found that the DI-conceived 10-year-old daughters of co-parenting lesbian couples were less likely to conclusively consider themselves heterosexual than their peers raised in heterosexual couple families, and also less likely to report parental or peer pressure to conform to gender stereotypes. Children of lesbian mothers report less aggressiveness (Vanfraussen et al., 2002), are less likely to believe their own sex is superior (Bos et al., 2006), are more tolerant of gender non-conformity in boys (Fulcher et al., 2008), and sons display more gender flexibility (Brewaeys et al., 1997; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) meaning although they rate similarly to sons in heterosexual families on masculinity scales, they also tend to rate higher on femininity scales. Interestingly, however, daughters of lesbian mothers expressed fewer "masculine" occupational aspirations than the daughters of heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2006). This is a finding that was contradicted in some of the earlier studies of children of lesbian mothers, in which girls had higher aspirations to traditionally male-dominated occupations than the children of heterosexual parents (e.g., Green et al., 1986; Steckel, 1987).

## The New Family Structures Study

The New Family Structures Study (NFSS) (Regnerus, 2012) has recently created controversy in the US because its findings of harm for same-sex parented adults run counter to the results of many previous studies. The NFSS surveyed a randomly chosen sample of 2,988 American adults aged 18–39 who were raised in a range of family types. "Same-sex parented adults" were defined as those who reported their mother had had a romantic relationship with another woman during their childhood ( $n = 163$ ) and/or those who reported their father had had a romantic relationship with another man ( $n = 73$ ). Respondents were asked about 40 different social and psychological issues including their history of drug and alcohol use; experience of bullying; sexual experiences (including sexual abuse and forced sex); emotional closeness to family of origin; history of criminal convictions; depression, overall happiness and physical

health. Regnerus then compared what he defined as the “lesbian mothered” and “gay fathered” adults’ results with those who grew up in six other family configurations: adoptive families ( $n = 101$ ), divorced families ( $n = 116$ ), step-families ( $n = 394$ ), single parent families ( $n = 816$ ), married biological families ( $n = 919$ ), and “other” ( $n = 406$ ). In his discussion section, the author chose to highlight the differences between the same-sex parented families and the married biological family group.

When compared with adults who grew up in families with married biological parents, Regnerus found a number of statistically significant disadvantages for adults whose parents had had same-sex relationships. Some of the notable differences were that adults raised by mothers who had had lesbian relationships were more likely to report experience of forced sex and childhood experience of sexual abuse, they had higher rates of depression, poorer sense of family-of-origin safety and security, poorer academic achievement, and higher marijuana use than those raised by married biological parents. The children raised by fathers who had had gay relationships were more likely than those of married biological parents to smoke, have higher rates of depression and poorer family-of-origin safety and security, to have been arrested for a minor offense, and reported more numerous sexual partners.

Although Regnerus (2012) ostensibly found more disadvantages for children raised in same-sex parented families than any previous studies, it would be false to draw the conclusion that these results are cause for alarm. This was certainly the consensus of the family studies scholars invited to provide expert commentary on the study (see Amato, 2012; Eggebeen, 2012; Osborne, 2012). In the first instance, the vast majority of participants in this study were not experiencing poor wellbeing irrespective of their family structure. Second, despite the large, random sample, a major disadvantage with the research design was that it defined “same-sex parented” too loosely to be of analytic use. Many of the participants with so-called “lesbian mothers” or “gay fathers” had not been raised by parents who lived with same-sex partners. The sampling strategy also did not enable the author to distinguish between same-sex parented young adults who have experienced their parents divorce or separation and those who have not, when this could actually be critical to the results.

