

## Child Adjustment and Parenting in Planned Lesbian-Parent Families

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One hundred planned lesbian-parent families (i.e., two-mother families in which the child was born to the lesbian relationship) were compared with 100 heterosexual-parent families on child adjustment, parental characteristics, and child rearing. Questionnaires, observations, and a diary of activities were used to collect the data. The results show that especially lesbian social mothers (i.e., nonbiological mothers) differ from heterosexual fathers on parental characteristics (e.g., more parental justification and more satisfaction with the partner as coparent) and child rearing (e.g., more parental concern and less power assertion). Child adjustment is not associated with family type (lesbian-parent families vs. heterosexual-parent families), but is predicted by power assertion, parental concern, and satisfaction with the partner as coparent.

*Keywords:* lesbian families, child rearing, child adjustment, mothers and fathers

There is an ongoing debate about whether or not there are some differences in child outcomes (particularly in gender and sexual attitudes and interest) between lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families. On the other hand, there is an agreement in empirical studies that lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families differ from each other on some parental characteristics and behavior. The majority of research has been conducted in lesbian families in which the mother initially raised the child in a previous heterosexual relationship. Lesbian families with children originating from a heterosexual relationship differ from planned lesbian families. In the former families the parental composition has changed, and parent and child experience divorce and coming out of the mother. The present investigation is unique in that it focuses on a large group of planned lesbian families to eliminate the possible confounding effects of parental divorce, reparenting, and coming out.

Although studies on children's gender social competence (Flaks, Fisher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995), behavioral adjustment (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997), gender role behavior (Brewaeys et al., 1997), psychological adjustment, romantic relationships, or school outcomes revealed no differences between children in planned lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families there is also some disagreement on these "no difference" findings. Opponents of lesbian parenthood, such as Cameron and Cameron (1996a, 1996b, Wardle (1997), and Knight (1997), for example, consider lesbian-parent families to be both different and inferior to heterosexual-parent families. In their view, children raised by active homosexual parents face certain unique risks of

developing deviant gender and sexual identity. The social stigma and the embarrassment of having a lesbian parent mean that children tend to be ostracized and that their relationships with peers are hindered, resulting in emotional problems. In the United States, these views continue to be cited in court decisions on lesbian and gay marriages, and they influence the discussion on the possibility for lesbian women and gay men to adopt children.

With regard to parental characteristics, there is an agreement in empirical studies that there are some differences between lesbian parents and heterosexual families. Evidence suggests, for example, that social mothers (nonbiological mothers) spend significantly more time performing family and childcare activities than do heterosexual fathers. Lesbian couples share household tasks more equally than heterosexual couples do (Patterson, 2002). The fact that the division of family tasks and childcare activities seems to be more equal in lesbian-parent families (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004) might be the reason why lesbian parents are more satisfied with their partner as a coparent. It was also found that lesbian and heterosexual-parent families differ as regards the intensity of the desire to have children, with lesbian parents having a much stronger desire (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2003).

In the Netherlands, almost every baby born to a heterosexual-parent family that has a Dutch ethnic background is also "planned," or at least not born unwanted. Fertility behavior in the Netherlands is well regulated, unwanted pregnancies are rare, and contraception is widely available and its use is widespread. However, for planned lesbian-parent families, only nonconventional ways of getting pregnant are available. It is assumed that in the Netherlands most lesbian women get pregnant as a result of artificial insemination with donor sperm at a fertility clinic (Rothuizen, 2001). Lesbian couples are confronted with long waiting lists for donor insemination procedures in Dutch fertility clinics. Because of the time it takes to get pregnant through donor insemination, lesbian parents are usually older than heterosexual parents. Furthermore, several authors suggest that lesbian parents are less focused on traditional child-rearing goals than heterosexual parents are (Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992; Tasker &

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Golombok, 1997; Weeks, Heaply, & Donovan, 2001). Finally, society's less favorable attitudes toward lesbian-parent families mean that lesbian mothers are likely to feel more pressured than heterosexual parents to justify or defend the quality of their parenthood (Morningstar, 1999; Rothuizen, 2001; Slater, 1999).

Also with respect to parental behavior, there is agreement in empirical studies that there are some differences between lesbian parents and heterosexual families. There were, for example, indications that nonbiological mothers (social mothers) exhibit a higher quality of parent-child interaction (Brewaeyts et al., 1997; Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997) than do fathers in heterosexual-parent families. Nevertheless, Golombok and colleagues (2003) showed that social mothers in lesbian-parent families are less likely to display elevated levels of emotional involvement with their children than are fathers in heterosexual couples. Some authors (e.g., Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Brewaeyts, Ponjaert, van Hall, & Golombok, 1997) suggest that the comparative parenting strength that lesbian social mothers exhibit in comparison to fathers is related more to gender than to sexual orientation. Female gender is assumed to be the source of positive parenting skills, and mothers tend to be more involved in and skilled at childcare and parenting than are fathers (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

Critics of lesbian and gay parenting have claimed that most of the abovementioned findings are based on research with comparatively small convenience samples, and therefore not representative. Another critical note is that samples were mainly recruited using one method—either through hospital fertility departments or through friendship networks—or that lesbian single-mother and lesbian two-mother families were pooled. Furthermore, findings of the abovementioned studies have been based mainly on parental self-report.

