



Parent-school relationships and young adopted children's psychological adjustment in lesbian-, gay-, and heterosexual-parent families



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ABSTRACT

Almost no research has examined the role of parent-school relationships in relation to child psychological functioning in adoptive families or same-sex parent families, much less same-sex adoptive families. Yet adoptive families, and particularly same-sex adoptive families, may be vulnerable to marginalization in the school setting, which could have implications for child adjustment. Using parent reports, in a sample of 106 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families with young children ($M_{age} = 3.38$ years at T1 and 5.42 years at T2), this study examined T1 parent-school relationships (school involvement, parent-teacher relationship quality, parent-school contact about child problems, and perceived acceptance by other parents) and adoption-specific school experiences at T1 (i.e., parent input about classroom inclusion and parent-teacher conflicts related to adoptive family status) in relation to children's later (T2) internalizing and externalizing symptoms, controlling for T1 symptoms. Follow-up analyses assessed these predictors in relation to concurrent (T1) symptoms. Family context and demographic variables were included as controls. Parents' school involvement was negatively related to later internalizing symptoms; providing input to teachers about inclusion, and parent-teacher conflicts related to adoption, were both positively related to later internalizing symptoms. Perceived acceptance by other parents was negatively related to later internalizing and externalizing symptoms. School-initiated contact about child problems more strongly predicted higher externalizing symptoms in same-sex parent families than heterosexual parent families. Cross-sectional analyses (T1 predictors in relation to T1 child outcomes) revealed a somewhat different set of findings: most notably, parents' school involvement was negatively related to externalizing symptoms. Findings have implications for early childhood educators and school administrators who seek to improve diverse family-school partnerships to enhance children's emotional and behavioral well-being.

According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995), individuals, especially children, are profoundly impacted by the contexts in which they live (e.g., home, school, and neighborhood) and the relationships among these systems (e.g., parent-teacher relationships) (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). A body of research has established that parent involvement in schools and strong parent-teacher relationships have implications for both parents' future school engagement as well as children's long-term psychosocial outcomes (Hornby, 2011; Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, & Fendrich, 1999). Notably, despite growing family diversity, including an increased number of lesbian/gay [LG] parent families, research on the role of the school context, and family-school linkages, in relation to children's well-being has primarily focused on heterosexual, two-parent families with biologically related children (Goldberg & Gartrell, 2014)—i.e., what is considered to be the standard North American nuclear family (SNAF; Smith, 1993). Both LG and adoptive families (and, in particular, LG adoptive families) deviate

from and challenge SNAF, belief in which is likely to be so omnipresent that it is rendered invisible, and hence unquestioned, in the school setting (Goldberg, Black, Sweeney, & Moyer, 2017). Schools, as microcosms of society, tend to be largely heteronormative, whereby heterosexuality, marriage, and reproduction are inextricably linked and privileged (De Graeve, 2014; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). According to queer theory (Oswald et al., 2005), such deviations from SNAF can be stressful, in that families may regularly confront reminders of their marginalization – for example, in the form of family tree assignments which both (a) require knowledge of ancestry, which may be unavailable to adopted children, and (b) assume a mother and father, which would not apply to children with LG parents. Yet such confrontations may also present opportunities for “queering”, or resisting and challenging the heteronormativity and biocentrism inherent in classroom practices and curricula, such as through the donation of books that reflect one's family (Goldberg et al., 2017).

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This study seeks to explore dimensions of parent-reported parent-school relationships as predictors of child emotional/behavioral functioning among LG and heterosexual adoptive families. This research is important in that adoptive families in general may encounter marginalization in the school setting (e.g., curricular lack of inclusion; insensitive remarks from teachers and other parents) related to their “non-normative” family building route, lack of genetic ties, and possibly multiracial status (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017). LG adoptive parents may face additional marginalization (e.g., in curricula and school relationships) due to their same-sex relationship status and associated stigmas surrounding LG parenting (Goldberg et al., 2017). Given that LG couples are between four to 10 times more likely to adopt than heterosexual couples (Gary Gates, personal communication, June 26, 2016), a focus on LG adoptive families’ experiences in schools, and their implications for child adjustment, is especially warranted.

1. Parent-school relationships and children’s well-being

Family-school relationships are widely recognized as contributing to child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Hornby, 2011). Parents’ involvement with schools (e.g., volunteering, serving on school committees, attending events) is recognized as a key way in which the family–school relationship may shape children’s academic (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Clements, Reynolds, & Hickey, 2004) and psychological (Domina, 2005; Hill et al., 2004) outcomes. Parents’ school-based involvement can be conceptualized as representing a form of social capital that may contribute to positive child outcomes via the “shared information that extended parent networks allow” and parents’ “intensive investment in the well-being of the school” (McNeal, 1999; p. 125). Parents who attend PTA meetings and volunteer in school develop relationships with teachers and parents – relationships that make it easier for parents to monitor children’s behavior and teachers’ practices and to exchange information (Domina, 2005). Further, school involvement gives parents access to insider information, such that when children have problems at school, parents learn about them earlier and know more about available solutions. Thus, school involvement grants parents a type of control that may impact child behavioral outcomes (Domina, 2005; McNeal, 1999). Parents’ school involvement may also influence children via modeling, whereby children who witness their parents investing time in school and showing respect for school officials come to internalize the message that school, as an extension of family, is a place where they are expected to behave appropriately (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). High levels of school involvement may indirectly benefit children through the positive relationships they form with teachers, such that teachers may in be more positively predisposed toward (and less likely to have conflict with) children of highly involved parents (Wyrick & Rudasill, 2009), which could have positive implications for children’s adjustment.

