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Children of Gay Parents

Abbie Marie Hill has three moms and that fact, to the Madison teenager, is at once crazy and completely unremarkable.

Hill was born to a lesbian couple who later separated. Today she has a third parent, a stepmother, in her life. The 17-year-old high school junior takes a viola to youth symphony sessions and carries straight As home from Madison East.

"It's crazy and confusing but it works," Hill said of her family, which makes sense to her but isn't what some strangers expect. "In some ways it doesn't even seem like that's different."

A new wave of research confirms earlier findings that the children of gay and lesbian parents are at least as healthy and well-adjusted as comparable children of straight parents and that the differences found between these two groups of children have been modest, researchers say.

The studies, they say, undermine the argument that denying marriage and other rights to same-sex couples helps children.

Opponents of same-sex marriage counter that it's too early to be certain the research is valid and that the government has an obligation to give straight families preference over others.

Jenny Baierl, of Evansville, who supports a proposed constitutional ban on same-sex marriages and civil unions, said she does so in part out of concern for her two young boys.

Baierl, one of thousands of volunteers working to promote or oppose the proposal, has spoken at legislative hearings and squared off in a televised debate over the measure with openly gay Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Madison.

"I want to make sure my kids are raised in a society that values marriage," she said.

But for Mike Tate, head of anti-amendment group Fair Wisconsin, the proposed ban is a threat to children, because of the possibility it could go beyond the question of marriage and cost families health insurance or other benefits. "Why would we want to do something that hurts children and hurts families?"

What research says Medical establishment groups that have come out in favor of gay marriage or against bans like Wisconsin's proposed constitutional amendment include the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association and, in July, the American Academy of Pediatrics. In Wisconsin, the national pediatrics academy's state chapter and the Wisconsin Medical Society also oppose the proposed ban because of its possible effects on patients.

That doesn't convince Bill Maier, vice president and psychologist in residence at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Maier said professional groups sometimes reflect decisions by committees, not all members. Existing studies are still hampered by questions about how strong and representative their samples of human subjects are, he said.

"The evidence confirms nothing about the quality of gay parents," he said. "It's still very early to be making any conclusive statements."

The children of gay men and lesbians are more likely to behave in ways that are outside the norm for their gender and may exhibit other differences as well, Maier said, citing in part a 2001 study that he called the "most comprehensive report" on the subject. But one of that study's co-authors, New York University sociology professor Judith Stacey, said anti-gay marriage groups have misrepresented her research in a "dishonest" way.

Stacey's article - a review of 21 studies going back some 20 years - examined in part whether having two parents of the same sex influenced the development of a child's sexual orientation and behavior related to his or her gender.

Five years later, Stacey said new research, including a study that used a random, nationwide sample, shows the situation has turned out to be more complicated than she had believed.

"I have been surprised that the differences so far seem to be smaller than I would have guessed," Stacey said.

Stacey, who has always supported gay marriage, is co-authoring an update to the first article that looks at some 80 studies of gay and lesbian parents, single mothers and fathers and their children from several countries.

In the first article, Stacey's study examined potential limitations in the studies' samples of human subjects and methods. Today, there are still holes in what we know, she said, noting that many studies of same-sex parents have focused on well-to-do whites and have neglected minorities and the poor.

But she said a new wave of research is "much solidier now," addressing more of those issues as well as children such as Hill, who were born into families of same-sex parents rather than to opposite-sex parents who later split up and took same-sex partners.

"The kids are fine. There's no evidence whatsoever that children of gay and lesbian parents have noticeably different outcomes on mental health," Stacey said of the findings. "They turn out at least as well."

These children may turn out somewhat better, she added. "It's not because of the sexuality but because of selection factors. It's because these are wanted children," Stacey said, noting that same-sex couples have to deliberately set out to conceive or adopt children. "When you're looking at heterosexual parenting, you have a lot of accidental" pregnancies.

Stacey's findings square with research that has shown that the social groups of parents - rich and poor, white and black - matter much less than the quality of the parents and the love and discipline they show their children, said David Riley, a human ecology professor at UW-Madison.

