

Children Raised in Fatherless Families from Infancy: Family Relationships and the Socioemotional Development of Children of Lesbian and Single Heterosexual Mothers

Susan Golombok, Fiona Tasker, and Clare Murray

Family and Child Psychology Research Centre, City University, London, U.K.

The aim of the study was to investigate family functioning and the psychological development of children raised in fatherless families from their first year of life. Thirty lesbian mother families and 42 families headed by a single heterosexual mother were compared with 41 two-parent heterosexual families using standardised interview and questionnaire measures of the quality of parenting and the socioemotional development of the child. The results show that children raised in fatherless families from infancy experienced greater warmth and interaction with their mother, and were more securely attached to her, although they perceived themselves to be less cognitively and physically competent than their peers from father-present families. No differences were identified between families headed by lesbian and single heterosexual mothers, except for greater mother–child interaction in lesbian mother families.

Keywords: Family structure, parent–child interaction, assisted reproduction, socioemotional development.

Introduction

Research on the psychological consequences for children of growing up in a fatherless family has focused on children who had lived with their father during their early years and who had then experienced parental separation or divorce. The first studies showed father absence to have negative outcomes with respect to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (for reviews see Biller, 1974; Herzog & Sudia, 1973). Later investigations that controlled for factors associated with, but not directly related to, father absence, such as economic hardship and lower social class, found that the absence of a father in itself is not adversely related to children's social adjustment or intellectual ability (Broman, Nichols, & Kennedy, 1975; Crockett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993; Ferri, 1976). However, it has been argued that economic disadvantage is a major consequence of single parenthood and as such should not be controlled for as an extraneous variable in data analysis. From their examination of four nationally representative data sets in the U.S., McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) concluded that the lower income that results from lone parenthood is the single most important factor in the underachievement of young people from one-parent homes. They also found a negative effect of lone parenting resulting from inadequate parenting and poor access to community resources over and above that of reduced family income.

Studies that have taken account of the reason for becoming a fatherless family have shown that discordant family relationships carry psychological risks for children. In comparisons between children whose parents had divorced or separated, and those whose father had died, a higher incidence of behavioural problems (Ferri, 1976; Rutter, 1971) and greater difficulties in the transition from adolescence to adult life (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) have been found among children who had experienced divorce or separation. From a review of the empirical evidence in support of the various explanations of children's psychological adjustment, Amato (1993) concluded that conflict between parents is the main predictor of emotional distress among children of divorce.

Evidence for the importance of factors that pre-date the transition to a fatherless family comes from longitudinal studies in the United States and Great Britain in which comparisons were made between the behaviour problems of children whose parents divorced or separated between the first and the second assessment, and the behaviour problems of children whose families remained intact (Cherlin et al., 1991). It was found that behaviour problems and family difficulties that were present before the parents' separation or divorce were strongly associated with children's difficulties after the families had broken up. Thus it is not only what happens to children after their parents separate, but also their circumstances beforehand, that influence the impact of rearing in a fatherless family on children's social and emotional adjustment.

Lesbian families are similar to families headed by a single heterosexual mother in that the children are being

Requests for reprints to: Susan Golombok PhD, Family and Child Psychology Research Centre, City University, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, U.K.

