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The Experiences of Children with Lesbian and Gay Parents – An Initial Scoping Review of Evidence

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The Experiences of Children with Lesbian and Gay Parents – An Initial Scoping Review of Evidence

Communities Analytical Services

This paper was written in response to the Hearts and Minds Agenda Group recommendation¹ that research is conducted into the experiences of children of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents. This paper presents a review of the findings from eight papers identified by experts in the field and an internal literature search. It should be noted that these identified papers were predominantly focused on lesbian and gay parenting and not on parents identifying as bisexual or transgender.

This paper is divided into three chapters. Chapter One sets out our reason for undertaking this review and the aims and objectives that we wanted to address. Chapter Two details our literature search results. Finally, Chapter Three discusses the review findings – what the authors of these eight papers say in relation to the experiences of children of LGBT parents.

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/19133153/0> (page 36)

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

Introduction

1.1 This chapter outlines the reasons why this initial scoping review was undertaken and the aims and objectives that we wanted to address.

Why

1.2 In early 2006, the then Scottish Executive asked representatives from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities to establish a working group to look at ways to tackle negative and discriminatory attitudes towards LGBT people in Scotland. This working group - 'The LGBT Hearts and Minds Agenda Group' - identified a set of five key areas for discussion: workplaces and public services; religion and belief; education and family; media and leadership; and citizenship and social capital. The group established five subgroups to consider each of these discussion areas.

1.3 The report of the LGBT Hearts and Minds Agenda Group '*Challenging Prejudice: Changing Attitudes Towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Scotland*²' (Scottish Government 2008) identified practical ways of changing attitudes towards LGBT people in Scotland and set out recommendations for research, policy and practice for the five key areas of discussion. Subsequently, the Scottish Government responded positively and with firm commitments to the vast majority of the reports recommendations³.

1.4 One of the recommendations of the education and family subgroup was for research to be conducted into the experiences of children of LGBT parents. The Scottish Government responded that a literature review would be undertaken to identify existing research examining the experiences of children of LGBT parents. We also aimed to consider attitudes towards and the needs of children and young people with one or more parent identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. This initial scoping review comprises the Scottish Government's response to this recommendation.

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/02/19133153/0>

³ The Scottish Government's response can be found at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/243417/0067747.pdf>

Aims and Objectives

1.5 At the outset the overall aim of this work was to review literature examining attitudes towards and the needs and experiences of children and young people with one or more parent who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender.

The specific objectives of this review were:

- To examine attitudes towards children and young people (up to the age of 18) who have one or more parents (adoptive or biological) who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender.
- To examine the experiences of children and young people (up to the age of 18) who have one or more parents (adoptive or biological) who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender.
- To examine the needs of children and young people (up to the age of 18) who have one or more parents (adoptive or biological) who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender.

1.6 Readers will note that the title of this paper refers to lesbian and gay parents only. Although the aim was to review papers that also examined the experiences of children who had one or more parent that identified as bisexual and/or transgender, the literature search undertaken identified papers focused on lesbian and gay parenting.

1.7 Further, readers should also note that although the aim was to consider needs and experiences of children, the papers reviewed were focused on attitudes and experiences rather than on the needs of children.

1.8 The remainder of this paper outlines our literature search results (Chapter Two) before moving onto discuss the review findings in more detail (Chapter Three).

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE SEARCH RESULTS

Introduction

2.1 Eight papers⁴ which were of relevance to this review were identified by experts in the field and an internal literature search. Although the literature search and experts in the field drew our attention to North American and European literature, the purpose of this review was to focus on research undertaken in the United Kingdom (published in the last ten years). This chapter sets out the research settings, LGBT focus and themes, and the research methods of these included papers. The chapter ends with a discussion on the use of comparative groups and limitations of the studies reviewed.

Literature Search Results

Research Settings

2.2 Table 2.1 summarises the research settings and LGBT focus of the papers reviewed. The table shows that only one study focused exclusively on Scotland and one drew data exclusively from England. Four studies had British samples (with one including Eire) and two studies drew their data from the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand.

