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**Considerations Relating to the  
Placement of Children in  
Gay/Lesbian Foster and Adoptive Homes**

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## **BAY AREA SOCIAL SERVICES CONSORTIUM (BASSC)**

BASSC was founded in 1987 and is composed of the directors of Bay Area county social service and human service agencies, deans of Bay Area graduate social work departments, and foundation representatives. BASSC has the objective of directing educational programs, conducting applied research, and developing policy.

Housed at the Center for Social Services Research (CSSR) at the University of California at Berkeley, the BASSC Research Response Team was organized in 1995 to respond rapidly to the emerging needs of county social service agencies for information about their changing environments. Small-scale research projects are undertaken in close collaboration with agency administrators and program staff.

The CSSR conducts research, policy analysis, program planning, and evaluation toward the improvement of the publicly supported social services. The Center responds to the concerns of community professionals and consumers of services to develop research activities that are practice- and policy- relevant. The focus of the work is on populations that are considered needy or disadvantaged and on human service agencies through analysis of agency management, finance, professional development, and service systems.

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**Executive Summary**  
**Considerations Relating to the Placement of Children**  
**in Gay/Lesbian Foster and Adoptive Homes**

This study draws upon data from the social science and legal literature, interviews with Santa Clara County Social Services Agency (SSA) staff, and a focus group of gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents to examine whether lesbian and gay foster and adoptive placements serve the best interests of children. Specifically, the study attempts to address the following questions:

1. How does placement in a gay/lesbian foster or adoptive home impact the psychological, behavioral, and social development of children?
2. Does the psychosexual development of children in gay/lesbian placements differ from that of children in heterosexual placements? If differences do exist, how do they affect the psychological, behavioral, and social development of children in gay/lesbian placements?
3. Is there a relationship between parent homosexuality and child sexual molestation?
4. What are the social and public issues raised by placing children into gay/lesbian foster and adoptive homes?

We review each of the research questions as addressed by the findings presented in the literature in addition to reports from key SSA staff and a focus group of gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents.

***Impacts of Placement on Child's Psychological, Behavioral, and Social Development***

Since no significant studies have been conducted on children raised in gay/lesbian planned

families including foster and adoptive homes, this study draws on research on gay/lesbian biological parenting. Recent research (Higgins, 1989; Tasker & Golombok, 1995, Golombok et al., 1983) shows that a parent's homosexuality does not negatively affect the psychological or behavioral development of children. Higgins (1989) found no significant differences in self-esteem between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual mothers. When investigating anxiety, depression and consequent contact with a health care professional, Tasker & Golombok (1995) found no significant differences between children raised by lesbian mothers and those raised by heterosexual mothers. In looking at emotional difficulties, behavioral difficulties, and hyperactivity, Golombok et al. (1983) reported no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and those of heterosexual mothers. However, children raised by heterosexual mothers were found to experience more psychiatric problems and to have been referred to a psychiatric clinic more than were children raised by lesbian mothers.

Research indicates that, especially during early adolescence, children may face some social stigma if they are perceived as having parents who are "different" (Sullivan, 1995). Several studies (Lewis, 1980; Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986; Miller, 1979) found that in spite of the problems (e.g., teasing, shaming) experienced by children of gay/lesbian parents, they still appeared to be as well-adjusted socially as their peers. Lewis (1980) reported that children of lesbians experienced some conflicts because of homophobia and their family composition, but all expressed pride in their mother's courage in being lesbian. When investigating the ability to be social and the quality of their relationships with peers, Golombok et al. (1983) found no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and those of heterosexual mothers. Green et al. (1986) studied sons and daughters of lesbians and heterosexual women and found no significant differences in the rating of their popularity with other children. Miller (1979) showed that gay fathers exercise discretion when revealing their sexual orientation so as not to expose their children to homophobic harassment.

In examining family and peer relationships, Tasker & Golombok (1995) found that young adults from lesbian family backgrounds were no more likely to remember general teasing or bullying by their peers than were those from heterosexual family backgrounds. For those who did report such hostility, there was no group difference in the recollected seriousness of the episode. With regard to teasing about their sexuality, those from lesbian families were more likely to recall having been teased about being gay or lesbian themselves. This was especially true for boys from lesbian backgrounds. However, the groups did not differ with respect to the proportion who had been teased about their family background or mother's lifestyle. In addition, of the 18 participants whose friends knew about their mother's lesbian identity, five received negative responses from friends.

SSA staff interviewed for this study spoke about the potential impact of placements with gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents on a child's emotional and social well-being. Most reported that children with severe medical and behavioral problems are often placed with a gay/lesbian family. The majority expressed that lesbian and gay foster and adoptive parents provide an invaluable community resource in that they are willing to accept children with a broader range of difficulties. Many spoke to the strengths of those gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents and their ability to care for such difficult children. Several staff expressed concern about the availability of supportive resources in the community to assist these children with possible social problems stemming from homophobia.

Gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents who participated in the focus group shared their experiences parenting the "high demand" children placed in their homes and tending to their medical, behavioral, and other needs. Several parents spoke about the homophobic attitudes that they and their children have encountered with the educational, medical, legal, and social services systems. A few shared the specific messages that they offer their children, (e.g., to honor and respect differences; "being gay/lesbian is not a big deal") to counter these harmful attitudes and assist them with building a sense of social well-being.

### *Impacts of Placement on Child's Psychosexual Development*

Findings from studies that have investigated the issue of whether a child raised by a gay/lesbian parent will develop a similar sexual identity indicate that a child does not become gay or lesbian by being raised by or living in an environment with a gay or lesbian parent (Bigner & Bozett, 1989; Patterson, 1992). Components of the issue of psychosexual development that have been examined include gender identity (i.e., the subjective sense that one is male or female), gender-role behavior (i.e., sex-type behaviors that are culturally ascribed to either males or females), and sexual orientation (i.e., sexual partner preference) (Steckel, 1987; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Research demonstrates that the gender identity development of children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers is consistent with their biological sex (Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Green et al., 1986; Golombok et al., 1983). Studies that have examined gender-role behavior (Green et al., 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Golombok et al., 1982; Hoeffler, 1980) generally show no differences between children raised by gay or lesbian parents and children raised by heterosexual parents. Green et al., (1986) looked at the children's favorite games, toys and activities and asked about their preferences for adult roles. Findings showed that boys in both groups chose toys and activities and spoke of future jobs that were typically masculine while girls exhibited a wider range of choices. Daughters of lesbians were found to be less traditionally feminine in their dress, interested in more physical activities, and significantly more likely to choose traditionally masculine jobs than were daughters of heterosexuals.

Studies exploring the connection between a gay/lesbian parent's sexual orientation and their childrens' show no relationship (Miller, 1979; Bozett, 1982; Bozett, 1989; Gottman, 1990; Higgins, 1989; Golombok et al., Tasker & Golombok, 1995). In their study, Tasker & Golombok (1995) did not find any significant differences in the sexual attraction of children raised by lesbian mothers or heterosexual mothers. However, of the young adults who did

report a same gender attraction, six from lesbian families as compared to none of those from heterosexual families reported acting on these feelings.

SSA staff and focus group participants provided few direct comments on the issue of the psychosexual development of children raised in gay/lesbian foster and adoptive homes. Most staff expressed their professional opinion that the needs of the child and the strengths and experience of the prospective parents are the most important variables to consider when placing a child. Staff expressed concern about the availability of resources in the community to assist foster parents who have a lesbian or gay child placed in their home.

Gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents in the focus group commented that the critical medical, psychological, and behavioral needs of their children take precedence over the issue of sexual orientation. One focus group couple stated that they were interested in only foster parenting gay/lesbian youth. They felt that they had the life experience to help these children with identity issues and social stigma.

### *Parenting and Child Sexual Molestation*

Several studies have investigated whether gay parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to sexually molest their children or to engage in inappropriate sexual displays in front of children. Results from general studies on molestation show that there is no connection between homosexuality and child molestation (Groth, 1978). In fact, research shows that the majority of child sexual abuse cases involve a heterosexual male abusing a young female (Patterson, 1992; Gebhard et al., 1965; Meiselman, 1978; Groth & Birnbaum, 1978). No empirical studies have been conducted on sexual abuse of children by lesbian mothers (Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

In conducting a study of parenting behaviors of self-identified gay and non-gay men, Bigner & Jacobsen (1989) found that gay fathers are similar to non-gay fathers in their overall parenting

abilities and skills. However, gay fathers were less willing to show affection to their partner in their child's presence than were non-gay fathers.

One SSA staff member spoke to the issue of the perceived link between gay male parenting and pedophilia. Her impression was that child sexual molestation was perceived as a problem by legal professionals in the courts more so than by employees of the SSA. None of the focus group participants addressed the issue of parenting and child sexual molestation.

### ***Social and Public Issues***

Gay and lesbian families are a growing segment of American society (Green & Bozett, 1991). As many as three million gay fathers and five million lesbian mothers are believed to live in the United States, parenting an estimated 14 million children (Sullivan, 1995). Research focusing on the psychological and emotional health of these parents (Sullivan, 1995; Green et al., 1986) and their ability to parent (Harris & Turner, 1986; Miller, 1979; Riddle, 1978; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1992; Scallen, 1981) offers a wealth of evidence confirming that non-clinical groups of gays and lesbians are no different than their heterosexual counterparts.

In contrast to the concerns surrounding foster and adoptive placements with lesbian and gay parents, many of the SSA staff highlighted the strengths that these parents bring to their foster and adoptive children. These strengths included: psychological stability, sensitivity, educational accomplishments, financial security, strong support systems, and the ability to use resources. In addition, staff spoke about the willingness of gays/lesbians to parent children with severe disabilities and multiple needs. The major theme that emerged from the interviews with SSA staff was the importance of the appropriateness of the placement for the child and the abilities of the parents independent of their sexual orientation.