The present study avoids the above pitfalls by examining a large sample of planned lesbian families—which were recruited with several methods—and data was collected by multiple methods, namely observations, diaries, and self-reports. In sum, the aim of the study was to examine the relation between parental characteristics and child-rearing aspects on the one hand, and child adjustment in planned lesbian-parent families and in heterosexual-parent families on the other hand.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 100 planned lesbian-parent families and 100 heterosexual-parent families. Families were considered eligible to participate in the study if the children had been raised in the family since birth, one of the children (the target child) was between 4 and 8 years of age, and both parents were Dutch. To allow a meaningful comparison between lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families, both family types were matched on degree of urbanization, number of children, and age, and gender of the target child. Families were not matched on parental age, because in general lesbian parents are older than heterosexual parents. Data on the lesbian-parent families were collected first. After the sociodemographic variables had been established, they were used to match the lesbian-parent families with the heterosexual-parent families.

We recruited the planned lesbian-parent families by consulting the patient files of the Medical Center for Birth Control (a Dutch center that provides donor insemination services to clients regardless of their sexual orientation or whether or not they are in an intimate relationship); by approaching the largest Dutch interest group for gay and lesbian parents, as well as various individuals with expertise in the area of gay and lesbian parenting; and by placing an advertisement in a lesbian magazine.

A letter of invitation was sent to the 178 lesbian-parent families that met the criteria for participation. Of these families, 43 were sourced through the medical center, 60 through the interest group, and 75 through experts in the area of gay and lesbian parenting. The response rate for the medical center was 18 (41.9%), 47 (78.3%) for the interest group, and 34 (45.3%) for the experts; only one family responded to the advertisement. The total response rate was 99 (55.6%).

The group of heterosexual-parent families was drawn from the population register of two cities that have a level of urbanization comparable to the cities in which the participating lesbian-parent families lived, as well as through schools and referrals from the participating lesbian-parent family group. The response rate for the population registry office was 42 (17.3%), 49 (24.1%) for the schools, and 9 (38.7%) for the referrals. The total response rate was 251 (21.4%). Of these 251 families, 100 were matched with the lesbian-mother families.

Lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families were successfully matched on degree of urbanization and on age and gender of the target child. Both family types lived in a suburban area (91% of the lesbian-mother families and 94% of the heterosexual-parent families), there was a similar proportion of boys and girls in each family type (52 boys and 48 girls in the lesbian-mother group, 51 boys and 49 girls in the heterosexual parent group), and there were no significant differences between the two groups of families in mean age of the target child (lesbian-parent families:  $M = 5.8$  years,  $SD = 1.37$ ; heterosexual-parent families:  $M = 6.1$  years,  $SD = 1.21$ ). However, the mean number of children in the lesbian-parent families ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) was significantly lower than in the heterosexual-parent families ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = .48$ ),  $F(1, 198) = 5.26$ ,  $p < .05$ .

No significant differences were established between lesbian parents and heterosexual parents on nonmatched sociodemographic aspects, such as educational level (75.5% of all respondents had studied at a higher professional level) or duration of the relationship ( $M = 14.8$  years,  $SD = 4.39$ ). As expected, the lesbian biological mothers ( $M = 40.8$ ,  $SD = 3.22$ ) and the lesbian social mothers ( $M = 42.1$ ,  $SD = 5.90$ ) were significantly older than the heterosexual mothers ( $M = 39.0$ ,  $SD = 4.33$ ) and fathers ( $M = 40.6$ ,  $SD = 4.45$ ),  $F(1, 198) = 11.54$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $F(1, 196) = 3.98$ ,  $p < .05$ , respectively.

### Procedure

The families who agreed to participate in the study were contacted by phone to explain the three different methods of data collection (i.e., questionnaires, observations, diaries), and to make an appointment for the home visit so that parent-child interactions could be observed. Before the home visit, each family was sent two questionnaires (one for each parent). The parents were asked to fill out the questionnaires independently. The family was then

visited at home at a time that was convenient to the parents. Observations were made of the child in interaction with each parent separately. Most home visits took place during the weekend. Parent and child were videotaped performing two instructional tasks. Each parent in the family was assessed, and different tasks were used for each parent-child observation. The order of tasks was counterbalanced across lesbian biological mother-child interaction and lesbian social mother-child interaction in planned lesbian-parent families, and across mother-child interaction and father-child interaction in heterosexual-parent families. Parents were allowed to help the child whenever they felt the need to do so. During the visits, the parents were instructed how to fill out the diaries. They were requested to return the diaries as soon as possible.

### *Instruments and Measures*

Data concerning child adjustment (internalizing, externalizing, and total problem behavior), parental characteristics (division of work and family tasks, satisfaction with the partner as coparent, intensity of the desire to have a child, child-rearing goals, and parental justification), and child rearing (emotional involvement, parental concern, power assertion, induction, supportive presence, respect for the child's autonomy, structure, and limit-setting) were collected by means of questionnaires, diaries, and observations. All variables were measured using standardized instruments with good psychometric properties, most of which had been used in other studies on parenting and child adjustment.

### *Child Adjustment*

Behavioral problems were used as the index of child adjustment. They were assessed by means of the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/4-18; Achenbach, 1991; Verhulst, van den Ende, & Koot, 1996). The CBCL includes 118 items. Each item is scored 0 if "not true," 1 if "somewhat true," and 2 if "very true" of the child. The sum of the scores on all items produces a total behavior problem score. The CBCL also produces a score for both internalizing and externalizing problem behavior. The alphas for the internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior scale were .82, .88, and .92, respectively. In each family type, the sums of the scores of both parents were averaged. Analyses of the data showed that there were no significant differences between lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers or between heterosexual mothers and heterosexual fathers on the internalizing, the externalizing, or the total behavior scale.