LGBT Focus and Themes

2.3 Table 2.1 shows that four studies focused exclusively on lesbian parenting and one exclusively on parenting by gay or bisexual men⁵. Two examined the experiences of children with lesbian or gay parents and one researched the barriers and facilitators to the inclusion of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) pupils⁶ in schools.

2.4 The predominant themes that framed the research of the included papers are also highlighted in table 2.1. One overarching theme was prejudice and discrimination encountered by lesbian and gay people and their families; particularly in the context of homophobic bullying. Another was the exploration of diverse and non-traditional family forms for example, Dunne (1998) examined egalitarian approaches to work and family life in lesbian households to investigate issues of gender inequality and, Barrett and Tasker (2001)

⁴ Although research into LGBT parenting and children's experiences is limited, it should be noted that this paper is an initial scoping review of the evidence so does not claim to be a comprehensive review of the evidence base.

⁵ The focus of this study is on gay parenting. It does not detail how many of the participants identified as either gay or bisexual and does not distinguish between the two orientations in the findings.

⁶ This study explored, from head and class teacher perspectives, the following three topic areas: the relevance of LGB pupil/issues to schooling; homophobic bullying; and teacher perceptions of barriers and facilitators to the inclusion of LGB pupils/issues. Identities of lesbian, gay and bisexual were discussed together to highlight the "silence on (homo) sexuality in the hidden and taught curriculum."

considered routes to parenting of gay and bisexual fathers and co-partners involvement in parenting.

Table 2.1 Research Settings, LGBT Focus and Themes

Papers	Research Setting	LGBT Focus and Themes
Barrett & Tasker (2001)	United Kingdom and Eire	Gay and bisexual parenting - routes to parenting, challenges of parenting and partner involvement (co-parenting) in parenting
Clarke et al (2004)	United Kingdom, United States, New Zealand	Lesbian and gay parenting – their perceptions of children’s experiences of bullying
Dunne (1998)	England	Lesbian parenting – exploration of their egalitarian approaches to work and family life as a tool to investigate gender inequality
Fairtlough (2008)	United Kingdom, United States, New Zealand	Young people and adults reflections on experiences of growing up with a lesbian or gay parent
McIntyre (2007)	Scotland – one education authority	Bullying and barriers and facilitators to inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual pupils in schools from the perspective of head and classroom teachers
Rivers et al (2008)	United Kingdom	Experiences of victimisation, social support and psychological functioning of young people with lesbian parents
Saffron (1998)	United Kingdom	Young people and adult experiences – advantages of having a lesbian parent
Tasker & Golombok (1998)	United Kingdom	Lesbian parenting – the role of co-parents (i.e. not birth-mother) in their children’s lives

Research Methods

2.5 Table 2.2 illustrates the research methods adopted by the papers reviewed. Methods utilised varied from questionnaires and interviews to participatory methods in two of the studies (Dunne 1998 and Tasker and Golombok 1998). Other methods included a life story approach (Fairtlough 2008) and analysis of television documentaries (Clarke et al 2004).

2.6 The papers varied on whether they researched parents or children. Three examined the experiences of children/young people of lesbian and gay parents from the children/young person’s perspective, four examined experiences of parenting and/or experiences of children from the perspective of parents; one of which did include children perspectives (Tasker and Golombok 1998). The remaining paper collected data from the perspectives of head teachers and class teachers.