raised by women without the presence of a father, but differ in the sexual orientation of the mother. Research on the development of children raised by lesbian mothers was initiated in the 1970s, when lesbian women began to fight for custody of their children when they divorced (for reviews see Falk, 1989; Golombok & Tasker, 1994; Patterson, 1992). These women had become mothers in the context of a heterosexual marriage before adopting a lesbian identity, and again the children studied had lived with their father during their early years. Investigations of lesbian families have generally compared school-age children in lesbian households with school-age children in households headed by a single heterosexual mother (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). No differences between children of lesbian and single heterosexual mothers have been identified for emotional well-being, quality of friendships, or self-esteem. Regarding the parenting ability of the mothers themselves, it has been demonstrated that lesbian mothers are just as child-oriented (Kirkpatrick, 1987; Miller, Jacobsen, & Bigner, 1981; Pagelow, 1980), just as warm and responsive to their children (Golombok et al., 1983), and just as nurturant and confident (Mucklow & Phelan, 1979) as are heterosexual mothers. A longitudinal study of adults who had been raised as children in lesbian families has found these young men and women to continue to function well in adult life and to maintain positive relationships with both their mother and her partner (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Almost one quarter of American families (Burns, 1992) and one fifth of British families (Roll, 1992) are currently headed by a single mother. Although a large proportion of these families result from parental separation or divorce, a growing number of heterosexual women are becoming mothers without marrying, or living with, the father of their child. This has resulted in an increase in the number of children being raised by a single mother from the outset (Burghes, 1993). In addition, an increasing number of women are becoming parents after coming out as lesbians, either as single mothers or as couples who plan a family together and share the parenting role (Patterson, 1992). These children are also being raised in the absence of a father from birth.

To the extent that early family experiences are important determinants of later socioemotional development, the findings of existing research on children of lesbian and single heterosexual mothers who had lived with their father during their first years of life cannot be generalised to children raised without a father from infancy. The only large-scale investigation of one-parent families to specifically examine children raised from the outset by a single heterosexual mother is Ferri's (1976) general population study in the U.K., from which it was tentatively concluded that these children were as well-adjusted as children in father-present families. Rather more negative outcomes for children of unmarried mothers were reported by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994). However, these findings relate to young adults and were largely attributed to the economic disadvantage they experienced while growing up. In a small but in-depth study of financially secure single heterosexual

mothers who had raised their children since birth without a male partner, Weinraub and her colleagues (Weinraub & Gringlas, 1995; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983) concluded that the more negative outcomes for children in single-parent families appeared to be associated with the low levels of social support and high levels of stress experienced by these mothers. Investigations of children raised by lesbian mothers from birth suggest that both pre-school children (McCandlish, 1987; Steckel, 1987) and those in middle childhood (Flaks, Ficher, Mast-erpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Patterson, 1994) function well in terms of socioemotional development. With respect to parenting, Flaks et al. (1995) found lesbian couples to show more parenting awareness than a comparison group of heterosexual couples, and Patterson (1995) demonstrated an association between children's adjustment and a more even distribution of child care between parents.

The aim of the present investigation was to examine the quality of parent-child relationships and the socioemotional development of children raised in female-headed families from the first year of life. A group of lesbian families and a group of families headed by a single heterosexual mother were investigated in comparison with a control group of heterosexual two-parent families. Studying these families allows an examination of the effects of rearing in a female-headed family without the confound of parental separation or divorce that, in itself, is likely to lead to problems for the child (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1988, 1989; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982, 1985). It might be expected that children raised from infancy without a father would be no more at risk for social and emotional difficulties than children raised by two heterosexual parents, as they had not been exposed to parental conflict or a disruption in family relationships. Similarly, they had not experienced the emotional distress and associated reduction in parental functioning common among single mothers following divorce (Amato, 1993; Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). However, lesbian and single heterosexual mothers may be subject to other pressures, such as social stigma and lack of social support, that may interfere with their parenting role, and their children may be vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems as a result. Data on the mothers' psychological state and on quality of parenting were, therefore, obtained to help disentangle the family processes that mediate toward positive or negative outcomes for children raised from the start in female-headed homes. In addition, the comparison between lesbian mother families and single heterosexual mother families allows an investigation of the influence of the mother's sexual orientation on children raised by a lesbian mother from birth.

Materials and Methods

Subjects

Thirty lesbian mothers (L), all of whom identified as lesbian before the child was born, participated in the study. In 15 families, the lesbian mother was a single parent, and in the other 15 families she lived with her partner; 10 partners had been the child's co-mother since birth. For the sake of simplicity, the biological mother will be referred to as the child's mother

throughout. It was only possible to obtain a volunteer sample of lesbian mothers. However, the authors have good access to lesbian families through their longitudinal study of children of lesbian mothers (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1995), and almost all of those asked to take part agreed to be interviewed.