### *Parental Characteristics*

*Division of work and family tasks.* The division of work and family tasks (childcare and household activities) was assessed by means of a structured diary record of activities. Every 15 minutes, one activity was selected from a checklist of activities that included such categories as "employment" (professional work), "household" (e.g., shopping and preparing food), and "childcare" (taking care of children). The checklist was based on a classification system used in time budget surveys (CBS, 1999). Both parents filled in the diary independently during an average week (Monday through Sunday) from 07:00 to 22:00 hrs. The diaries were used to

compute three variables, that is, the amount of time a parent spent each week on childcare, on household activities, and on employment outside the house.

*Satisfaction with the partner as coparent.* A subscale of the Parental Stress Index (Abidin, 1983; Groenendaal, Deković, & Noom, 1996) was used to measure the degree of satisfaction with the partner as coparent. This scale comprises seven items (e.g., "Since we've had children, my partner has been less supporting than I expected"). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 6 (*fully agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .87.

*Intensity of the desire to have a child.* The intensity of the desire to have a child was assessed by means of a questionnaire item that had been used in previous research on parenthood motives among infertile, childless couples (van Balen & Trimbos-Kemper, 1995), namely "What were you willing to give up in order to have children?" (1 = *It didn't really matter to me*, 6 = *I was willing to give up more than anything in order to have children*). The question referred to the period of transition to parenthood.

*Child-rearing goals.* A subscale of the Child-Rearing Goals List (Vermulst, Gerris, & Siebenhaller, 1987) was used to assess traditional child-rearing goals ("Conformity"). Although the list is a Q sort, in the present study it was included as a questionnaire measure. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of each item on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*completely unimportant*) to 4 (*very important*). The subscale "Conformity" (development of qualities that are valued in our society) consists of 23 items (e.g., "self-control"). Cronbach's alpha was good ( $\alpha = .67$ ).

*Parental justification.* Parental justification (the degree to which a parent feels pressured to justify the quality of his or her parenthood) was assessed by means of a scale developed using information obtained in small-scale qualitative studies of lesbian motherhood (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999; Rothuizen, 2001; Seyda & Herrera, 1998; Warmerdam & Gort, 1998). The scale consists of four items: (1) "In anticipation of negative reactions from others, I give my children more attention than other parents do;" (2) "I try to prove to others that I am a good parent;" (3) "I feel that I must justify my parenthood qualities to other parents;" and (4) "I feel pressured to tell other people that everything is going well with the development of our child." These items were rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*fully disagree*) to 6 (*fully agree*). Cronbach's alpha was .68.

### *Child-Rearing Variables*

*Emotional involvement and parental concern.* Emotional involvement and parental concern were measured using the Child-Rearing Practices Report (CRPR; Block, 1965). The CRPR contains subscales consisting of a few items with reliabilities ranging from moderate to low. Other researchers (Deković, 1991; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Trickett & Susman, 1989; van Balen, 1996) performed a factor analysis that yielded two factors, namely emotional involvement and parental concern. The Parental Emotional Involvement scale consists of the subscales Open Expression of Affection (e.g., "Express affection by kissing and hugging") and Enjoyment of the Parental Role (e.g., "Interesting to be with the child for long periods"). The Parental Concern scale comprises the subscales Parental Worry About the Child" (e.g.,

“Worry about bad things that might happen”), Protectiveness of the Child” (e.g., “Keep the child away from others with different values”), and Overinvestment in Child (e.g., “Tend to spoil the child”). The items of both scales have response categories ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). Cronbach’s alphas for these two scales were  $\alpha = .58$  (emotional involvement, 9 items) and  $\alpha = .60$  (parental concern, 10 items), respectively.

*Power assertion and induction.* Power assertion and induction were measured using the Parenting Dimensions Inventory (PDI; Gerrits, 2000; Gerrits, Deković, Groenendaal, & Noom, 1996; Slater & Power, 1987). Power assertion refers to the degree to which parents use power-assertive methods of discipline and control. In the present study, each parent was presented with six different situations describing misbehavior (e.g., “After arguing over toys, your child hits a playmate”) and was asked to indicate how likely it was (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*) that he or she would use physical punishment, yell at the child, ignore the child, withhold privileges, or send the child to his or her room.

Induction measured the degree to which parents resort to inductive methods of discipline and control. The same situations were used as in the power assertion scale. For each situation, the parent was asked how likely it was (1 = *very unlikely*, 5 = *very likely*) that he or she would talk to the child, point out the consequences of the child’s behavior, or point out earlier agreements. Cronbach’s alpha was .89 for power assertion and .87 for induction.

*Supportive presence, respect for the child’s autonomy, and structure and limit-setting.* Supportive presence, respect for the child’s autonomy, and structure and limit-setting were assessed by rating the videotaped parent–child instruction sessions using the 7-point scales developed by Erickson, Sroufe, and Egeland (1985). The observation situations were scored by various raters who had been trained by the first author. Scoring was blind; that is, the raters were not aware of the sexual orientation of the mother. This, of course, was not possible for the father-child observations, because all the fathers in the study were heterosexual. Inter-rater reliability (Cohen’s  $\kappa$ ) was established for 38% of the interactions and was computed for agreement within one scale point. Reliability coefficients were as follows: supportive presence = .89; respect for the child’s autonomy = .92; and structure and limit-setting = .88. Pearson correlations between self-reported child-rearing and observed child-rearing variables were significant for power assertion and respect for the child’s autonomy ( $r = -.27, p < .001$ ), and for power assertion and structure and limit-setting ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ).

