

# The Kids Aren't All Right: New Family Structures and the "No Differences" Claim

by Ana Samuel within Marriage, Science

June 14th, 2012

Two new peer-reviewed studies show that family structure matters and children do best when reared by their married biological mother and father.

The widely circulated claim that parents engaged in same-sex relationships do just as well as other parents at raising children—a claim widely known today as the “no differences” thesis—is not settled science. Two new peer-reviewed studies released this week by the academic journal *Social Science Research* challenge the claim that there are no differences in outcomes between children raised by parents who have same-sex relationships and those raised by their biological mother and father in intact, stable marriages.

In the first article, family studies scholar Loren Marks of Louisiana State University reviews the 59 studies that are referenced in the 2005 American Psychological Association brief that came to the conclusion that there are “no differences.” Marks concludes that “not one of the 59 studies referenced ... compares a large, random, representative sample of lesbian or gay parents and their children with a large, random, representative sample of married parents and their children. The available data, which are drawn primarily from small convenience samples, are insufficient to support a strong generalizable claim either way.”[1] Marks’s study casts significant doubt upon the older evidence on which the APA brief, and thus the “no differences” paradigm, rests.

The second article, by sociologist Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas at Austin, presents new and extensive empirical evidence that shows there are differences in outcomes between the children of a parent who has same-sex relationships and children raised by their married, biological mother and father. This new evidence was gathered by Dr. Regnerus, the lead investigator of the New Family Structures Study (NFSS) of the University of Texas, which in 2011 surveyed 2,988 young adults for the specific purpose of collecting more reliable, nationally representative data about children from various family origins. (The Witherspoon Institute provided funding for this study.) Already, the NFSS has been acknowledged by critics to be “better situated than virtually all previous studies to detect differences between these groups in the population.”[2]

As Regnerus explains, the NFSS is unique among gay parenting research in three ways:

First, it compares the outcomes of children who reported having a mother who had a same-sex relationship with another woman (LM for short) or a father who had a same-sex relationship with another man (GF for short) with the outcomes of children who reported coming from an intact biological family (IBF for short). Most gay parenting research compares gay and lesbian parenting to single, divorced, and step-parent parenting, or conversely compares a select, and often socio-economically privileged, population of gay parents to a broad, representative sample of the general population.

Second, the NFSS gathered responses from young adult children. Other gay parenting studies focus on the responses of parents for their views about what it is like to be parenting as a gay man or lesbian woman. The NFSS interviewed the sons and daughters of GFs and LMs after they had grown up and matured into young adults (ages 18-39). This allowed the children to speak for themselves about their past experiences and to report on how they are doing at present.

Finally, the NFSS drew from a large, random sample of the U.S. population. To date, there is only one other gay parenting study that draws from a large, random sample, that of Michael Rosenfeld of Stanford University, who relies upon 2010 U.S. Census data. Every other gay parenting study thus far relies upon small or non-probability samples, which are inadequate for drawing conclusions about the population at large. Additionally, the NFSS gathered more data of interest to gay parenting researchers than did the U.S. Census, soliciting answers on a wide range of outcomes, including social, emotional, and relational well-being.

### **Qualifications of the Results**

Before detailing the results of the NFSS, two important points must be made: First, the results do not claim to establish causality between parenting and child outcomes. In other words, the results are not a "report card" on gay parenting, but a report on the average condition of grown children from households of gay and lesbian parents versus those from IBFs. So, for instance, when the study finds that children who have had a parent in a same-sex romantic relationship are much more likely to suffer from depression as young adults than the children who come from IBFs, this does not claim that the gay parent was the cause of the depression in his or her child; simply that such children on average have more depression, for reasons unidentified by the study. That said, however, the study controlled for variables like age, gender, race, level of mother's education, perceived household income while growing up, the degree of legislative gay-friendliness of the respondent's home state, and experience of being bullied as a youth. Controls help eliminate alternative explanations for a given outcome, making the causal link between parenting structure and children's outcomes more likely when the results are statistically significant after controls.

Second, the kind of gay parenting identified was rarely planned by two gay parents. The study found that the children who were raised by a gay or lesbian parent as little as 15 years ago were usually conceived within a heterosexual marriage, which then underwent divorce or separation, leaving the child with a single parent. That parent then had at least one same-sex romantic relationship, sometimes outside of the child's home, sometimes within it. To be more specific, among the respondents who said their mother had a same-sex romantic relationship, a minority, 23%, said they had spent at least three years living in the same household with both their mother and her romantic partner. Only 2 out of the 15,000 screened spent a span of 18 years with the same two mothers. Among those who said their father had had a same-sex relationship, 1.1% of children reported spending at least three years together with both men.