Table 2.2 Research Methods and Sampling Methods

Papers	Research Methods	Sample and Recruitment
Barrett & Tasker (2001)	Postal questionnaire – Gay and Bisexual Parenting Survey	Parents recruited through gay press and local / national groups. Snowballing technique
Clarke et al (2004)	Interviews and analysis of television documentaries	Parents recruited through personal contacts. Snowballing technique. Does not say how the television documentaries were selected
Dunne (1998)	Questionnaires, interviews, time-task diaries, 'household portrait' ⁷ and longitudinal (participants re-contacted 2-3 years later)	Parents recruited through snowballing technique
Fairtlough (2008)	Life story approach - content analysis of published accounts reflecting on experiences of young people and adults	Does not say how the published accounts were selected
McIntyre (2007)	Questionnaire and interviews	Does not say how head and class teachers were recruited
Rivers et al (2008)	School-based questionnaire with comparative analysis of matched students raised by opposite sex couples	Young people identified from a large school survey on adolescent behaviour
Saffron (1998)	Interviews	Young people and adults recruited through contacts and advertising in gay media and leaflets. Snowballing technique
Tasker & Golombok (1998)	Interviews, questionnaires and participatory methods with children to explore their feelings about their parents. Comparative analysis with heterosexual families	Parents recruited through advertisements in newsletters and contacts in the lesbian community. Snowballing technique

Comparative Groups

2.7 Of the papers included, two employed a comparison group (see Rivers et al 2008 and Tasker and Golombok 1998). Including a control or comparison group in a research study has the potential to improve the internal validity of a study by providing a standard against which to make comparisons. However, it is crucial that the comparison group chosen is appropriate - controlling for confounding factors for example, age, gender, race and socio-

⁷ 'Household portraits' were used by Dunne to consider approaches to work and family-life of co-habiting lesbians. Household portraits are a participatory method and involved each partner putting colour-coded task responsibility tokens (relating to a variety of household, financial and parenting responsibilities) onto a scale on a large board to see how these tasks differed for each.

economic status – to allow for a fair assessment to be made (Crombie 1996). The two studies above employed heterosexual controls however, some authors have argued against this approach, claiming that such studies position heterosexuality as the norm against which other forms of parenting should be judged and measured (Clarke 2000). In so doing, studies “erroneously imply that a parent’s sexual orientation is the decisive characteristic of her or his parenting” (Stacey and Biblarz 2001: 177) and fail to take account of the effects on children of family diversity (e.g. adoption, divorce, step-parenting, children conceived by donor insemination to name a few), and the family dynamics that result from such new possibilities of “doing family” (Fairtlough 2008; Stacey and Biblarz 2001).

Limitations

2.8 Table 2.2 highlights the sampling methods adopted. Five used volunteer-based convenience samples brought together through advertising and snowballing techniques. Such methods were adopted due to the sensitivity of the research and the invisibility of the LGBT population and thus the difficulties of recruiting ‘hidden’ populations (Clarke et al 2004; Dunne 1998; Stacey and Biblarz 2001). Using such sampling techniques limits the representativeness and therefore generalisability of the study results as it would be unlikely that those who participated would be representative of the larger population of LGBT families. It should be noted that Rivers et al’s (2008) study did select participants through a large school-based survey, thus increasing the likelihood that participants were representative of children of lesbian couples in the United Kingdom (Rivers et al 2008).

2.9 In addition, all of the studies included in this review relied heavily or exclusively on self-reported data. Data collected by self-reporting methods such as self-completion questionnaires or face-to-face interviews are subject to potential inaccuracies such as poor event/experience recall or incorrect reporting of information and misunderstanding/interpretation of questions (Cowan and Plummer 2003). Such inaccuracies can reduce the reliability and validity of the study results (Wight and West 1999).

2.10 Further some of the studies relied on parental accounts of the experiences of their children (Barrett and Tasker 2001; Clarke et al 2004). In these instances there is no way of knowing - without the children participating and corroborating - if these accounts were a ‘true’ reflection of their children’s experiences (Tasker and Golombok 1998).

2.11 With these limitations in mind, this paper now moves onto discuss the review findings.

CHAPTER THREE REVIEW FINDINGS

Introduction

3.1 We have separated the findings from the papers included in this review into firstly, children's experiences within the home and secondly, their experiences outside the home. Within the home the findings are discussed around the following theme: parenting dynamics within lesbian and gay households from the perceptions of parent(s) and children. Outside the home the findings are discussed around the following themes: the school setting and advantages, attitudes and prejudices.