*Sociodemographic characteristics.* Data concerning sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age of parent and child, education, and family size) were collected by means of questionnaires.

## Results

Analyses were conducted in several steps. In the first series of analyses, planned lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families were compared on child adjustment. In the subsequent steps, the focus was on parental characteristics and on child rearing. In these steps, planned lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families were compared on the above-mentioned variables by means of several univariate analyses. With a sample size of  $N = 100$  for each family type, the statistical power was sufficient to detect medium

differences between two independent sample means (Cohen, 1988, 1992).

To examine whether parents in lesbian-parent families differ significantly from each other and whether parents in heterosexual-parent families differ significantly from each other, we conducted paired  $t$  tests within each family type. We also examined the influence of gender on parental characteristics and child-rearing variables; that is, we compared the heterosexual fathers with all the mothers (i.e., the lesbian biological mothers, the lesbian social mothers, and the heterosexual mothers) on parental characteristics and child rearing.

In the final series of analyses, Pearson  $r$  correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether parental characteristics and child-rearing variables were significant predictors of child adjustment.

### Child Adjustment

A series of 2 (family type: lesbian-parent families vs. heterosexual-parent families)  $\times$  2 (gender of the target child: boys vs. girls) analyses of variances (ANOVAs) were conducted to assess differences between child adjustment in the lesbian-parent families and those in the heterosexual-parent families. No significant main effects of family type emerged on the total behavior problem score, nor on the internalizing or externalizing behavior problem scores assigned by parents to their children (see Table 1). However, as shown in Table 1, significant main effects of gender of the target child were found on the total behavior problem score and on the externalizing behavior problem score, indicating that boys scored higher than girls. There was no significant family type  $\times$  gender of the target child interaction on the total behavior problem score, nor on the internalizing or externalizing behavior problem scores.

### Parental Characteristics

ANOVAs were conducted with family type as the independent variable and with parental characteristics (intensity of the desire to have a child, division of work and family tasks, satisfaction with the partner as coparent, child-rearing goals, parental justification) as dependent variables, in order to compare: (1) lesbian biological mothers with heterosexual mothers, (2) lesbian biological mothers with heterosexual fathers, (3) lesbian social mothers with heterosexual fathers, and (4) lesbian social mothers with heterosexual mothers. Paired  $t$  tests were conducted to examine significant differences between biological mothers and social mothers in the lesbian-parent families and between mothers and fathers in the heterosexual-parent families. To assess the influence of gender on the parental characteristics, ANOVAs were conducted with gender as independent variables (1 = *lesbian biological mothers, lesbian social mothers, and heterosexual mothers*; 2 = *heterosexual fathers*) and with the above-mentioned parental characteristics as dependent variables. Table 2 presents an overview of the means and standard deviations of all the variables examined.

*Lesbian biological mothers versus heterosexual mothers and fathers.* A significant difference on the division of family tasks and employment indicates that lesbian biological mothers spend fewer hours on such household activities such as shopping and preparing food. The lesbian biological mothers seem to be signif-

icantly more satisfied with their partner as a coparent than heterosexual mothers are, and they scored significantly higher than heterosexual mothers on the strength of the desire to have children. The lesbian biological mothers find traditional child-rearing goals less important.

Compared with the heterosexual fathers, the lesbian biological mothers spend significantly more hours on childcare and household activities and significantly fewer hours on work outside the home. With respect to the strength of the desire to have children, they scored significantly higher than the heterosexual fathers did. The lesbian biological mothers find traditional child-rearing goals less important than do the heterosexual fathers, and they defend their position as a parent more than the heterosexual fathers do.

*Lesbian social mothers versus heterosexual mothers and fathers.* Significant differences emerged between the lesbian social mothers and the heterosexual fathers. The former spend more time each week on childcare and household tasks than do the latter, and they spend fewer hours on employment outside the home. Furthermore, the intensity of the lesbian mothers' desire to have children was stronger than that of the heterosexual fathers. Significant differences also emerged on parental justification and child-rearing goals; that is, the lesbian social mothers feel significantly more often than the heterosexual fathers that they have to justify their quality of their parenthood. The lesbian social mothers find traditional child-rearing goals significantly less important.

The lesbian social mothers scored significantly higher on the strength of the desire to have children than did the heterosexual mothers, and they spend fewer hours on household activities and more hours on paid work outside the home. The lesbian social mothers are significantly less attuned to traditional child-rearing goals than the heterosexual mothers are.

*Differences between parents within each family type.* A significant difference was found between the parents in lesbian-parent families on one of the parental characteristics, namely the biological mothers spend more hours on childcare than the social mothers do. Significant differences between the fathers and mothers in the heterosexual-parent families were found on almost all the parental characteristics: The strength of the desire to have children among

the mothers was significantly higher than among the fathers, and the mothers spend significantly more time on childcare and household tasks. Compared with the fathers, the mothers in the heterosexual-parent families spend significantly less time on paid work outside the home and are less satisfied with their partner as coparent.

*Gender differences.* The mothers (lesbian biological mothers, lesbian social mothers, and heterosexual mothers) scored significantly higher than the fathers on the desire to have a child and spend significantly more time on childcare and household activities. The fathers spend significantly more time on work outside the home and are significantly more satisfied with their partner as coparent. The fathers find it significantly more important for their child to develop traditional goals and qualities (conformity). There was a nonsignificant trend between the fathers and the mothers with respect to the need to justify the quality of the parent-child relationship (parental justification).

