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Have you thought about... **equal rights for children?**

In conversations about “marriage equality”, we are told that there is no difference between children raised by same-sex parents and opposite-sex parents. Is that accurate?

What does the research say?

There are studies which claim that children raised by same-sex couples do as well, if not better, than their peers who are raised by opposite-sex parents.

There are studies which also claim the reverse.

How can studies come up with different results?

There are a number of reasons why these studies are showing such varied results.

Often, it is because they use entirely different criteria to measure what it means to “do well” as a child.

For example, a 2003 study claimed that children raised by same-sex couples showed no difference to their peers raised by opposite-sex couples. This study measured factors such as “time spent in imaginative and domestic play”, “warmth”, “use of corporal punishment” and “security of attachment to parents” as measures of child wellbeing.

Source: Golombok S., Perry B., Burston A., et al. (2003). Children with lesbian parents: A community study. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 20-33.

By contrast, a study in 2012 showed that children raised by opposite-sex couples were better off, and this study used more objective measurements such as drug and alcohol use, criminal activity, sexual partners, employment and a number of other factors as indicative of child wellbeing.

Source: Regenerus, M. (2012). How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study. *Social Science Research*, 41, 752-70.

When you choose different criteria, you are going to yield different results.

And subjectivity is not limited to what is measured. There is also subjectivity in how these measurements are interpreted.

For example, a recent Australian research paper stated “greater tolerance of sexual and gender diversity; and gender flexibility displayed by children” as “benefits” exhibited by children and young adults being raised by lesbian mothers. But whether gender flexibility is an indicator of a child’s wellbeing is completely subjective.

It could equally be argued that this type of gender confusion is an indicator of poor outcomes for children.

Source: Deborah Dempsey, Same-sex parented families in Australia, 2013.

The design of the study makes a difference

The design of the studies also makes a difference to the outcomes.

As the Dempsey research paper notes about studies regarding the wellbeing of children raised by same-sex couples:

... many studies are based on small and homogenous samples of highly educated and middle-class participants. Many of the comparative studies conducted to date on children or young adults raised in the same-sex parented families are based on volunteer samples of participants rather than random samples. This means that it is unknown how representative and generalisable the studies’ results are. Further to this, many researchers in this field note that their participants were mostly white and well educated, which does not reflect the likely socio-economic, ethnic and racial diversity of the same-sex parenting population.

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Research becomes unreliable when data collected from small and/or non-representative samples is extrapolated in an attempt to apply it more universally. Adding to this lack of reliability is the use of self-selection (ie, volunteering) as a means to recruit participants for these studies. Even psychologists who advocate for children to be raised by couples of the same sex note that studies which recruit their participants through self-selection are problematic:

"Parental self-report, of course, may be biased. It is plausible to argue that, in a prejudiced social climate, lesbian and gay parents may have more at stake in presenting a positive picture."

Source: Tasker, F. (2010). Same-Sex Parenting and Child Development: Reviewing the Contribution of Parental Gender. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 35-40.

So, is there anything we do know?

Currently there is no research which gives us a definitive answer on the long-term wellbeing of children raised from birth by same-sex couples.

There are simply not enough children being raised by parents of the same sex to design a sufficient study (according to the 2013 publication Same-sex couples from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 0.1% of Australian children are being raised by same-sex couples.) And same-sex parenting has not been around long enough for us to know the long-term effects.

Are we willing to experiment with the wellbeing of children?

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Importantly, one of the biggest studies in the world on the effect of childhood relationships showed that the influence of a mother is different to that of a father.

The Grant study followed men of similar backgrounds for 70 years. It found that the closeness of their relationship with their mother was linked to success in work, income and study, and found that a father is mostly influential in the ability to play, to enjoy vacations, to have healthy coping skills, and better mental health outcomes generally.

What the Grant study shows is that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable because they impart different gifts to their children.

So, while we do not have data on the long-term effects of same-sex parenting, we do have very good data on what happens when a person grows up without a close relationship with their mother or father.

Obviously, this does not happen in every circumstance. There are single and same-sex parents who raise their children well and opposite-sex couples who raise their children poorly, however if we are looking at the optimal environment for children, it is with married, biological parents.

KEY POINTS

Studies which look at the wellbeing of children raised by same-sex couples often use subjective indicators of child wellbeing.

Many studies have been based on small numbers of self-selected participants, limiting the reliability of the research.

We do not have sufficient data to definitively know the effects of same-sex parenting on children. But children are too important to be experimented with.

What we do know is that when children grow up without a mother or a father, their long-term wellbeing is harmed.