Forty-two families headed by a single heterosexual mother (H1) were selected from a pool of 130 volunteers, obtained through articles in the national press, using a screening interview designed to obtain information on the mother's relationship and employment history since the child's birth. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study for both the lesbian and the single heterosexual mothers were that (1) they had a child aged between 3–9 years; (2) the child had been raised since the first year of life without the presence of the father or a father-figure in the family home; (3) the child had not been born as part of a multiple birth; (4) the child had not been born with a major congenital abnormality; and (5) the family was not experiencing economic hardship, i.e. was not receiving state benefits. The latter criterion was included to avoid the confounding negative effects of poverty on children's psychological well-being in father-absent families. At the time of the child's conception, 9 (21%) of the single heterosexual mothers definitely planned to raise a child without a male partner, and a further 16 (38%) were prepared to do so if the situation arose. The remaining 17 (41%) had either wished to have a child in the future with a male partner or had not thought about having a child before becoming pregnant.

Forty-one two-parent heterosexual families (H2) were selected from maternity ward records on the basis of stratification to maximise comparability with the other family types with respect to the age and sex of the children, and the age of the mother. The participation rate was 62%.

There was a similar proportion of boys and girls in each group of families, and the groups did not differ with respect to the age of the child. The mean age of the children was 6 years. A significant difference between groups was found for age of the mother [$F(2, 110) = 3.42, p < .05$]. Fisher's LSD comparison showed the single heterosexual mothers to be younger (mean age 37 years) than the two-parent heterosexual mothers (mean age 40 years). Social class was rated on the basis of the mother's occupation or, where the child's father or the mother's female partner lived in the family home, according to the parent with the highest ranking occupation (1–professional/managerial; 2–skilled nonmanual; 3–skilled manual; 4–unskilled manual). There was a significant difference between groups for social class [$\chi^2(6, 113) = 22.60, p < .001$], reflecting a higher proportion of working class families among the heterosexual families (28% of the highest ranking parents were in manual occupations) than among the lesbian families (3% of the highest ranking parents were in manual occupations). The groups also differed significantly in family size ($\chi^2(6, 113) = 37.94, p < .0001$), with fewer children in the female-headed families. The families were predominantly white, with no difference between groups with respect to ethnic origin. As significant group differences were found for social class, age of the mother, and number of children in the family, these demographic variables were entered into the statistical analyses as covariates.

The families were visited at home on two occasions. On the first visit, data were collected from the mother by interview and by questionnaire. In some cases the questionnaires were returned by post, and completed questionnaires were obtained from 95% of mothers. A completed questionnaire was also received from 77% of the children's school teachers. In order to maintain confidentiality and minimise bias, the teachers were not informed about the precise nature of the research. Instead, they were told that the child was participating in a general study of child development. On the second visit, data were collected

from the child using a battery of standardised tests. Assessments were carried out with 95% of the children.

Measures

Mothers' psychological state. The short form of the Parenting Stress Index (PSI/SF) (Abidin, 1990), a standardised assessment of stress associated with parenting, was administered to the mother to produce a total score for the level of parenting stress she was experiencing at the time of study. Test–retest reliability for this instrument has been shown to be high over a 6-month period. Concurrent and predictive validity has been demonstrated for the full-length questionnaire, and the short form has been reported to correlate very highly with the full-length version.

The Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983) and the Beck Depression Inventory (Beck & Steer, 1987) were also completed by the mother to assess anxiety and depression respectively. Both instruments have been shown to have good reliability and to discriminate well between clinical and nonclinical groups.

Quality of parenting. The quality of parenting was assessed by standardised interview with the mother using an adaptation of the technique developed by Quinton and Rutter (1988). This procedure has been validated against observational ratings of mother–child relationships in the home, demonstrating a high level of agreement between global ratings of the quality of parenting by interviewers and observers (concurrent validity, $r = .63$). The interview, which was tape-recorded, lasted between 1–2 hours and was conducted with the mother alone. Detailed accounts were obtained of the child's behaviour and the mother's response to it. The mothers were asked to describe the child's daily routine, focusing on waking, meal-times, leaving for school/day-care, returning home, play activities with the child, and bed-time. Information was obtained on the mother's handling of any problems associated with these areas, and particular attention was paid to mother–child interactions relating to issues of control and the child's fears and anxieties.

