

Raising adopted children, how parents cooperate matters more than gay or straight

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A new study by psychology researchers suggests that whether parents are gay, lesbian or straight, how well they work together as a couple and support each other in parenting is linked to fewer behavior problems among their adopted children and is more important than their sexual orientation.

Rachel H. Farr at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Charlotte J. Patterson at the University of Virginia report their findings from this first empirical examination of differences and similarities in co-parenting among lesbian, gay and heterosexual adoptive couples and associations with [child behavior](#) in the July/August issue of *Child Development*.

Farr, who led the study, says, "While actual divisions of childcare tasks such as feeding, dressing and taking time to play with kids were unrelated to [children's](#) adjustment, it was the parents who were most satisfied with their arrangements with each other who had children with fewer [behavior problems](#), such as acting out or showing aggressive behavior."

"It appears that while children are not affected by how parents divide childcare tasks, it definitely does matter how harmonious the parents' relationships are with each other," she adds. She and Patterson also observed differences in division of labor in lesbian and [gay couples](#) compared to heterosexual parents.

The study suggests that lesbian and gay couples may be creating new ways to live together and raise children outside of [traditional gender roles](#), the authors say, and results are important to adoption professionals and others who work with adoptive families. Further, the research is informative for those debating legal, political and policy questions about [family dynamics](#) and outcomes for children raised by same-sex couples.

For this study, Farr and Patterson recruited families from five adoption agencies across the United States. In total, 104 families agreed to participate, 25 headed by lesbian partners, 29 by gay [male partners](#) and 50 by [heterosexual couples](#). Their adoptive children had been placed with them at birth or within the first few weeks of life; at the time of the study the children were all around three years old.

Parents were asked to report on the division of child-related labor between them and on factors of their child's adjustment. They were also observed by researchers who coded their co-parenting behavior during videotaped parent-child play sessions along scales rated for "supportive" and "undermining" interactions, using an established test.

The researchers discovered that lesbian and gay couples were more likely to equally share childcare tasks, while heterosexual couples were likely to specialize, with mothers doing more work than fathers in these families. In addition, Farr says, from the videotaped observations of family interactions, "it was clear that other aspects of co-parenting, such as how supportive parents were of each other, or how much they competed, were connected with children's behavioral problems."

Parents' dissatisfaction with division of child-care labor, not the actual division of these tasks, was significantly associated with increased child behavior problems. As the researchers had expected, supportive co-parenting interactions, such as greater pleasure and engagement between parents, were associated with positive child behavior for all three types

of parents.

Overall, whether parents shared child care tasks or had a more specialized division of this work was not related to children's adjustment. The best predictor of child behavior problems was competition between the parents and dissatisfaction with child care labor divisions, which were not related to [parents' sexual orientation](#).

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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