

Children raised in fatherless families from infancy: a follow-up of children of lesbian and single heterosexual mothers at early adolescence

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Background: An increasing number of lesbian women and single heterosexual women are bringing up children with no male involvement. This study follows up to adolescence a sample of children raised in fatherless families from birth or early infancy. **Methods:** Twenty-five lesbian mother families and 38 families headed by a single heterosexual mother were compared with 38 two-parent heterosexual families. The quality of parenting by the mother, and the social and emotional development of the child, were assessed using standardised interview and questionnaire measures administered to mothers, children and teachers. **Results:** Children in fatherless families experienced more interaction with their mother, and perceived her as more available and dependable than their peers from father-present homes. However, there were no group differences in maternal warmth towards the children. Mothers raising their child without a father reported more severe disputes with their child than did mothers in father-present families. The children's social and emotional development was not negatively affected by the absence of a father, although boys in father-absent families showed more feminine but no less masculine characteristics of gender role behaviour. No major differences in parenting or child development were identified between families headed by lesbian and single heterosexual mothers. **Conclusions:** The presence or absence of a father in the home from the outset does appear to have some influence on adolescents' relationships with their mothers. However, being without a resident father from infancy does not seem to have negative consequences for children. In addition, there is no evidence that the sexual orientation of the mother influences parent-child interaction or the socio-emotional development of the child. **Keywords:** Adolescence, lesbian mothers, single parents, parent-child interaction, socioemotional development.

It is estimated that in the UK today, 22% of children are being raised in a family without a father present (Office of National Statistics, 2002). Early research on the psychological well-being of children from fatherless families concentrated on situations where the father had left following separation or divorce, exposing the child to discordant parental relationships as well as to the loss of a once-present parent. These studies found children of single mothers to be at increased risk for cognitive, social and emotional problems (for reviews see Biller, 1974; Herzog & Sudia, 1973). However, single parenthood following separation or divorce may involve consequences other than just father absence, specifically those of financial hardship, low socio-economic status and lack of social support. Indeed, in an analysis of four representative samples of US single mother families, it was found that the single most important factor contributing to the difficulties experienced by children of lone parents in later life was the lower family income associated with single parenthood (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Studies that controlled for these social and economic factors demonstrated that father absence in itself does not negatively impact on the child's intellectual ability or socioemotional adjustment (Broman, Nichols, & Kennedy,

1975; Crockett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993; Ferri, 1976).

The other confounding issue in the early studies was that the children had been through the experience of parental separation. Children whose parents have divorced or separated show poorer psychological adjustment than children whose fathers have died, in terms of incidence of behavioural problems (Ferri, 1976; Rutter, 1971) and coping with the transition to adulthood (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The most influential factor seems to be the exposure to parental conflict, which was found in a review by Amato (1993) to be the most significant predictor of emotional distress in the children of divorced parents. Divorce also creates adjustment difficulties for mothers, who may have raised levels of depression and anxiety (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). In a recent study in the United Kingdom, the high rate of depression found among single mothers was found to be associated with psychological disorder in children (Dunn et al., 1998).

Thus, the negative outcomes seen in some studies of father-absent families cannot necessarily be generalised to those children who are reared by their mother without a male partner from birth or shortly thereafter, and have no experience of marital

disruption or family realignment. It is possible, however, that other pressures on these mothers such as social stigma and lack of social support may interfere with their parenting role and leave their children vulnerable to emotional and behavioural problems. From a general population study in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, a small group of families was identified where the father had never been resident, and it appeared that the children were not showing any adverse effects due to their family situation (Ferri, 1976). Conversely, a series of reports by Weinraub and colleagues, who studied a sample of families in the United States, found that children of these 'solo' mothers had more behavioural problems, lower social competence and poorer school performance than children from two-parent families (Weinraub, Horvath, & Gringlas, 2002). However, these negative outcomes were found to be associated with the low maternal social support and heightened maternal stress experienced by some of the solo mothers, rather than directly related to single parenthood. It is important to remember that single mothers will vary with respect to their age, social and economic status, and educational level, and it is the complex combination of these and other factors that may affect the mother's ability to parent effectively.

An alternative way in which fatherless families can be formed is when lesbian women become mothers, either singly or with a female partner. These families are similar to single heterosexual mother families in that there is no father present, but differ with respect to the sexual orientation of the mother, and possibly in the presence of a female co-parent. Research on lesbian mothers began in the 1970s and initially focused on women who had become mothers within a heterosexual relationship, and had then separated from the father and come out as lesbian (for reviews see Golombok, 1999; Patterson, 2002). At that time, women who identified as lesbian often lost custody of their children because of concerns about the impact of being raised by a lesbian mother on the psychological development of children. It was argued that due to the stigma attached to homosexuality, children would be teased and ostracised by their peers, leading to social isolation and psychological dysfunction. There was also concern that the lack of a father figure and the presence of one or two mothers who were not following conventional sex-typed behaviour could result in children showing atypical gender development, i.e., boys being less masculine and girls less feminine. Additionally, it was suggested that the children of lesbian mothers were themselves more likely to grow up to be lesbian or gay, which was considered an undesirable outcome by courts of law. The findings from the early investigations of lesbian mother families were strikingly consistent. With regard to the children themselves, there was no evidence of raised levels of emotional or behavioural problems, or of difficulties relating to

peer adjustment, self-esteem or gender development (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoefler, 1981; Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981), and this remained the case in a recent community study of lesbian mother families (Golombok et al., 2003). When a group of children of lesbian mothers were followed up into early adulthood, they were found no more likely to identify as lesbian or homosexual than their counterparts from heterosexual homes (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Moreover, these young men and women continued to function well and to maintain good relations with both their mothers and their mothers' partners. In terms of quality of parenting, lesbian mothers were found to be just as warm and responsive (Golombok et al., 1983), just as nurturing (Mucklow & Phelan, 1979), and just as child-oriented (Kirkpatrick, 1987) as comparison groups of single heterosexual mothers.

