A child will benefit from a healthy, loving home, whether the parents are gay or not. (US President Barack Obama, 2008)

Another change that has challenged one of the central assumptions of the ideal family form is the increase in lesbian and gay families. Janice Standish and Darlene McCloud, the lesbian family that we introduced in the opening chapter is one of these new families. Not only does the Standish–McCloud family challenge our notions of the “ideal” family it also “challenges and exposes the meaning and limits of gender – and inextricably, standard or traditional conceptualizations of family” (Goldberg, 2010, p. 11).

The goals of this chapter are to examine the implications of growing up in a family of two same-gender parents on children’s development and to explore the family processes in this new family form to better understand these developmental outcomes. As I will show, in spite of some challenges, children are not harmed by being raised by two same-gender parents but instead seem to be quite normal in their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Another goal is to continue our exploration of the critical issue of whether it is the gender of the parent or the types of family processes irrespective of the family form or the parents’ gender that is most important for the successful socialization of children. This is a hotly contested issue in American culture, with many skeptics and many supporters. My goal is to present the science behind the headlines so cooler heads can prevail as we try to sort out the scholarly research aimed at achieving a better understanding of the issues surrounding same-gender families.

The Controversy about the Wisdom of Same-Gender Parent Families Is Alive and Well

Early as well as contemporary critics of nonheterosexual parent families were and are concerned that the lack of a male figure or in the case of gay parents a female parental figure would disrupt gender role development, expose children to peer ostracism, and
cause emotional and relational problems (Blankenhorn, 1995; Dobson, 2004; Wardle, 1997). In the words of David Popenoe, author of *Life Without Father* “Children need a committed male and female couple – a mother and father in a joint partnership – to provide them with dependable and enduring love and attention” (1996, p. 197). In addition he notes, “we should disavow the popular notion that ‘mommies can make good daddies’ just as we should disavow the popular notion of feminists that ‘daddies can make good mommies’” (1996, p. 197). To put aside any doubts that these new family pioneers are not always accepted by the wider culture, consider these results of a recent national survey. In response to the statement “we should do everything we can to encourage that children are reared by their biological parents,” 81% agreed with this sentiment (Cultural Cognition Project, 2009). At the same time, acceptance of gay and lesbian parent families has increased from earlier eras, when there was not only less acceptance of gay and lesbian parents but also fewer opportunities for gay or lesbian couples to become parents (Pew Research Center, 2011; see Table 4.1). The laws restricted the ability of gay/lesbian couples to adopt, and only in the last few decades did the advances in assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as sperm- or egg-donor based artificial insemination and the use of surrogacy open up new ways for gay and lesbian couples to achieve parenthood. Even the popular media are catching up now, and in the process increasing acceptance of gay and lesbian families. We see gay families in more and more TV shows such as Modern Family and The New Normal and in movies such as The Kids Are All Right. At the same time, we need to examine the prevalence of these types of families and see how they work as families. Only then can we properly assess whether the concerns behind the controversy are real or imagined.

### Table 4.1 The Changing Attitudes Toward Gay Parenting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More gay and lesbian couples raising children</th>
<th>Feb 2007 (%)</th>
<th>Jan 2010 (%)</th>
<th>Oct 2010 (%)</th>
<th>Mar 2011 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good thing for society</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad thing for society</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not make much difference</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

How Prevalent Are Same-Gender Parent Families?

The exact number of children in America currently being raised by gay, lesbian, and bisexual parents is unknown. Resistance to lesbian and gay rights continues to force many lesbian and gay people to remain silent about their sexual orientation and relationships. But several studies indicate the numbers of children with same-sex parents in America are significant. Beginning with the 2000 US Census, two same-gender adults who were living together could identify themselves as an unmarried couple.
This allowed an estimate of the number of gay and lesbian couples as well as the number of children under age 18 who were living in their homes. According to the 2010 Census, there are approximately 650,000 same-sex couples in the United States (Gates & Cooke, 2011) and 20% of these couples identified as spouses. Furthermore, 19% of all same-sex couples are raising children. Of these child-rearing couples 31% identified as spouses and 14% as unmarried partners. Therefore, parents of the same sex are raising at least 200,000 children – possibly more – in America (these numbers do not include single lesbian or single gay parents). In contrast, 43% of heterosexual couples have children in their homes. Race and ethnic variations are evident. About a quarter of individuals in same-sex couples are nonwhite, and they are generally as racially and ethnically diverse as those in different-sex couples, though individuals in same-sex couples are less likely to be Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander (Gates, 2013). Fully a third of same-sex Hispanic couples and a quarter of African American same-sex couples are raising children, compared to 17% of white same-sex couples (Gates, 2012).

There are limitations in the Census report that suggest that the numbers are an underestimate and the real numbers are probably higher (Gates & Cooke 2011). Some same-sex couples may have failed to disclose their couple status to census interviewers. Single gay and lesbian parents were not counted nor were children over 18 of same-sex parents. “These data were nevertheless valuable because they demonstrated that, even when undercounted, substantial numbers of gay and lesbian parents live in all parts of the United States” (Patterson & Riskind, 2010, p. 328).

The social stigma surrounding gay and lesbian identity, the legal barriers concerning same-sex marriage as well as the higher hurdles associated with adoption all contribute to this lower rate of parenthood among nonheterosexual adults (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). Even though most women (90%) have or intend to have children it is significantly less likely that lesbians will fulfill this dream (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). The evidence we have, however, suggests that substantial percentages of gay and lesbian adults want to become parents although the rates are lower than for heterosexual adults. In one national study (the 2002 NSFG project), although 52% of childless gay men and 41% of childless lesbians expressed a desire to have children, these rates are lower than the level of desire to become a parent among heterosexual males or females (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). In the 2002 NSFG survey, 53% of childless heterosexual women and 67% of childless heterosexual men expressed a desire for children (Gates, Badgett, Chambers, & Macomber, 2007). Thus, reduced desire for children may be responsible, in part, for lower parenthood rates among gay and lesbian adults. Whether this lower desire to become parents among gay men and lesbians is due to a truly diminished desire or due to the societal barriers imposed on gay men and lesbians who wish to have children is unclear. Perhaps if the obstacles are removed and gay- and lesbian-parent families become socially acceptable, the discrepancy between the desire to become a parent and the actual rates of parenting for heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians will diminish.

A final caveat is in order. We know more about both prevalence and process among white, middle class and relatively well educated same-sex couples, and significantly less about same-gender couples from other ethnic and racial groups in our society. There are exceptions such as Mignon Moore’s recent book *Invisible Families* (2011), a study of
Black lesbian women and mothers. We highlight some of this recent work later in this chapter. The fact that the proportion of minority gay/lesbian couples who are raising children is higher than white same-sex-couple families (Gates, 2012) underscores the need for more information about minority same-sex parents and their children.

**Routes to Parenthood among Gay/Lesbian Couples**

In contemporary Western societies, there are a variety of ways in which gay and lesbian couples can achieve parenthood. Many of the same-sex parents studied 20 or 30 years ago in the initial period of investigation of this issue were, in fact, previously married individuals in heterosexual relationships who later self identified as gay or lesbian after a divorce (Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bigner, 1999). In some cases, a lesbian or gay man would continue as a single parent and in other cases, he or she would partner with another person of the same gender and coparent as a same-sex family. It was difficult to sort out whether the effects of growing up in these families on children was due to divorce, single parenthood, or same-gender parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). However, more recent studies have included gay and lesbian individuals or couples who have followed a diverse set of pathways to parenthood (Goldberg, 2010; Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Instead of becoming a parent in a heterosexual relationship, common routes today are artificial insemination and adoption. Janice and Darlene Standish-McCloud, the lesbian couple we introduced earlier chose the international adoption route but other lesbian couples choose the artificial insemination path to parenthood. As we will see in the next chapter, the access to ART may be limited by income and possibly race (Moore, 2011). One US survey of lesbians found that only 2.8% of Black lesbian mothers had their children this way compared to 5.6% of white lesbian mothers (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). Other lesbians pursue the old fashioned route – engaging in heterosexual sex in order to become parents, which some may view as more natural or a way to increase the chances of conception (Lev, 2004). Some lesbians and gay men pursue surrogacy, whereby a contracted female carries a baby to be raised by the couple. Some are even more unorthodox and devise unusual parenting arrangements (e.g., a lesbian couple coparenting with a gay couple; a single lesbian coparenting with a lesbian or gay friend or friends). Family forms seem to be limited only by our imagination.

