

What is family? Study explores how children of gay parents overcome stigma

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How do children of gay and lesbian parents create a positive family identity in a culture where negative messages can drown others out and tell them their family dynamic is wrong?

A forthcoming study by Diana Breshears and Dawn O. Braithwaite provides clues into how those children can solidify a positive family identity.

Through in-depth interviews with people whose parents came out as gay or lesbian to their children at various ages, Braithwaite, University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor and chair of [communication studies](#), and Breshears, of the University of Pretoria in South Africa, found that children of gay parents overcame stigmatization through suppressing [negative messages](#) and using positive language when speaking of their [family dynamics](#).

"One of the most interesting and important findings in the study is that participants only received positive messages about their family identity from friends and family," Breshears said. "Thus, participants did not identify or anticipate any cultural messages that are in support of their family identity—all of these messages were perceived as negative."

The study, which will be published in the *Journal of Family Communication*, is a relatively new area of research. Breshears, who completed the study as her dissertation while pursuing her doctorate at UNL under Braithwaite's advisement, wanted to understand how

children experience and create their family identity in a society where they face stigmatization.

"There has been a lot of research focusing on the effects of gay parenting on children in three areas: [sexual identity](#), social functioning, and psychological well-being, and some of these studies included children who were conceived in previous [heterosexual relationships](#)," Breshears said. "What has received little attention until now is the role of relational and cultural discourses in the ways children think and talk about their non-traditional family identity."

The researchers identified four common pathways that were used to marginalize negative messaging: Emphasizing opposing views as ignorant; highlighting flaws of religious views; stressing others' lack of authority to judge; and emphasizing the precedence of love. The most common way of overcoming negative messaging was to emphasize opposing views as ignorant.

Braithwaite said she was impressed with how those in the study were able to accept others' strong negative feelings toward their [family](#) and, at the same time, have a positive relationship with their lesbian or gay parent.

"These individuals understood people's strong feelings toward gay and lesbian relationships," she said. "They were able to frame what was happening within some of these strong negative messages and they learned to communicate within that frame of others' beliefs. For kids, that's a pretty tall order."

One study participant shared with researchers how she has dealt with strong negative feelings.

"Everybody has their own opinions and I'm respectful of other people's

opinions, because at the end of the day, you can't go around and challenge fights with everybody," the participant said to the researchers. "I'm not going to lie, it's still hurtful sometimes when I hear these things, but at the same time, everybody's entitled to their opinions and how they feel. Who am I to take that away? But, at the end of the day, at least I've conveyed my message and you've conveyed yours. I can only hope that you've taken something positive away from what I've shared with you."

Breshears and Braithwaite noted that those who participated in this study had no ill will toward their parents.

"The children were not upset that their parents are gay," Breshears said. "In fact, most of them embraced it. The negativity that children with gay parents experience is rarely the result of having gay parents. Instead, it's the cultural stigma that causes all the problems.

"Any concerns they had were the result of how they would be treated in the public sphere. Research constantly shows that children with gay parents are normal, healthy, well-adjusted people. It's the social scrutiny and stigmatization that [children](#) have to negotiate and contend with."

The researchers also found that these individuals feel the cultural views are shifting toward more acceptance of gay-parent families, but that they believe there is still a long way to go. Breshears notes that with the Supreme Court's overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act, perhaps cultural views may shift at a faster pace.

"Most people are aware of the growing acceptance of lesbian and gay individuals through the last few decades, and the violence many of these individuals faced in the past," Breshears said. "Though many people still experience extreme discrimination, overall we have made great strides as a country in the acceptance of people's sexual identities."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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