By way of comparison, in Potter’s previously mentioned 2012 US-based study of educational achievement for children in a range of family types, also based on a random, representative sample of children, the disadvantages that seemed associated with being raised in a same-sex parented family per se disappeared after controlling for family transitions within the lesbian mother and gay father groups. Furthermore, the higher levels of forced sex or parental sexual abuse for lesbian-parented adults in this study could well be explained by father abuse in the mother’s prior heterosexual relationship. The author himself indeed makes this point (Regnerus, 2012, p. 763). By contrast, Gartrell et al. (2005), in the National Longitudinal Lesbian Families Study, found that 78 children parented from birth by lesbian parents reported experiences of sexual abuse well below the national US average, in that none of the young people in the study reported being sexually abused.

In comparative research of this kind, the question always arises about the politics of research and what researchers are seeking to find in highlighting some family type comparisons over and above others (see Osborne, 2012; Stacey, 1997; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Amato (2012) re-analysed the Regnerus study data to compare differences between the adults whose parents had had gay or lesbian relationships and the entire group of heterosexual parented adults, on the grounds that this allowed a more accurate picture of the impact of parental sexual orientation. This is because most of the same-sex parented group in the Regnerus study would also have experienced parental divorce or separation, due to the way he drew his sample. Amato (2012) found the sizes of the differences between the same-sex and heterosexual parented groups were small to moderate rather than large and therefore of limited cause for concern when the group of same-sex parented young adults were compared to the total group of young adults with heterosexual parents. Arguably, Amato’s analytic strategy is fairer in comparing “like with like” and therefore taking into account the family transitions likely to have been experienced by the participants in this study whose parents had had a same-sex romantic relationship.



### Key messages: Children's wellbeing in same-sex parented families

- Most studies suggest that children raised by lesbian parents do at least as well as their peers with heterosexual parents when compared on a range of social, psychological and educational variables. Only a few studies overseas have included children of gay men. No comparative research of this kind has been conducted in Australia or New Zealand.
- Family processes such as levels of conflict between parents and their divisions of labour are more influential than the gender or sexuality of parents when it comes to children's wellbeing.
- In several US studies with adopted children who had previously been in foster families, those raised in heterosexual or lesbian and gay parented families both displayed considerable gains in their cognitive development after adoption. This is despite the fact that the lesbian and gay parented children were considered "higher risk" prior to their adoptions.
- Children raised in lesbian- and gay-parented families worry about being teased, harassed or bullied, particularly by peers in the school environment. This may lead to very selective disclosure about their parents' sexuality or family configuration. Despite this, children with lesbian mothers are only modestly more likely than their peers with heterosexual parents to be teased or bullied about their family composition or parents' sexuality.
- Children raised from infancy by lesbian couples may be more likely than children of heterosexual couples to experience their parents' separation. This could relate to the relative lack of institutional support for same-sex relationships.
- The country in which children are raised appears to have a bearing on the likelihood of experiencing bullying or teasing, indicating that the prevailing socio-cultural climate of support for same-sex relationships has some bearing on child wellbeing.

## Social support

Because many Australians continue to believe that the two-parent heterosexual nuclear family is the optimum environment in which to raise children (Dempsey & Critchley, 2010; Morse, McLaren, & McLachlan, 2007), lesbian and gay parents and their children may encounter prejudice in school environments and in dealings with other institutions in the course of daily family life (Lindsay et al., 2006; McNair et al., 2002; Ray & Gregory, 2001). In the past decade, Australian researchers have begun to document same-sex parented families' experiences of the education and health care systems, in order to find out how supportive these systems are of their needs (Lindsay et al., 2006; Mikhailovich, Martin, & Lawton, 2001; McNair et al., 2002, 2008; Perlesz & McNair, 2004). Research has also considered the sources of informal support families draw on in order to ensure adults and children's wellbeing (McNair et al., 2002; Rawsthorne, 2009; Short, 2007). As Rawsthorne (2009) argued, this research focus is important to ensure the needs of parents and children can be considered and taken into account in relevant social policy.