But Riley also noted that this research on its own can't answer the question of how people should vote on the amendment. "Most people on both sides of the debate base their arguments on civil rights and religious teachings. Behavioral science can't tell you which of those is preferable."

A busy life Abbie Marie Hill enjoys the youth group at her Unitarian congregation, plays in the Wisconsin Youth Symphony Orchestra and muses thoughtfully about the high school where she earns high marks.

Some evenings, she goes to talks on mathematics at UW-Madison - just because she wants to - and she dreams of a career in engineering or some other math-heavy discipline.

She spends five days a week at the condominium of her biological mother, Abbie Hill, who conceived Abbie Marie through artificial insemination, and two days a week at the East Side home of Hill's former partner.

Abbie Marie said that, growing up in Madison, she's never felt like she's different. In spite of that, she said she sometimes has difficulty explaining her family to strangers.

"I have the lesbian parents, and the split household," she said, joking that some people might scratch their heads when they hear her give contradictory details about her "mom."

"They probably think my mom has multiple personalities."

Most of the time she feels like any other student. "Occasionally, I'll just think of things that people in a traditional family have and realize, 'Oh I really will never have that. Hmmm.' Usually it's just like a hmmm thing. It's not a bad thing or 'Oh I'm missing out on something,'" Abbie Marie said.

Abbie Marie's step-mother Mary Waitrovich said the teen-ager has thrived.

"Here Abbie is - she's near the top of her class," Waitrovich said.

"She's a great kid. She's a shining example of how a child who's raised by lesbians can turn out great."

Abbie Hill said she cried once when she heard a speaker at an event argue that she and other lesbians were second-rate parents.

"As a mother for me to hear that it just broke me out. It made me feel like wait a minute," she said. "I've been such a good mother. It's probably the most important thing I've ever done."

Hill's former partner, Madison firefighter Karen Hoffman, called their daughter "a gift I never thought I'd have."

But Hoffman has never been able to adopt or gain legal recognition as a parent that would guarantee custody rights to her daughter or just the right to authorize hospital treatment.

"You don't have any rights at all," Hoffman said.

Father role cited Focus on the Family's Maier acknowledged the love and effort many lesbian parents give their children but pointed to studies that he said showed children need a father.

"The two most loving lesbians in the world cannot provide a father to a little boy," Maier said. "It's not just two parents. It's having the contributions of a married mother and father."

Jenny Baierl, the Evansville mother and pro-amendment activist, said she knows from experience the challenges of having two women as parents.

Baierl was raised by her mother and grandmother after her father was killed by a drunken driver when she was 5.

Though the two women loved her, Baierl had no uncles or grandfather to fill the void her father had left, she said. That searing experience, the teachings of her Christian faith, and her marriage to her husband John, leave Baierl with a powerful certainty about the value of traditional marriage.

"I had no male role models," said Baierl, 33, who now lives in an all- male household with her husband and two young sons in Evansville. "I feel like I was really cheated."

Differences modest Stacey said the situation of a child who tragically loses a parent isn't comparable to a child who has had two same-sex parents from birth. Plus, children often have access to relatives and other adult role models of both sexes, she said.

But Stacey said her studies and training in sociology suggest that having same-sex parents can lead to modest differences in the areas of a child's gender behavior and sexual orientation.

For instance, the boys of lesbian moms in one study scored just as high on masculinity scales as boys of opposite-sex parents but also higher on femininity scales, showing a willingness to talk about feelings as well as play sports, Stacey said.

As for sexual orientation, Stacey has predicted that the children of gay and lesbian parents are likely to be more comfortable identifying with that orientation themselves, but said that so far the research hasn't proven conclusive on that.

Abbie Marie Hill, for her part, isn't dating anyone and calls herself "straight but not narrow."

Her upbringing in liberal Madison with lesbian parents leaves her less worried about her sexual orientation or who she will love, she said.

"I don't feel this need for labels or I have to be one way or the other and I have to box myself in just to fit in," Abbie Marie said. "Whatever happens, it's cool. Why spend all this time, anguished time, like searching for, you know? Why not just be?"