



Are children of same-gender parents worse off?

There is over a decade of scientific research demonstrating that the outcomes for children of same gender-parents¹ are just like those for children of mother-father parents.² In some instances, children of same-gender parents may even fare better.³ The collective research does not support the idea that children need specific gender figures (i.e. “a mother and a father”) to have positive childhoods, be well-adjusted, or succeed. Instead, what matters are things like family stability, economic resources, supportive parenting, and parental warmth.⁴

Nonetheless, some people believe that same-gender parents are less suitable than heterosexual parents or mother-father parenting couples.⁵ In a 2012 U.S. survey of over 1000 participants, less than half of respondents agreed that same-gender parents could raise children as well as mother-father couples.⁶ Some even rated single parents as better for children than two same-gender parents.⁷

The acceptance of same-gender parents has improved in the last 10+ years, but there is still a substantial group of people who continue to believe harmful misconceptions⁸ about LGBTQ+ and same-gender parents. This is reflected in ongoing policies. For example, in some states, child placement agencies are allowed to discriminate against LGBTQ+ parents.⁹ LGBTQ+ people wanting to become parents continue to face obstacles, especially those who are transgender, racialized, or have less access to financial resources.¹⁰

¹ “Same-gender parents” refers to a parenting couple comprised of two mothers or two fathers. The research cited in this article uses terms such as “same-sex parents”, “same-gender” parents, and “gay and lesbian parents”. Though sex, gender, and sexual identity are distinct concepts, this article uses “same-gender parents” as an umbrella term for clarity and consistency when discussing these family structures.

²Baiocco et al. 2024; Fedewa et al. 2015; Knight et al. 2017; Manning et al. 2014; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Prickett et al. 2015; Reczek 2020

³Baiocco et al. 2024; Kabátek and Perales 2021; Mazrekaj et al. 2020

⁴ Baiocco et al. 2024; Manning et al. 2014; Reczek 2020

⁵Cheng et al. 2023; Manning and Gustafson 2025

⁶ Cheng et al. 2023

⁷ Cheng et al. 2023

⁸ Manning and Gustafson 2025

⁹ Every Child Deserves a Family, n.d.

¹⁰ Goldberg 2023

Commented [de1]: I've decided to use this given that: the studies use a mix of terms, sometimes same-sex but a few also use same-gender and some use gay/lesbian. Also, given that the studies are from the 2010s, though they used "same-sex" they probably meant "same-gender" by today's definitions, since i doubt they were looking at sex assigned at birth specifically but rather looked at woman-woman and man-man couples. I provided a definition in the footnotes to try to encompass all this. let me know what you think.

Commented [AG1R2]: This could be ok for the context of the FC audience. what do you think Mandy?

Commented [MS1R3]: Yeah, I think so. I don't see the definition in the footnotes, did I miss it?

Commented [de1R4]: It's the first one, footnote are a bit complicated in sharepoint it seems. Here it is copied: "Same-gender parents" refers to a parenting couple comprised of two mothers or two fathers. The research cited in this article uses terms such as "same-sex parents", "same-gender" parents, and "gay and lesbian parents". Though sex, gender, and sexual identity are distinct concepts, this article uses "same-gender parents" as an umbrella term for clarity and consistency when discussing these family structures.

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Commented [AG3R2]: I think mother-father is the most digestible. Unless the studies you are referencing include samples of non-binary or gender fluid parenting couples, then I would leave mother-father.

Commented [MS3R3]: Agreed. Mother/father is simple and understandable.

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Myth #1: Children of same-gender parents are worse off.

Broadly, research finds that children of same-gender parents do not have a disadvantage compared to children of mother-father parenting couples.¹¹ Differences in child outcomes are primarily explained by things like socioeconomic factors and access to resources,¹² family stability,¹³ stigma,¹⁴ and family transitions,¹⁵ not by parents' sexual orientation or gender.