Experiences within the Home

3.2 Four studies included in this review detailed the experiences of children with lesbian or gay parents within the home (Barrett and Tasker 2001; Dunne 1998; Fairtlough 1998; Tasker and Golombok 1998); one of these focused on gay and bisexual parents (Barrett and Tasker 2001).

Parenting Dynamics within Lesbian and Gay Households

Lesbian Parenting – Parent Perceptions

3.3 Two studies examined parenting dynamics within lesbian households (Dunne 1998; Tasker and Golombok 1998). Dunne's (1998) study goes beyond a limited focus on sexual orientation to explore approaches of lesbian couples (with children) to work and domestic life and, Tasker and Golombok (1998) compared the role of co-mothers in lesbian partnerships with the role of fathers in heterosexual families where children had been conceived by donor insemination and naturally.

3.4 From these studies there was some suggestion that childcare may be more equally shared between lesbian couples than between a mother and father in a heterosexual relationship. Indeed, Tasker and Golombok's (1998) findings show that compared to fathers (in heterosexual relationships) co-mothers in lesbian relationships were involved more in childcare, although it should be noted that this difference was less so in heterosexual families where children had been conceived by donor insemination. That said, Tasker and Golombok concluded that father-child and co-mother-child relationships appeared to be warm and affectionate in both lesbian and heterosexual families. They stated:

“...that the quality of the child's relationship with their “second” parent appears to be unrelated to whether that parent is male or female. Children do best in lesbian and

heterosexual families where parents report greater relationship satisfaction and little conflict, and lower levels of parenting stress” (Tasker and Golombok 1998: 51).

3.5 Dunne’s (1998) study shows how co-habiting lesbian parents are “blurring the boundaries of parenthood” and provides some insights into why childcare may be more evenly shared between lesbian couples than heterosexual couples. Lesbian parents who participated in this study said that they both saw themselves as mothers and explained that men were often part of their children’s support networks, although families varied with extent of donor involvement, with some not known to the children, some acting as ‘uncles’ in the children’s lives, and others playing an active parenting role. Generally Dunne found that respondents were committed to creating and maintaining extended family networks of kin and friends to help them with parenting their children.

3.6 In addition, Dunne’s research participants completed time-task diaries which showed that employment and domestic responsibilities were more evenly balanced between co-mothers in lesbian partnerships than mothers and fathers in heterosexual partnerships – “there was no evidence of the mirroring of ‘gender segregated’ patterns of allocation found in heterosexual households” (p.3). Dunne suggests that such egalitarianism allows co-mothers to have more time with their children than is usual for mothers in relationships with men. Dunne says that domestic demands on mothers in heterosexual partnerships can “squeeze out time for single-minded and relaxed time with children” (p.3). Further, among the mainly middle-class lesbian couples with children in Dunne’s study, although co-mothers were more likely to work than their partners they were less likely than comparative highly qualified fathers to be in full-time paid employment:

“Unlike the situation for heterosexual parents, where ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood exist to differentiate responsibilities for children and income generation, both birth-mother and co-parents tended to conceptualise parenthood as the *integration* of mothering and bread-winning” (Dunne 1998: 17).

From this finding Dunne suggests that co-mothers may be more willing than most fathers in heterosexual relationships to compromise paid work/adjust their employment lives around children in order to take on more involvement in daily parenting arguing that:

“...rather than mirroring the dichotomy within heterosexual parenting, these women are actively engaged in a process of extending and re-defining the meaning and contents of mothering” (Dunne 1998: 11).

Gay Parenting – Parent Perceptions

3.7 One study examined the parenting circumstances of over 100 gay and bisexual men and their children (Barrett and Tasker 2001). This study found that for the majority of these

children, decision making was shared equally between the mother and father and often, other adults – usually the father’s male partner or the mother’s male or female partner - regularly helped with child care. Sixty percent of the children were definitely aware of their father’s sexual orientation, with 43% having been told directly by their father. As would be expected, there was a significant association between age and level of awareness ($p < 0.0001$). In these households, fathers perceived their daughters to be more positive and more sympathetic in their response to their sexual orientation compared to their sons however, the authors state, to rule out the chance that this finding is due to daughters, usually being more sympathetic towards their fathers than sons, this finding would have to be compared with the perceptions of fathers in heterosexual relationships and who were also in comparable situations.

