



Predictors of school engagement among same-sex and heterosexual adoptive parents of Kindergarteners

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ABSTRACT

Little research has explored parental engagement in schools in the context of adoptive parent families or same-sex parent families. The current cross-sectional study explored predictors of parents' self-reported school involvement, relationships with teachers, and school satisfaction, in a sample of 103 female same-sex, male same-sex, and heterosexual adoptive parent couples (196 parents) of kindergarten-age children. Parents who reported more contact by teachers about positive or neutral topics (e.g., their child's good grades) reported more involvement and greater satisfaction with schools, regardless of family type. Parents who reported more contact by teachers about negative topics (e.g., their child's behavior problems) reported better relationships with teachers but lower school satisfaction, regardless of family type. Regarding the broader school context, across all family types, parents who felt more accepted by other parents reported more involvement and better parent–teacher relationships; socializing with other parents was related to greater involvement. Regarding the adoption-specific variables, parents who perceived their children's schools as more culturally sensitive were more involved and satisfied with the school, regardless of family type. Perceived cultural sensitivity mattered more for heterosexual adoptive parents' relationships with their teachers than it did for same-sex adoptive parents. Finally, heterosexual adoptive parents who perceived high levels of adoption stigma in their children's schools were less involved than those who perceived low levels of stigma, whereas same-sex adoptive parents who perceived high levels of stigma were more involved than those who perceived low levels of stigma. Our findings have implications for school professionals, such as school psychologists, who work with diverse families.

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1. Introduction

Individuals, including children, are profoundly impacted by the settings in which they live (e.g., home, school, neighborhood, and community) as well as the relationships among these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). In particular, the dynamic relationship between family and school greatly contributes to child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Parents' engagement with their children's schools is widely recognized as one important way in which the family–school relationship may shape child outcomes. In fact, school engagement is the main focus of family–school relationship standards established by leading national organizations, such as the National Parent Teacher Association (2014). School professionals recognize that when parents develop strong relationships with teachers and seek involvement in schools, such relationships may (a) model for children the importance of relationships

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with teachers, thus affecting their academic experience, and (b) provide teachers with a more thorough understanding of children's developmental needs and strengths, via the information that they gain from parents (Dearing, Kreider, & Weiss, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Parents' engagement in school (e.g., via volunteering) may also benefit child–teacher relationships indirectly, as such involvement can promote positive family–teacher interactions (Dearing et al., 2008; Hornby, 2011). In turn, school psychologists can play a valuable role in promoting parent engagement through home–school collaborations and providing appropriate assessment and interventions for parents, teachers, and other school professionals (Beveridge, 2005).

The kindergarten period in particular is often recognized as an optimal time to foster and promote school engagement (Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010), inasmuch as parents' early school engagement may set the stage for long-term patterns of school-based involvement and relationships with the educational system (Beveridge, 2005; Malsch, Green, & Kothari, 2011). Indeed, parents' school engagement during preschool and kindergarten has been linked to children's later academic and achievement outcomes, such that parents who demonstrate more school-based involvement and connection early on have children with better grades, attendance, homework completion, and state test results (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Clements, Reynolds, & Hickey, 2004; Powell et al., 2010). Parents who have regular and direct contact with their children's schools and teachers, and who therefore model an appreciation for school engagement and learning, are more likely to have children who demonstrate positive engagement with learning and their schools (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). Thus, parental engagement in children's education clearly benefits children's school success (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; McWayne et al., 2004).

There are several dimensions of parent engagement in children's education, including school-based involvement (e.g., volunteering), the parent–teacher relationship, and home-based involvement (e.g., help with homework; Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). In this paper, we focus on parents' involvement in the school context, as well as their relationships with teachers; we do not assess parents' home-based involvement, in part because of the young age of the sample. We also examine parents' overall endorsement of their child's school (i.e., school satisfaction). We examine these outcomes in 103 adoptive parent couples: 35 female same-sex, 28 male same-sex, and 40 heterosexual adoptive couples, based on data from 68 sexual minority women, 54 sexual minority men, 35 heterosexual men, and 39 heterosexual women.

Although parents' school engagement is widely recognized as a crucial component of successful family–school partnerships, and is often examined in the literature (see Powell et al., 2010), no work has examined parent–school relationships in adoptive families, and little work has explored parent–school relationships in same-sex parent families (Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Such work is important, in order to identify whether established predictors of school engagement hold up in these understudied family forms, as well as to identify unique predictors of school engagement. Same-sex parent families and adoptive families represent understudied family forms that are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion in society and in the school setting, which may in turn have implications for their perspectives on and relationships with their children's schools (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Many aspects of the school environment assume a biological relationship between parent and child, and the language of teachers and parents, class assignments, and school forms may serve to stigmatize or exclude adoptive families. These problems can be further compounded for same-sex parent families, who not only encounter—and often violate—the assumption of biological relatedness between parents and children in the school context but also face heterosexist language, curricula, and school forms that assume the existence of different-sex parents (Byard, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2013). Understanding predictors of, and processes related to, parent engagement in adoptive and same-sex parent families is highly relevant to the field of school psychology, as such families become increasingly common and visible. As with any cultural competency, understanding the concerns and interests of adoptive and same-sex parents should inform the work that school psychologists engage in, including assessment, consultation, intervention, and systems change (Nastasi, 2006). School psychologists, as well as other school personnel, will be more effective if they can understand, anticipate, and ideally prevent barriers to school engagement among same-sex and heterosexual adoptive parent families. Indeed, strong and healthy parent–school relationships have the capacity to benefit parents, children, and schools (Beveridge, 2005).

1.1. The parent context

Parents' personal characteristics are important to take into account in considering parent–school relationships. For example, parents' sexual orientation and gender may have implications for how they approach their children's schooling (e.g., their level of engagement) as well as how schools respond to them (e.g., their receptivity and openness).

1.1.1. Sexual orientation

Although all adoptive families may face marginalization in schools, same-sex parent families face additional issues, inasmuch as they violate several assumptions about families. Namely, they violate the assumptions of both parent–child (biological) relatedness and parental heterosexuality (Byard et al., 2013). Their deviation from heteronormative family ideals, in turn, renders them highly visible and thus vulnerable to marginalization, exclusion, and stigmatization.

Some research suggests that same-sex parents may actually be more involved in their children's education, on average, as compared to heterosexual parents. Namely, a survey of over 500 same-sex parents by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that the parents surveyed—who had children ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade—were more likely to have volunteered at their child's school (67% vs. 42%) and to have attended events such as Back-to-School night or parent–teacher conferences (94% vs. 77%), compared to a national sample (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Such findings suggest that same-sex parents are, as a group, concerned about the quality of their children's education and the schools of which they are part. Notably, their involvement in schools may be driven by their desire to ensure that their children are not discriminated against. That is, they may feel that their presence makes it harder for the school to ignore, marginalize, or discriminate against their children or families (Goldberg, 2010).

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