Three overall ratings of the quality of parenting were made, taking into account information obtained from the entire interview: (1) *Warmth* was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from “0”–“none” to “5”–“high”. This rating of the mother's warmth toward the child was based upon the mother's tone of voice and facial expression when talking about the child, spontaneous expressions of warmth, sympathy, and concern about any difficulties experienced by the child, and enthusiasm and interest in the child as a person. (2) *Mother–child interaction* was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from “0”–“very low” to “4”–“very high”. This rating of the quality of interaction between the mother and the child was based upon the mother's reports of the extent to which she and the child enjoyed each other's company, wanted to be with each other, spent time together, enjoyed joint play activities, and showed physical affection to one another, as well as the extent to which the mother took responsibility for caregiving and disciplining the child. (3) *Emotional involvement* was rated on a 5-point scale from “0”–“little or none” to “4”–“extreme”. This rating took account of the extent to which the family day was organised around the child, the extent to which the needs or interests of the child were placed before those of other family members, the extent to which the mother was over-concerned, over-protective, or inhibited the child from age-appropriate independent activities, the extent to which the mother was willing to leave the child with other caretakers, and the extent to which the mother had interests or engaged in activities apart from those relating to the child. Data on child discipline were also obtained from the interview material. Ratings were made of (1) the number of times the mother had disciplined the child in the previous 3 months, and (2) the seriousness of disputes between the mother and child [“0”–no confrontations; “1”–minor episodes;

“2”—moderate episodes; “3”—major battles]. In a previous study using this interview (Golombok, Cook, Bish, & Murray, 1995), 27 randomly selected interviews were coded by a second interviewer who was “blind” to family type in order to calculate inter-rater reliabilities. Pearson product-moment coefficients for warmth, emotional involvement, and mother-child interaction were found to be .75, .63, and .72 respectively.

Children's emotions, behaviour, and relationships. The following measures were chosen to assess different aspects of children's psychological well-being including the presence of behavioural or emotional problems, security of attachment, and developing self-esteem.

Mother and teacher measures. The child's psychiatric state was assessed using a standardised interview with well-established reliability and validity (Graham & Rutter, 1968) with the mother. Detailed descriptions were obtained of any behavioural or emotional problems shown by the child. These descriptions of actual behaviour, which included information about where the behaviour was shown, severity of the behaviour, frequency, precipitants, and course of the behaviour over the past year, were transcribed and rated “blind” to the knowledge of family type by an experienced child psychiatrist. Psychiatric disorder, when identified, was rated according to severity and type. The presence of behavioural or emotional problems in the child was also assessed using the Rutter “A” scale, which is completed by the child's mother, and the Rutter “B” scale, which is completed by the child's teacher. An overall score of psychiatric state is obtained from each scale. Both questionnaires have been shown to have good inter-rater and test-retest reliability, and to discriminate well between children with and without psychiatric disorder (Rutter, Cox, Tupling, Berger, & Yule, 1975; Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970).

Child measures. An adaptation of the Separation Anxiety Test (Klagsbrun & Bowlby, 1976) was administered to the children to assess their internal representations of their attachment relationships with parents. The test consists of a series of six photographs of a same-sex child experiencing separation from his or her mother and father. Three photographs depict mild separations (e.g. saying goodnight) and three depict severe separations (e.g. parents go on vacation for 2 weeks). The child is asked what the child in the picture would feel and what the child in the picture would do on separation. A coding scheme for this data has been developed by Grossmann and Grossmann (1991). Each child obtains a total score of security of attachment representation, which takes account of affectivity (the degree to which the child attributes negative emotions to the child in the picture, such as sadness or anger), coping (the degree to which the child attributes a coping response to the child in the picture, such as an action that will help master the situation), and expression (the degree to which the child shows a facial expression and tone of voice that is appropriate to the verbal response). Ratings of affectivity and coping are each made on a five-point scale according to standard criteria, with a high score representing high affectivity and high coping respectively. Expression is rated on a three-point scale, with a high score representing an appropriate expression. An overall score is then calculated for each picture that takes account of the appropriateness of the affectivity and coping according to the type of separation depicted (i.e. mild vs. severe), as well as the expression rating. Finally, a total score is obtained for each child that incorporates the responses to all six pictures. This coding scheme has been validated for 6-year-olds against security of attachment to the mother and the father in the laboratory at 1 year of age. Significantly more children who had been classified as securely attached at 1 year responded appropriately to at least one picture in terms of affectivity, coping, and expression than children who had been classified as insecurely attached at 1 year (Grossmann & Grossmann, 1991). This was true of 100% of securely attached children compared