In the early lesbian mother research, as with the first studies of single mothers, the children had lived with their father during the early years of their life, and had experienced the breakdown of their parents' relationship. More recently, a growing number of lesbian women have turned to assisted conception, in particular donor insemination, to have a child without the involvement of a man from the outset. In line with the previous investigations, comparisons between these families and two-parent heterosexual families have found lesbian mothers to show a high quality of parenting and positive relationships with their children (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995). In addition, no differences were identified between children from lesbian families and those from heterosexual families in terms of psychological well-being or gender development. A study from Belgium also found that children from lesbian families were no more likely to experience teasing by peers, although they were more prone to family-related teasing incidents (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002).

One of the initial studies of children raised in families without the presence of a father since their first year of life was carried out in the United Kingdom (Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997). Although the sample was comprised of volunteers, the families were recruited according to strict criteria, and are of interest because the children were raised from the outset in a father-absent family. Thirty lesbian mother families and 42 families headed by a single heterosexual mother were compared with 41 two-parent heterosexual families when the children were 6 years old. It was found that mothers in fatherless families showed greater warmth towards their children and interacted more with them than did mothers in father-present families. In addition, disputes between mothers and children were found to be more serious, but no more frequent, in fatherless

families. Although the children in fatherless families did not show raised levels of emotional and behavioural problems, they perceived themselves as less cognitively and physically competent. There were no differences identified between families headed by lesbian mothers and those headed by single heterosexual mothers, suggesting that the sexual orientation of the mother did not have any effect.

This article reports on a longitudinal study of the fatherless families investigated by Golombok et al. (1997) as the children reached age 12, focusing on parent-child relationships and the children's socio-emotional development. It is the first study to have followed up to adolescence children raised in fatherless families throughout the pre-school years. In the first phase of the study the children may have been too young for any negative impact of being raised without a father to be seen, since it is conceivable that the effect of father-absence in early infancy may not become apparent until the adolescent years. Adolescence is a time when issues of identity formation assume great importance and parent-child conflict becomes more frequent (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). Thus the absence of a father may become more salient at this stage for both mothers and children.

Aspects of parenting considered particularly important for the psychological adjustment of the adolescent child include parental warmth in combination with appropriate levels of control, and the fostering of autonomy (Baumrind, 1991; Collins, 1990; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, 1990, 2000). Studies of the impact of father-absence on parenting have shown that, on average, children in single parent homes experience a poorer quality of parenting than children who live with both their mother and their father. In the study by Dunn et al. (1998), greater maternal negativity toward the child was shown by single mothers than by mothers in two-parent heterosexual families, and found to be associated with a higher rate of behavioural problems in children. Similarly, McLanahan & Sandefur (1994) reported that single mothers exert less control over their children in terms of supervision and establishing rules than do mothers in two-parent heterosexual families. The poorer quality of parenting shown by single mothers may be explained, in part at least, by the higher rates of psychological problems, particularly depression, found among single mothers. Depression is thought to interfere with parents' emotional availability and sensitivity to their children and also with their control and discipline of them (Cummings & Davies, 1994). A number of studies have shown that depressed parents tend to be either very lenient with their children or very authoritarian, often switching between the two (Kochanska, Kuczynski, Radke-Yarrow, & Welsh, 1987). Insofar as children in fatherless families experience good quality parenting from their mothers, they would not necessarily be

expected to show negative consequences arising from their family structure. Thus, it was predicted that problems would arise for these adolescents to the extent that the absence of a father interfered with the quality of the mothers' relationship with their child.

With respect to gender development, different theoretical perspectives lead to different expectations about the consequences of father absence for children's sex-typed behaviour. Although theories that stress the importance of prenatal (Collaer & Hines, 1995), cognitive (Martin, 1991; Martin & Halverson, 1981) or peer group (Maccoby, 1998) processes in the acquisition of gender role behaviour would not predict differences between children in father-absent and father-present homes, theories that view parents as influential (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Mischel, 1970) would predict less feminine behaviour in daughters and less masculine behaviour in sons.

Method

Participants

At the time of the initial study, families were asked for permission to contact them again for follow-up, and all agreed to this (for details of recruitment of participants to the first study, see Golombok et al., 1997). Families were then approached either by telephone or letter as close as possible to the child's 12th birthday. Twenty-five lesbian mother families, 38 single heterosexual mother families and 38 two-parent heterosexual families agreed to participate in the follow-up study, giving response rates of 83%, 90% and 93% respectively. Two lesbian mother families, 2 single mothers and one two-parent heterosexual family refused (without giving their reasons), and seven families had moved house and could not be traced. Therefore, excluding those families who were untraceable, the responses rates were 93%, 95% and 97% respectively. Examining the data from the first phase, the non-participating families did not differ from the participating families at that stage on the measures of quality of parenting and parent-child interaction. Therefore, there is no evidence that those families not taking part are experiencing more problems in family functioning.