In 2012, researchers conducted a meta-analysis examining 40 studies on same-gender families in the USA.¹⁶ Across the studies reviewed, findings consistently showed that American children raised by same-gender parents fare just as well as children raised by mother-father parents.¹⁷ This was true for a wide range of measures including:

- academic performance
- cognitive development
- social development
- psychological health
- sexual behavior (STI, pregnancy, rates of sexual activity, age of sexual activity) and;
- substance use

Another meta-analysis from 2015 looking at 33 studies with a total of 5272 children also failed to find any evidence that showed that children of same-gender parents are worse off than children of mother-father parents.¹⁸ However, the researchers did find that in some cases, children of same-gender parents had better parent-child relationships¹⁹ and slightly better psychological adjustment.

Interestingly, some research indicates that children of same-gender parents engage in more prosocial behavior, which involves helping others, showing kindness, and having empathy.²⁰ Certain studies have also demonstrated better academic outcomes for children

¹¹ Baiocco et al. 2024; Fedewa et al. 2015; Knight et al. 2017; Manning et al. 2014; Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Prickett et al. 2015; Reczek 2020

¹² Manning et al. 2014; Reczek 2020

¹³ Manning et al. 2014

¹⁴ Reczek 2020

¹⁵ Reczek 2020

¹⁶ Manning et al. 2014

¹⁷ Manning et al. 2014

¹⁸ Fedewa et al. 2015

¹⁹ Fedewa et al. 2015

²⁰ Baiocco et al. 2024

with same-gender parents compared to children of mother-father parents,²¹ including scoring higher on standardized tests,²² being more likely to graduate high school,²³ and being more likely to enroll in college,²⁴

Historically, children of same-gender parents were sometimes found to be behind in school in comparison to children of mother-father parents.²⁵ However, researchers discovered that these differences disappeared over time.²⁶ By 2008, it was only in areas with anti-LGBTQ+ laws and negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ communities that children of same-gender parents were falling behind, and from 2010 on, researchers were unable to find such differences.²⁷ This means that stigma and structural inequality, not parent sexuality or gender, were likely responsible for these earlier differences.²⁸

It is difficult to say for certain why children of same-gender parents might fare better in certain areas, such as academics. One hypothesis is that it is typically more complicated for same-gender parents to have children, potentially involving time-consuming and expensive steps, such as adoption or IVF; therefore it is possible that same-gender parents are more likely to have a higher socioeconomic status,²⁹ a factor which has been demonstrated to impact child wellbeing and success regardless of parent gender or sexuality,³⁰

Studies have also found that, in some cases, same-gender parents spend more time with their children³¹ and show higher parental warmth³² compared to mother-father parents. Again, it is possible that this is due to same-gender parents having access to more resources. It may also be that same-gender parents feel the need to involve themselves more due to perceived social stigma about their abilities as parents.³³

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²¹ Kabátek and Perales 2021; Mazrekaj et al. 2020

²² Kabátek and Perales 2021; Mazrekaj et al. 2020

²³ Kabátek and Perales 2021; Mazrekaj et al. 2020

²⁴ Kabátek and Perales 2021

²⁵ Boertien and Bernardi 2019

²⁶ Boertien and Bernardi 2019

²⁷ Boertien and Bernardi 2019

²⁸ Boertien and Bernardi 2019

²⁹ Mazrekaj et al. 2020

³⁰ Manning et al. 2014; Reczek 2020

³¹ Prickett et al. 2015

³² Baiocco et al. 2024

³³ Baiocco et al. 2024

When it comes to adoption, research finds that birth parents are typically open to adoption by same-gender couples, with some even actively seeking out same-gender couples.³⁴ After adoption, birth parents were found to be happy with the contact they had with same-gender adoptive parents and have warm feelings towards them.³⁵ Research has also shown that transgender individuals are more open to adopting “hard to place” children, including teenagers, and children with behavioral or mental health challenges.³⁶

Finally, it is important to note that research does not find that children's gender identity or sexual orientation changes based on their parents' sexual orientation.³⁷ Beliefs that same-gender parents try to influence their child's sexual or gender identity are unsupported.

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Myth #2: Children need a mother and a father.

Related to the myth that children of LGBTQ+ parents are worse off than children of heterosexual parents is the idea that having a gendered example of both a mother and a father is paramount to the healthy development of children. However, the research does not support this.