Some studies of family functioning in lesbian-parent households indicate that informal social support received from friends, families and other community members and formal support from organisations can help explain differences in children's wellbeing (e.g., Gartrell et al., 1999). In other words, poor access to social support and negative social interactions can be sources of stress that diminish parents' self-esteem and resources and hamper children's development. Support from friends, families, same-sex parented family-friendly organisations and communities can assist in mediating potentially adverse affects of legal and other forms of discrimination (Lindsay et al., 2006; McNair et al., 2002; Rawsthorne, 2009).

McNair et al. (2002) explored 125 mostly Victorian and NSW-resident lesbian prospective and current parents' levels of acceptance and support from informal networks and various formal health and community service providers. They also asked about their actual and anticipated parental difficulties

when dealing with services and people in their networks. They found that lesbian parents generally encountered high levels of acceptance and support from their informal networks and service providers. GPs and mental health service providers were most supportive, with child protection workers found to be among the least supportive. Prospective parents anticipated significantly greater difficulties for themselves and their children than women who were already parents indicated was typical. Prospective parents also expected less support from community and health service providers than women who were already parents reported receiving. This indicates that fear of prejudice or discrimination due to parental sexuality may outweigh actual experiences of ill treatment. However, the authors pointed out that qualitative data provided by the parents indicated that professional and other kinds of social supports are carefully chosen for their anticipated “lesbian-friendly” credentials, and that lesbian parents are particularly reliant on other lesbian parents for support. Mikhailovich et al. (2001) also found that lesbian and gay parents reported largely positive experiences of their interactions with the health care system. Although a quarter of the 92 parents they surveyed had experienced some discrimination, usually in the form of inappropriate or invasive questioning about their familial or relationship circumstances, most of their concerns related to problems that had nothing to do with parental sexual orientation (e.g., long waiting times and effective treatment of chronic health conditions).

Lesbian, gay or bisexual foster families may contend with discriminatory practices among social workers that mean they are not given due consideration as suitable carers (Hicks, 2006; Riggs, 2007, 2011). Riggs (2011) noted that few foster care agencies have policies to guide working with LGBT families. Hicks (2000) indicated that gay and lesbian foster parents in the UK, more often than their heterosexual counterparts, have disabled children placed in their care or children who are hard to place for other kinds of behavioural reasons. Although Riggs (2007, 2011) has found no comparable evidence of such practices in Australia, he concurs that Australian lesbian and gay foster parents may be treated as carers of “last resort”. In his qualitative study of the experiences of foster families in four Australian states, Riggs (2011) found that many gay men and lesbians believed they were treated with some degree of “justifiable suspicion” by agencies, and were often reliant on the goodwill of individual social workers rather than a policy framework that encouraged their participation. Riggs (2007) also found evidence that social workers’ assessment reports are approving of lesbian and gay couples who are not demonstrably affectionate with each other, indicating that their sexuality is only acceptable if it is rendered invisible.

How Australian schools respond to same-sex parented families has recently received research attention. Mitchell and Ward (2010) noted that while there are many opportunities for Australian schools to lead social change in supporting family diversity, many do not effectively address issues facing same-sex attracted or gender diverse young people or same-sex parented families. Lindsay et al. (2006), in a qualitative study of the school experiences of 20 Victorian lesbian-parented families (in which children were included in the family interviews), found that some children receive very strong messages in school environments that they should not discuss their family experiences in the classroom. This could include being silenced by teachers when they attempted to share information about events such as Pride March or their parents’ commitment ceremony. Although Lindsay and colleagues noted an increase in families with same-sex parents in some areas is putting pressure on some primary schools to change these kinds of occurrences, both curriculum and pedagogy in primary schools remains strongly heteronormative (Mitchell & Ward, 2010). In other words, teaching materials and library books often give minimal coverage to any kind of family diversity or present a “sanitised” view of lesbian and gay parented families in which parental affection or sexuality is erased (see also Lovell & Riggs, 2009).

In common, researchers call for increased attention to teacher, social worker and medical practitioner training about family diversity, including the need for service providers to avoid making assumptions about family relationships, and for inclusive language about gender and number of parents on relevant documentation. Health, community agency and education service providers, in order to better support LGBT parented families, need to encourage environments in which familial diversity is considered the norm rather than the exception (Lindsay et al., 2006; Lovell & Riggs, 2009; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; McNair et al., 2002, 2008; Rawsthorne, 2009; Riggs, 2011).