Lesbian and Gay Parenting – Children Perceptions

3.8 Fairtlough’s (2008) study explored young people and adult accounts of their experiences of growing up with one or more lesbian or gay parent through data from 67 published accounts drawn from the United Kingdom, the United States and New Zealand. Fairtlough (2008: 526) found that many had experienced homophobic behaviours within their own family, such as attacks on their gay parent from their heterosexual parent or step-parent. Such behaviours included “rejection, unpleasant comments, the use of religion as a weapon, and actual or threatened use of the court welfare system to limit contact or challenge custody.” Fairtlough explained that for these children, homophobia within the home intensified their experience of their parents’ relationship breakdown and conflict.

3.9 Nonetheless, regardless of reports of homophobia Fairtlough found that accounts of experiences of gay or lesbian parenting were predominantly positive. Even where accounts were classed as negative, children made a clear separation between their parents’ behaviour and their sexuality, never condemning the latter. Overall children said that their parents sexuality did not determine their ability to be a good or bad parent rather they said that the problems they experienced came from other people’s negative attitudes - “...The disadvantage is that others don’t accept it” (Fairtlough 2008: 524).

Experiences outside the Home

3.10 Six studies included in this review examined the experiences of children with lesbian and gay parents outside the home (Barrett and Tasker 2001; Clarke et al 2004; Fairtlough 2008; McIntyre 2007; Rivers et al 2008; Saffron 1998). The evidence presented in these studies was mixed. McIntyre and Rivers et al’s work focused on the school setting. The other four studies did not focus on a particular setting but considered advantages to having a

lesbian or gay parent and the attitudes and prejudices of others towards lesbian and gay parenting.

School

3.11 Rivers et al's (2008) school-based survey conducted in the United Kingdom found that students with lesbian parents did not report differently from students with opposite-sex parents (or from the general student sample) in relation to victimisation, measures of psychological functioning, experience of general adolescent worries (e.g. about looks, school work, friends and sex) and the potential use of support from family and peers. Although Rivers et al's findings indicated that children of lesbian parents did experience victimisation from their peers their findings also indicated that children of opposite-sex parents experienced peer victimisation; no differences were apparent in the form of victimisation experienced by both groups of children.

3.12 Where Rivers et al did find a difference was in the use of available school support systems. They found that children of lesbian parents were less likely to draw on school-based support through school teachers, nurses and counsellors for example. According to Rivers et al this finding suggests that school teachers, administrators and psychologist need to develop better understandings and knowledge on the needs and experiences of children of lesbian parents in order to ensure that appropriate support services and resources are available to them and used by them.

3.13 McIntyre (2007) agrees with Rivers et al and goes further by stating that within the school she found that the notion of family is regulated and policed, such that only opposite-sex partnerships or single-sex parents are recognised. In McIntyre's study, although teachers said that family make-up - whether children had same-sex or opposite-sex parents – was immaterial in determining whether a family was good or not, they did tend to voice concern for children of same-sex couples. McIntyre suggests that sympathy and a desire to protect children from an implied harm dominated teacher discourses with discussions of difference and diversity avoided with an "individual liberal humanitarian stance" of "we treat all pupils alike" adopted. In so doing McIntyre's research found that there was "a silence of diverse sexualities in schools" with the believe that sexuality should be kept private which the author concludes has resulted in confusion on how to respond to the needs of LGB pupils:

"The main finding of this study is that teachers lack the language to discuss diverse sexualities. However, more importantly, when challenged to discuss the subject, they are unaware of how their behaviours inadvertently act to silence the subject. In

adopting a liberal approach of equality for all, they have interpreted equality to mean *sameness*. In their determination to describe LGB pupils as ‘the same as’ heterosexual pupils they fail to understand that equality actually means respecting difference. There is no indication in teachers’ discourse that heterosexuality could be just another mode of existence, rather there is a sense that it is the superior norm. There is no appreciation that teachers’ actions on silencing diverse sexualities, has a damaging effect on the development of the LGB pupil. On the contrary many of the teachers in this study perceived their actions as caring and in the best interest of the LGB pupil” (McIntyre 2007: 24-25).