In the original study, 11 of the lesbian mothers were single parents, whilst 14 lived with partners who acted as co-parents to the child. By the time of the follow-up study, 7 of these couples were still co-habiting, 6 had separated but were still co-parenting, and in one case the biological mother had died leaving the child to be raised by the co-mother. However, due to the small sample sizes that would arise if dividing the group into two-parent lesbian mother families and single lesbian mother families, all of the lesbian mothers were analysed as one group. Of the 38 single heterosexual mothers, 29 were still living alone, 8 were co-habiting with a new male partner and one mother was living with the child's father. Thirty-three of the heterosexual two-parent families were still married or co-habiting, and five couples had separated or divorced. In those families

which had separated, the child still had regular contact with the non-resident parent, parenting decisions were still made jointly by the couple, and both parents were making financial contributions to the child's upbringing, so these were considered two-parent families for the purposes of the analysis.

There were similar proportions of boys and girls in each family type. The age of the target child differed significantly between groups, $F(2, 98) = 3.37, p < .05$ (see Table 1). The children of lesbian mothers were the oldest with a mean age of 12 years 1 month, whereas the single mother children and two-parent heterosexual family children had mean ages of 11 years 10 months and 11 years 9 months, respectively. Similarly, a significant group difference was found for the age of the mothers, $F(2, 98) = 4.74, p < .05$. The single mothers were the youngest (mean age = 43 years), whilst the lesbian mothers and the mothers from two-parent heterosexual families were slightly older (mean age = 46 years). The groups were also found to differ significantly with respect to family size, $F(2, 98) = 22.72, p < .005$, with more children in the two-parent heterosexual families than in the other two types. There was no difference between family types for social class as measured by mother's occupation, using a modified version of the Registrar General's classification (OPCS and Employment Department Group, 1991) ranging from 1 (professional/managerial) to 4 (partly skilled or unskilled). Neither was there a group difference for geographical location, i.e., whether the families lived in urban or rural areas. As a significant group difference was found for the child's age, mother's age and family size, these demographic variables were entered into all further analyses as covariates.

Procedure

The families were visited at home by a researcher who was trained in the study techniques. Data were collected from the mother and the target child by tape-recorded interview and questionnaire. Information obtained by interview was rated according to a standardised coding scheme and regular meetings were held to minimise rater discrepancy. In most cases, two visits were made, the first to interview the mother and the second to interview the child. Ninety-nine per cent of mothers and 94% of children were interviewed (one single mother and one lesbian mother family had moved abroad so could not be interviewed but completed questionnaires). Questionnaire data were obtained from 94% of mothers and children. The

groups did not differ with respect to the proportion of children taking part.

Measures

Mothers' psychological state. Mothers were administered the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; Spielberger, 1983) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck & Steer, 1987; Steer, Beck, & Garrison, 1986) to assess anxiety and depression respectively. Both instruments have been shown to have good reliability and to discriminate well between clinical and non-clinical groups.

Mother-child relationships. *Interviews with mothers:* The mothers were interviewed using an adaptation of a standardised interview designed to assess parenting (Quinton & Rutter, 1988). The interview lasted 1 to 2 hours and was tape recorded. This procedure has been validated against observational ratings of mother-child relationships in the home, and has demonstrated a high level of agreement between global ratings of the quality of parenting by interviewers and observers (concurrent validity; $r = .63$). Detailed accounts were made of the child's behaviour and the mother's response to it, with reference to the child's progress at school, peer adjustment and relationships within the family unit. Particular attention was paid to mother-interactions relating to issues of maternal warmth and control, and to the child's social and emotional development. In a previous study using this interview by the same researchers (Golombok, MacCallum, Goodman, & Rutter, 2002), 57 randomly selected interviews were coded by a second interviewer who was 'blind' to family type. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between raters for individual variables are given in the relevant sections below.

Overall ratings of the quality of parenting were made, taking into account information obtained from the entire interview: (1) *Expressed warmth* was rated on a 6-point scale from 0 ('none') to 5 ('high'). Aspects of warmth considered for this rating included tone of voice, facial expression and gestures when speaking about the child, spontaneous expressions of warmth, sympathy and concern about the child's difficulties (if any) and interest in the child as a person; (2) *Sensitive responding* was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 ('none') to 4 ('very sensitive responding') and represents the mother's ability to recognise and respond appropriately to her child's fears and anxieties; (3) *Emotional involvement* was rated on a 3-point scale from 0 ('no

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants by family type

	Two-parent heterosexual		Single heterosexual mother		Lesbian mother		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Age of target child (months)	140.76	5.87	1141.71	4.47	144.76	5.94	3.37	<.05
Age of mother (years)	45.66	3.95	42.89	5.01	44.59	4.47	4.74	<.05
Mother's occupation	1.32	.70	1.35	.71	1.08	.28	1.44	n.s.
Family size	1.26	.69	.32	.62	.44	.65	22.72	<.005
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Number of boys	21	55.3	17	44.7	9	36.0	2.33	n.s.
Families living in urban areas	34	89.5	28	75.7	20	83.3	2.52	n.s.

over-involvement') to 2 ('enmeshed'). This rating takes account of the extent to which the parent is over-concerned or over-protective toward the child, and the extent to which the parent has interests apart from those relating to the child; and (4) *Disciplinary aggression* was rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 0 ('none') to 5 ('abusive'). This rating measures irritability, loss of temper and physical aggression shown by the mother toward the child during disciplinary interactions.