### Key messages: Social support

- Support from friends, families, same-sex parented family-friendly organisations and communities can assist in mediating potentially adverse affects of legal and other forms of discrimination.
- Lesbian co-parenting couples and single parents appear to be receiving good support from medical and other kinds of health care providers but evidence suggests that this is at least in part because lesbian parents choose their health care providers very carefully.
- Lesbian, gay or bisexual foster families may contend with discriminatory practices among social workers that mean they are not given due consideration as suitable carers, or expected to hide open displays of affection in order to be considered suitable carers. Many foster care agencies do not have policies that support family diversity.
- Although some school environments in areas with large numbers of lesbian or gay parents have developed practices supportive of family diversity, this is, at best, uneven. Some children receive very strong messages in school environments that they should not discuss their family experiences in the classroom. This could include being silenced by teachers when they attempted to share information about events such as Pride March or their parents' commitment ceremony.

## Conclusion

There are many ways in which same-sex parented families are similar to and different from conventional, heterosexual couple families. Although a two parent cohabiting couple often forms the basis of the family, same-sex parented families may also be based on three or four parent models, in which a known sperm donor or co-parenting male couple will be engaged in non-resident care of the children. Same-sex parented families in Australia are often created through assisted reproductive technologies and foster care, yet a substantial number of children being raised by lesbian or gay parents, like many children raised by heterosexual couples, have experienced their parents divorce and were born in the context of prior heterosexual marriages. Although same-sex parented families to some extent challenge the conventional idea that parents are biologically related to their children, with the exception of foster families, it is usual for children to be biologically related to at least one of the parents, and adoption is rare due to legal and social constraints in Australia. Indications are also that same-sex parented families are more likely to challenge the inequitable divisions of paid and domestic labour known to characterise dual earner heterosexual nuclear families (ABS, 2013).

Although numerous scholars now agree it is not possible to sustain a claim frequently made in the earlier literature that there are no differences between children raised in same-sex and heterosexual parented families (Amato, 2012; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Eggebeen, 2012; Goldberg, 2010; Marks, 2012; Regnerus, 2012; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), there is now strong evidence that same-sex parented families constitute supportive environments in which to raise children. Indeed, with regard to children raised from birth by lesbian couples clear benefits appear to exist with regard to: the quality of parenting children experience in comparison to their peers parented in heterosexual couple families; children's and young adults' greater tolerance of sexual and gender diversity; and gender flexibility displayed by children, particularly sons.

Biblarz and Stacey (2010) commented that the benefits regarding parenting quality that children of lesbian parents appear to experience could well be due to the "double dose" of "feminine" parenting. Just as heterosexual mothers usually have greater care-giving responsibilities and display greater parenting skill than heterosexual fathers (e.g., Craig, 2006), lesbian mothers appear to bring this gendered tendency to their parenting relationships. Additionally, lesbian mothers are likely to be highly motivated parents given the lengths many need to go to conceive children, and they may also be conscious that their parenting practices are under scrutiny due to social disapproval. It is also possible that same-sex parents are especially attentive to the quality of their parenting as a way of counteracting the ill effects of prejudice and discrimination their children may experience. More needs to be known about whether

children raised in planned lesbian parent families are more likely to experience parental separation. However, if this does hold true, it could well be linked to the relative lack of institutional support for same-sex relationships, rather than any inherent instability to which relationships between two women are prone. In many jurisdictions, including Australia, same-sex couples are still not permitted to marry, and it remains to be seen how more widespread marriage rights could influence this relational stability finding.