This strongly suggests that the parents' same-sex relationships were often short-lived, a finding consistent with the broader research on elevated levels of instability among same-sex romantic partners. For example, a recent 2012 study of same-sex couples in Great Britain finds that gay and lesbian cohabiting couples are more likely to separate than heterosexual couples.[3] A 2006 study of same sex marriages in Norway and Sweden found that "divorce risk levels are

considerably higher in same-sex marriages"[4] such that Swedish lesbian couples are more than three times as likely to divorce as heterosexual couples, and Swedish gay couples are 1.35 times more likely to divorce (net of controls). Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey, two of the most outspoken advocates for same-sex marriage in the U.S. academy, acknowledge that there is more instability among lesbian parents.[5]

Therefore, while critics of the NFSS have faulted it for lacking comparisons between children of IBFs and the children of committed and intact gay or lesbian couples, this was attempted, but was not feasible. Despite drawing from a large, representative sample of the U.S. population, and despite using screening tactics designed to boost the number of respondents who reported having had a parent in a same-sex relationship, a very small segment reported having been parented by the same two women or two men for a minimum of three years. Although there is much speculation that today there are large numbers of same-sex couples in the U.S. who are providing a stable, long-term parenting relationship for their children, no studies based upon large, random samples of the U.S. population have been published that show this to be true, and the above-cited studies of different nations show that on average, same-sex couple relationships are more short-lived than those of opposite-sex couples.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence for the claim that today there are large numbers of stable, two-parent gay households, for the last ten years, contemporary gay parenting research has nevertheless claimed that there are "no significant differences" (and some benefits) to being raised by same-sex parents. Therefore, Regnerus analyzed the new NFSS data to verify this claim. In the end, he found the claim to be more plausible when comparing the grown children of parents who had a same-sex relationship to the grown children of divorced, adopted, single-parented, or step-parented arrangements. The claim is false if one compares the grown children of a parent who had a same-sex relationship to those from IBFs. While the study has been criticized for "comparing apples to oranges," Regnerus's work studies the reality of the population of children who were raised by parents who had same-sex relationships. As the next sections show, there are clear and, in most cases, very unfortunate differences between the children of parents who had a same-sex relationship and those from biological families of still-married parents.

The following selection of NFSS outcomes can be found animated, graphed, and numerically compared at: [www.familystructurestudies.com](http://www.familystructurestudies.com).

### **Social Outcomes**

Public perceptions and stereotypes of children of gays and lesbians usually assume them to be white, upper-middle-class members of society. However, in response to questions about race, 48% of the respondents with a GF, and 43% of the respondents with an LM indicated that they were either black or Hispanic, a number much higher than previously found by studies based on convenience samples.[6] On economic outcomes, grown children of an LM were almost four times more likely to be currently on public assistance than the grown children of IBFs. As young adults, they were also 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed than the grown children of IBFs.

On criminal outcomes, the children of GFs showed the greatest propensity to be involved in crime. They were, on average, more frequently arrested and pled guilty to more non-minor offenses than the young-adult children in any other category. The children of LMs reported the

second highest frequency of involvement in crimes and arrests, and in both categories the young-adult children of intact biological families reported the lowest frequency of involvement in crimes or arrests.

Contrary to recent and widely circulated reports that there is no sexual victimization in lesbian households, the NFSS found that, when asked if they were ever touched sexually by a parent or other adult, the children of LMs were eleven times more likely to say “yes” than the children from an IBF, and the children of GFs were three times more likely to say “yes.” The children of IBFs were the least likely of all family types to have ever been touched sexually: only 2% reported affirmatively (compared to 23% of LMs who replied “yes”). When asked if they were ever forced to have sex against their will, the children of LMs were the worst off again—four times more likely to say “yes” than the children of IBFs. The children of GFs were three times more likely to have been forced to have sex than the children of IBFs. In percentages, 31% of LMs said they had been forced to have sex, compared with 25% of GFs and 8% of IBFs. These results are generally consistent with research on heterosexual families. For instance, a recent federal report showed that children in heterosexual families are least likely to be sexually, physically, or emotionally abused in an intact, biological, married family.[7]

Regarding physical health, when asked if they had ever had a sexually transmitted infection (STI), the young-adult children of GFs were three times more likely to say “yes” than those of IBFs. Children of LMs were two and a half times more likely to say “yes,” followed by the children of stepfamilies, who were twice as likely to have had an STI as children of IBFs. Children of IBFs and children from “other” family types were the least likely of all to have had an STI. When asked to report upon frequency of marijuana use, the young-adult children of divorced parents were the worst off, reporting that they had used marijuana on average one and a half times more frequently than children of IBFs; next came the children of LMs, followed by the children of single parents, and the children of GFs. The children adopted prior to age 2 by strangers (people unrelated to them) and the children of IBFs reported least frequent marijuana use as young adults.