Some have suggested that there has been a generational shift in the routes to parenthood (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). One large scale survey of over 2000 lesbian women, found that 96% of lesbian and bisexual mothers at least 60 years of age reported that they had become parents in the context of a heterosexual relationship, before coming out (Morris et al., 2002). In contrast, only 59% of those 30–40 years of age reached parenthood in this way. There has been a similar generation shift in the paths to parenthood for gay men as well. An online survey of nearly 900 gay men found that older men (over 50 years of age) were more likely than younger respondents to have become parents in the context of a heterosexual relationship (Tornello & Patterson, 2010). A few older men achieved parenthood through adoption and foster care but rarely through the more recently available new reproductive technology routes of surrogacy, donor insemination, or sperm donation. For younger gay men, parenthood was rarely achieved through a prior heterosexual relationship but
more likely through adoption and surrogacy (Goldberg, 2012). New Internet sites which provide information about parenting possibilities for gays and lesbians and specific resources such as “Maybe Baby” groups for lesbian and gay prospective parents and more same-gender couple-friendly adoption agencies and fertility clinics are all contributing to the changing landscape for same-sex couples (Lev, 2004). New surveys may provide even stronger support for the generational shift hypothesis as more lesbian women as well as gay men are taking advantage of the new pathways to parenthood afforded by both adoption and ART.

Regardless of the route to parenthood that is chosen, all involve a violation of the “ideal” family form. Artificial insemination is a solution to fertility problems for heterosexual couples but when used as a route to parenthood for lesbian couples or single lesbians, it is viewed as a violation of the “ideal” family form. The use of the new reproductive technologies by nonheterosexual couples is viewed by some as a distortion of the purpose for which these medical advances were intended (assisted reproductive technology as a route to parenthood is discussed in the next chapter). Even adoption is sometimes viewed as subverting American kinship ideology since it involves the separation of biological from social kin (Gailey, 2004). In the case of gay or lesbian adoptive singles or couples, there is even greater concern about the departure from the cultural “ideal” family form. In fact, in some states, such as Utah and Louisiana, only married couples can adopt, while in other states single gay/lesbian individuals can adopt but not gay/lesbian couples. This requires that the second or nonadopting parent petition to be legally recognized as a parent. About two-third of all states allow second-parent adoptions by the unmarried partner of an existing legal parent either by legal statute or by generally being permitted by the courts. In a handful of states, courts have ruled these adoptions not permissible under state laws (Fenton & Fenton, 2011).

Enlisting a male partner only to be able to conceive, is a departure from the ideal that two heterosexual individuals should not only conceive but also serve as parents of the child; in this case the biological father is not involved and the child may either be raised by a single lesbian mother or in a lesbian couple family. As Goldberg (2010) notes, there are other risks as well.

When a coupled lesbian engages in heterosexual sex to become pregnant, this threatens both the legal and symbolic parental role of her partner, in that the biological father is often awarded greater symbolic and legal recognition than the non-biological lesbian partner (Goldberg, p. 55).

The use of surrogacy is also a departure from the “ideal” family form since a third party is involved in achieving parenthood rather than the child rearing couple. Furthermore, in the case of gay and lesbian couples, their parenthood violates the cultural norm of two heterosexual parents who conceived their child. Complex coparenting in which multiple figures play roles as parents, although a creative social form in which to rear a child is again a violation of the “ideal” family form which includes the mother and father as the primary caregivers. (As we explore in Chapter 6, more cooperative forms of parenting are, in fact, common in other cultures). In sum, regardless of the route to parenthood chosen, gay/lesbian parents face societal discrimination, in part, due to their departure from the cultural notion of the “ideal” family form. The question is whether this discrimination and prejudice directed toward same-gender parents adversely affects their adequacy as parents. As we noted
earlier, critics have been concerned that children who are raised in these families will suffer cognitively, socially, and emotionally, in part, due to the suspected inadequacy of same-gender couples as parents. To assess the validity of these claims, we examine both the parenting of same-gender couples and single gay or lesbian parents and the development of children reared in these families.

The Challenges of Same-Gender Parenting

When partners become parents, both heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian couples face many challenges. These include decisions about the division of labor inside and outside the household, the roles and responsibilities of each partner and decisions about child-rearing practices. As we will see, there are many similarities across heterosexual and gay/lesbian parents in terms of how they deal with these challenges but also some unique and specialized ways in which gay/lesbian parents approach these decisions about their parenting roles and responsibilities.

Division of Household Responsibilities in Same-Gender Families

Research comparing gay and lesbian parent families with heterosexual families finds that gay and lesbian parents tend to share household duties more equally than do heterosexual couples (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2008). Heterosexual couples specialize more than same-sex couples: in heterosexual families, mothers do more unpaid child care while fathers work outside the home more. In contrast, gay/lesbian couples are more equitable in their parenting tasks and roles and more satisfied with their division of responsibilities than heterosexual couples (Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010a; Farr & Patterson, 2013b). Similarly, lesbian and gay couples report that they divided child care (feeding, bathing, dressing) more evenly than did heterosexual couples and perhaps even preferred this equitable division of caregiving (Farr et al., 2010a; Farr & Patterson, 2013b; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). Observations confirmed this pattern: lesbian and gay parents participated more equally than heterosexual parents during family interaction (Farr & Patterson). Not surprisingly, lesbian couples generally coparented more compatibly than heterosexual parents and were more satisfied with their division of parenting responsibilities (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2004, 2007). Heterosexual couples were more undermining as coparents compared to lesbian and gay couples (Farr & Patterson).

Nevertheless, in some lesbian families, the biological mother tends to be more involved in child care and the nonbiological mother spends longer hours in paid employment (Goldberg et al., 2008; Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). This pattern is particularly evident among Black lesbian couples where the biological mother does more housework, child care, and management of the household schedule than her partner (Moore, 2011). Similarly, in Black stepparent families, the biomother is highly involved while the stepmother may be more detached and removed from child decision making. As Moore argues, Black lesbian women may be less committed to the “ethic of equality” endorsed by white lesbian mothers and instead view the investment in household tasks as a sign of being a good mother. However, this pattern of greater
involvement of the biomother may occur more in the early years of a child’s life when feeding responsibilities (especially if breast feeding) are a central focus than when the child is older (Patterson & Farr, 2011). Without biological factors as a constraint as in the case of lesbian adoptive couples, the division of labor was more equally divided than in either lesbian couples who achieved parenthood through artificial insemination or in heterosexual adoptive couples (Ciano-Boyece & Shelley-Sireci, 2002).

As in the case of heterosexual couples, there is much variability among gay and lesbian couples in how they organize the tasks of child care and paid work. As Goldberg (2010) notes

some lesbian and gay parents may enact labor arrangements that appear similar to traditional heterosexual parenting arrangements (one woman does more paid work, one woman does more unpaid work), others may execute labor arrangements that look very different (e.g., both women contribute equally to paid and unpaid work) and some may enact arrangements that we likely have yet to imagine, conceptualize, or understand (p. 102).

Some lesbian couples, even those who used donor insemination do manage to share child care tasks relatively equally between the biological and nonbiological coparent. In fact, they shared more equally than heterosexual couples and in this study the lesbian nonbiological mothers were more involved in child care than heterosexual fathers (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998). Similarly, in some lesbian parent families the amount of outside paid work undertaken by biological and nonbiological parents is relatively similar (Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). This is sometimes at the expense of career advancement which may reflect women’s socialization into the motherhood role as mandatory rather than discretionary. As in heterosexual families, when both partners share in the child-care tasks, they are more satisfied and their children are better adjusted in terms of social–emotional development (Patterson, 1995). However, a rigid commitment to the equality principle may not always be best especially if equality of care is associated with resentment or dissatisfaction due to the thwarting of personal preferences for different time allocations. As earlier studies (Hock & DeMeis, 1990) of maternal employment among heterosexual families found, satisfaction was greatest when there was a match between a woman’s preferences for the balance of paid/unpaid work and the actual work arrangement regardless of the specifics of the work plan. Others found a similar pattern for gay/lesbian couples: the subjective evaluations of parents – gay, lesbian, and heterosexual – predicted child adjustment; those who were dissatisfied with their division of labor due to a discrepancy between their real and preferred arrangements had children with more behavior problems regardless of the actual division of labor (Farr et al., 2010b; Farr & Patterson, 2013b). Forming new family forms is to some degree a creative process, and finding a workable solution that satisfies the couple involved is more important to the partner’s satisfaction than the final division of labor that ensues.