Pearson product-moment inter-rater reliability coefficients for expressed warmth, sensitive responding, emotional involvement and disciplinary aggression were .52, .63, .51, and .60, respectively.

In addition to these overall ratings, the following individual variables were rated from the interview material: (1) *Mother to child warmth* and (2) *Child to mother warmth* were both rated on a 4-point scale from 0 ('little or none') to 3 ('marked') and represent the level of demonstrably affectionate behaviour between the mother and the child; (3) *Confiding of child to mother* was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 ('none') to 3 ('some intimate disclosure') and assesses the level of sharing of intimate or personal information; (4) *Enjoyment in motherhood* was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 ('none') to 3 ('a great deal') and represents the degree of positive feelings expressed about being a parent; (5) *Activities where parents not informed* was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 ('none') to 4 ('major problem') and is concerned with the extent to which the child engages in activities or is absent from the house without the parent's knowledge of their whereabouts; and (6) *Severity of disputes* was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 ('no confrontations') to 3 ('major battles') and assesses the intensity of disputes during conflict with the child. Inter-rater reliability coefficients for the above variables were found to be .70, .84, .79, .46, .67 and .81, respectively.

Interviews with children: Children were interviewed using the Child and Adolescent Functioning and Environment Schedule (CAFE; John & Quinton, 1991), a semistructured interview designed to obtain information on the child's functioning at school, relationships with peers and relationships with parents. The interview lasted 1-1 1/2 hours and was tape-recorded. The following ratings relating to children's perceptions of their relationships with their mothers were made from the interview. All variables were measured on a 4-point scale with a higher score representing a higher level of the behaviour: (1) *Warmth from mother* is a measure of the mother's overt affectionate and caring behaviour; (2) *Confiding in mother* assesses how often the child confides difficulties and anxieties to the parent; (3) *Shared interests/activities with mother* is a measure of the amount of time the child spends directly involved in interests or activities with the mother; (4) *Availability of mother* assesses the child's perception of the mother's availability to the child when the child wants or needs to make contact; (5) *Dependability of mother* represents the mother's reliability and trustworthiness; and (6) *Quality of maternal discipline* measures the mother's level of disciplinary control. Inter-rater reliabilities for *warmth from mother*, *confiding in mother*, *shared interests with mother*, *availability of mother*, *maternal dependability*, and *maternal discipline* respectively were found to be .50, .77, .68, .84, .74 and .50.

Questionnaire measures: The Expression of Affection Inventory (EAI; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992) was completed by both the mothers (regarding the child) and the children (regarding the mother). Internal consistency for the *total affection score* for the present sample was calculated to be .76 for the maternal questionnaire and .68 for the child questionnaire. A higher score represented greater affection.

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) was also administered to mothers and children, to assess how each acts during conflict. The CTS yields three subscales; *reasoning* (e.g., discussing issues), *symbolic aggression* (e.g., sulking) and *physical aggression* (e.g., hitting). Internal consistencies for this sample for the reasoning, symbolic aggression and physical aggression scores respectively were .67, .65, and .77 for the maternal questionnaire and .57, .60, and .83 for the child questionnaire. A higher score represented a higher level of the behaviour during disputes between mother and child.

Children's socioemotional development. Interviews with mothers: The child's psychiatric state was assessed using a standardised procedure, the reliability and validity of which are well established (Graham & Rutter, 1968). 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 (on a 4-point scale from 0 = 'no abnormality' to 3 = 'definite and marked abnormality') and type (1 = 'emotional disorder', 2 = 'conduct disorder' and 3 = 'mixed emotional and conduct disorder').

The following ratings regarding the child's adjustment were also made from the interview with the mother: (1) *Interest in schoolwork* was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 ('no interest/effort') to 4 ('keen on most subjects') and concerns the child's interest in academic subjects; (2) *Worries about relationships at school* was measured on a 4-point scale from 0 ('none') to 3 ('major') and is a rating of worries expressed to the mother by the child concerning relationships with other children at school, e.g., not having any friends or being bullied; and (3) *Peer problems* was rated on a 4 point scale from 0 ('no problems') to 3 ('very many problems') and assesses the mother's perception of the extent to which the child appears to have difficulties in making and keeping friends.

Interviews with children: The child's views of his or her own school and peer adjustment were assessed using the following ratings from the CAFE: (1) *Interest/effort in schoolwork* was rated on a 5-point scale from 0 ('no interest/effort') to 4 ('above average interest in most areas') and assesses the child's interest and effort in both academic and non-academic subjects; (2) *Confidence in school performance* is a rating on a 4-point scale from 0 ('none in any subject') to 3 ('very confident in most') and measures the child's confidence in his or her own abilities at school; and (3) *Bullying* was rated on a 4-point scale from 0 ('never') to 3 ('chronic and more

serious') and assesses whether the child has ever been bullied and the severity of the incidents.

