



# How Does Parental Anxiety Affect Adopted Children's Self-Concept in Families with Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents?

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## Introduction

- There is a distinct gap in the literature surrounding the extent to which parental anxiety is passed on from parent to child in adoptive family structures as well as in same-sex parented families.
- Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserts in his ecological theory that when something affects one member of the family, it will affect each other member of that family.
- Bowen's family systems theory describes the fact that families represent a complex set of interrelationships and key characteristics and values that are instilled within it (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).
- According to Bowlby (1969), children's interactions with primary caregivers play an instrumental role in children's emerging self-concepts in middle childhood.
- Pinto (1998) found that children with mothers who were socially anxious were more likely to be neglected by peers, be more socially withdrawn, and exhibit less pro-social behaviors.
- There have been indications that maternal anxiety plays a significant role in child anxiety (Waters, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Farrell, 2012). The major contributor that researchers have found relating these two factors was the child's perception of their mothers' anxiety.
- Woodruff-Borden, Morrow, Bourland and Cambron (2002) researched the effects of anxious parenting on their interactions with their children. They found that anxious parents agreed less with their child, praised their children less, and ignore their child more often than non-anxious parents.
- Based on previous research, we hypothesized that children who have parents with higher levels of anxiety would have lower self-concepts.
- We also hypothesized that there would not be any difference by family type.
- The purpose of the current study was to explore how children adopted by same-sex and other-sex parents might be affected in terms of self-concepts by their parents' anxiety levels.

## Method

- Participants were 150 parents (14 lesbian, 21 gay, and 32 heterosexual couples) and their adopted child (via domestic, private adoption) between 6 and 11 years of age (mean age of 8). See Table 1 for demographic characteristics of participating families.
- Parents' symptoms of anxiety were assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983).
- Children's self-concepts were assessed using Harter's Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 2012).
- Families were recruited from five private domestic adoption agencies, and were from 12 jurisdictions across the U.S. (East and West Coasts, and the South) in which couples had jointly adopted (all parents were the legal adoptive parents of their child).
- All participating families were from a larger longitudinal study and were visited in their homes by a researcher.

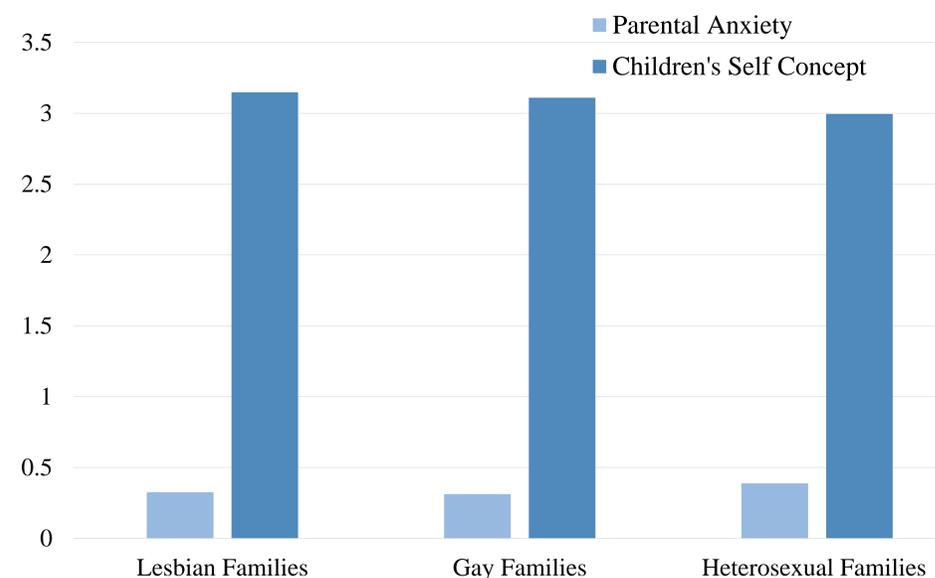
Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of LGH Adoptive Families

	Lesbian Families	Gay Families	Heterosexual Families	ANOVA or Chi-square
Parent age	49(5.20)	45(5.28)	48(6.28)	$p = .025$
Parent race (% White)	89%	87%	84%	n.s.
Education (% college degree)	97%	87%	87%	n.s.
Work status (% full-time)	66%	77%	65%	n.s.
Annual family income (\$K)	134K	239K	172K	$p = .008$
Child mean age at visit	8(1.5)	8(2.0)	8(2.1)	n.s.
Child sex (% girls)	75%	33%	56%	$p = .021$
Child race (% White)	30%	29%	44%	n.s.
More than one child in household	58%	67%	67%	n.s.

## Results

- Results of the Behavioral Severity Index indicated that our parents overall had low levels of anxiety. Results of the Harter's Self-Perception Profile indicated that our children had high levels of self-concepts
- Children's self-concept and parental anxiety did not differ by family type (see Figure 1).
- The correlation between parental anxiety and children's self-concept was not significant,  $r(68) = .19, p = n.s.$

Figure 1. Mean scores by family type for the Brief Symptom Inventory and Harter's Self-Perception Scale for Children



## Discussion

- Contrary to our hypothesis, we did not find any significant correlations between parental anxiety and children's self-concept in adoptive families across family types.
- Our parents had low levels of self-reported anxiety across all family types, and children reported very positive self-concepts, which indicates no disadvantage of children having lesbian or gay parents.
- It is possible that there are discrepancies between the way parents perceive their anxiety and the amount that a child picks up on parents' emotions.
- It is equally possible that since there are not biological ties between parent and child, children are not predisposed to the same genetic vulnerabilities of their adoptive parents.
- Since our families represent a higher socioeconomic status, it is likely that these parents have the resources and coping mechanisms to control their anxiety symptoms, and thereby minimizing effects on their children.
- Few studies about parental anxiety have considered same-sex couples, and few about adoption focus on lesbian and gay parents, so the results here offer several important contributions to the literature since there were no differences among family type.
- Limitations to our study included having a relatively small sample size and self-reported anxiety as opposed to a clinical diagnosis.
- There should be future research into adoptive families across family types where one or more parent has a clinical diagnosis of anxiety and what type of effect that has on children's self-concepts.

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