To sum up, the take home message is threefold. First, the pathway to parenthood for lesbian/gay parents makes a difference in who does what in the household. Second, satisfaction with the division of responsibilities is more important than a strict accounting of who does what and third, there are individual differences within the
lesbian and gay communities that make overall generalizations difficult. The story sounds a lot like the tale of heterosexual couples as chronicled by so many others (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

**Parenting Practices in Same-Gender Families**

Do child rearing practices and parenting skills differ between same-sex and heterosexual families? This is one of the hot button issues that has kept a cloud over same-sex parents for decades since social critics and perhaps more importantly the judicial system have questioned whether gay or lesbian individuals could be competent parents. As we have noted, concerns include the lack of an opposite-gender parent in the home, the negative impact of discrimination on children in these families, and even doubts about the mental health and psychological stability of nonheterosexual adults (Goldberg, 2010). To illustrate the extent to which these attitudes affect legal decisions, consider the historic case of Sharon Bottoms, a lesbian mother in Virginia who lost custody of her son to her own mother who felt that a lesbian was unfit for motherhood. Sadly the court agreed with the grandmother’s claim that her grandson’s well-being was undermined by living in a lesbian mother household. The evidence based on numerous research studies suggests that both the judge and the grandmother were wrong (Patterson, 2006).

**Adjustment and Parenting Knowledge of Lesbian Couples:** In several studies, comparisons between donor insemination lesbian couples and donor insemination heterosexual families revealed no differences in parental adjustment, parental self-esteem, or relationship satisfaction (Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995). Others find a similar pattern: lesbian women’s well-being and psychological health is similar to females in general (Rand, Graham, & Rawlings, 1982). Nor are there differences in parental knowledge of the skills necessary for effective parenting or in the self-reported parenting skills between lesbian and heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2007). Parenting stress levels were similar across adoptive gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples (Farr & Patterson, 2009). It would be surprising if gay or lesbian parents were not just as capable as heterosexual parents of fulfilling the basic set of universal parenting tasks that we reviewed in Chapter 1.

**Parenting Quality of Lesbian Couples:** Does parenting quality vary across same-gender and heterosexual coparent family forms? The short answer based on numerous studies in both the United States and Europe is *No*; parenting is not very different in these types of families. Several studies in the United States found few differences between the parenting practices of lesbian couples and heterosexual couples (Patterson, 2006). In Belgium, Brewaeys (1996) found no differences between donor insemination lesbian and heterosexual families and naturally conceiving families in the quality of parenting or the quality of the couple’s relationship. In Great Britain, Golombok, Cook, Bish, and Murray (1997) compared lesbian donor insemination families, heterosexual donor insemination single mother, and two-parent families; they found no differences in parental warmth and mother–child interaction patterns. Other work by this British team found that lesbian and heterosexual mothers were similar in warmth
Future Families

Figure 4.1 Parenting styles of lesbian couple families are more similar than different from heterosexual parent families (Marcie and Chantelle Fisher-Borne, North Carolina mothers).

Source: © Tiburon Studios/iStockphoto.

and sensitive responsiveness in interacting with children, adolescents, and young adults (Golombok & Badger, 2010; Golombok et al., 2003; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). When differences in parenting style are found, there is no indication that these stylistic differences are cause for concern; some would argue that the differences in style may, in fact, be better for children. For example, lesbian coparents tend to play with their children more than heterosexual parents (Golombok et al.) and are less likely than heterosexual mothers to physically discipline (spank) their children (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2007; Johnson & O’Connor, 2002; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Although the moral justification and the effectiveness of physical punishment is debatable, many experts agree that such child-rearing tactics can lead to a variety of negative outcomes such as an increase in aggression (Gershoff, 2002). Other studies (Bos et al., 2007) report higher rates of structuring and limit setting for lesbian biological mothers compared to lesbian nonbiological mothers. Since in many cases the biological lesbian mother takes more caregiving responsibility and spends more time with the child than her coparent partner, this pattern is not surprising. Parenting by lesbian coparenting couples has been aptly described as “a double dose of a middle class ‘feminine’ approach to parenting” (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010, p. 11). More importantly these child-rearing characteristics are part of the style that Diana Baumrind (1991) has described as authoritative, a style that is widely recognized as an optimal approach to child rearing. So rather than concern, there may even be some positive advantages to the parenting styles of lesbian mothers (Figure 4.1).
Parenting Quality of Gay Fathers: What about gay fathers? Women are culturally prepared from an early age to be nurturant and sensitive, characteristics that are critical for successful parenting. Most play with dolls, many babysit and take care of younger siblings. For lots of girls, childhood is an extended apprenticeship in parenting. Boys have a very different set of childhood experiences. They are more likely to play with trucks than baby dolls and fewer neighbors provide them with opportunities to babysit. For boys, childhood is an apprenticeship in sports and mechanics – wonderful training for the working world, but not particularly helpful to future fathers (Parke & Brott, 1999).

In spite of the lack of cultural support for parenting during childhood, we saw in the last chapter that men can be competent and effective caregivers. Is the same true for gay men? Gay parents face unique challenges. They encounter more discrimination and experience more stress than heterosexual fathers because gay dads are a stigmatized group (Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Moreover, gay fathers may be less accepted than lesbian mothers since women are culturally expected to be mothers while men’s roles as parents are less culturally scripted. The fact that some gay fathers assume a primary caregiver role is a further departure from the cultural norms of fatherhood. In the context of two men as parents there are other challenges. “Both men must cooperatively negotiate the actuality of engaging in both mothering and fathering and they must navigate the realities of (co)constructing and sharing the parenting role without the societal support and guidance that heterosexual couples receive” (Goldberg, 2010, p. 106). At the same time, gay men who decide to become parents are a self-selected group just as in the case of heterosexual men who seek or gain custody after divorce (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). They are committed to the responsibilities of parenting, are generally better educated, and earn more than those who do not choose parenthood. Although there has been much less attention given to gay men as fathers compared to lesbian mothers, current evidence suggests that gay men are competent parents in spite of the challenges faced by these parenting pioneers. Early studies comparing divorced gay fathers and divorced heterosexual fathers found no differences in their self reported levels of involvement or intimacy with their children; gay fathers were even more sensitive and responsive to their children’s needs than their heterosexual counterparts (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989). However, gay fathers were more strict and set more limits on their children but also used more reasoning (i.e., provided more explanations for their decisions) and involved their children more in family decisions. As we saw in the case of lesbian couples, gay couples use less corporal punishment than heterosexual coparents and even somewhat less than lesbian coparents (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). It is clear that when two gay men parent together they do not “provide a double dose of masculine parenting” (Biblarz & Stacey, p. 12). Instead, their parenting approach more closely resembles lesbian than heterosexual coparents (Mallon, 2004; Stacey, 2006) or mothers rather than heterosexual fathers. These observations suggest that it is overly simplistic to assume that gay and lesbian parenting is always based on a heterosexual-couple model which provides clear guidelines for role divisions between males and females based on both biological differences and cultural expectations. Same-gender families are exempt to some degree from these constraints, although as we saw in our discussion of the division of labor, the biological mother in a lesbian couple family sometimes assumes a traditional role of caregiver,
while the nonbiological mother takes on more paid work. Unlike the roles prescribed by gender in heterosexual couples, gay men, in some ways, are least hindered by biological constraints and often develop what has been termed “degendered parenting” (Schacher Auerbach & Silverstein, 2005). In this case, each father enacts and blends aspects of both mother and father roles into a creative, flexible, nonconventional but workable parenting role. "The gay fathers (in the Schacher study) described themselves as having a hybrid parenting role, where both they and their partner divided child-care duties by preference, aptitude, or equality, rather than splitting into ‘mother or father’ roles” (Golombok & Tasker, 2010, p. 327). For gay men the concepts of father and mother may be obsolete. As one gay man questioned, “Am I a mother or a father? So what does that make when I nurture him? What’s a father and what’s a mother? I don’t really know” (Silverstein Auerbach, and Levant, 2002, p. 366). And another gay man observed, “It’s not about gender…males and females can be equally mothers and fathers” (Schacher et al., 2005). Another gay dad expressed a similar sentiment,

As a gay dad, I’m not a mom, but sometimes I think I have more in common with moms than I do with straight dads. I mean, these straight dads that I know are essentially weekend dads; they don’t parent with the same intensity that I do or that their wives do. In many ways, despite being a man, I am a dad, but I am like a mom too (Mallon, 2004, p. 138).