The Social Adjustment Inventory for Children and Adolescents (SAICA; John, Gammon, Prusoff, & Warner, 1987) was administered to each child by the interviewer. Items are presented in the 'some children-other children' format developed by Harter (Harter, 1985), with higher scores representing greater problem behaviour. In the present study, the following four SAICA scales were used; *functioning in school*, *peer relationships*, *physical self-esteem* and *global self-esteem*. The SAICA has been found to discriminate well between adolescents with and without psychiatric disorder. The school functioning and peer relationship scales of the SAICA have also been validated against maternal reports from the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1980) subscales relating to school performance and peer relations with correlations of .69 and .59 respectively. Internal consistencies for this sample were .60, .70, .93 and .91 for school functioning, peer relationships, physical self-esteem and global self-esteem, in that order.

Questionnaire measures: The presence of behavioural or emotional problems in the children was also assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1994, 1997) administered to mothers and to the children's teachers. Eighty per cent of mothers gave permission for their child's teacher to be contacted, and 80% of the teachers who were contacted returned completed questionnaires. The SDQ produces an overall score of the child's adjustment (*total deviance score*). The questionnaire has been found to have good inter-rater reliability with correlations between parent and teacher total deviance scores reported to be .62. Evidence for validity comes from the high correlations between the total deviance score of the SDQ and the total score of the Rutter Parent Questionnaire, $r = .88$ (Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970) and the Rutter Teacher Questionnaire, $r = .92$ (Rutter, 1967), which were designed to assess child psychiatric disorder. In addition, the SDQ discriminates well between psychiatric and non-psychiatric samples.

In addition, the Children's Sex Role Inventory (CSRI; Boldizar, 1991) was administered to the children. This questionnaire assesses the gender role orientation of children and yields two separate independent subscale scores, one of *masculinity* and one of *femininity*. Significant gender differences have been found for each subscale, and the validity of the scales has also been demonstrated by correlations with other measures of children's self-perceptions. Internal consistency scores for the masculinity and femininity scales for this sample were .80 and .81, respectively.

Results

Mother's psychological state

Using one-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs), no differences were found between groups for the degree of anxiety or depression reported by the mothers as assessed by the STAI and the BDI (see Table 2).

Table 2 Means, standard deviations (SD) and F values for mothers' psychological state by family type

	Two-parent heterosexual		Single heterosexual mother		Lesbian mother		F	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Mothers' STAI	38.81	7.04	39.97	9.98	37.04	8.16	.86	n.s.
Mothers' BDI	6.15	4.74	7.23	6.23	4.24	2.98	2.61	n.s.

Mother-child relationships

The mother-child relationship variables were separated into two categories; those relating to warmth and those relating to control. The results are reported according to these two constructs. Multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs) were conducted for the warmth variables and for the control variables, with separate MANCOVAs for the interview and questionnaire variables within each construct. Where a significant group difference was found, the following contrast analyses were performed on each variable within the MANCOVA to address specific questions: (1) *Father-absent vs. father-present* (H1/L vs. H2) – this contrast examines whether families with no father resident in the household from infancy differ from those where a father is present; and (2) *Lesbian vs. single heterosexual* (L vs. H1) – this contrast examines whether lesbian mother families differ from single heterosexual mother families.

Warmth. The warmth variables derived from the interviews with mothers and children were divided into those that measured expressed warmth/closeness and those that measured instrumental warmth (i.e., frequency and nature of parent-child interaction) and MANCOVAs were carried out for the two sets of variables separately.

Expressive warmth/closeness: The expressive warmth/closeness variables were derived from the interviews with mothers (*expressed warmth*, *sensitive responding*, *emotional involvement*, *mother to child warmth*, *child to mother warmth*, *confiding of child to mother* and *enjoyment in motherhood*) and children (*warmth from mother* and *confiding in mother*). The adjusted correlations between each variable and the overall construct ranged from .30 to .62 and the α coefficient for the construct was .79. The variables were entered into a MANCOVA and Wilks's λ was not significant, showing no overall difference between the family types (see Table 3).

Instrumental warmth: Variables from the child interview (*shared interests/activities with mother*, *availability of mother* and *dependability of mother*) were combined to form the instrumental warmth construct with adjusted correlations between each variable and the overall construct ranging from .44

Table 3 Means, standard deviations (SD), *F* values and *p* values for comparisons of maternal warmth between family types