Most research exploring the relationship between parents’ school involvement and children’s socioemotional adjustment has been cross-sectional (McCormick, Capella, O’Connor, & McClowry, 2013; McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, Cox, & Bradley, 2003), providing little insight into whether parents’ school involvement affects children’s adjustment or vice versa, or the long-term effects of involvement on adjustment. Nevertheless, both cross-sectional (McCormick et al., 2013; McWayne et al., 2004) and longitudinal (Domina, 2005; Hill et al., 2004; El Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010) research on parents’ school involvement and children’s behavior suggests that involvement is associated with lower levels of child behavioral problems – although some research has found non-significant linkages between involvement and child adjustment (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003). A recent study of parents’ school involvement among school-aged children found that involvement predicted declines in problem behaviors across elementary grades, and children with more involved parents had enhanced social functioning and fewer adjustment problems (El Nokali et al., 2010).

Parent-school relationships are multidimensional (Kohl, Lengua,

McMahon, & the CPPRG, 2000), and, thus, there are several aspects of parents’ relationships with schools that are important to examine distinct from parents’ school involvement in order to tease apart their unique impact on child well-being. In particular, the quality of the parent-teacher relationship has been positively linked to child psychological adjustment (Izzo et al., 1999; Kim, Sheridan, Kwon, & Koziol, 2013; Serpell & Mashburn, 2012), with at least one study documenting its unique impact on child outcomes even when examined alongside school involvement and frequency of parent-teacher communication (Izzo et al., 1999). In addition, distinct from school involvement and parent-teacher relationship quality, parent-teacher contact about children is rarely examined but represents a key aspect of parent-school communication (Izzo et al., 1999; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 1999) that may reflect both parents’ and schools’ concerns about problematic behavior. Indeed, the number of direct contacts between teachers and parents has been negatively linked to child outcomes (i.e., it predicts increasing child behavior problems over the early school years) (Izzo et al., 1999). Thus, we examine parents’ school involvement, the parent-teacher relationship, and the quantity of parent-school contact about problematic child behaviors and performance (including parent- and school-initiated contact), in relation to child emotional/behavioral outcomes.

Insomuch as societal stigma related to adoption is still pervasive (Goldberg, Kinkler, & Hines, 2011) and may trickle down into school attitudes and practices (Goldberg et al., 2017), adoptive parent families are potentially vulnerable to implicit marginalization within the school in general and the classroom specifically. A limited body of primarily qualitative research has examined adoptive parents’ school experiences, and no work has examined adoptive parent-school relationships in relation to child outcomes—yet existing work highlights important dynamics that may be relevant to consider in quantitative research. Nowak-Fabrykowski, Helinski, and Buchstein (2009) surveyed heterosexual foster parents and found that most respondents reported that their children’s teachers and classrooms did not have any materials related to adoption, and felt that teachers should make more of an effort to incorporate the experiences and needs of adoptive families into materials and curricula. A qualitative study of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents with found that about one-fifth of parents reported teacher insensitivity and inexperience related to adoption (e.g., insensitive language, such as calling them “adoptive parents”; over-focusing on adoption as the root cause of children’s behavioral issues) as a challenge during the early childhood years (Goldberg, 2014). Unknown but of interest is how negative experiences with teachers related to child adoption might relate to children’s emotional and behavioral outcomes.

Notably, knowledge of adopted children within the classroom may not be enough to prompt teachers to pursue more sensitive or inclusive teaching practices related to adoption. One study found that more than half of early childhood educators were aware of adopted children in their classes, but only 34% of those who were aware had made adjustments in their teaching (e.g., in assignments related to families) (Taymans et al., 2008). It may be that direct input and education by adoptive parents – an adoption-focused, parent-initiated form of school involvement, and a form of “queering” in response to perceived marginalization (Oswald et al., 2005) – is necessary for teachers to adapt their teaching practices to be more inclusive. Parents who provide input to teachers may, however, be perceived as difficult or demanding by teachers, which could cause teachers to resent parents and children and treat them differently (Pyhalto, Pietarinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2011), which might ultimately have a negative impact on children.

There is some evidence that LG adoptive parents may be especially vulnerable to marginalization within the school setting. A national survey of LGBT parents found that 1 in 6 parents felt that schools did not acknowledge their type of family or that they could not fully participate in the school because they were LGBT; and, less than one-third of parents said that their children’s school curriculum included

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