### Child Rearing

Analyses were also carried out with respect to child rearing (emotional involvement, parental concern, power assertion, induction, supportive presence, respect for the child's autonomy, structure, and limit-setting). Table 2 presents the results of these analyses.

*Lesbian biological mothers versus heterosexual mothers and fathers.* Significant differences between the lesbian biological mothers and the heterosexual mothers emerged on emotional involvement, indicating that lesbian biological mothers are significantly more emotionally involved in rearing their child than heterosexual mothers are. However, the lesbian biological mothers scored lower on structure and limit-setting.

The lesbian biological mothers are significantly more emotionally involved in child rearing than the heterosexual fathers are, and they scored significantly higher on supportive presence and respect for the child's autonomy. The lesbian biological mothers scored

Table 1  
Means and SDs of Child Adjustment in Lesbian-Parent and Heterosexual-Parent Families (Assigned by Parents to Their Children) by Gender of Child

	Family type			F value		
	Lesbian-parent families	Heterosexual-parent families	Total	Family type	Gender	Gender × Family type
Internalizing problem behavior				1.67	1.85	.33
Boys	5.45 (3.70)	6.40 (6.45)	5.93 (5.23)			
Girls	6.44 (5.02)	6.81 (4.84)	6.62 (4.92)			
Total	5.94 (4.40)	6.61 (5.68)	6.27 (5.08)			
Externalizing problem behavior				.78	13.95***	.99
Boys	9.62 (6.70)	10.22 (8.03)	9.92 (7.37)			
Girls	7.13 (6.25)	7.70 (5.44)	7.41 (5.85)			
Total	8.37 (6.59)	8.96 (6.97)	8.66 (6.78)			
Total problem behavior				1.85	4.96*	.46
Boys	20.38 (11.40)	23.10 (17.88)	21.74 (14.96)			
Girls	18.30 (11.81)	19.21 (11.04)	18.76 (11.40)			
Total	19.34 (11.62)	21.16 (14.98)	20.25 (13.41)			

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 2  
Means and SDs of Parental Characteristics and Child-Rearing Variables

	Lesbian-parent families			Heterosexual-parent families			Gender		F value				
	Biological mothers (BM)	Social mothers (SM)	BM versus SM <sup>a</sup>	Heterosexual mothers (HM)	Heterosexual fathers (HF)	HM versus HF <sup>a</sup>	Women	Men	BM versus HM	BM versus HF	SM versus HM	SM versus HF	Women versus men
Parental characteristics													
Intensity of desire and employment	4.52 (.94)	4.34 (1.08)	1.16	3.85 (1.18)	3.57 (1.06)	2.08*	4.22	3.56	19.87***	45.25***	9.17*	25.47***	26.46***
Childcare	28.89 (10.09)	26.55 (8.18)	2.17*	27.99 (9.48)	18.44 (7.19)	8.72***	28.00	18.31	.51	72.21***	1.33	55.38***	88.81***
Household activities	15.96 (7.04)	15.60 (6.84)	.42	18.79 (6.26)	10.68 (5.93)	9.13***	16.83	11.15	8.99*	32.96***	11.83***	29.53***	55.12***
Employment	26.93 (13.08)	29.41 (13.96)	-1.21	24.00 (12.23)	43.11 (10.47)	-11.42***	26.52	42.23	2.68	93.13***	8.50*	61.62***	114.74***
Satisfaction partner	4.51 (.70)	4.54 (.75)	-.36	4.28 (.79)	4.67 (.74)	-5.10***	4.44	4.67	4.57*	3.22	5.34**	.21	6.74*
Conformity	2.38 (.18)	2.42 (.20)	-1.79	2.49 (.22)	2.50 (.19)	-.27	2.43	2.50	14.08*	19.92***	5.37*	8.20**	8.05**
Parental justification	1.83 (.78)	1.88 (.93)	-.42	1.76 (.75)	1.64 (.60)	1.26	1.83	1.66 <sup>†</sup>	.45	3.47*	.97	4.51*	2.71
Child rearing variables													
Emotional involvement	5.45 (.35)	5.40 (.39)	.97	5.34 (.39)	5.26 (.43)	1.58	5.39	5.25	3.96	11.85***	3.11	6.09*	10.76**
Parental concern	2.95 (.57)	3.03 (.67)	-1.27	2.88 (.59)	2.80 (.61)	1.13	2.95	2.82	.71	3.04	2.82	6.23**	2.77
Power assertion	1.77 (.43)	1.71 (.43)	1.06	1.89 (.48)	2.00 (.53)	-1.72	1.79	2.00	3.56	11.74***	7.56**	18.02***	15.53***
Induction	4.51 (.47)	4.55 (.51)	-1.24	4.52 (.45)	4.41 (.49)	1.75	4.52	4.42	.05	1.95	.26	3.97*	3.51
Supportive presence	5.44 (1.05)	5.34 (1.18)	.67	5.63 (.87)	5.13 (1.17)	3.48***	5.48	5.11	1.99	3.85***	3.96*	1.57	9.10*
Respect for child's autonomy	5.73 (1.05)	5.74 (.91)	-.08	5.66 (.99)	5.03 (1.50)	3.59***	5.71	5.03	.22	13.53***	.34	15.12**	24.88***
Structure and limit-setting	5.65 (1.04)	5.34 (1.37)	2.09*	6.03 (.61)	5.85 (1.11)	1.64	5.81	5.68	9.95*	1.66	20.92	8.15***	.95

Note. BM = birth mothers; SM = social mothers; HM = heterosexual mothers; HF = heterosexual fathers.