	Two-parent heterosexual		Single heterosexual mother		Lesbian mother		<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	Contrasts	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			H1/L vs. H2	L vs. H1
Maternal expressive warmth/closeness							1.40	n.s.		
Expressed warmth	4.03	.75	4.11	.91	4.25	.79				
Sensitive responding	2.87	.62	3.02	.93	3.21	.78				
Emotional involvement	2.29	.65	2.54	.61	2.21	.59				
Mother to child warmth	2.79	.41	2.75	.60	2.79	.66				
Child to mother warmth	2.74	.50	2.72	.61	2.83	.48				
Confiding of child to mother	2.76	.63	2.86	.48	2.79	.51				
Enjoyment in motherhood	2.34	.67	2.39	.60	2.38	.71				
Warmth from mother (child interview)	2.46	.70	2.66	.73	2.75	.64				
Confiding in mother (child interview)	2.57	.66	2.40	.55	2.40	.75				
Maternal instrumental warmth							2.37	<.05		
Shared interest/activities (child interview)	1.57	.70	2.23	.77	2.67	1.59		<i>p</i> < .005	n.s.	
Mother's availability (child interview)	2.09	.78	2.43	.69	2.55	.51		<i>p</i> < .05	n.s.	
Mother's dependability (child interview)	2.17	.79	2.57	.56	2.65	.49		<i>p</i> < .005	n.s.	
Expression of Affection Inventory							1.33	n.s.		
Mother's total score about child	48.43	16.25	52.20	18.82	58.45	14.72				
Child's total score about mother	55.74	12.19	52.11	11.75	56.52	14.79				

to .52. The α coefficient for the construct was .66. When these variables were entered into a MANCOVA, Wilks's λ was significant, $F(6,164) = 2.37, p < .05$. Contrast analyses showed that the family types differed significantly with respect to all three variables. Children in father-absent families perceived their mothers to share more interests and activities with them (H1/L vs. H2), $t = -3.23, p < .005$, to be more available to them (H1/L vs. H2), $t = -2.32, p < .05$, and to be more dependable (H1/L vs. H2), $t = -2.96, p < .005$, than did children in father-present families. There were no significant differences between lesbian mother and single heterosexual mother families for any of the three variables.

Expression of Affection Inventory: A further MANCOVA was carried out for the EAI with mother's total affection score about child and child's total affection score about mother as dependent variables. Wilks's λ was not significant.

Control. Interview variables: The variables relating to maternal control derived from the mother's interview (*disciplinary aggression, activities where parents not informed and severity of disputes*) and the child interview (*quality of maternal discipline*) were entered into a MANCOVA. The adjusted correlations between each variable and the overall construct ranged from .23 to .42 and the α coefficient for the construct was .50. Wilks's λ was significant, $F(8,152) = 2.74, p < .01$, indicating an overall group difference, as shown in Table 4. Contrast analyses showed that family types differed significantly with respect to disciplinary aggression, with mothers in father-absent families showing more overall aggression towards their children during disputes than mothers in father-present families (H1/L vs. H2), $t = -2.44, p < .05$. Also, single heterosexual mothers showed higher levels of disciplinary aggression than

lesbian mothers (H1 vs. L), $t = 2.42, p < .05$. A significant group difference was found for severity of disputes, with mothers in father-absent families reporting more severe disputes than did mothers in father-present families (H1/L vs. H2), $t = 2.86, p < .01$. No difference in the level of disputes was found between lesbian mother and single heterosexual mother families [H1 vs. L]. Nor were there differences between any of the family types for the activities where mothers were not informed or for the quality of maternal discipline as reported by children.

Conflict Tactics Scale: Separate MANCOVAs were carried out for the three CTS subscales (reasoning, symbolic aggression and physical aggression) using mother's score and child's score as the dependent variables. There were no significant group differences for any of the subscales.

Children's socioemotional development

Psychiatric ratings. Thirteen children in the whole sample were rated by the child psychiatrist as showing definite emotional or behavioural problems. Of these, seven were children of single mothers (four with emotional disorder, two with conduct disorder, and one with mixed emotional and conduct disorder), three were children of lesbian mothers (all with emotional disorder) and three were children from heterosexual two-parent families (two with emotional disorder and one with conduct disorder). The numbers of children from father-absent families showing problems was compared with the number from father-present families using χ^2 analyses. No significant difference was found between the two groups.

Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire. The SDQ total deviance score has a designated cut-off point

Table 4 Means, standard deviations (SD), *F* values and *p* values for comparisons of maternal control between family types

	Two-parent heterosexual		Single heterosexual mother		Lesbian mother		<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>	Contrasts	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			H1/L vs. H2	L vs. H1
Interview measures										
Disciplinary aggression	1.34	.75	1.97	.76	1.52	.79	2.74	<.01	<i>p</i> < .05	<i>p</i> < .05
Activities where parents not informed	.18	.56	.64	.96	.24	.63			n.s.	n.s.
Severity of disputes	1.18	.69	1.67	.63	1.61	.66			<i>p</i> .01	n.s.
Quality of maternal discipline (child interview)	1.71	.52	1.56	.50	1.35	.59			n.s.	n.s.
Mother-child reasoning (CTS)										
Mother's score about child	17.0	5.42	17.88	3.91	15.96	5.59	1.35	n.s.		
Child's score about mother	16.08	5.30	15.56	4.46	15.86	5.31				
Mother-child symbolic (CTS)										
Mother's score about child	2.06	2.37	3.20	3.35	2.20	2.46	1.06	n.s.		
Child's score about mother	5.58	3.59	4.69	2.90	5.33	3.61				
Mother-child physical (CTS)										
Mother's score about child	4.09	4.27	5.26	4.76	3.80	4.07	1.25	n.s.		
Child's score about mother	1.81	4.96	1.75	2.29	2.67	4.32				

Table 5 Means, standard deviations (SD), *F* values and *p* values for comparisons of children's socioemotional development between family types

