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## Elementary School-age Children's Attitudes Toward Children in Same-Sex Parent Families

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### ABSTRACT

As numbers of families with same-sex parents increase in the United States, children are more likely to encounter diverse family structures. Given that young children can demonstrate in-group bias, prejudicial attitudes, and social exclusion, it is important to understand how children perceive their peers in diverse families. To our knowledge, no studies have assessed elementary-school-age children's attitudes about same-sex parent families. Here, 131 elementary school students ( $M_{\text{age}} = 7.79$  years; 61 girls) viewed images of same-sex (female and male) and other-sex couples with a child and then were asked about their perceptions of these families, particularly the children. Results indicated participants' preferences toward children with other-sex versus same-sex parents. Developmental and practical implications about children's attitudes toward sexual minority parent families are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Children's attitudes; bias, family diversity; lesbian and gay; same-sex parent families

American families have become increasingly diverse over recent decades, including growing numbers of families with sexual minority (i.e., individuals whose identity or orientation differs from the majority; not heterosexual) parents (Gates, 2015). As such, children are increasingly likely to either belong to or encounter sexual-minority-parent families. Between 2.0 to 3.7 million children under age 18 in the United States have lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) parents (LGBT; Gates, 2014). Moreover, increasing numbers of same-sex parents have adopted children (disproportionately more so than heterosexual parents; Gates, 2015). Despite increasing visibility, expanding legal rights, and increasingly favorable attitudes toward LGBT people (Gates, 2015), societal stigma and discrimination are still prevalent in the United States (Herek, 2016; McLaughlin, 2016). Among adolescents and adults, negative attitudes and stereotypes about LG people largely center on feelings of fear, disgust, and defying norms (Heinze & Horn, 2014; Herek, 2016; Zeichner & Reidy, 2009). Please note that in our literature review, we

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use the terms *LGBT*, *LG*, *sexual minority*, and *same-sex* to accurately represent the samples and focus of previous studies.

Given that young children can demonstrate in-group bias, prejudicial attitudes, and social exclusion toward numerous marginalized groups (e.g., based on race, income, disability, nationality, etc.; Abrams & Killen, 2014; Bigler & Liben, 2006; Brown, 2011; Kang & Inzlicht, 2012), it is reasonable to expect that children might also hold prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minority groups, as well. Yet, despite the attention given to sexual-minority-parent families in public and political spheres, no known research has yet examined whether children hold biases toward children from these families. This is critically important, given that these biases could potentially target the millions of children who belong to sexual minority parent families, and understanding how and what biases children demonstrate toward members of certain groups can inform early intervention efforts to reduce discrimination. That is the focus of this article.

### **Developmental intergroup theory**

There are theoretical and empirical reasons to expect children to hold prejudicial attitudes toward sexual-minority-parent families. One theoretical approach for understanding how children develop prejudicial attitudes is developmental intergroup theory (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007). According to DIT, children are active agents in the creation of prejudices and are especially likely to develop prejudice toward groups that are perceptually salient and/or proportionally distinct (Bigler & Liben, 2007). For example, by middle childhood, children have formed strong prejudicial attitudes toward perceptually salient gender and ethnic groups (e.g., Raabe & Beelman, 2011). Likewise, by middle childhood, children may also hold prejudicial attitudes toward sexual-minority-parent families because (a) the gender composition of the parents is perceptually salient and (b) sexual-minority-parent families are less common than heterosexual parent families. Children of same-sex parents, however, belong to a less perceptually discriminable social group than their parents, or those based on salient features like race or gender. Specifically, children of same-sex parents belong to a social group that may not always be obvious to others. DIT predicts that prejudice toward groups that are less perceptually discriminable can form based on contextual factors that bring attention to categorization, such as the cultural environment or adults' unintentionally modeling behavior. For example, media attention surrounding issues like same-sex marriage or adoption might implicitly influence children's attitudes, as well as observing adults acting differently around same-sex versus other-sex couples.

### **Heteronormativity and homonegative microaggressions**

Heteronormativity, which involves the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and therefore superior to other sexual orientations, is a common cultural ideal worldwide (Pennington & Knight, 2011). Heteronormativity can lead to negative

feelings and fear toward sexual minorities, commonly referred to as homophobia or sexual prejudice (Herek, 2016). Children and adolescents with sexual-minority parents experience homonegative microaggressions, teasing, and bullying from peers (Bos & Gartrell, 2010; Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016; Farr, Oakley, & Ollen, 2016; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Microaggressions represent discrimination that may be unintentional, sometimes occurring as comments or questions reflecting ignorance of difference from majority groups (Sue et al., 2007). Given that microaggressions from peers may be common experiences for children with LGBT parents (Farr et al., 2016; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), it is likely that many children hold biases, even if not expressed overtly, toward same-sex parent families.

