



# Coparenting and Child Adjustment among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Adoptive Parent Families

Rachel H. Farr & Charlotte J. Patterson

University of Massachusetts-Amherst & University of Virginia  
Departments of Psychology



## Abstract

- Coparenting among heterosexual parents is associated with child behavior. Less is known, however, about coparenting and its associations with child adjustment in adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents.
- In this study, associations among coparenting and child adjustment were explored among adoptive families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples using multiple assessments, including observational data.
- Although significant differences in coparenting were found across couple type, all couples on average demonstrated more supportive than undermining coparenting behavior.
- Couples who were more supportive than undermining also had children with fewer behavior problems, regardless of family type.
- In sum, parental sexual orientation was associated with differences in parenting interaction, but not with differences in child outcomes.

## Introduction

- Coparenting describes the ways in which two parents accomplish the tasks of childrearing together (McHale et al., 2000).
- In heterosexual-parent families, qualities of coparenting have been found to be associated with child adjustment such that more supportive coparenting behaviors are related to fewer child behavior problems (e.g., McHale et al., 2002; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2009).
- To date, coparenting and associations with child outcomes have not been extensively studied among adoptive families and families with lesbian and gay parents. Little observational data in this area exists.
- The purpose of this study was to examine coparenting and child behavior in adoptive families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples with young children.

## Method

- Participants were 104 families (25 lesbian, 29 gay, and 50 heterosexual couples) with at least one adopted (via domestic, infant adoption) child ( $M_{age} = 3$  years). Demographic information is presented in Table 1.
- Observational data of family interaction were collected. Both parents and child engaged in a videotaped, free play session lasting ten minutes.
- Dimensions of supportive and undermining coparenting behavior demonstrated during family play were analyzed using the Coparenting Behavior Coding Scale (Schoppe et al., 2001).
- To assess child behavioral adjustment, parents completed the Child Behavior Checklist for 1½ to 5 year olds (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000).
- Hypothesis 1: Couples would differ in coparenting across family type, since previous coparenting literature on division of labor indicates that same-sex couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to report sharing rather than specializing in childcare (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).
- Hypothesis 2: Regardless of family structure, more supportive coparenting interactions would be associated with better adjustment among children.

Table 1. Demographic Information about Adoptive Families

Variable	Lesbian Mothers	Gay Fathers	Heterosexual Parents	ANOVA or Chi-square
Age (years)	43	41	42	n.s.
Race (% White)	80%	86%	78%	n.s.
Education (% College or Graduate Degree)	94%	89%	85%	n.s.
Work Status (% Full-Time)	72%	81%	77%	n.s.
Family Income (\$K)	168	190	150	n.s.
Length of Couple Relationship (years)	13	13	14	n.s.
One child in household	63%	62%	50%	n.s.

Figure 1. Coparenting behavior among adoptive parenting couples.

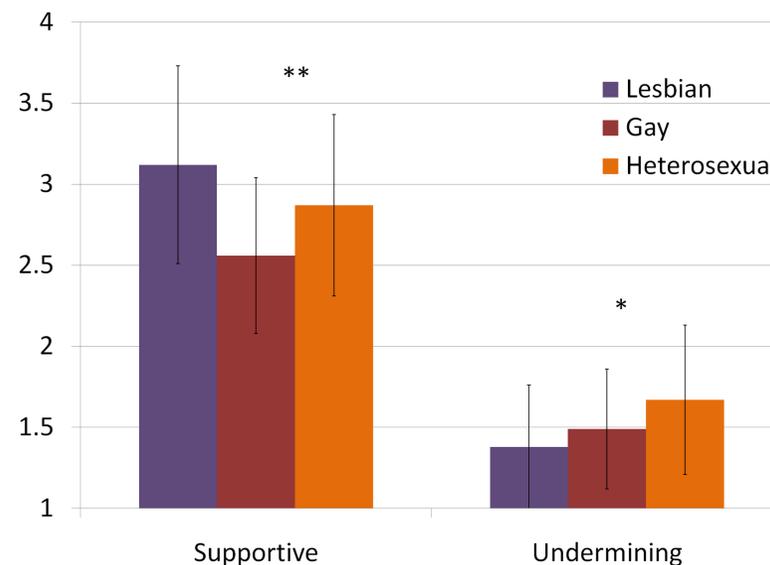


Table 2. Correlations among Coparenting and Child Behavior Problems

	Internalizing	Externalizing	Total
Supportive	-.17	-.22*	-.19 <sup>†</sup>
Pleasure	-.04	-.19*	-.13
Interactiveness	-.21*	-.21*	-.24*
Undermining	.06	.15	.09
Competition	.04	.20*	.16

Note. Values represent Pearson  $r$  values.  
<sup>†</sup>.05 <  $p$  < .01. \* $p$  < .05.

## Results

- Results showed that, overall, all couples demonstrated significantly higher levels of supportive rather than undermining behavior during family play (see Figure 1).
- Several significant differences, however, were found among couples in coparenting (see Figure 1). Lesbian couples were the most supportive, and gay couples the least. Heterosexual couples were the most undermining, and lesbian couples the least.
- Thus, a unique profile of coparenting dynamics emerged for each family type.
- Despite these differences, parents who demonstrated more supportive behaviors also had children with fewer problems, regardless of family type (see Table 2).
- In particular, greater pleasure and interactiveness among parents were associated with fewer child externalizing problems. Greater interactiveness was also associated with fewer internalizing and total behavior problems among children (see Table 2).
- In contrast, greater competition demonstrated by parents was associated with greater externalizing behavior problems among children (see Table 2).
- These associations were not significantly different across family types.

## Discussion

- In conclusion, families led by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive couples differed in coparenting behaviors. These findings may indicate how parental sexual orientation, as well as parent gender, may be linked with differences in parenting experiences of adoptive families.
- For all families, however, supportive coparenting was significantly related to fewer behavior problems among children.
- Taken together, the results suggest the importance of family processes to child outcomes in adoptive families with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents, over and above the influence of family structure and parental sexual orientation.
- These findings contribute new information to developmental and family systems theory about how parental sexual orientation is related to family dynamics and child outcomes. The results may also inform policy and law regarding controversy about the adoption of children by lesbian and gay adults.

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## Contact:

Dr. Rachel H. Farr, [rfarr@psych.umass.edu](mailto:rfarr@psych.umass.edu); Dr. Charlotte J. Patterson, [cjp@virginia.edu](mailto:cjp@virginia.edu)

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