

What Does the Research on Same-Sex Parenting Tell Us?

Book Review: Same-Sex Parenting Research – A Critical Assessment
Walter R Schumm, Wilberforce Publications, 2018, 306pp, £14.00

It is frequently presented as a settled fact that children raised by same-sex parents are just as healthy and well-adjusted as those raised by their biological mother and father, and any challenges to the claimed 'consensus' are considered an expression of hatred and bigotry. Conscious of the extent to which scholarship on LGBT parenting has been heavily politicised, this thorough overview of the research evidence has been written to enable readers to determine the facts for themselves and to weigh how honestly the data has been handled by academics and others.

Walter Schumm is Professor of Applied Family Science in the School of Family Studies and Human Services at Kansas State University and editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Marriage and Family Review*. In his assessment of same-sex parenting, Professor Schumm has set out to be scrupulously honest and faces up to the complexities of the research.

His primary motivation is that he cares about how science is done and how it is used in the public square. He is concerned that people should think more carefully about scientific research in areas of political controversy and be less eager to jump to conclusions that are not warranted by a careful, detailed, systematic review of the research literature. He writes:

Research on same-sex parenting has often been cited because it came to the politically correct conclusions, not because it was of the highest quality... In one sense, this book is an attempt to redress that imbalance. In another sense, it is a call for scientists to be more careful in the future and not deceive courts about scientific evidence...

He expresses the hope that his contribution to the debate will persuade the courts and the lay public that 'science is far from perfect and is capable of making mistakes that are not discovered for decades, especially when there are financial or political pressures pushing the process more than scientific curiosity by itself'.

Focus on evidence

At the outset Professor Schumm emphasises that his focus is more on assessing 'difference' rather than 'harm', since difference can be tested scientifically, whereas some harms are a matter of probability and only become evident over the longer term. He also stresses that the purpose of the book is not to address legal or political questions; his focus is solely on the research evidence. He is therefore at pains to resist the common temptation in a politicised and media-driven academic environment to inflate results to gain scholarly or media attention.

After an introductory section in which he discusses social science theory and methodological questions, Professor Schumm proceeds to address what we know about same-sex parents: How many are there? How stable are their families? Is sexual abuse more common among them? What about their values and behaviours?

He then considers what is known about the children of same-sex parents in terms of sexual orientation, gender identity, gender roles and mental health. In each section, he considers in turn what has been claimed and what is known, before providing a literature review, and identifying the limitations of the data currently available and areas where further research is required. Only then does he attempt to offer any conclusions.

Comprehensive and careful

In drawing his conclusions, Professor Schumm honestly acknowledges where the research is sparse or inconclusive and is careful not to make assertions beyond what is warranted by the data.

Nevertheless, his comprehensive overview of research findings demonstrates that ‘there are both significant and substantial differences in a variety of areas with respect to both same-sex parenting in general and with respect to the outcomes for children’. He is persuaded that the data ‘overturns the so-called research consensus in this area of science and contradicts the views of hundreds, maybe even thousands, of professional social scientists as well as probably dozens of scholarly professional organisations’.

He is concerned that ‘substantial amounts of “fact” have been ignored or suppressed in the process of moving forward the civil rights agenda of LGBT persons’ and insists that in a politically-charged area of social science, ‘Scholars must resist any temptation to accept simplistic solutions, especially if those solutions contradict well-established, common sense social science theory.’

Norman Wells

Norman Wells is a graduate of the London Seminary and has served as director of the Family Education Trust since 2004. He is also a director of the Coalition for Marriage.

(This article was originally published in the Affinity Social Issues Bulletin for February 2019. The whole edition can be found at www.affinity.org.uk)

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‘[S]ame-sex parents may have lower rates of stability, especially lesbian mothers. [They] may be less likely to emphasise traditional gender roles, traditional views of gender as a binary factor, and traditional views of sexual expression (e.g. restricting sex to legal marriage). They may value self-control less in their children than heterosexual parents. The children of same-sex parents may be more likely to question their sexual orientation or sexuality while growing up and more likely to try same-sex sexuality, even if not sexually attracted to same-sex persons. The children are less likely to adopt traditional gender roles and perhaps be more likely to reject traditional definitions of gender. In the USA, the children of same-sex parents appear more likely to engage in substance abuse, at least occasionally. The children’s mental health from their mothers’ perspectives appears fine, but as rated in terms of drug abuse or by other observers seems more questionable...’

‘[T]he primary “take-away” is that, despite many declarations to the contrary for decades by many scholars, children do learn from their parents – not just reading or mathematics, but personal values as they relate to sexuality, sexual expression, gender roles, the meaning of gender itself, and possibly even the importance of self-control or emotional self-regulation. Same-sex parents appear to hold more progressive values with respect to such issues and those values would seem to have been adopted in many cases by at least some of their children... This is pretty much common sense, in agreement with most social science theories, except that it has been denied for decades in the interests of promoting or protecting the civil rights of LGBT persons. While the rights of LGBT persons may have been advanced, it is not clear that the integrity of social science in general has been protected nearly as much.’

(Same-Sex Parenting Research: A Critical Assessment, pp. 213, 215)