Often gay male coparents both share child caretaking as well as organize their lives to permit both of them to participate in the workforce (Goldberg, 2012; Schacher et al., 2005). This balance between home and work responsibilities is especially important to gay male coparents who tend to be more committed to maintaining a full time career than lesbian coparents but less so than heterosexual fathers (Sears Gates & Rubenstein, 2005). While some gay fathers challenge the traditional concepts of masculinity by taking on more caregiving responsibility, “They cannot fully escape hegemonic masculine roles, such as those that assign greater value to breadwinning than to caregiving” (Goldberg, 2012, p. 107). As we explore next, dichotomous labeling of parents based on biological gender may prevent couples from fully exercising their preferences and utilizing their unique talents and predispositions. Some fathers may eschew the breadwinner role in favor of more home time with the children but still coach his children’s soccer team while his coparent may both work outside but still be a nurturant and involved dad.

This emerging evidence of the plasticity of roles among gay fathers in which they combine elements of “maternal” and “paternal” into a hybrid role is a further reminder of the fluidity of gender roles and is consistent with a more general story of gender role flexibility, regardless of gender identity. For example, other work illustrates that heterosexual men and women are more flexible in their family roles than cultural stereotypes would suggest. Recall the Lewin family who we introduced in the opening chapter in which Todd was a full-time dad while his wife Mary Helen worked full time. The success of these reverse role arrangements in which men become primary caregivers and women become the chief breadwinners illustrates this flexibility and fluidity of gender roles (Radin, 1994; Russell, 1983). Clearly, caregiving can be effectively provided not only by mothers by a variety of partners, including both gay and
heterosexual fathers (Figure 4.2). Both adults and children can benefit from more flexibility in how we define parent roles and who assumes these roles.

**Is Gender of Parent or Family Process More Important?**

The quality of the parenting in both same-sex and heterosexual-parent families, is more important than the gender of the parents for children’s development (Patterson, 2006). British family expert, Susan Golombok agrees: “Family structure, in itself, makes little difference to children’s psychological development. Instead what really matters is the quality of family life” (2000, p. 99). A parenting pattern of warmth and sensitivity and responsiveness in conjunction with appropriate limit setting and control (Baumrind’s classic authoritative pattern) is associated with better outcomes in both same-gender parent families and in heterosexual-parent families. Support for this claim comes from Charlotte Patterson and her colleagues (Chan, Raboy et al., 1998; Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004; Wainright & Patterson, 2006) who found that the quality of parent child relationships (i.e., adolescents perception of parental warmth, parents perception of the quality of the parent–child relationship) were associated with less trouble at school and greater school connectedness, especially in same-gender parent families. Substance use and delinquent behavior were also related to the quality of the parent–adolescent relationship. A good quality parent–adolescent relationship is related to lower use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana as well as less delinquent behavior across all types of families. Moreover, the quality of coparenting
in heterosexual, lesbian and gay adoptive families was related to lower levels of externalizing in young children (Farr & Patterson, 2013b). Finally, both quality of the parent–child relationship and care from other adults and peers were linked with more positive peer relationships (Wainright & Patterson, 2006). Another factor that is associated with child adjustment across heterosexual, lesbian and gay parent adoptive families is parental stress. When parents agreed with such items as “I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent;” “I expected to have closer and warmer feelings for my child than I do and this bothers me;” and, “My child seems to cry or fuss more than most other children,” their three-year-olds were rated as higher in both externalizing and internalizing outcomes (Farr et al., 2010b). Process emerges once again as trumping family form or parent gender.

Factors that Alter Parenting Processes in Same-Gender Families

Several factors influence the success of gay and lesbian parents in rearing well-adjusted children. Consistent with a family systems view, it is not only parenting processes and, in turn, parent–child relationships that are important but partner–partner relationships are critical family processes as well (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cummings & Davies, 2010). Sharing the tasks of parenting with a cohabitating partner is linked with more positive parenting among gay parents. Compared to single gay fathers, gay couples rated themselves as better able to meet the financial emotional and practical challenges of parenting (Barrett & Tasker, 2001). This parallels findings with heterosexual single mothers: in general single mothers have more stress and challenges in meeting their parenting responsibilities than two-parent families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). It is not simply sharing that matters, it is the degree of satisfaction with the partner relationship that is important. When couples who were satisfied with their relationship, their children had fewer behavioral problems (Chan, Brooks et al., 1998; Farr et al., 2010). In a Belgian study, Bos and colleagues (2007) found that school-age children were rated by their parents as having fewer externalizing and internalizing problems when parents – lesbian or heterosexual – were satisfied with their partner as a coparent. One of the determinants of relationship satisfaction is how satisfied the couple is with the division of labor in the household. When lesbian, gay, or heterosexual parenting couples were satisfied with the division of labor, relationship satisfaction was higher and, in turn, child adjustment was better (Chan, Brooks et al., 1998; Farr et al., 2010). The effect of feelings about the division of labor was linked to couple relationship satisfaction which suggests that couple contentment mediated the links between division of labor and child adjustment. Interpartner harmony is a positive influence on children in both heterosexual and same-gender parent families. Again, the centrality of process for understanding families is evident.

On the other hand, interpartner conflict clearly has a negative impact on children’s adjustment. There is a plethora of evidence that intercouple hostility and conflict is linked with poorer social and emotional functioning among children and adolescents in heterosexual families (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Similar findings are evident in investigations of both donor insemination lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families. Regardless of family form, when parent–parent conflict was high,
there were higher levels of behavioral problems in the children (Chan, Raboy et al., 1998). Finally, family systems theory suggests that marital discord not only adversely affects parent–child and coparent–child relationships but also impairs quality of the triadic parent–parent–child relationships by reducing the effectiveness of how well partners work together as coparents with their children. Although there has been some progress on this issue in heterosexual families (McHale & Lindahl, 2011), more work on gay and lesbian coparenting is needed (Patterson & Farr, 2011).

Another factor that is linked with parenting and family satisfaction is the openness of the gay parent about their sexual orientation. Those who are more positive about their sexual identity experienced less parenting stress than those who were less positive (i.e., I often wonder whether others judge me for my sexual orientation; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). Among gay divorced fathers who had come out to their children, many reported greater honesty and openness in their parent–child relationships and felt that their children were similarly more open and honest with them (Benson, Silverstein, & Auerbach, 2005).

Families do better when there is social support from friends, relatives, and community; as in the case of heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian parents benefit from the acceptance, assistance, and advice of a social network (Golombok & Tasker, 2010; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). Friends may be even more important than family as a source of social support for gay parents (Tornello et al.) and lesbian parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2008) since families of origin are not always reliable sources of support due to lack of acceptance and understanding of their relative’s sexual orientation. Interestingly, the members of the network who provide assistance in child care and rearing among gay father families are not as restricted to close kin as in heterosexual families. Rather than the closed nuclear family unit which is typical for the “ideal” family paradigm, some gay fathers incorporate several adults into their child-care system including not only people who are biologically related such as the “birth mother” and members of the “birth family” but others who are neither biologically related nor even in the same residence (Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). As is the case for African American and Latino families, gay couples base their definition of family on sentiments such as love and loyalty rather than biology. In this conceptualization of family, “bonding transcends biology” (Schacher et al.). Another departure from the traditional “ideal” family model among gay couples is the inter-racial and interethnic nature of their families. Most gay men who adopted were unconcerned about the racial identity of the child. As one gay adopting father commented, “We don’t see in Black and White” (Schacher et al.). This pattern of inter-racial adoption is especially evident among younger gay men. According to a survey of gay men (Tornello & Patterson, 2010), about half of gay fathers under 40 adopted a child of a different race while only a quarter of older gay men (over 60) had formed an interracial family through adoption. The barriers gay men face in the adoption arena may, in part, make them more accepting of a range of possible adoptive children than culturally conforming adopting families who face fewer obstacles. In Judith Stacey’s (2006) discussion of gay adoption, she describes the gay men of Los Angeles as having to search through the state’s “overstocked warehouse of ‘hard to place children,’ the majority of whom have been removed from families judged negligent, abusive, or incompetent. Most of the state’s stockpiled children are children of color, and disproportionately boys with ‘special needs’” (p. 39). However, it may not
simply be availability; younger generations may be more open to a wider variety of nonconforming family forms including interracial families.