Some of the reasons offered by focus group participants for wanting to become foster and

adoptive parents matched the sentiments expressed by SSA staff. Many stated that they had much to share with a child: a stable, committed, loving relationship; emotional maturity and psychological stability; a comfortable home; financial resources; their own biological children; and extended support systems. One couple shared that their personal experience as lesbians in a homophobic society would be invaluable in foster parenting lesbian or gay youth. Most focus group participants agreed that the fact that they are gay or lesbian is not as important as the quality of parenting that they are able to provide to their children.

### ***Conclusion and Recommendations***

This study begins to address the issue of gay and lesbian foster and adoptive parenting by reviewing the social science literature on gay and lesbian biological parenting and the legal literature, and conducting interviews with key staff of the Santa Clara County Social Service Agency and a focus group of gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents in the county.

Social science research focusing on the psychological and emotional health of gay/lesbian parents and their ability to parent showed that homosexual parents have at least equal parenting abilities as do heterosexual parents. Furthermore, research found that a parent's sexual orientation does not negatively affect the psychological, behavioral, or psychosexual development of their children. Research indicated that, especially during early adolescence, children may face some social stigma if they are perceived as having parents who are "different." Results from studies on child sexual molestation showed that there is no connection between homosexuality and child sexual abuse.

Social service agency staff reported that gays/lesbians are a viable resource for foster and adoptive parenting and should be recruited to care for the difficult children waiting for placement in the county. Many staff recounted the numerous strengths (e.g., psychological stability, financial security, strong support systems) inherent in the gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents with whom children have been placed in the county.

Focus group participants provided insights about gay/lesbian foster care and adoption. Many talked about the care that they provide to their children, the informal supports available in the community to assist them, and some of the homophobia that they and their children have encountered. Focus group participants agreed that the fact that they are gay/lesbian is not as important as the quality of parenting that they are able to provide to their children.

### ***Recommendations***

**Recommendation #1** - Informal policies that support gay/lesbian foster care and adoptive placements need to be incorporated into the written policies and procedures of agencies.

There is no evidence showing that gay/lesbian families are detrimental to their children. The implications of the research point to the need for equal scrutiny of homosexual and heterosexual applicants by judges, probation officers, child welfare workers, and therapists when considering the placement of children. There is the need to develop official written policies for gay/lesbian foster care and adoptive placements.

In light of the fact that there is little written legislation which addresses the placement of children in lesbian and gay foster and adoptive homes, the most judicious and socially responsible approach for determining the appropriateness of such placements is a case by case analysis based on the needs of the child and the abilities of the prospective parents to meet these needs.

**Recommendation #2** - Education about gay/lesbian families should be offered to human service and legal professionals.

The study supports the need for continued education and training for social service and legal professionals (attorneys, judges, and family court personnel) on the issue of alternative lifestyles and family constellations.

**Recommendation #3** - Children placed in gay/lesbian families (as well as their parents) need to be provided with pre- and post-placement services and supports.

The inherent differences in gay/lesbian families need to be acknowledged so that the children can feel free to communicate any potential difficulties in addressing issues related to social stigma received from friends, classmates, and neighbors. Part of the assessment process for gay/lesbian foster and adoption placements needs to focus on the ability of the prospective family to help the child with appropriate responses should such rejection occur.

**Recommendation #4** - Further research needs to be conducted on the issues of lesbian/gay foster care and adoption.

This is a preliminary and exploratory review of the issues pertaining to gay and lesbian foster/adoptive placements. Additional empirical research is needed on this issue, especially longitudinal studies which would track the experiences of these children over time.

Special issues to consider in future research include: Are the early adolescent child's wishes being taken into consideration if s/he does not want a placement with a gay/lesbian family? Are the young child's wishes taken into consideration in determining future placements if s/he becomes attached to gay/lesbian foster parents? Are the gay/lesbian child's wishes taken into consideration in determining potential placements in gay/lesbian families?

The basic goal of child welfare is to guarantee safety. The scientific evidence shows that placements with gay/lesbian families are just as safe as those with heterosexual families. Another critical goal of child welfare is to promote permanent lifetime relationships when children cannot go home. If gay/lesbian caregivers are willing and able to provide for these children, we should not deny them an opportunity for permanence. Potential loving and competent adoptive and foster caregivers need not be excluded from receiving consideration

for parenting the increasing numbers of children needing placement solely on the basis of sexual orientation.

Since there is no scientific evidence in the literature showing that gay/lesbian families are detrimental to a child's development and there exists a receptive pool of prospective gays/lesbians interested in fostering or adopting the large number of children waiting for placement, gay/lesbian foster and adoptive parents are a valuable community resource.

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