### **Emotional and Mental Health Outcomes**

Respondents were asked to report their sentiment about their family experiences while growing up. The children of LMs reported the lowest levels of perceived safety in their childhood home, followed by children of GFs, with the children of IBFs reporting the highest levels of perceived safety. When asked if they were recently or currently in therapy “for a problem connected with anxiety, depression, relationships, etc.,” children adopted by strangers reported receiving such therapy the most, followed by the children of LMs. The children from IBFs were least likely to report receiving therapy.

On the CES-D depression index, an eight-measure survey of respondents’ happy-to-depressed thoughts over the previous seven days, the young-adult children of LMs and GFs reported statistically significantly higher levels of depression than young-adult children from IBFs. The young-adult children of GFs were twice as more likely to have thought about suicide in the previous 12 months as the children of LMs, and almost five times more likely than the children of IBFs to have thought about the same.

### **Relational Outcomes**

The study asked questions about the history and current status of the young adults' relationships. When asked to rate the quality of their current relationship, the children of GFs reported the lowest, followed by children adopted by strangers, the children of stepfamilies, and then the children of LMs.

When asked about the number of times they thought that their current relationship was in trouble, the children of GFs reported the highest numbers again, followed by the children of divorced parents. The children of IBFs reported both the highest levels of relationship quality and the lowest frequency of thinking their relationship to be in trouble of all of the family arrangements.

When asked about infidelity, children of LMs were three times more likely to report having had an affair while married/cohabiting than children of IBFs, followed by children from stepfamilies (who were two and a half times more likely than IBFs) and children of GFs (who were twice as likely).

The NFSS asked respondents to identify their sexual orientation and found that children of LMs were more open to same-sex romantic relationships, bisexuality, and asexuality than any other group. Daughters of LMs reported an average of just over one female sex partner and four male sex partners in their lifetimes, in contrast to daughters of IBFs who reported an average of only 0.22 female sex partners and 2.79 male sex partners in their lifetimes. Daughters of LMs were also most likely to self-report asexuality, "not sexually attracted to either males or females" (4.1% of females from lesbian mothers compared to 0.5% of females from IBFs). Children of GFs were the next least likely to identify as fully heterosexual. Children from IBFs were most likely of all family types to identify as entirely heterosexual.

## Conclusions

Taken together, the findings of the NFSS disprove the claim that there are no differences between children raised by parents who have same-sex relationships and children raised in intact, biological, married families when it comes to the social, emotional, and relational outcomes of their children. On 25 out of 40 outcomes evaluated by Regnerus, there were statistically significant differences between children from IBFs and those of LMs in many areas that are unambiguously suboptimal. On 11 out of 40 outcomes, there were statistically significant differences between children from IBFs and those who reported having a GF in many areas that are suboptimal. The "no differences" claim is therefore unsound and ought to be replaced by an acknowledgement of difference.

Acknowledging the differences between the children of IBFs and those from LMs and GFs better accords with the established body of social science over the last 25 years, which finds that children do best when they are raised by their married, biological mother and father. At the turn of the millennium, social scientists widely agreed that children raised by unmarried mothers, divorced parents, cohabiting parents, and step-parents fared worse than children raised by their still-married, biological parents.[8] Although data on gay and lesbian parenting were not yet available at that time, it was difficult to imagine that gay and lesbian parents would be able to accomplish what parents in step-parenting, adoptive, single-parenting, and cohabiting contexts had not been able to do, namely, replicate the optimal child-rearing environment of married,

biological-parent homes.

However, as early as 2001, social scientists working on sexual orientation and parenting began to claim just that, that there were not as many differences as sociologists would expect between outcomes for children in same-sex versus heterosexual unions, and that the differences were not negative, but favorable.[9] Since then, an increase in gay parenting research over the last decade has made similar claims, such that the emergent message from social scientists working in gay parenting has gone in a different direction, alleging that there are no differences in outcomes—and some advantages—for children raised by parents with same-sex behavior.[10]

By challenging these claims, the Regnerus and Marks papers are consistent with the social science consensus that existed at the turn of the millennium: to be raised in an intact biological family presents clear advantages for children over other forms of parenting. In particular, the NFSS provides evidence that previous generations of social scientists were unable to gather: that children from intact, biological families also out-perform peers who were raised in homes of a parent who had same-sex relationships. Therefore, these two new studies reaffirm—and strengthen—the conviction that the gold standard for raising children is still the intact, biological family.[11]

Ana Samuel is a Research Scholar of the Witherspoon Institute. She holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Notre Dame. For a more in-depth examination of the results and methods of the NFSS please see Dr. Regnerus's article, "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," and visit the website [www.familystructurestudies.com](http://www.familystructurestudies.com).