Growing Up in a Same-Gender Parent Family: Harmful or Helpful for Children’s Development?

Contrary to the concerns and fears of many cultural critics that children reared in same-gender families will be poorly adjusted (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996), the vast body of evidence suggests that these fears are not borne out by the research evidence. Instead, children of lesbian and gay parents are well-adjusted (Goldberg, 2010; Patterson, 2006). While a wide range of outcomes have been examined, the central issue has been gender identity, gendered role behavior, and sexual orientation. Let us look at the evidence.

Gender Development: Studies in both Europe and North America have tried to answer this question: “Is children’s gender identity – their self identification as male or female – affected by being reared in a same-gender parent household?” While some commentators have expressed concern that boys in lesbian parent families who lack a male model would identify as female (Wardle, 1997), there is little support for this concern. Over 30 years ago in a study of American 5–12-year-olds raised in either a lesbian mother family or a heterosexual-mother family, Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) found no differences in children’s gender identity. In Britain similar results were found, namely that gender identity was unaffected by the nature of the sexual orientation of the parent (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983). In short, there is no evidence that gay or lesbian parents produce children with a poorly defined sense of their gender. Boys know they are male and girls identify as female, regardless of the gender of their parents.

Another aspect of the gender development issue that has been examined is the extent to which children’s gender role behavior is affected by the type of family in which they are raised. Do children raised in same-sex parent families exhibit more androgynous sex role behavior patterns whereby they exhibit aspects of both male and female gender appropriate behavior than children raised in heterosexual parent families? As Goldberg (2010) argues,

to the extent that lesbians and gay men hold less rigid gender stereotypes, may be more tolerant of cross-gender interests and behaviors, and may model less rigid conformity to gendered roles in their dress, behaviors and overall comportment, they may also facilitate similar nonconformity in their children (p. 130).

Some American studies have found no differences between children from lesbian single mother and heterosexual-single mother families in their preferences for gender typed toys (Hoeffer, 1981) while others found no differences in knowledge of gender stereotypes nor any differences in gender toy or activity preferences (Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008). Boys preferred trucks and girls liked dolls regardless of their parent’s sexual orientation. However, children with lesbian parents were more tolerant of gender transgressions (e.g., boys wearing nail polish or girls playing football) than children of heterosexual parents. A closer look at the gender attitudes of lesbian and
heterosexual parents helps us better understand these findings. Lesbian mothers endorse less traditional gender attitudes than heterosexual parents (e.g., lesbian parents approve of active play for girls as well as boys more than do heterosexual parents). In turn, the children of the lesbian parents were less traditional in their attitudes than children from heterosexual (i.e., more traditional) families (Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008). In a British study, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found that children in lesbian parent households show less gender-typed behavior; but their work suggested that parent gender rather than sexual orientation may be more important. Comparisons of gender typed behavior of 12-year-old children from either lesbian–mother families, single heterosexual-mother families, or two-parent heterosexual families revealed that boys in both types of father absent families were higher on a femininity scale than boys from two-parent heterosexual families. Boys from the three family types were similar in terms of masculinity scores. Girls were similar in both masculinity and femininity, regardless of family type. According to the authors, single mothers may encourage their sons to act in caring and sensitive ways, which would account for the higher femininity scores. However, these scores were not outside the normal range and present a profile of androgyny or gender balance which may have some advantages in later life. After all what is wrong with a dose of androgyny? Adult men who are more androgynous are more involved fathers (Russell, 1983), score higher on emotional intelligence (Guastello & Guastello, 2003), and may be better adjusted (Shimonaka, Nakazato, Kawaai, & Sato, 1997). Less is known about gender role development among gay father families. However, in a recent comprehensive study of parenting and child development, Farr and Patterson (2009) compared gay couples, lesbian couples, and heterosexual couples who had an adopted child between one and five years of age. The gender role development of the children from the three types of families as assessed by their toy and activity preferences did not differ.

The biggest worry expressed by critics of same-gender parenting is that children who are reared in these homes will grow up to adopt a nonheterosexual orientation. In spite of these fears, the alarmists are misguided as there is no evidence that children of gay or lesbian parents are any more likely to adopt a gay or lesbian sexual orientation than children from heterosexual families. Several American studies of lesbian and heterosexual mothers found that the rates of adolescents who identified as nonheterosexual did not differ (Huggins, 1989). British studies tell a slightly more complex story but the conclusion is similar. In a comparison of young adults from single-mother lesbian and heterosexual-mother families, Tasker and Golombok (1997) found no differences in rates of same-sex sexual attraction. However, young adult females but not young adult males reared by lesbian mothers were more likely to have entertained a possible same-sex relationship and to have experienced a relationship with a person of their own gender than their peers raised in a heterosexual-couple family. In a more recent Dutch study of preadolescents raised by lesbian and heterosexual couples, Bos and colleagues (2007) found similar patterns: boys who were raised in either lesbian couple or heterosexual-couple families were not different in their heterosexual identity score but girls from lesbian couple families scored lower on the heterosexual orientation index than girls from heterosexual-couple families. Perhaps the presence of only female parents may lead to lower expectations that they will form heterosexual relationships (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Or a family climate of tolerance and acceptance of same-sex relationships could, in part, be responsible for
the lower heterosexual orientation among females from lesbian mother homes just as we saw in the case of greater acceptance of nontraditional gender attitudes by children reared in lesbian mother homes. Biblarz and Stacey offer an interesting interpretation of this gender difference:

The fact that lesbian parenting did not diminish heterosexual desires in sons supports research finding greater fixity in male and fluidity in female sexual desires over the life course (Butler, 2005; Diamond, 2008). The lower heterosexual identity scores of these girls (but not their brothers) might reflect this gender difference (p. 15).

More longitudinal work is needed to determine whether these gender differences in heterosexual orientation are stable across adulthood or whether they are transient and part of adolescent experimentation.

What are the effects of being raised by gay coparents on sexual identity? To address this issue, Tasker and Barrett (2004) studied 72 British young adults, half of whom were raised by gay fathers and half by heterosexual fathers. All of the young adults from heterosexual father families identified as heterosexual, as well as the majority of those from gay father families. However, in the gay father families two sons identified as gay, one daughter as lesbian, and two sons and one daughter identified as bisexual. Moreover, children of gay fathers were more likely to have been attracted to or have had a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender than children of heterosexual dads. As in the case of the lesbian reared preadolescents and young adults, perhaps the more positive response by gay fathers to their children’s partners may, in part, account for the increased attraction to and experimentation with same-gender partners. Perhaps genetic factors play a role but in all likelihood in combination with environmental factors as is the case of other aspects of development (Rutter, 2006). The take-home message is clear: most children of both gay and lesbian parents identify as heterosexual, and the sexual orientation of parents is a minor influence on their offspring’s sexual orientation (Golombok & Tasker, 2010). To put this work into perspective, Goldberg (2010) suggests that treatment of sexual orientation as a relevant indicator of children’s well-being per se is inappropriate given that homosexuality is no longer considered a mental illness….While inclusion of sexual orientation as a child outcome is arguably justified, it should be clearly distinguished from other true mental health and well-being outcomes and accurately identified as one aspect of sexual identity development (p. 134).

Finally, it is important to note that most gay/lesbian individuals were raised by heterosexual parents.

Social Adjustment Outcomes: There are many other important aspects of social development beyond gender-related issues that merit close scrutiny. How well do children of gay or lesbian parents get along with their peers? Are they more depressed or anxious than their peers from heterosexual parents? Are there differences in other aspects of mental health?