Advantages, Attitudes and Prejudices

Advantages of having a Lesbian or Gay Parent

3.14 Saffron’s (1998) respondents suggested advantages for themselves in having a lesbian mother - morally they felt they had developed a greater awareness of prejudice and a wider acceptance of diversity, especially with regard to sexual orientation. In addition, they felt that they had benefitted from “a broader more inclusive definition of family” and “insights into gender relations” (Saffron 1998: 35).

3.15 Barrett and Tasker’s (2001) survey found that gay parents perceived differences between their children with regard to the benefit(s) they experienced of having a gay or bisexual parent. Their research found that fathers felt their daughters were more tolerant of others compared to sons ($p < 0.10$) whilst their sons benefited more than their daughters in relation to accepting their own sexuality ($p < 0.10$). Overall, the study found that parents generally reported their children experienced few difficulties as a result of their sexual orientation (Barrett and Tasker 2001).

Attitudes and Prejudices of Others

3.16 There is some evidence to suggest that many problems experienced by children of lesbian or gay parents arise because of other people’s negative views about lesbian and gay people (Fairtlough 2008). In Fairtlough’s analysis of 67 accounts of young people aged 13 years and older, although accounts of experiences of growing up with a lesbian or gay parent were predominantly positive, only four said that homophobic views of others had not caused difficulties for them. Nearly half of the young people had heard homophobic comments or experienced homophobic abuse from other children in school or from other parents. Fairtlough highlighted that the abuse could be physical in nature, with some young people describing serious physical abuse or other forms of physical harassment from peers. In other cases, the abuse was verbal, being called a ‘fag’ or a ‘lezzy’ or accused of having AIDS. The negative views and attitudes were experienced across domains from anti-gay and

lesbian sentiments voiced in the media to court welfare officers making judgements based on homophobic stereotypes.

3.17 Barrett and Tasker's (2001: 73) survey found the reported (by the father) extent of difficulties suffered by children relating to the child's knowledge of their parents' sexual orientation was low. However, the research did reveal for those children who did encounter difficulties, problems related to "keeping their family a secret, being teased or bullied by other children or feeling different."

3.18 To understand experiences of bullying (and homophobic attitudes/prejudice more broadly) some of the studies stated that both children and parents' accounts of homophobic bullying reveal the need for negotiation within a "heterosexist socio-political context" (Clarke et al 2004; Fairtlough 2008). Fairtlough (2008) highlights that some young people concealed the abuse they suffered in an attempt to protect their parents from prejudice. Clarke et al (2004) highlight that parents may also conceal bullying that they or their children have suffered. They state, with reference to relevant studies, that homophobic bullying is often used to undermine lesbian and gay families. In this sense, Fairtlough argues that if parents acknowledge that their children are being bullied there is a risk that they will be implicated as unfit to parent by those opposed to same-sex parenting. By contrast, if parents say their children are not at risk to experience bullying because of their sexual orientation they risk not being believed. Clarke et al (2004: 536) suggest that "to manage this dilemma lesbian and gay parents construct their versions of bullying to minimise and normalise homophobic bullying" in order to prevent being undermined and therefore held accountable. Thus, parents may say that bullying is not occurring despite clues to suggest that it is, or attempt to normalise bullying by arguing that "Kids are just cruel anyway."