<sup>a</sup> paired *t* test.

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .05$ . \*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ . \*\*\*  $p < .0001$ .

significantly lower on power assertion than the heterosexual fathers did.

*Lesbian social mothers versus heterosexual mothers and fathers.* The lesbian social mothers showed more parental concern and emotional involvement than did the heterosexual fathers. They more often used induction and showed more respect for the child's autonomy than the heterosexual fathers did. The opposite was found with respect to power assertion: The lesbian social mothers reported the use of power assertion less frequently. This was also the case for structure and limit-setting: The heterosexual fathers scored significantly higher than the lesbian social mothers did. Compared with the heterosexual mothers, the lesbian social mothers reported significantly less power assertion in child rearing and showed significantly less supportive presence in parent-child interactions.

*Differences between parents within each family type.* The parents in the lesbian-parent families did not differ significantly on emotional involvement, parental concern, power assertion, induction, supportive presence, or respect for the child's autonomy. Nevertheless, the lesbian biological mothers scored significantly higher than the lesbian social mothers on structure and limit-setting.

In the heterosexual-parent families, the mothers showed significantly more supportive presence and respect for the child's autonomy than did the fathers. However, no differences between fathers and mothers in the heterosexual-parent families were found on emotional involvement, parental concern, power assertion, induction, supportive presence, or structure and limit-setting.

*Gender differences.* No significant differences were found between the fathers and the mothers (i.e., the lesbian biological mothers, the lesbian social mothers, and the heterosexual mothers) on induction or structure and limit-setting. However, the mothers reported significantly more emotional involvement and showed more supportive presence and more respect for the child's autonomy. However, the mothers reported the use of power assertion less frequently than the fathers did.

*Relations Between Parental Characteristics and Child Rearing, and Child Adjustment*

Pearson *r* correlations and multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether the above-mentioned parental characteristics and child-rearing variables were significant predictors of child adjustment. Family type, parental age, and gender of the child were also included as predictors. Interactions between family type and parental characteristics and parenting variables were not included in these analyses, because they were not significantly correlated with child adjustment. For these analyses, the reports of both parents in each family were averaged. The analyses were carried out separately for children's internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problem scores. Table 3 presents the primary correlations between the various predictors and the various dimensions of child adjustment (children's internalizing, externalizing, and total behavior problem behavior).

The results show significant correlations between parental characteristics (i.e., parental justification and satisfaction with the

Table 3  
Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Internalizing, Externalizing and Total Problem Behavior

	Internalizing problem behavior		Externalizing problem behavior		Total problem behavior	
	<i>r</i>	$\beta$	<i>r</i>	$\beta$	<i>r</i>	$\beta$
Controlling variables						
Family type	.08	.00	.06	.06	.09	.04
Parental age	.00	-.03	-.04	.02	-.01	.03
Gender of the child <sup>a</sup>	.09	.10	-.21**	-.15*	-.12*	-.08
Parental characteristics						
Intensity of desire	-.09	-.10	.05	.07	-.01	-.01
Division:						.03
Childcare	-.09	-.06	.01	.10	-.05	.11
Household activities	.11	.08	.13*	.15	.12	.07
Employment	.01	.10	-.01	.07	-.01	
Satisfaction partner as coparent	-.41***	-.36***	-.36***	-.30***	-.43***	-.37***
Conformity	-.05	.04	.02	.02	.03	.04
Parental justification	.12*	.06	.20**	.14	.20**	.12
Child rearing variables						
Emotional involvement	-.10	.00	-.18**	-.12	-.19**	-.11
Parental concern	.18**	.13	.04	-.08	.13*	.03
Power assertion	.15*	.13	.20**	.09	.21**	.11
Induction	-.07	-.02	-.06	-.01	-.06	.01
Supportive presence	.26***	.26*	-.05	.04	.08	.14
Respect for child's autonomy	.14*	.11	-.08	-.07	-.02	-.01
Structure and limit-setting	.14*	.01	-.01	-.06	.10	.01
<i>F</i>		4.41***		3.00***		3.52***
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.31		.24		.27

<sup>a</sup> 0 = boys. 1 = girls.  
\* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

partner as coparent) and child adjustment ( $-.41 < r < .20$ ; see also Table 3). Several significant correlations were also found between child-rearing variables and child adjustment ( $.14 < r < .26$ ; see also Table 3). Multiple regression analyses show that children's internalizing problem behavior is associated with the parent's level of satisfaction with the partner as coparent ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ) and with the level of supportive presence ( $\beta = .26, p < .001$ ): Higher levels of internalizing problem behavior are associated with a more supportive presence and less satisfaction with the partner as coparent. Externalizing problem behavior is associated with the gender of the child ( $\beta = -.21, p < .01$ ), namely boys scored higher on externalizing problem behavior than girls did. Higher levels of externalizing problem behavior were also associated with less satisfaction with the partner as coparent ( $\beta = -.30, p < .001$ ). This also applies to total problem behavior: Parents who are less satisfied with their partner as coparent reported higher levels of children's total problem behavior ( $\beta = -.37, p < .001$ ).