Peer Relationships: One of the central challenges of childhood is developing satisfying and amiable relationships with your peers. And peers can be tough and are renowned for
their low tolerance for kids who are different (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). The possibility that children with two lesbian mothers or two gay fathers may be rejected by their age mates is a concern. In fact, it is a serious enough fear that some judges have used this concern as a basis for denying custody to gay or lesbian parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Is this concern warranted? Scholars in both the United States and Europe have addressed this issue with early and middle school age children and found no differences in parent ratings of peer sociability, acceptance, or social competence between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; Golombok et al., 1983, 2003). Nor do the children of lesbian or heterosexual mothers themselves perceive their peer relationships differently (Golombok et al.). A similar story is found among adolescents. In a large national sample of male and female adolescents, self and peer reports of the quality of peer relationships were similar regardless of family type (Wainright & Patterson, 2008). Peer relations remain satisfactory in young adulthood as well. Eighteen year olds reared from infancy by single heterosexual mothers, single-lesbian mothers or two heterosexual parents did not differ in the quality of their peer relationships (Golombok & Badger, 2010). There is no evidence of impaired social ties with peers as a result of the gender orientation of one’s parents.

Another related concern is that children from lesbian mother families will be teased more. Again, the fears are generally not warranted. A Belgian study, found no differences in the rates of teasing among school age children in lesbian mother and heterosexual-parent families. Instead some children, regardless of their family type were teased, laughed at, excluded, and called names (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002). As is common among children, different clothing, odd behavior, unusual appearance (being overweight; disabled), or even being too smart are all reasons for teasing. Nor do adolescents from lesbian mother and heterosexual families differ in their rates of being teased, victimized, or bullied (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008). Even when young adults who were raised in either a lesbian-divorced mother household or in a divorced heterosexual mother family reflected on their childhood experiences, they recalled similar levels of bullying in childhood (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

While there is the good news about rates of teasing, there is some bad news for children of same-gender parents regarding the reasons for being teased. When children from lesbian mother families were teased it was often about family-related issues. Typically, they were teased about their parent’s sexuality or about their own presumed sexual orientation (Vanfraussen et al., 2002). In a European study, nearly a quarter of the children in lesbian mother families experienced teasing that was directly linked to their family type. An Australian study of gay or lesbian families reported that just under half of third to sixth grade children and approximately one-third of secondary school children, had experienced teasing, bullying, and homophobic language (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Such comments as “Your mother is a lesbian,” “How come you have two mommies?” “Where is your dad?” or “Are you gay too?” were typical comments directed toward these children. Similarly, in the study of young adults in Britain (Tasker & Golombok, 1997), boys from lesbian mother families recalled being teased about their own sexuality more than males from heterosexual mother families. Others report a similar pattern of family specific harassment for children from nonheterosexual-parent families. Such verbal insults as “fag,” “lesbo,” “devil’s daughter” were directed at the school-age children from nontraditional families (Kosciw & Diaz,
Although the rates of teasing may be similar, it is likely that these more personal and family focused comments hurt more than generic insults that are commonly used in classrooms and school playgrounds.

Here is one British girl’s experience of being picked on and rejected because her mother was lesbian:

> When I was about 13, my friend found out about my mum. I wasn’t allowed to go to her house anymore. Her mum and dad forbade me to go anywhere near. And that hurt me because she had been my best friend for a long, long time. I lost that friend. And then, of course, there was a chain reaction. Everyone found out. They said ‘Don’t go near her, she’ll just turn out like her mum, so don’t go near her.’ And I lost a lot of friends through that. But there was one friend who really did stick by me and she is still around today (Golombok, 2000, pp. 55–56).

Does the teasing and social challenges encountered by some children raised in same-gender families lead to problems in psychological adjustment? American and British studies of the mental health of young children (ages three to nine) raised in lesbian or heterosexual households found few differences in psychiatric disorders (Golombok et al., 2003) or in psychological adjustment (Flaks et al., 1995). Nor were there any differences in children reared in gay adoptive-parent and heterosexual adoptive-parent families in emotional or behavioral adjustment as rated by their teachers (Farr & Patterson, 2009). Among older children and young teens; rates of anxiety, depression, and other socio-emotional problems did not differ across family groups (Gartrell et al., 2005; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Rivers et al., 2008). Finally, in one particularly impressive study using a large national sample, Wainright and colleagues (Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004) found that adolescents in female same-sex and heterosexual families were similar in positive aspects of development such as self-esteem just as they were similar in negative ones such as depression, anxiety, delinquency, and substance abuse. Clearly, children and adolescents are developing just fine in same-gender parent families in spite of the concerns of critics and commentators who worry that damage will result from being raised in these new family forms.

Several factors make a difference in the degree of acceptance of family differences or in how well children cope with teasing. The community, the neighborhood, and even the part of the country in which you live matters. In some communities with liberal leaning views, the degree of acceptance of same-gender families is likely to be greater. Growing up in the San Francisco Bay area, for example, a child in a lesbian or gay parent family is less likely to be harassed than a child in such a family growing up in a small town in Mississippi where homophobic attitudes are more prevalent. Living in a favorable social environment (e.g., a high proportion and large number of same-sex couples) for sexual minorities was related to better well being for adult offspring of lesbian/gay parents, regardless of their own sexual orientation (Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012). The type of school influences teasing and harassment rates too. Children in progressive private schools may experience less harassment than children in poorer public schools which suggests that parental income and education matter. More affluent parents have more choices about where to live and which school their child will attend than those further down the socioeconomic ladder. Having supportive parents can help too. Adolescents from lesbian mother families who enjoyed closer relationships with their parents had more friends and higher quality peer relationships (Wainright & Patterson,
And having a best friend, even one, can buffer a child from the loneliness and sadness of being rejected or ostracized by the larger peer group (Rubin et al., 2006). A final factor is age. Children in late elementary and middle school are most likely to be victims of homophobic-related teasing but children in the early grades and in the later years of high school are spared some of the wrath of their peers (Gartrell et al., 2005; Ray & Gregory, 2001). This is more than just a list of mitigating factors but a reminder that there is a great deal of variability in children’s experiences in same-gender parent families. Even though these families are structurally similar, not all same-gender families are alike and not all children in these families experience the same joys or difficulties.

In sum, there are some heightened risks of being teased about the nontraditional nature of one’s family for children in same-gender parent households but the overall rates of teasing across children from same-gender and heterosexual families are similar. It is likely that as homophobic attitudes decline and same-gender parent families become more common, more children will understand and accept that families come in a wide variety of forms and not just in the “ideal” family variety.

Achievement and School Success: Perhaps children from same-gender families suffer academically as a result of their prejudicial treatment by peers and perhaps some teachers. Just as we have concluded in the case of social and emotional outcomes, children from these nontraditional families are not behind academically. In a study of nearly 90 teens, half living with female same-sex couples and the others with heterosexual couples, both groups fared similarly in school (Wainright et al., 2004). Teen boys in same-sex households had a grade point average (GPA) of about 2.9, compared with 2.6 for their counterparts in heterosexual homes. Teen girls showed similar results, with a 2.8 GPA for same-sex households and 2.9 for girls in heterosexual families. Recently, Rosenfeld (2010) used the 2000 census data to examine school progress among children in different family structures (2000 children with lesbian mothers and 1500 children with gay fathers). After controlling for socioeconomic status, there were no differences in school retention between children from gay/lesbian and heterosexual families. Comparisons between children in same-gender parent families and cohabitating heterosexual families yield a similar picture. In all cases, retention was between 7 and 10%. However, families, regardless of their form, do give children a clear academic advantage since children in group homes, awaiting adoption or foster parents, had a grade retention rate of 34%, while incarcerated children had a grade retention rate of 78%.

The similarity in school performance between children of same sex couples and children of heterosexual couples fails to support the gender essentialist theories of parenting, which argue that child development depends on having parental role models from both gender groups (Rosenfeld, p. 773).

Beyond Neutral: Advantages for Parents and Children of Same-Gender Families

While it is important to address critics and concerns about new family forms that violate the “ideal” family model, it is equally and in the long run more important to carefully evaluate the potential advantages of living in alternative family forms such
as a same-gender family. Lessons can be learned from alternative family forms that could be valuable for not only our understanding of parenting more generally but for identifying ways that parenting among heterosexual families can be improved. Parenting is a generative activity and most adults benefit from parenting (Snarey, 1993). However, parent pioneers such as gays and lesbians benefit from the unique satisfaction of achieving parenthood in the face of societal barriers. Among the gay parents interviewed by Schacher et al., “most spoke of a strong sense of satisfaction in helping make social change and paving the way for others. Many felt that they had beat the system simply by successfully navigating all the obstacles to having a family” (p. 45). Many experienced personal growth and fulfillment by becoming fathers as well as closer ties to their partner and to their family of origin (Schacher et al., 2005).