As explained in this article, children with same-gender parents (i.e. two “moms” or two “dads”) fare as well as children with different-gender parents (a “mom” and a “dad”), demonstrating that a child does not need both a mother and a father to grow up healthy and successful.

Researchers emphasize that when it comes to child outcomes, family stability, access to economic resources, and supportive parenting matters more than the gender of the parents.³⁸ This is in line with broader sociological research that establishes these factors as key to healthy child development. Research has also shown that regardless of gender, higher parental warmth is associated with more prosocial behaviors, while higher hostility and rejection is associated with more externalizing behavior (e.g.: aggression, drug use, delinquency, antisocial behavior, hyperactivity, bullying, etc.)³⁹ This shows that the way someone parents their child matters much more than their gender.

³⁴ Farr et al. 2023

³⁵ Farr et al. 2023

³⁶ Goldberg et al. 2020

³⁷ Fedewa et al. 2015

³⁸ Manning et al. 2014

³⁹ Baiocco et al. 2024

Furthermore, families with less traditional gender roles may have a less gendered division of labor when it comes to housework and parenting,⁴⁰ which could translate to parents spending more equal time with their children and may have a positive impact on children.⁴¹ For families with transgender parents, the transition of the parent can increase family resilience and may encourage children to have broader understandings of gender and develop greater tolerance toward marginalized groups.⁴² Many transgender parents and their children report positive parent-child relationships, indicating that even changes in parental gender identity do not have a negative impact on children.⁴³

Despite the abundance of evidence that the gender of parents does not have an important impact on children, this myth prevails for many reasons:⁴⁴

- the media representing families with a heterosexual and cisgender mother and father as “the norm”;
- believed differences in parenting ability between women and men despite research finding this to be “virtually nonexistent”;⁴⁵
- socially constructed expectations about women’s roles (e.g. cooking, cleaning and nurturing) and men’s roles (working and leading);
- people who have more traditional beliefs about gender roles may be more likely to believe that children “need a mom and dad” despite the evidence showing the contrary.

Importantly, these beliefs about gender roles and parenting are produced by society and not scientifically established.

Conclusion

Many studies have been conducted on the potential differences between children of same-gender parents and mother-father parents. Throughout this large body of literature, researchers have not found evidence to support that children of same-gender parents are at a disadvantage in comparison to children of mother-father parents, nor have they found support for the idea that a child “needs a mother and a father”. In fact, some studies point

⁴⁰ Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013; Prickett et al. 2015; Reczek 2020

⁴¹ Prickett et al. 2015

⁴² Goldberg 2023

⁴³ Goldberg 2023

⁴⁴ Webb et al. 2018

⁴⁵ Webb et al. 2018, p.1352

to children of same-gender parents having an advantage over different-gender parents in certain areas.⁴⁶

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Children of same-gender parents have been found to experience stress when exposed to homophobia, prejudice, bullying, discrimination, and hostile public rhetoric,⁴⁷ demonstrating that the public's reaction to LGBTQ+ families is what can be harmful, not the gender or sexuality of the parent.

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Recommendations

- There is a limited amount of research on a range of LGBTQ+ parents, including bisexual and transgender parents. Current research does not support that these parents disadvantage children, but more nuanced research beyond "same-gender vs "different-gender" should be conducted to better understand the potential obstacles, challenges, and advantages experiences by various LGBTQ+ family configurations.⁴⁸
- More research is also needed on families with different race and socio-economic backgrounds given that research has historically focused on white and middle-class families.⁴⁹
- Policies must be developed to reduce barriers to becoming parents for LGBTQ+ people and fight the stigma and discrimination that they experience.
 - This should include access to multiple pathways for becoming parents, such as adoption and reproductive technologies (IVF, sperm donation, etc.) as different pathways may be better suited for different LGBTQ+ people/family configurations.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Baiocco et al. 2024; Fedewa et al. 2015; Kabátek and Perales 2021; Mazrekaj et al. 2020

⁴⁷ Knight et al. 2017

⁴⁸ Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013

⁴⁹ Goldberg 2023

⁵⁰ Goldberg 2023

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