	Two-parent heterosexual		Single heterosexual mother		Lesbian mother		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Children's school adjustment								
Interest in schoolwork	3.05	.96	3.35	.95	3.29	.75	.65	n.s.
Interest/effort in schoolwork (child interview)	2.97	.73	3.26	.74	3.32	.48		
Confidence in school performance (child interview)	1.86	.63	2.14	.65	2.14	.47		
Children's peer relationships								
Worries about relationships	.53	.83	.78	1.02	.71	.86	.84	n.s.
Peer problems	.54	.77	.73	.84	.74	.76		
Bullying (child interview)	.76	.98	.60	.78	.68	.72		
Children's SAICA scores								
School functioning	35.70	5.49	32.37	5.10	31.68	4.31	1.49	n.s.
Peer relationships	26.00	5.61	25.54	4.14	25.68	5.21		
Physical self-esteem	13.29	3.95	14.30	3.50	13.27	4.57		
Global self-esteem	11.00	3.04	10.06	2.52	9.73	2.12		
CSRI scores								
Boys - femininity scale	27.77	3.63	30.57	4.07	33.00	3.85	3.14	<.05
Girls - femininity scale	32.71	4.68	32.15	3.66	32.23	5.25	.21	n.s.
Boys - masculinity scale	27.43	5.88	29.14	4.26	28.50	4.81	.23	n.s.
Girls - masculinity scale	26.29	5.28	27.20	4.32	26.70	4.96	1.27	n.s.

above which the child is considered to be outside the normal range for emotional or behavioural problems. Scores for the SDQ from both mothers and teachers were recoded, so that a score below the cut-off was designated as '0', representing normal behaviour. Scores above the cut-off were designated as '1', representing the borderline to abnormal range of behaviours. Using χ^2 analyses to compare children from fatherless families with those from father-present families, there were no differences between groups for the proportion of children scoring above the cut-off for the total deviance score as reported either by mothers or by teachers.

School adjustment. A construct relating to the child's functioning in school was formed using

variables from the mother interview (*interest in schoolwork*) and the child interview (*interest/effort in schoolwork* and *confidence in school performance*), with adjusted correlations between individual variables and the overall construct ranging from .27 to .42. The α coefficient for the overall construct was .53. These variables were entered into a MANCOVA and Wilks's λ showed no overall significant group difference (see Table 5).

Peer relationships. There were two variables from the mother's interview (*worries about relationships at school* and *peer problems*) and one from the child interview (*bullying*) that related to children's relationships with their peers. These formed a construct with adjusted correlations between each variable

and the overall construct ranging from .34 to .52, and an α coefficient of .63. When these were entered as dependent variables into a MANCOVA, Wilks's λ was not significant.

SAICA scores. The scores for the four SAICA scales (*functioning in school, peer relationships, physical self-esteem and global self-esteem*) were combined to form a construct representing children's self-report of their adjustment. Adjusted correlations between each score and the overall construct ranged from .37 to .66, and the α coefficient was .69. When these variables were entered into a MANCOVA, no significant difference was found between the groups.

Gender role orientation. Scores on the *masculinity* and *femininity* scales of the CSRI were analysed separately for boys and girls, using ANCOVAs. On the femininity scale, there was a significant difference between family types for boys, $F(2,38) = 3.41$, $p < .05$. Contrast analyses showed that boys in father-absent families scored higher on the femininity scale than did boys in father-present families (user contrast, H1/L vs. H2), $t = -2.35$, $p < .05$. However, there was no difference in femininity scores between boys from single heterosexual mother families and boys from lesbian mother families. Nor were there differences between boys from any of the family types on the masculinity scale.

For girls, there were no significant group differences for either the femininity scale or the masculinity scale.

Discussion

In this follow-up of children raised in fatherless families from infancy, adolescents' relationships with their mothers were found to differ in some ways depending on the presence or absence of a father in the home. In fatherless families, children perceived their mothers as interacting more with them and as being more available and dependable. The mothers themselves did not show any differences in warmth towards their children, but mothers in father-absent families reported more serious disputes and more irritability and loss of temper during disciplinary interactions. There were no differences between father-absent and father-present households in the mother's psychological state. Neither were there differences with respect to the presence of a father on the children's level of emotional and behavioural problems, school adjustment, peer relationships or self-esteem. However, boys being raised without a father showed more feminine characteristics, although no less masculine ones, in terms of gender role orientation.

Overall it seems that there are not serious negative consequences for children raised in fatherless families from infancy as they reach adolescence, with

regard to the quality of parenting they experience or their own social and emotional development. The finding from the initial study (Golombok et al., 1997) that mothers in fatherless families interacted more with their children is still apparent at age 12. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the fact that in the majority of these families, the mother is the only parent present, and therefore has sole responsibility for interaction with the child. However, the greater maternal warmth found in fatherless families in the first phase of the study has not continued. Although children in two-parent heterosexual families saw their mothers as less available and dependable than those in fatherless families, they felt equally warm towards her and able to confide in her.

With respect to control issues, the increased severity of disputes in fatherless families is also consistent with findings from the initial study. It is possible that in heterosexual two-parent families, it is still traditional for the father to take on more of the disciplining role. However, mothers in female-headed households were not showing dysfunctional levels of disciplinary aggression and the children themselves did not report their mothers to be more punitive. A good level of control combined with high parental warmth creates an authoritative parenting style, proposed by Baumrind (1989) as optimal for children's development. In line with this, the children in fatherless families showed no evidence of raised levels of problems in emotions, behaviour or relationships.

