Medical Xpress

Study examines how parenthood affects gay couples' health, HIV risk

June 27 2012

Gay parents face many of the same challenges as straight parents when it comes to sex and intimacy after having children, according to a new study of gay fathers published in the journal *Couple and Family Psychology*. The findings suggest that gay male couples who are raising children may experience lifestyle changes that could reduce their HIV risk.

"When gay couples become parents, they become very focused on the kids, they are tired, there is less time for communication and less desire for sex," said Colleen Hoff, professor of sexuality studies at San Francisco State University. "They go through a lot of the same changes as heterosexual couples who have kids."

Nationwide, approximately one in five gay male couples is raising children. Hoff and colleagues studied whether becoming a parent causes gay dads to change their lifestyle in ways that protect them from risky sexual behavior, or if the stress of parenting leads to increased health risks such as infidelity and unprotected sex with outside partners. The researchers interviewed 48 gay male couples who are raising children together.

"We found that gay fathers have less time for sex and less emphasis on sexuality, which could mean they are at less risk for HIV," Hoff said. "Many fathers said they feel a sense of responsibility toward their children which motivates them to avoid risky sexual behavior."

Many of the couples reported that having children increased their commitment to each other and deepened their relationship. Fathers reported they gained a new admiration for their partner as they observed them parenting.

Couples said they have sex less frequently since becoming parents, but few found this to be problematic. "From the fathers we studied, there was this pragmatic acceptance that this is what happens at this stage of life," Hoff said.

One surprising finding is that becoming parents did not affect the couples' sexual agreements -- the contracts that many gay male couples make about whether sex with outside partners is allowed.

"There wasn't the shift that we thought we might find," Hoff said. "For the most part, those who were monogamous before becoming parents said they stayed with that arrangement. Those who had open relationships before having children reported that they kept to that agreement."

While some of the lifestyle changes associated with parenthood might reduce HIV risk for gay couples, the study highlighted some changes that could raise problems for couples with open sexual agreements. These couples had fewer opportunities to discuss their sexual agreements with each other, and a few men said that once they became a parent they felt uncomfortable talking to their friends or their doctor about the fact that they are in an open relationship.

"Some men felt that there is this assumption that if you are a gay parent you are monogamous," Hoff said. "This kind of stigma around gay parents' sexuality could be a concern if gay fathers are reluctant to talk to their physician about their sexual agreement and get tested for HIV.

The study warns physicians and counselors against making assumptions about gay fathers and stresses the importance of offering them opportunities to discuss their sexual agreements and access to testing services. In particular, the study highlights the need for HIV prevention programs to find alternative ways to reach gay fathers since they spend less time in gay social venues where sexual health messages are typically promoted.

More information: "Impact of parenting on gay male couples' relationships, sexuality and HIV risk" was published in the journal *Couple and Family Psychology* on June 25, 2012.

Provided by San Francisco State University

Citation: Study examines how parenthood affects gay couples' health, HIV risk (2012, June 27) retrieved 24 April 2024 from
https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-06-parenthood-affects-gay-couples-health.html

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