with 40% of insecurely attached children. In the present investigation, the testing session was not videotaped so that ratings of expression could not be made. For this reason, the coding scheme was modified to include only the ratings of affectivity and coping. A total score was obtained for each child ranging from 0 (representing very insecure attachment) to 12 (representing very secure attachment). Inter-rater reliability for the modified coding scheme has been calculated for 60 children, coded by 2 interviewers, one of whom was “blind” to family type. A Pearson product-moment coefficient of .76 was obtained (Golombok et al., 1995).

Each child was administered the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance for Young Children (Harter & Pike, 1984). This is a measure of children's perceptions of their cognitive and physical competencies, and of their perceptions of acceptance by their mother and by peers, all of which have been shown to be associated with the development of self-esteem in later childhood. Children's perceptions in these domains do not necessarily reflect their actual competencies or acceptance by others. A score is obtained for each of the following subscales; (1) *cognitive competence*, (2) *physical competence*, (3) *maternal acceptance*, and (4) *peer acceptance*. The higher the score, the more positive the child's feelings of competence and social acceptance. Satisfactory internal consistency has been demonstrated, with coefficient alpha values ranging from .85 to .89 for the different age groups of children studied. The scale has been shown to discriminate between groups of children in predicted ways, for example between peer acceptance and length of time at a school, and between perceived cognitive competence and academic achievement at school, indicating that it is a valid measure.

Results

Mothers' Psychological State

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with one between-subjects variable (group) and three dependent variables (Parenting Stress Index score, Trait Anxiety Inventory score, and Beck Depression Inventory score). There was no significant difference between groups using Wilks's criterion for combined ratings. Nor were there significant group differences between mothers for the individual measures of psychological state, i.e. stress associated with parenting as assessed by the Parenting Stress Index, anxiety level as assessed by the Trait Anxiety Inventory, and depression as assessed by the Beck Depression Inventory (see Table 1).

Quality of Parenting

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with one between-subjects variable (group) and five dependent variables (warmth, mother-child interaction, emotional involvement, frequency of disputes, and severity of disputes). Wilks's criterion for the combined ratings was employed, showing a significant effect for group [$F(10, 184) = 5.63, p < .0001$]. One-way ANCOVAs, with mother's age, social class, and number of children in the family as covariates, were then carried out for each variable. Where a significant group difference was found, independent contrasts were conducted to address specific questions. These were: (1) *Father-absent vs. father-present* (H1/L vs. H2). This contrast examines whether father-absent families are different from father-present families, thus allowing an investigation of the role

Table 1
Group Comparisons on Measures of Mothers' Psychological State and Quality of Parenting

	Heterosexual two-parent families H2			Single heterosexual mother families H1			Lesbian mother families L			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Contrasts			
	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE			H1/L vs. H2		H1 vs. L	
												<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother's PSI/SF score	38	73.2	2.4	40	71.2	2.3	29	67.8	2.7	0.82	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Mother's Trait Anxiety score	38	41.4	1.4	39	39.8	1.4	29	40.5	1.7	0.20	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Mother's Beck Depression score	37	7.7	0.8	39	5.6	0.7	29	6.2	0.9	1.23	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Mother's warmth to child	41	3.4	0.1	42	4.0	0.1	30	4.3	0.2	5.38	< .01	3.78	< .001	1.32	n.s.
Mother-child interaction	41	3.0	0.1	42	3.1	0.1	30	3.5	0.1	3.43	< .05	2.15	< .05	2.19	< .05
Mother's emotional involvement with child	41	1.9	0.1	42	2.3	0.1	30	2.0	0.1	1.44	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Frequency of disputes	36	66.1	5.4	37	63.2	5.3	28	46.1	6.1	2.79	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Seriousness of disputes	36	1.0	0.1	41	1.5	0.1	30	1.3	0.1	5.59	< .01	3.51	< .001	1.78	n.s.

