



National Stepfamily
Resource Center

THE EXPERIENCES OF
STEPFAMILIES HEADED BY GAYS
AND LESBIANS



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OBJECTIVES

Gain both a historical and a current understanding of gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies and contexts in which they live.

Learn about the *similarities* in experiences of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual stepfamilies.

Understand some of the unique experiences and how they affect family life for adults and children in stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples.

I also hope you will be able to identify some of the key family strengths among this important minority stepfamily group.



HISTORICAL VIEWS AND PREVALENCE OF GAY AND LESBIAN-HEADED STEPFAMILIES

Historical views

- Stepfamilies created through remarriage following death of a spouse

Views in past decades

- Focus on stepfamilies formed through divorce and remarriage

Contemporary views

- Diversity of stepfamilies
- Created through cohabiting, and including same-sex couples with children from previous relationships

Prevalence

- Difficulty estimating due to:
 - Assumption that all gay families are the same or never include children
 - Lack of data and questions asked about the sexual orientation of family members
- A good guess- about the same percentage of gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies as stepfamilies in the general population
- Another good guess- slightly more lesbian-headed stepfamilies



THE CONTEXT OF GAY AND LESBIAN STEPFAMILY LIFE TODAY

Legal and technological advances

- Creating of partnership registries, civil unions, same-sex marriage
- Reproductive technology
- Adoptions laws banning or allowing same-sex parent adoptions

Legal advances as a benefit or risk

Changing acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality and same-sex headed families



SIMILARITIES OF GAY AND LESBIAN-HEADED AND HETEROSEXUAL-HEADED STEPFAMILIES

More similar than different

- Relationship functioning
- Adult outcomes, and well-being
- Family outcomes



SIMILARITY IN FAMILY PROCESSES

Transition to becoming a stepfamily in the early years

Family and stepparent roles

Need to adjust parenting styles

- Biological parents take more responsibility for children

The “first family” expectation

Can't we all just get along?

Family finances

Dividing household chores



UNIQUE ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY STEPFAMILIES HEADED BY GAY AND LESBIAN COUPLES

Legal ambiguity by the stepparent- is a stepparent a parent, and in who's eyes?

- Invisible strangers, especially in court
- Few rights, many expectations
- Lack of social and legal recognition

Fewer legal rights leading to more distress

Stigma received due to:

- Being gay, being in a stepfamily, being a parent, and in some cases for being a woman



UNIQUE ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY GAY AND LESBIAN-HEADED STEPFAMILIES

Lesbian adults in stepfamilies

- Earn lower wages, less education, younger (risk factors for negative outcomes)

Deciding when and to whom to come out to (making the decision as a family helps)

- Children, Doctors, Schools, Friends, etc.

Risk from being less likely to participate in social support networks

Many transitions = more stress

Children's decisions about family outness and their positive outcomes



FAMILY STRENGTHS

High levels of flexibility and adaptability

- For example, stepparent awareness of the need to step back from the parenting role rather than acting as an equal parent

Family decision making- promotes closeness and adjustment

Turn to each other for support- promotes closeness

Proactive and child-centered

Everyone is on the same page- shared family perceptions