Sharing the experience of parenthood can even change attitudes toward and relationships with heterosexuals; most gay/lesbian parents felt a new sense of commonality with heterosexuals. According to one new gay father, “it’s not a straight versus gay world anymore” (Schacher et al., 2005, p. 47). Perhaps increased acceptance and tolerance for nonconforming families is a by-product of successful models of gay and lesbian parenting. For children and adults who grew up in gay or lesbian families, there are valuable benefits too. The experience of growing up in a marginalized family form may provide appreciation of other marginalized and minority groups. According to an interview study of over 400 lesbian and gay parents, 89% of lesbian mothers and 82% of gay fathers believed that their children benefited from growing up in a gay or lesbian family (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). The most common theme was the feeling that children would show a greater tolerance and acceptance of differences and diversity. Here are the thoughts of one adult who grew up in a lesbian couple family: “I think knowing from a very early age what it is to be different or not, to be like the mainstream or not accepted…that gives me an understanding that people just come from so many different walks of life and that respect and an open mind and encountering the world with love and flexibility is definitely how I live my life” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 555). In addition, in a study of lesbian stepmother families, Lynch and Murray (2000) found that parents modeled openness and communication within the family which, in turn, led to more openness and disclosure by their children. Another common theme is the example of sharing and equality in gay/lesbian households that helps children understand alternatives to more traditional and often unbalanced role allocations and responsibility in “ideal” family forms. The focus on less gender stereotyping in these families allows children to explore more flexible roles for men and women both domestically and in the workplace. In fact, daughters of lesbian mothers had higher career aspirations and were more likely to choose traditionally male occupations such as lawyers or doctors than daughters of heterosexual mothers. The development of more androgynous gender attitudes with an emphasis on both caring and instrumentality especially for males (Bignier, 1999; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) and perhaps girls as well (Sutfin et al., 2008) may flow from life in a gay or lesbian family. In turn, this higher androgyny may be linked to positive adjustment and a higher emotional IQ (Guastello & Guastello, 2003; Shimonaka et al., 1997). The experience of growing up in a nontraditional family can have advantages and offers opportunities to learn valuable life lessons.
Challenges to the “Ideal” Family Form

Evidence of the adequacy of same-gender parent families poses serious challenges to our traditional views of the “ideal” family form with its focus on two opposite-gender parents with children with biological ties to both parents. Are either mothers or fathers necessary for the healthy psychological development of children? The traditional focus on the gender of the parent is too narrow a conceptualization of the issue of adequate parenting. Instead, the issue needs to be recast by asking whether exposure to a male or female parent is critical for adequate development or whether it is the provision of the universal and fundamental ingredients of parenting – nurturance, protection, nourishment, and stimulation – regardless of the gender of the person who provides these ingredients that is critical (Parke, 2002b). Nor is the argument restricted to these core components of parenting. Parental play, a common form of interaction and an important contributor to children’s social and emotional development just as in the case of caregiving can be provided by a parent of either gender. The ingredients of parenting from caregiving to play are more critical for adequate child development than the gender of the parent who provides these experiences.

As our discussion of parenting processes suggests parent gender is clearly less important than the processes themselves. As we saw in the chapter 2 in our discussion of reverse role families, fathers and mothers are equally effective as caregivers. Our review of same-gender parent families tells a similar story: two mothers can successfully socialize children who are well adjusted and psychologically healthy. This raises the fundamental question of whether a male presence as part of the parenting mix is necessary for the successful development of children. In an influential but controversial article “Deconstructing the essential father,” Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) concluded that “the empirical research does not support the idea that fathers make a unique and essential contribution to child development” (p. 403). Fathers may, in fact, be unnecessary for children’s development but this does not mean that they are unimportant in children’s lives. Just as Silverstein and Auerbach have questioned the essential father, the data on the ability of gay couples to successfully rear children without a female parent raises a similar question about the essential mother. Just as fathers may be unnecessary but still important for a child’s development, mothers remain important even though not necessary.

However, the fact that same-gender couples can successfully raise children does not negate the extensive data that suggests that mothers and fathers are similar in many ways but may also provide some unique experiences to their children as well. Two key issues need to be addressed. More needs to be understood about the extent to which role division in lesbian or gay families approximates role division in heterosexual families, and more needs to be understood about the degree to which same-gender couples expose their children to opposite-sex role models. If mothers and fathers make different contributions to their children’s development, do same-gender parent families adjust their roles to mirror more traditional maternal/paternal roles with each partner enacting the behaviors and actions associated with the paternal and maternal roles? Some support for this possibility comes from the evidence that the biological mother in a lesbian couple family may assume more caregiving duties while the
nonbiological coparent may spend more time in outside employment, a pattern that mirrors, in part, traditional male/female role divisions. Whether nonbiological mothers enact other aspects of more traditional male roles, such as a physical play style, remains to be established. To date, the evidence is mixed (Patterson, 2009). Moreover, we know little about the ways in which gay men enact their family roles and whether one partner is likely to enact a more traditional maternal role. In short, children may be afforded opportunities to experience both maternal and paternal interactive styles in same-gender households, but more systematic research is needed to evaluate this possibility. Moreover, the critical issue is whether differentiation of roles between coparents in same-gender parent families is associated with the apparent advantages that this bestows in heterosexual families (Ricaud, 1998). Again this allows us to address the issue raised earlier, namely the relative importance of parental style versus gender of parent who is the delivery agent of this style.

Or does each partner engage in some aspects of both maternal and paternal roles as suggested by the “degendered” parenting notion described by Schacher et al. (2005) for the gay male couples in their study. Presumably, lesbian couples could decide to engage in this same kind of “degendered” parenting as well. In both cases, the parenting components are not only independent of the gender of the parent but the components themselves are itemized and used in novel combinations across partners rather than paternal behaviors being provided by one partner and maternal components by the other partner. The same set of experiences are available to the child but may come from either parent or perhaps both, depending on how the couple divides the components. Parenting can be viewed as a “cafeteria model” in which parents select different ingredients but as long as the selection produces a balanced meal of parenting ingredients the child will be fine. It matters less which parent chooses which ingredient than that a balance from all the critical “food groups” is achieved.

There are other strategies for providing a child with exposure to a range of stylistic experiences in both same-gender parent and traditional opposite-gendered parent households. Not only can two male or two female parents provide the range of experiences that children need for healthy development but others outside the family can play roles as well. This suggests that not only is the gender of the socializing parent not critical for children’s development but that parents themselves are not solely responsible for their children’s socialization. As noted earlier, it is increasingly common practice for families, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or same-gender families, to follow a communal model of socialization in which some parental responsibilities are outsourced to others. They hire babysitters, enroll their toddlers in child care or preschool, and sign up their school age children for soccer teams or girl scouts.

The question is whether the family form – heterosexual or same-gender – dictates the nature of these choices of supplementary assistance. In the case of nonheterosexual families, does the lack of an opposite-gender parent shape their choice of individuals to whom their child is exposed? Some evidence suggests that lesbian and gay parents have concerns about the lack of either a father or mother figure and some may actively engage others to compensate for the absence of an opposite-gender parent. As Goldberg (2010) has argued,
assumptions about the functional and moral superiority of the heterosexual nuclear family. Families that lack a father or mother are assumed to be deficient, and the children in these families are presumed to be at risk (p. 94).

Although the evidence that we have presented suggests that these perceptions and concerns are not well founded, nonnormative families may be motivated to more closely conform to the cultural ideal by engaging outside surrogates to compensate for their departure from the cultural expectation about the gender mix of families. In short, they violate the norm of the “ideal” family form and these efforts are a way to address this concern.

Do these same-sex parent families engage either female or male figures from outside the family to respond to these concerns? When lesbian mothers were interviewed after the birth of their child and again at three months, two-thirds were highly aware of the lack of a father figure and expressed some concern about the absence of a male model (Goldberg & Allen, 2007). They were actively planful in their efforts to secure role male models by talking with brothers, fathers, male friends, and neighbors about possible involvement even before the baby was born. This was especially true in the case of male infants, while there was less focus on male involvement in the case of baby daughters. Lesbian and gay parents feel less accountable to the wider society for their daughter’s gender development while they are more concerned about their son’s gender development (Kane, 2006).