Review Findings – Conclusions

3.19 The review findings have shown that within the home lesbian and gay parents are "blurring the boundaries of parenting" by creating home environments for their children that involve more extended family networks of kin and friends (Barrett and Tasker 2001; Dunne 1998) and by challenging heterosexual gender divisions in employment and domestic life (Dunne 1998; Tasker and Golombok 2008). Of particular note in the latter is Dunne's finding that employment and domestic responsibilities were more evenly balanced between co-mothers in lesbian partnerships than between a mother and father in comparable heterosexual partnerships. Such egalitarian approaches to employment and domestic lives Dunne argues, allows co-mothers to have more time with their children than mothers do in relationships with men and illustrates co-mothers willingness, more so than fathers in

comparable heterosexual relationships, to adjust their careers around their children in order to be more involved in parenting.

3.20 Outside the home, the review papers highlighted perceived advantages, from both children and parents, of lesbian and gay parenting. Saffron's (1998) participants said advantages they attributed to having a lesbian mother were greater awareness of prejudice(s) and understandings of diversity. The gay fathers in Barrett and Tasker's (2001) study reported benefits related to for example, their daughters greater tolerance of others.

3.21 When examining bullying (and homophobic attitudes/prejudices more broadly) the perceptions of parents tended to be that their children's experiences were "no different" from those of children of same-sex couples (Barrett and Tasker 2001; Clarke et al 2004). However in this context Clarke et al argue that even when parents are aware of bullying they tended to minimise and normalise bullying accounts to prevent being undermined and held accountable.

3.22 Some of the authors (e.g. Clarke et al 2004; Fairtlough 2008; Rivers et al 2004; Saffron 1998; Stacey and Biblarz 2001) provide an explanation of why parents may report "no difference" or minimise bullying accounts. They explain that much of the research focusing on children of lesbian and gay parents has "sought to understand the role these parents play in influencing gender-typical and gender atypical traits in their children, sexual orientation and behaviour, social functioning and psychological adjustment" (Rivers et al 2004: 128). Asking questions such as: "do the children develop normally?" "Are they confused about their gender identity?" "Will they be lesbian or gay?" (Saffron 1998: 36). Although the authors highlighted that such research has not evidenced differences in child development between children of lesbian and heterosexual parents (Saffron 1998), heterosexual parenting has been taken as the norm – e.g. healthy child development is dependent upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple - against which other forms of parenting, such as lesbian/gay parenting, should be judged and measured (Stacey and Biblarz 2001) and seen as undesirable (Fairtlough 2008). The authors suggest in the face of such discrimination parents are compelled to report defensively that there is "no difference" between for example their children's experiences of bullying and victimisation compared to children of same-sex couples.

3.23 When the perceptions of children to growing up with a lesbian or gay parent were considered their accounts were, in the main, positive. The findings from the papers reviewed showed that children did not see their parents sexuality as determining whether they were a good or bad parent and the victimisation/bullying they experienced were from other people's

(e.g. family members, peers and institutional organisations (e.g. in schools)) negative attitudes and prejudices toward lesbian and gay families (Fairtlough 2008).

3.24 In terms of research, the focus should not just be on sexual orientation and gender identity alone and the implications of these for children's development and experiences - pitching lesbian and gay parenting/families against the 'norm' of heterosexual parenting/families. Some of the authors suggested that comparative studies should more fruitfully consider family dynamics more widely in relation to family formations through divorce, adoption or step-parenting for example and also among two parents of the same or different gender who do or do not share similar attitudes, values and behaviours. Such sentiment is summed up by Stacey and Biblarz:

“...we believe that knowledge and policy will best be served when scholars feel free to replace a hierarchical model, which assigns “grades” to parents and children according to their sexual identities, with a more genuinely pluralist approach to family diversity...[for example] Exploration of the interactions of gender, sexual orientation, and biosocial family structures on parenting and child development” (Stacey and Biblarz 2001: 164).

3.25 Finally, a word of caution. It should be borne in mind that this paper is based on a review of only eight papers and does not claim to have captured all existing relevant research. As the papers focus on different themes and/or settings the conclusions drawn tend to be based only on one or two of the papers. Therefore, the findings of this review should be read tentatively keeping in mind the limitations that we highlighted at 2.11-2.13.

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