Table 2
Group Comparisons on Measures of Children's Emotions, Behaviour, and Relationships

	Heterosexual two-parent families H2			Single heterosexual mother families H1			Lesbian mother families L			<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Contrasts			
	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE	<i>N</i>	\bar{X}	SE			H1/L vs. H2		H1 vs. L	
												<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
A scale	38	9.8	0.6	40	8.1	0.6	29	7.4	0.7	1.99	n.s.	—	—	—	—
B scale	32	4.7	0.8	34	4.5	0.7	21	3.4	1.0	0.46	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Separation Anxiety Test	38	4.6	0.3	39	8.3	0.3	27	7.8	0.3	21.89	< .0001	7.97	< .0001	1.01	n.s.
Cognitive competence	38	20.6	0.4	41	18.9	0.4	28	18.2	0.5	4.34	< .05	3.44	< .001	0.99	n.s.
Physical competence	38	19.7	0.4	41	17.6	0.4	28	18.3	0.5	3.15	< .05	2.72	< .01	0.92	n.s.
Maternal acceptance	38	18.2	0.4	41	16.8	0.4	28	17.9	0.5	1.77	n.s.	—	—	—	—
Peer acceptance	38	17.8	0.6	41	18.1	0.6	28	18.5	0.7	0.20	n.s.	—	—	—	—

of fathers in children's early development. (2) *Lesbian vs. single heterosexual* (L vs. H1). This contrast determines whether lesbian mother families differ from single heterosexual mother families, and thus examines the influence of the mother's sexual orientation on children's development.

As shown in Table 1, a significant difference between groups was found for warmth [$F(2, 107) = 5.38, p < .01$]. Contrast analysis showed that mothers in father-absent households expressed greater warmth toward their child than mothers of children whose fathers lived in the family home (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 3.78, p < .001$). No significant difference in mother's warmth was identified between lesbian mothers and single heterosexual mothers (L vs. H1).

A group difference was also found for the quality of interaction between the mother and the child [$F(2, 107) = 3.43, p < .05$], and the contrast between father-absent and father-present families showed greater interaction by mothers in female-headed households (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 2.15, p < .05$). In addition, there was a difference in mother-child interaction between lesbian mothers and single heterosexual mothers (User contrast [L vs. H1], $t = 2.19, p < .05$), showing greater mother-child interaction in lesbian mother families. The groups did not differ in the level of the mother's emotional involvement with the child.

With respect to the variables relating to child discipline, there was no difference between groups in the frequency with which mothers disciplined their children, but a group difference was found for the seriousness of disputes [$F(2, 101) = 5.59, p < .01$]. Contrast analysis showed that disputes between mothers and their children in father-absent families were more severe than in father-present families (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 3.51, p < .001$). No difference in the seriousness of disputes was found between lesbian mother and single heterosexual mother families [L vs. H1].

Children's Emotions, Behaviour, and Relationships

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with one between-subjects variable (group) and seven dependent variables ("A" scale, "B" scale, the Separation Anxiety Test, and the four subscales of the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance). Using Wilks's criterion for the combined ratings, a significant effect was found for group [$F(14, 142) = 2.89, p < .001$]. One-way ANCOVAs and contrast analyses were then carried out in the same way as for the measures of quality of parenting.