Lesbian parents give a range of reasons for planning for male involvement (Goldberg & Allen, 2007). Some women, especially with sons were sensitized to the societal view of the importance of male involvement and sought out males as a way to reduce their anxiety about the cultural expectation of male involvement. Others did it out of fairness to their offspring; for example, they wanted to provide the same kind of father–child experience that they enjoyed as a child. Others did this because they wanted to expose their children to a diverse range of people – males, females, gay, straight, white, nonwhite – as part of their commitment to teaching acceptance of many types of individuals. As they develop children often maintain contact with these “father” figures. In one study, 58% of children of lesbian mothers had regular contact with their biological mother’s father, 24% with their nonbiological mother’s father and 62% with unrelated male adults (Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998). Men who served as donors for lesbian couples also play roles in the lives of their children. Among known donors 29% had regular contact and 71% saw their five-year-old children occasionally (Gartrell et al., 2000).

Involvement of a male from outside the nuclear family circle does not necessarily mean that the figure acts as a father. This is, of course, consistent with the view that children can grow up well without their biological fathers, but instead benefit from the activities and stimulation that fathers typically provide but can be delivered by either one of their lesbian mothers or another outside figure. In fact, while many lesbian mothers value male involvement, they do not necessarily prefer this involvement to be as a father figure. Instead the relationships that donors and male friends and relatives have with children in lesbian-mother families are often described as “uncle-like” (Goldberg et al., 2008). Not all lesbian mothers feel this way; some choose a male donor specifically to provide a father-figure for their child (Almack, 2006; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). It is less clear what factors determine the type of male
relationship different lesbian mothers prefer or what the advantages and disadvantages of “uncle-like” or “father-like” relationships are for either children or for the lesbian parental couple. It also remains unknown whether there are clear advantages of using opposite-gender others as supplementary socialization figures rather than providing a range of parenting experiences by the coparenting same-gender couple alone. Finally, some argue that the active recruitment of opposite gender figures by lesbian parents signals an acquiescence to societal expectations and reinforces the stereotype that men are necessary adjunct parent figures for lesbian parent families (Clarke & Kitziner, 2005).

Do gay men invite their mothers, sisters, aunts, female cousins, or friendly female neighbors over for child-care advice or for baby sitting duties? While we know less about gay men who are parents than about lesbian parents, it is likely that they pursue a similar set of strategies. For example, some gay adoptive fathers consider the birth mothers of their children to be part of the family, at least symbolically (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Moreover, gay fathers often prefer open adoption arrangements in order to ensure a female figure in their child’s life (McPheeters, Carmi, & Goldberg, 2008). Whether gay parents view females as mother figures or as aunt-like figures or just another set of nurturing hands is unclear.

**A Word of Caution:** Little is known about the effects of the exposure to and involvement of opposite-gender “surrogate parent” figures on the development of children, especially their gender role development. Nor do we know about the duration and frequency of contact necessary to confer any potential developmental advantage if such exposure were found to be beneficial. Perhaps most fundamentally, we lack data on the kind of relationship needed if exposure is to prove beneficial for the child’s development. And of course, the larger question is whether this exposure, after controlling for parent effects, makes a difference in child outcomes. However, work on adult mentors and other nonparental adults suggests that the positive effect of nonfamilial mentors on adolescents’ social behavior is independent of the effect of parent–child relationships (Greenberger et al., 1998). Moreover, it remains to be determined whether or not any positive effects of involving opposite-gender socialization surrogates in the families of same-gender couple on children are due specifically to the gender-related role models or behaviors provided by these individuals. Or are the positive effects due to the increased social support provided by these family adjuncts, regardless of their gender or their gender-related activities.

Just as we have argued in the case of same-gender parents, the gender of the outside figures may be less important than the support resources that they bring to the family. Social support, regardless of the source, is an important predictor of parental well-being, effectiveness as a parent and, in turn, the health and adjustment of children – for both heterosexual (Mayes & Leckman, 2007) as well as lesbian parents (Vyncke & Julien, 2007). Although some studies report that lesbian and gay parents may receive less social support than heterosexual parents (Kindle & Erich, 2005), others report the opposite with gay/lesbian parents receiving more family support (Goldberg, 2006), while others report no differences in the amount of support (Patterson, 2009). Part of the inconsistency may be due to the fact that the support of lesbian and gay parents increases as children develop and grandparents increasingly desire and value contact with their grandchildren. Some support for this argument comes from the increasing
number of grandparents who are open and forthcoming about their daughter’s sexual orientation as their grandchild develops. While only 29% of grandparents with a two-year-old grandchild were open about their daughter’s lesbian status, the percentage increased to 63% by their grandchild’s fifth birthday and 73% when their grandchild was 10 (Gartell et al., 1999, 2000, 2006).

The level of family support varies depending on which lesbian parent is the biological mother: grandparents and other family relatives of the biological mother were more involved than the nonbiological mother’s relatives with their grandchildren (Patterson et al., 1998). This is, of course, consistent with evolutionary theory that suggests that biologically based kin ties are a strong basis for social investment (Bjorklund & Pellegrini, 2000). However, it is not all based on biological ties; when the nonbiological lesbian mother gains second-parent adoption rights, this legal recognition led to increased involvement on the part of the grandparents as well. Being recognized as legal, even if not biological kin, apparently increases investment by grandparents in their grandchild (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Social class matters too; more educated, middle class gay and lesbian families gain more family support and acceptance than their working class counterparts. This is a reflection of the well-established finding that there is more acceptance of gays and lesbians, in general, among more educated individuals (Carrington, 2002; Goldberg, 2010).

As I show in Chapter 6, in many other cultures, children have a range of parental figures beyond their biological parents. While evidence concerning the effects of variations in contact on children’s development remains unclear, these contacts, at a minimum, can be viewed as significant and stable sources of social support for these developing children. Perhaps these adjunct male parent figures also provided assistance and advice for the parents as well. While the cultural push to include males in the mix of lesbian families may not necessarily be welcomed by all lesbian partner families (Clarke & Kitziner, 2005), the expanded network of parental support figures is likely beneficial for parents and children alike. Traditional heterosexual two-parent families (“ideal” families) could learn a lesson about the value and benefits of porous family boundaries. The burgeoning literature on the influence of nonfamily mentors on child and adolescent social, academic and even spiritual development supports the value of including both family and nonfamily agents in the socialization mix (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

Reflections

The presence of not just two parents but parents of opposite genders remains a central-defining feature of the “ideal” family paradigm. In our continuing exploration of alternatives to the “ideal” family form, it is not surprising that the issue of the centrality of either a mother or a father for the adequate development of children continues to generate debate and controversy. The increasing prevalence of same-gender families in which either two lesbians or two gay men become parents provides a unique opportunity to critically address the issue. As our review suggests, the necessity of either a father or a mother for children’s socialization is challenged by the success of children raised in same-gender parent families. Although we have an incomplete understanding of the internal interactional dynamics, the role distributions across
partners and the extent to which other nonfamily socialization agents play a role in these families, it is clear that these alternative family forms are sufficient to produce well-adjusted children. However, most of our knowledge is based on a narrow set of samples – white, middle class, and educated – and whether or not similar findings will be evident for other racial or ethnic groups is unknown. Since the degree of acceptance of nonheterosexuality in general and same-gender parent families in particular may be lower among these groups (Herek, 2007), it is critical that samples be expanded so that the generalizability of the findings can be assessed. As we have seen in earlier discussions of other family forms such as single-mother families, stepfamilies or reverse role families, family processes that are common across a range of forms are better predictors of child outcomes than the form itself. The main impediment to the continued success of same-gender parent families is the fundamental misunderstanding that the underlying sexual preferences of same-gender individuals is independent of their ability to be loving and skilled parents. It is not inadequate parenting that contributes to children’s experiences of prejudice and discrimination but the continued intolerance of these nonconforming families by many in our society. As our society progresses in understanding that diversity is not deficiency, greater acceptance and appreciation of these alternative family forms will follow. Finally, it is clear that these new family forms present a significant challenge to the “ideal” family form. Although same-gender parent families deviate from the tenets of the dominant family paradigm they work just as effectively as socialization contexts for our children.