Copyright 2012 the Witherspoon Institute. All rights reserved.

[1] L. Marks, "Same-sex parenting and children's outcomes: A closer examination of the American psychological association's brief on lesbian and gay parenting," *Social Science Research* (2012), 14, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.03.006>>. Steven Nock, the late sociologist of the family at the University of Virginia, said comparable things in his affidavit for the Supreme Court of Ontario, in *Halpern v. Canada*, 2003. Stacey and Biblarz's affidavit criticized Nock for arguing that there was no scientifically valid evidence for the claim that children with same-sex parents and children with heterosexual parents have equal outcomes. [http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/Affidavit\\_of\\_J\\_Stacey.html](http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/Affidavit_of_J_Stacey.html)

[2] P. Amato, "The well-being of children with gay and lesbian parents," *Social Science Research* (2012), 772. Eggebeen, who like Amato is critical of the paper by Mark Regnerus that studies the NFSS, nevertheless argues that the real importance of the paper is "the description of a new data set that offers significant advantages. Whether the New Family Structures Study has the possibility of unsettling previously settled

questions depends in equal parts on the richness of the information collected, as well as the willingness of scholars to make use of these data" (D. Eggebeen, "What can we learn from children raised by gay or lesbian parents?", *Social Science Research* (2012), 777).

[3] Strohm, Charles Q., "The Stability of Same-Sex Cohabitation, Different-Sex Cohabitation, and Marriage." California Center for Population Research, UCLA, 1 Feb 2012 <<http://papers.ccpr.ucla.edu/papers/PWP-CCPR-2010-013/PWP-CCPR-2010-013.pdf>>.

[4] Andersson, Noack, Seierstad and Weedon-Fekjaer, "The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriages in Norway and Sweden." *Demography*, Volume 43 Feb 2006: 79-98. "We found that divorce risks are higher in same-sex partnerships than opposite-sex marriages and that unions of lesbians are considerably less stable, or more dynamic, than unions of gay men....In Norway, 13% of partnerships of men and 21% of female partnerships are likely to end in divorce within six years from partnership registration. In Sweden, 20% of male partnerships and 30% of female marriages are likely to end in

divorce within five years of partnership formation. These levels are higher than the corresponding 13% of heterosexual marriages that end in divorce within five years in Sweden." p. 95.

[5] Biblarz and Stacey, "How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?" *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72. (February 2010): 3-22. "...two women who chose to become parents together seemed to provide a double dose of a middle-class "feminine" approach to parenting. Some research suggests, however, that a double dose of maternal investment sometimes fostered jealousy and competition between the comothers, which the asymmetry of the women's genetic, reproductive, and breast-feeding ties to their infants could exacerbate (Chrisp, 2001; Gartrell et al., 2000; Reimann, 1998; Stiglitz, 1990)....[P]reliminary data hint that their relationships may prove less durable." p. 11

[6] M. Regnerus. "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study," *Social Science Research* (2012), 6, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.03.009>>.

[7][http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/nafl\\_incid/reports/nis\\_execsumm/nis4\\_report](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/nafl_incid/reports/nis_execsumm/nis4_report)

[8] Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Sara McLanahan, "Parent Absence or Poverty: Which Matters More?" (1994). G. Duncan and J. Brooks-Gunn, *Consequences of Growing up Poor*. (New York: Russell Sage). Marquardt and David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Bruce Ellis et al., "Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?" *Child Development* 74 (2003), 801-821. Sara McLanahan, Elisabeth Donahue, and Ron Haskins, "Introducing the Issue," *The Future of Children* 15 (2003), 3-12. Mary Parke, "Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?" (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2003). Elizabeth Marquardt, "Family Structure and Children's Educational Outcomes" (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005). Wilcox et al. (2005). Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown, 2005).

[9] Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz, "(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?" *American Sociological Review* (2001).

[10] Tasker, 2005; Wainright and Patterson, 2006; Rosenfeld, 2010.

[11] "[C]hildren appear most apt to succeed as adults—on multiple counts and across a variety of domains —when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father, and especially when their parents remain married to the present day. Insofar as the number of intact, biological mother/father families continues to shrink in the United States, as it has, this portends growing challenges within families, but also heightened dependence on public health organizations, federal and state public assistance, psychotherapeutic resources, substance use programs, and the criminal justice system" (Regnerus 15).