As shown in Table 2, comparisons of children's total "A" scale and "B" scale scores found no significant differences between groups for either measure. The mean

scores for each group were below the cut-off points for emotional and behavioural problems ("A" scale cut-off = 13; "B" scale cut-off = 8). Only three children in the entire sample were rated as showing psychiatric disorder. Of these three, two were from two-parent heterosexual families (one with conduct disorder and one with mixed conduct/emotional disorder), and one was the child of a lesbian mother (with emotional disorder).

A difference between groups was found for the Separation Anxiety Test [$F(2, 98) = 21.89, p < .0001$], such that children in father-absent families obtained significantly higher scores reflecting greater security of attachment than their counterparts in father-present families (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 7.97, p < .0001$). Children with lesbian mothers did not differ from children with single heterosexual mothers on this measure [L vs. H1].

With respect to the Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Social Acceptance, a group difference was identified for both cognitive competence [$F(2, 101) = 4.34, p < .05$] and physical competence [$F(2, 101) = 3.15, p < .05$], but not for maternal acceptance or peer acceptance. Contrast analyses showed that children in father-absent families perceived themselves to be less cognitively competent (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 3.44, p < .001$) and less physically competent (User contrast [H1/L vs. H2], $t = 2.72, p < .01$) than children in father-present families, with no differences between children in lesbian and single heterosexual families [L vs. H1].

Discussion

In father-absent families, children's relationship with their mother differed in a number of ways from that of their peers whose father lived with them at home. Mothers who were raising their child without a father showed greater warmth, and interacted more, with their child, but also reported more serious, although no more frequent, disputes. There were no differences between father-absent and father-present families in the mothers' psychological adjustment, and mothers in father-absent families were just as emotionally involved with their children and experienced similar levels of stress associated with parenting as mothers who were married or who cohabited with a male partner. With respect to the children themselves, those being raised without a father were more securely attached to their mother as assessed by the Separation Anxiety Test, but perceived themselves to be less cognitively and physically competent than their peers from father-present families. They were no more likely to develop emotional or behavioural problems, and felt just as accepted by their mother and by peers, as those whose father lived in the family home.

It seems, therefore, that children raised in fatherless families from birth or early infancy are not disadvantaged in terms of either the quality of their relationship with their mother, or their emotional well-being. Indeed, the children in father-absent households were rated as experiencing greater warmth and interaction with their mother, and as being more securely attached to her. This suggests that the absence of a father from birth or infancy, in itself, does not have negative implications for

children's psychological adjustment. These findings run contrary to what is known about the outcomes for children in father-absent families resulting from divorce. However, the families studied in the present investigation differ from divorced families in a number of important ways; the children had not been exposed to (1) parental conflict, (2) separation from a parent with whom they had shared their daily life, (3) their mother's emotional distress, or (4) economic hardship, all of which have been implicated in the adverse consequences for mother-child relationships and children's emotional well-being that commonly accompany divorce. It may be relevant that the mothers in female-headed families in the present study showed high levels of both warmth and discipline, with the more severe disputes possibly occurring due to the absence of a father to perform a disciplinary role. As it is generally acknowledged that an authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1989), i.e. a combination of warmth and control, is optimal for children's socio-emotional adjustment, it is perhaps not surprising that the children raised by lesbian and single heterosexual mothers show no evidence of problems in their emotions, behaviour, or relationships.

The highly significant finding that children from father-absent families showed greater security of attachment than children whose father lived with them is of particular interest, as the data were obtained from the children themselves (and coded "blind" to family type) rather than from the mothers, who may have presented an over-positive view of their relationship with the child. This finding contradicts the commonly held assumption that mother-child relationships are likely to be more difficult in female-headed families. However, there is a growing body of empirical evidence in support of the view originally put forward by Ainsworth (1979) that secure attachment relationships result from mother-infant interactions that are characterised by maternal responsiveness and sensitivity to the child's psychological needs (Grossman, Grossman, Spangler, Suess, & Unzer, 1985; Isabella, Belsky, & von Eye, 1989). It is conceivable, therefore, that the greater security of attachment shown in the present study by children in female-headed families results from the mothers' greater involvement with the child in the absence of a father from the family. Alternatively, a psychoanalytic perspective might suggest that oedipal issues are more salient for children who live in father-present families, thus heightening their separation anxiety at this developmental period.

