

# Unusual families



Susan Golombok

Susan Golombok is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Family and Child Psychology Research Centre, City University, London, UK. She was educated at Hutcheson's Girls School and then the University of Glasgow in Scotland where she was awarded a BSc Honours degree in 1976. This was followed by an MSc degree in Child Development in 1977 and a PhD degree in 1982, both from the University of London. Her research interests include family relationships and child development, particularly the effects on children of being raised in non-traditional families. Her publications include five books and more than 100 scientific papers, book chapters and reports.

Family and Child Psychology Research Centre, City University, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK  
Correspondence: Tel: +44 207 0408510; Fax: +44 207 0408582; e-mail: s.e.golombok@city.ac.uk

## Abstract

The introduction of assisted reproduction has led to unusual forms of procreation. This article describes the social consequences of lesbian motherhood and of families headed by single heterosexual mothers.

**Keywords:** gamete donation, gender development, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, mother

## Introduction

Thank you very much for inviting me here today, especially Bob Edwards who, right from the beginning, has been a great supporter of following up assisted reproduction families to look at the consequences of these new techniques for children and their parents.

When asked previously to give a talk on unusual families created by assisted reproduction, I have given the hypothetical example of a child with five parents: an egg donor (the genetic mother), a sperm donor (the genetic father), a surrogate mother who hosts the pregnancy, and the two social parents whom the child knows as mum and dad. This example is no longer hypothetical. Last month, the High Court granted an adoption order to the social parents of twins conceived using donated embryos and carried by their grandmother. Advances in assisted reproduction have led to a variety of unusual family forms, some more controversial than others. This presentation today concentrates on the issue of lesbian and single heterosexual women having access to assisted reproduction as a means of conceiving a child without the involvement of a male partner. These types of families are particularly relevant at the present time because of the ongoing review of the clause in the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (HFE) Act regarding the need of a child for a father.

## Lesbian mothers

The first topic is lesbian mothers and this is followed by discussion about single-mother families. In the UK, widespread public awareness of lesbian mothers began in 1978

with a sensational piece of investigative journalism. It was reported in a London evening newspaper that lesbian women were attending a private clinic with the aim of conceiving a child by donor insemination. Headlines such as 'Ban these Babies' and 'Dr Strangelove' produced an outcry not just about the doctor helping lesbian women to have children but also about the fact that lesbian women were being allowed to raise children at all. One member of the British Parliament at the time, Rhodes Boyson, was quoted as saying, 'This evil must stop for the sake of the potential children and society, which both have enough problems without the extension of this horrific practice. Children have a right to be born into a natural family with a father and a mother. Anything less will cause lifelong deprivation of the most acute kind for the child.'

Around the same time, partly as a result of the growth in the women's movement and also the gay liberation movement, there was a rise in the number of lesbian women who were becoming involved in child custody disputes when they divorced. Although a great fuss was made in the media about lesbian women having children by donor insemination, almost all lesbian mothers at that time had had their children while married, and most of the children spent their early years in a heterosexual family before making the transition to a lesbian mother household. These women, almost without exception, lost custody of their children when they divorced on the grounds that it would not be in the children's best interests to remain with their lesbian mother.

The arguments against lesbian mothers seeking custody were the same then as they are today in relation to lesbian women seeking donor insemination. Those who were opposed to

lesbian mothers argued that the children would be teased and rejected by their peers, and would develop emotional and behavioural problems as a result. It was also argued that they would show atypical gender development, i.e. that boys would be less masculine in their identity and behaviour, and girls less feminine, than their counterparts from heterosexual homes.

At that time, no studies had been carried out of the psychological development of children in lesbian families, and nothing was known about what actually happened to children in these circumstances. The absence of such information meant that custody was almost always awarded to the more conventional parent, i.e. to the heterosexual father in preference to the lesbian mother. It was the lack of knowledge about these children and their parents that prompted the first systematic studies in the mid 1970s in the US and the UK. The UK study was conducted by Sir Michael Rutter, Anne Spencer and myself, and there were also American studies conducted by Richard Green, Martha Kirkpatrick and Beverly Hoeffler (Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Kirkpatrick, 1987).