### Discussion

With respect to child adjustment, the results of our large sample study confirm the findings of previous small sample studies. In general, our findings support the "no difference" consensus in empirical research on planned lesbian-parent families (Clarke, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). That is, children in planned lesbian-parent families do not differ in well-being or child adjustment compared with their counterparts in heterosexual-parent families based on parental reports of the CBCL. These findings contradict what is maintained by opponents of lesbian-parent families, namely that children of lesbian parents run the risk of developing a variety of behavior problems because they were raised fatherless, lack a biological tie with one of the mothers, and are stigmatized by their peers (Blankenhorn, 1995; Cameron & Cameron, 1996a, 1996b; Wardle, 1997; Knight, 1997).

Our results indicate that especially satisfaction with the partner as coparent is significantly associated with child adjustment. Significant relations between parental characteristics (satisfaction with partner as coparent) and child-rearing variables (parental concern and power assertion) on the one hand and externalizing problem behavior and total problem behavior on the other hand are similar for planned lesbian-parent families and for heterosexual-parent families, indicating that children in planned lesbian-parent families are raised and develop in the same way as children in heterosexual-parent families. For internalizing problem behavior it was found that in planned lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families, parents with high levels of power assertion, parental concern, and supportive presence reported more often internalizing problem behavior of their child. With respect to supportive presence, this finding was somewhat unexpected. However, other studies (Gadeyne, Ghesquière, & Onghena, 2004; Paulussen-Hoogeboom, 2006) found a similar result in their study on parenting and child adjustment in young children. It is suggested that the expression of support in combination with power assertion is confusing or inconsistent to children and leads to internalizing problem behavior (Gadeyne et al., 2004).

Regarding parental characteristics, however, our findings do not support the no-difference consensus. We found several interesting differences between lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent fami-

lies, e.g., lesbian biological and social mothers had a stronger desire to have a child and have less traditional child-rearing goals than heterosexual parents. Lesbian social mothers are more committed as a parent than are heterosexual fathers; that is, they display a higher level of satisfaction with their partner as coparent and spend more time on childcare and less on employment.

As regards child-rearing aspects, again our results do not support the no-difference consensus. Especially lesbian social mothers are more effective and more committed than heterosexual fathers as a parent. They show higher levels of support (e.g., more emotional involvement and parental concern) and lower levels of control (less power assertion, less structure, less limit-setting, and more respect for the child's autonomy). Some authors (Bos, 2004; Clarke, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) have criticized the no-difference consensus. They argue that the majority of studies on lesbian-parent families are based on a no-difference hypothesis, and thus emphasize similarities in child adjustment and parenting, instead of unraveling the family processes in which lesbian and heterosexual families differ. Based on our results, one could perhaps come to the provocative conclusion that lesbian social mothers show more effective and committed parental behavior than do heterosexual fathers. Additional research is needed to confirm the reliability of these findings, to establish their generalizability to contexts less supportive of lesbian families than the Netherlands, and to reveal the processes underlying these differences in behavior.

The differences between lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents on parental characteristics may be explained by the unique situation of these families. For example, a lesbian's stronger desire to have a child might be associated with the fact that lesbian couples have to go through a long and difficult process before pregnancy is achieved. As a consequence, lesbian mothers might see their child as a precious gift more than other parents do. This is comparable to long-standing infertile parents (Colpin, 1994; Colpin, de Munter, & Vandemeulebroecke, 1998; Golombok, 1992; van Balen, 1996). However, a lesbian couple's decision to have a child is probably not easily taken, because of the less favorable attitude toward homosexuality and lesbian (and gay) parenthood (Gartrell, et al., 1996; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Lesbians' greater desire for parenthood also suggests that they might be a more select group than the heterosexual parents. Highly motivated parents such as these might be more willing or more able to buffer their children from some of the inevitable stresses that are associated with stigmatized lesbian identities.

It should be mentioned that we did not have information about whether the children in the heterosexual-parent families had been planned. However, among heterosexual-parent families in the Netherlands, almost every baby is planned (or at least not born unwanted). Fertility behavior in the Netherlands is well regulated, unwanted pregnancies are rare, and contraception is widely available and its use widespread (Latten & Cuijvers, 1994; Bonsel & van der Maas, 1994). This might be an explanation why we also found a relatively high level of the strength of the desire to have a child among heterosexual parents. However, lesbian mothers—social and biological—still scored significant higher on this variable compared with heterosexual parents. The fact that lesbian parents scored higher on the strength of desire to have a child, might be a consequence of the situation that they are confronted



with a situation that is not easy for them to fulfill their desire to become a parent.

The fact that lesbian social mothers feel the need to justify the quality of their parenthood is probably a result of the societal pressure to be visible as a mother that these mothers feel (de Kanter, 1996; Muzio, 1999; Nekkebroeck & Brewaeys, 2002). Furthermore, lesbian parents score low on the child-rearing goal of conformity. Previous inquiries also found that lesbians feel more comfortable discussing sexuality with their children, that they accept their children's sexuality whatever it may be, and that the teenage children of lesbians communicate their feelings more openly (Golombok, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). In addition, several authors suggest that children who are brought up by lesbian parents might benefit from their personal experience of diversity and might therefore feel less restricted (Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Weeks et al., 2001).

With respect to emotional involvement, our findings contradict those recently reported by Golombok and colleagues (2003), who found that lesbian social mothers are less likely to have enhanced levels of emotional involvement with their children than are fathers in heterosexual-parent families. Although the children involved in their study were also born to a lesbian relationship, a substantial number of the lesbian social mothers were stepmothers. Hence, the stepmothers were not actively involved in the decision to have a child and did not raise the child from birth onward. This probably caused the different findings.