At age 6, the children in father-absent families perceived themselves to be less cognitively and physically competent than the children from father-present homes but this difference seems to have dropped out by age 12, with school adjustment and self-esteem being similar across family types. One explanation for the original discrepancy was that since perceptions of competence and self-worth are strongly related to approval by others (Harter, 1993), children may have been reacting to the perception that female-headed families are less valued in society. The growing number of father-absent families and the changing social climate towards greater acceptance of non-traditional family forms may explain why these children no longer feel themselves to be inferior in these aspects.

The finding that boys from fatherless families are significantly more feminine in their gender role orientation, although no less masculine, than their counterparts from father-present homes seems to contradict previous research on pre-school children which found that gender role behaviour did not differ for boys in father-absent families (Stevens, Golombok, Beveridge, & ALSPAC Study Team, 2002). In a review of previous studies of children of lesbian mothers, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) criticised researchers for downplaying the differences that have been identified in gender development between children of lesbian parents and children from

heterosexual homes. However, Stacey and Biblarz made no distinction between core aspects of children's gender development, such as gender role behaviour, on the one hand, and children's attitudes, such as occupational preferences, on the other. The present study used a measure that examined attitudes and self-perceptions, rather than actual activities and behaviours as were assessed with the younger children by Stevens et al. Children's attitudes towards gender-related issues are more open to influence by parents than is their gender role behaviour or identity (Egan & Perry, 2001; Jodl, Micheal, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001), so it may be that the single and lesbian mothers are explicitly encouraging their sons to have more sensitive and caring attitudes than the stereotypical male. During interview, several of the mothers in father-absent families spoke about how they were trying to teach their children, both sons and daughters, to be considerate and appreciate the feelings of others, suggesting that social learning and social cognitive processes may be involved (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Mischel, 1970).

It is noteworthy that this difference in gender development applied to children from all fatherless families and not just to those with lesbian mothers. In fact, there were very few differences found overall between single heterosexual mother families and lesbian mother families, apart from the higher levels of disciplinary aggression from single heterosexual mothers, which is possibly due to a greater proportion of lesbian mothers having a co-parent to share the disciplinarian role. It seems, therefore, that the sexual orientation of the mother does not in itself influence the quality of parenting or the psychological well-being of the child. In addition, there was no evidence to support the concern that children of lesbian mothers would experience more teasing or bullying and more difficulties in their relationships with their peers.

The majority of the single heterosexual and lesbian mothers in this study were in occupations classed as 'professional/managerial', as were most of the mothers from two-parent heterosexual mothers. A measure of mother's educational level (which correlated highly with occupational level) found that a large proportion from all three groups had some form of further education past the age of 18 and there was no difference between the groups in level of maternal education. Thus, the sample is highly educated and relatively affluent, unlike groups of fatherless families in some previous studies (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Therefore, the study allows an evaluation of the impact on family life of being raised without a father, without the confounding influence of a lower socio-economic status.

It must be remembered that the samples of lesbian mothers and single heterosexual mothers in the present study are relatively small. However, the findings are consistent with Ferri's (1976) data from

a general population sample of never married heterosexual mothers. They are also in line with other investigations of younger children raised from infancy without a father (Brewaeyts et al., 1997; Flaks et al., 1995). In addition, one must be aware of the potential for social desirability bias since these mothers may try to present themselves and their children in the best possible light, due to the prejudice still present regarding their family structures. The use of multiple measures (standardised interviews and questionnaires) and multiple respondents (mothers, children and teachers) goes some way towards combating this problem. Of particular value is the finding that teachers did not report more problems for the children from father-absent families.

A further difficulty comes from the heterogeneity of the samples. Some of the single mother families now have a resident stepfather, which presents the child with a new array of psychological issues. Of the lesbian mothers, some are in two-parent families and some are single mothers; indeed one lesbian mother said that the main challenge in parenting for her was being single, not being lesbian. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the differences found have arisen due to the presence of only one parent or due to the specific absence of a father. The small cell sizes when the lesbian families were divided according to the number of parents, and the inclusion of several lesbian couples who were co-parenting but not co-habiting, meant that statistical comparisons between one-parent and two-parent lesbian families could not be carried out to address this question.

Although family circumstances had changed for seven of the lesbian mothers and eight of the single heterosexual mothers (and for five of the heterosexual couples), during the primary school-age years the children had all been in father-absent families (or father-present families for the control group). Therefore the study provides data on the effects of early father absence on adolescent development, and is the first follow-up to adolescence of a group of children raised in fatherless families from birth or early infancy.

There will always be difficulties associated with single motherhood, such as poverty and low social status, but it is important to understand that single mothers can vary in their circumstances to the same extent as two-parent families. Whilst factors associated with fatherless families such as financial hardship (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), parental conflict (Amato, 1993) and maternal psychiatric disorder (Dunn et al, 1998; Hethington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002) do appear to place children at risk, the findings of this follow-up study of children in fatherless families from the outset who were not exposed to financial hardship, parental conflict or maternal psychiatric disorder in their early years suggest that the absence of a father per se does not

necessarily result in psychological disadvantages for children.

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