Regardless of the geographic or demographic characteristics of the samples studied, the findings of these early investigations were strikingly consistent. Firstly, in terms of the children's socio-emotional development, children from lesbian mother families did not show a higher incidence of psychological disorder, or of difficulties in peer relationships, than their counterparts from heterosexual homes, and for measures for which norms were available, they were found to be functioning within the normal range.

With respect to gender development, a distinction is usually made between gender identity, a person's concept of him or herself as male or female, and gender role behaviour, i.e. the behaviours and attitudes that are considered to be appropriate for males and females in a particular culture. There was no evidence of gender identity confusion for any of the children studied; all of the boys identified as boys, all of the girls identified as girls. In terms of gender role behaviour, no differences were found between children in lesbian and heterosexual families for either boys or girls, i.e. the daughters of lesbian mothers were no less feminine, and the sons no less masculine, in terms of their toy and activity preferences, than the daughters and sons of heterosexual mothers, and this was in spite of lesbian mothers' preference for less sex-typed toys and activities for their daughters and sons. It was concluded that children in lesbian families did not differ from other children as a result of their non-traditional family environment. These findings were replicated by other researchers over the years, culminating in a seminal review by Charlotte Patterson in 1992.

But that wasn't the end of the story. A number of criticisms were made about this body of research. Firstly, a limitation was that only school-age children had been studied. It was argued that 'sleepers effects' may exist, such that children raised in lesbian households may experience difficulties in emotional wellbeing, and in intimate relationships, when they grow up. In order to address these questions, Fiona Tasker and I followed up the children from the UK study in 1991/1992, 14 years after they had first been seen, when their average age was 24 years old. It was possible to contact 25 young adults

from lesbian families and 21 young adults from single heterosexual families, representing 62% of the original sample. Although the sample size was not large, the advantage of the study was that the majority of children were recruited before they had reached adolescence, and so the results were not confounded by the knowledge of their sexual orientation in adult life.

With respect to peer relationships, data were obtained on the proportion of young adults in each group who reported having been teased or bullied during adolescence. Young adults from lesbian families were no more likely to report teasing by peers in general, than those from heterosexual single parent homes. But with respect to teasing about their own sexuality, there was a tendency for those from lesbian families to be more likely to recall having been teased about being gay or lesbian themselves, although those from lesbian families may have been more likely to remember such incidents.

Interestingly, those who were most negative about their experiences of growing up in a lesbian family tended to come from poorer backgrounds and to live in a social environment that was generally hostile toward homosexuality. It seems, therefore, that the social context of the lesbian mother family is an important predictor of the experiences of the child. How the mother handled the situation also made a difference. It was important to the children that their mother was sensitive to their need for discretion, and that they themselves controlled who, and who not, to tell.

The findings relating to psychological wellbeing showed that children raised by lesbian mothers continued to function well in adulthood and did not experience long-term detrimental effects arising from their early upbringing. No differences between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual homes were found for anxiety or depression as assessed by standardized questionnaire measures, and their scores fell within the normal range. In addition, those from lesbian families were no more likely to have sought professional help for anxiety, depression or stress-related difficulties.

In terms of sexual orientation, the large majority of young adults with lesbian mothers identified as heterosexual. Only two young women from lesbian families identified as lesbian compared with none from heterosexual families. So the commonly held assumption that lesbian mothers will have lesbian daughters and gay sons was not supported by the findings of the study. The large majority of the children who grew up in lesbian families identified as heterosexual in adulthood.

Another criticism of research on lesbian mother families was that most of the children studied had spent their first years in a heterosexual home before making the transition to a lesbian family. To the extent that early experience influences later development, knowledge about these children could not be generalized to children raised by a lesbian mother from birth. In recent years, however, controlled studies of lesbian families with a child conceived by donor insemination have begun to be reported; two from the US, one from Belgium and one from my own group in the UK. Unlike lesbian women who had their children while married, these couples planned their family together after coming out as lesbian and so the children that

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