Gender might be an alternative explanation for the differences found in the present study between lesbian-parent families and heterosexual-parent families. As mentioned, lesbian social mothers seem to be more skilled at parenting and more involved with the children than are fathers, but the comparative strengths of these mothers might be related to their gender. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) emphasized this gender effect in their review "Does the sexual orientation of parents matter?" They concluded that compared with fathers, mothers tend to invest more in and to be more skilled at child rearing. In our study, too, the lesbian biological mothers, the lesbian social mothers, and the heterosexual mothers scored significantly higher than the fathers on measures related to child rearing. However, we agree with Stacey and Biblarz (2001) that sexual orientation and gender should be viewed as interacting factors that create new kinds of family structures and processes that may have consequences for the parent-child relationship. Possible evidence for this is that we found significant differences between fathers and mothers in the heterosexual-parent families on most of the variables. This is in contrast to the lesbian-parent families, where we did not find significant differences between both parents on most of the variables.

These findings might indicate that lesbian-parent families perform more egalitarian and shared parenting compared with heterosexual-parent families. Here, however, we found two interesting differences: The lesbian biological mothers scored higher on childcare and structure and limit-setting than the lesbian social mothers did. The absence of a genetic tie with the child might explain these differences. It might be the case, for example, that because of the experience of pregnancy and the bond with their biological child, lesbian biological mothers feel more responsible for their child compared with lesbian social mothers. It might also be that lesbian biological mothers and lesbian social mothers differ in the reasons they wanted to become a mother (Bos, van Balen, &

van den Boom, 2003), or that they differ in terms of personality traits, and therefore differ over some aspects of child rearing.

### *Limitations*

Because of the design of the study (i.e., a comparison between planned lesbian-parent families and fertile heterosexual-parent families), it is unclear whether the differences found can be attributed to gender, the absence of a genetic tie with the child, society's less favorable attitude toward homosexuality and lesbian-parent families, or a combination of these aspects. A comparison between, for example, planned lesbian-parent families, fertile heterosexual-parent families, heterosexual-parent families in which the father has no genetic tie with the child (e.g., blended families with a stepfather or artificial insemination with donor sperm [AID] families), and two-father families (a biological and a social father) could help to unravel the confounding of the possible influence of the abovementioned aspects.

It should be mentioned that there was a difference in response rate between the lesbian-parent and the heterosexual-parent families. Curiosity about the way lesbian parents function might have been an important reason for lesbian couples to participate. However, in our study the response rate among heterosexual-parent families was comparable with that in other Dutch studies on family issues (Brinkman, 2000; de Leeuw & de Heer, 2002). One should also bear in mind that the educational level of the planned lesbian-parent families in our study is relatively high. In the Netherlands, one is not allowed to include questions in general population surveys about the sexual orientation of parents, as Wainright, Russell, & Patterson (2004) did. However, we compared the planned lesbian mothers in our study with data from a large-scale population survey on sexual behavior in the Netherlands (Sandfort, 1998). Lesbian mothers in our sample did not differ from the lesbian women questioned in that survey. The lesbian women in both studies tended to be more highly educated and to live in an urban area. Another remark is that we matched the planned lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families on a limit number of sociodemographic variables (e.g., age and gender of the target child, urbanization level). Both family types were—for example—not matched on variables such as educational level or income. In the Netherlands income is highly correlated with educational level. In research literature (e.g., Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002; Paulussen-Hoogeboom, 2006) it has been found that educational level is an important predictor of parenting; however, no significant differences were found in the present study between planned lesbian-parent and heterosexual-parent families on educational level. Therefore, both groups are comparable on this aspect.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that in a country with a rather tolerant climate toward homosexuality, such as the Netherlands (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998), life may be easier for both the children and the parents in a planned lesbian-parent family. The legal climate for lesbian parenthood in the Netherlands is rather more positive than it is in other countries. For example, it is possible for a social mother to legally adopt the children born to the relationship with her partner (the biological mother of the children). However, as suggested by Dutch research on sexual orientation and mental health, the consequences of a more tolerant climate should not be overestimated (Sandfort, de Graaf, Bijl, & Schnabel, 2001).

There is also the issue of representativeness. It is not entirely clear whether the lesbian mothers involved in our study are representative of planned lesbian-parent families in general in the Netherlands. To ensure that the sample of planned lesbian-parent families would not be selective, lesbian mother families were recruited using several entries such as the Medical Centre for Birth Control and a Dutch interest group for gay and lesbian parents. A significant difference between lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents was found on parental justification. Prudence is required regarding this finding, because the instrument used to measure the parents' belief in the need to justify the quality of their parenthood was new.

### Conclusion

Although lesbian-parent families are nontraditional in structure, they are confronted with the same daily problems as heterosexual-parent families. However, lesbian-parent families are also confronted with issues that do not appear in the family situation of heterosexual-parent families; for example, the decision to parent, pathways to parenthood, and societal homophobia. Although some lesbians and their children might seek counseling services for matters unrelated to their nontraditional family situation, for some lesbians these matters might well be related to their unique family situation. It would therefore be erroneous for health care workers to overlook issues that are related to the nontraditional family situation of lesbian-parent families. Finally, the number of purposefully created children in lesbian relationships may be lower in those Western countries in which there is less social acceptance of lesbian-parent families than in the Netherlands. It is reasonable to believe, however, that the number of two-mother lesbian-parent families would increase in other Western countries as the social acceptance of nontraditional families increases. Research among this group could help to understand the strengths and well as problems experienced by lesbian-parent families, reduce prejudice against them, and contribute to knowledge about parenting and child development more generally.

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