The finding that children in father-absent households perceived themselves to be less cognitively and physically competent than their peers from father-present families suggests that the presence of a father may be associated with children's developing self-esteem. Although the present study does not permit an investigation of the processes through which fathers may influence the self-esteem of their children, it is conceivable that fathers may act as role models of competence and mastery for their children, or may directly reinforce their children for cognitive and physical achievement. In line with this explanation, studies of families where the father is the primary caregiver have shown the children to exhibit greater intellectual performance, independence, and feelings of control than children in traditional families

(Radin, 1982; Sagi, 1982). Nevertheless, it is important to point out that perceptions of competence are closely associated with approval by others, at least for older children (Harter, 1993). It is possible, therefore, that the lower perception of cognitive and physical competence among children from fatherless families may result from their perception of female-headed families as being less valued in our society than families where the father is present in the home.

The lack of differences between lesbian mother and single heterosexual mother families, except for greater interaction between lesbian mothers and their children, suggests that growing up in a lesbian family from birth does not have a negative impact upon quality of parenting or children's psychological development. It seems, therefore, that children who grow up with a lesbian mother from birth or early infancy are no different from those who make the transition to a lesbian family later in childhood, in that they do not experience greater psychological difficulties than children raised by single heterosexual mothers. It is important to point out that when the female-headed families are subdivided into lesbian mother and single heterosexual mother families, the cell sizes, and thus the power of the statistical analyses, may be reduced to such a level that differences may not be detected. However, inspection of the means suggests that larger samples would not result in more negative outcomes for lesbian mother families.

Whereas the findings of the study indicate that positive family relationships and good outcomes for children can occur in families where the child has been raised from birth or early infancy in a female-headed household, it should be remembered that the recruitment of volunteer lesbian and single heterosexual mothers may have produced biased samples, with mothers whose children were experiencing problems possibly being less likely to take part. It could also be argued that the greater warmth and interaction with the child shown by mothers in female-headed families may be a consequence of more socially desirable responding, although the absence of children's difficulties as reported by teachers and the children themselves, together with the children's greater security of attachment to the mother, suggests that the findings cannot be explained in this way. Data from general population samples would be necessary to definitively answer questions relating to the effects of father absence from birth on children's psychological development. Nevertheless, the results of the present study are in line with other investigations of volunteer samples of children raised by lesbian mothers from the start ((Flaks et al., 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Patterson, 1994; Steckel, 1987). The findings are also consistent with Ferri's (1976) data from a general population sample of children raised by unmarried heterosexual mothers, and with Weinraub's data (Weinraub & Gringlas, 1995; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983) in that the single heterosexual mothers did not report higher levels of stress than mothers in two-parent heterosexual families, and thus difficulties would not necessarily be expected for the child.

A fundamental difficulty in interpreting the findings of studies of fatherless families is that it is impossible to determine whether any differences between these children and their counterparts in traditional nuclear families

result from the absence of a father in particular, or the absence of a parent in general. A comparison between two-parent and one-parent lesbian families would address this issue by examining whether differences exist between one-parent and two-parent families when the additional parent is also female, thus providing an opportunity to examine the importance for children of having two parents as opposed to one parent, irrespective of their sex. This analysis was not reported as such a contrast is not orthogonal and would thus increase the likelihood of alpha inflation. It is worth noting, however, that when conducted for exploratory reasons, no differences were found between one-parent and two-parent female-headed families for any of the study variables, suggesting that the number of parents in the family home was unrelated to either the quality of parenting or the socioemotional development of the child.

Single mothers, and particularly unmarried single mothers who are financially dependent on the state, have in recent years been accused of producing an "underclass" of delinquents, drop-outs, and drug addicts. Whereas an association does appear to exist between single motherhood, poverty, and childhood problems (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), the circumstances of single-mother families can be just as diverse as those of the traditional nuclear family. It is important, therefore, not only to determine which factors associated with single parenthood place children at risk, but also to establish those aspects that do not result in psychological difficulties for the child.

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