Where differences that could be construed as disadvantageous to children have been detected between samples of same-sex parented families and heterosexual couple families these need to be kept in perspective. With regard to the one large study thus far that has detected harms to children raised in same-sex parented families, the fact that the analysis does not take into account the children's experience of their parents' separation and divorce is a serious methodological flaw. In commenting on the legislative and policy implications of the recent Regnerus study in the US, Paul Amato (2012), a very well-respected US-based family scholar, warns against deriving legal or policy implications from these ostensibly negative research findings about same-sex parents and their children:

It would be unfortunate if the findings from the Regnerus study were used to undermine the social progress that has been made in recent decades in protecting the rights of gays, lesbians and their children ... Most of the young adults with gay or lesbian parents in the New Family Structures Survey also experienced divorce as children. Consequently, it is likely that many of the disadvantages reported by these offspring were due to ... the failed heterosexual marriages of parents rather than the sexual orientations of parents. (p. 773)

Law- and policy-makers in Australia have already made use of the considerable research evidence that demonstrates children in planned lesbian parent families do as well psychologically and sometimes better than children in heterosexual parented families. For example, findings from earlier reviews of this body of literature were taken into account in recommending extending the eligibility criteria for access to clinical donor insemination to lesbian couples in the State of Victoria, in addition to amending the Status of Children Act to make children's parentage clearer in cases where lesbian couples use donor insemination to conceive (see Victorian Law Reform Commission, 2007). A remaining area of state and territory based legal inequity involves access to adoption rights for same-sex couples.

Although many Australian same-sex parented families are currently receiving good support from their health care providers, more could be done in the social policy arena to develop supportive service systems. One very positive finding emerging from this overview of the research is that same-sex parented families often do not experience the sexuality-based abuse or discrimination they fear. However, the reported levels of concern about discrimination, teasing or bullying by parents and children in the school setting do indicate that a generalised stigma associated with societal prejudice against same-sex relationships forms a backdrop to all same-sex parenting. Health care providers, the education system, the child protection system and other family service systems clearly have work to do in being fully aware of the diverse family forms in Australia and supporting and providing appropriate services to meet their needs. A set of guidelines were recently developed by the Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University, in conjunction with VicHealth, to assist service providers in community, hospital and counselling settings in Victoria to provide inclusive and sensitive care to same-sex attracted parents and their children, and to prospective same-sex attracted parents.<sup>6</sup> More initiatives of this kind in other states and territories would ensure responsive and inclusive service provision to same-sex parented families.

To date, little research has been published on transgender or bisexual parented families, the experiences of children growing up with transgender or bisexual parents, or planned gay father families. More research into family structures and processes among these groups is needed, both in Australia and internationally. Additionally, given the evidence that children's wellbeing in same-sex parented families varies cross-culturally, a body of Australian quantitative data on the wellbeing of same-sex parented children and families would be welcome as a means of monitoring how Australian families are faring in global perspective. It is also important to avoid the assumption that it is only comparative, quantitative research that enables learning about the wellbeing or other characteristics of children in same-sex

<sup>6</sup> *Guidelines for Health Care Providers Working With Same-Sex Parented Families* is available via VicHealth <[www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Health-Inequalities/Guidelines-for-Health-care-Providers-working-with-Same-Sex-Parented-Families.aspx](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/Publications/Health-Inequalities/Guidelines-for-Health-care-Providers-working-with-Same-Sex-Parented-Families.aspx)>

parented families (see Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Goldberg, 2007, 2010; Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). As scholars such as Goldberg (2010) advocate, it is important to “study complex families in context” through qualitative research, and indeed over time, in order to learn more about how parental gender and sexuality interact in specific relational settings.

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Note: To assist the reader to identify which references may be most relevant to an Australian context, the references marked with an asterisk (\*) indicate that the research was conducted in Australia or New Zealand.

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**Acknowledgments:** Sincere thanks to Judy Cashmore, Abbie Goldberg, Jennifer Power, Damien Riggs and Nicola Surtees who generously gave their time to read drafts of this report and provide helpful suggestions about structure, content and additional references.



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ISSN 2200-4106

ISBN 978-1-922038-34-0