Nadal and Griffin (2012) argued that observing homonegative microaggressions occurring in communities, families, or media may perpetuate tolerance or acceptance of discrimination toward sexual minority individuals and their families. Indeed, children are exposed to heteronormative and homophobic commentary in elementary school classrooms (Renold, 2002). By early adolescence, children (particularly boys) regularly use homophobic epithets to tease or bully one another, reflecting a norm of insult equated with being LG (Poteat & Rivers, 2010). Recent research has also revealed that adult children from LGBTQ parent families do report experiencing a variety of microaggressions based on their family structure (Haines, Boyer, Giovanazzi, & Galupo, 2017). These studies underscore the importance of understanding how younger children perceive children from same-sex-parent families, which is the goal of this study and a potential step in effectively addressing and minimizing homophobic microaggressions and bullying.

### **Attitudes toward sexual minority individuals**

Some studies have addressed adults' negative attitudes about LG parents, including LG adoptive parents (Gato & Fontaine, 2016; Kirby & Michaelson, 2015; McCrary, 2014; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2015; Rye & Meaney, 2010). Main concerns cited about same-sex parenting include (a) children will miss out on gender role modeling that occurs in heterosexual parent families and (b) children might experience negativity or bullying (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Pennington & Knight, 2011). Studies indicate that male versus female children of LG couples are perceived as "at risk" for non-normative development, and male versus female children of gay fathers are less "normal" (Gato & Fontaine, 2013, p. 250 2016; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2015, p. 156). These sentiments appear unfounded; children adopted or born to sexual-minority parents demonstrate typical social, emotional, and cognitive development (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Farr, 2017).

Studies of heterosexual adolescents' attitudes toward LGBT individuals reveal various influential contexts and demographic factors (e.g., Horn, Szalacha, & Drill, 2008). Among two large middle- and high-school samples ( $n = 20,509$  and  $n = 16,917$ , respectively), students who were male, younger, or enrolled in racially homogeneous schools were less willing to remain friends or attend school with LG

peers than students who were female, older, or enrolled in racially heterogeneous schools (Poteat, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009). Other studies indicate similar patterns, with particularly negative attitudes toward gay versus lesbian individuals (e.g., Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Heinze & Horn, 2009, 2014; Horn & Szalacha, 2009). Adolescents outside the United States also demonstrate negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals (Chang, You, & Lu, 2014; Collier, Horn, Bos, & Sandfort, 2015; Vecho, Poteat, & Schneider, 2016). Only one study, to our knowledge, has directly examined preadolescent children's attitudes ( $N = 229$ ,  $M_{age} = 11$  years, range: 10–13 years) toward LG individuals (Bos, Picavet, & Sandfort, 2012). The data were collected in the Netherlands via self-report questionnaires regarding children's endorsement of negative attitudes toward LG individuals. The data revealed variations in attitudes based on ethnicity and gender, paralleling findings with older children. Female children and those with Western ethnic backgrounds held more positive attitudes than did male and non-Western children (i.e., predominantly with parents from Turkey, Morocco, or Surinam; Bos et al., 2012).

Given that young children demonstrate stereotypic knowledge of gender and numerical minority groups (based on race or nationality; Raabe & Beelman, 2011), further examination is warranted about how young children perceive not only sexual-minority parents, but their children. Relatedly, no studies to date have assessed whether young children have accurate, not just stereotypic, knowledge about what terms like *gay* and *lesbian* mean, and whether such knowledge is associated with attitudes toward sexual-minority individuals and their families. Other researchers have found that children are capable of demonstrating prejudicial attitudes and outgroup bias toward other marginalized social groups (e.g., Arab Muslims) before understanding what it means to be part of these social groups (Brown, Ali, Stone, & Jewell, 2017), so it remains a question as to how children understand and perceive families with same-sex parents.

As positive attitudes toward LGBT people have become more common among adults over time (Gates, 2015), children could also feel positively about same-sex-parent families. Intergroup contact may play an important role in impacting children's attitudes regarding family diversity. From research with older children (i.e., young adolescents), evidence shows that contact with LG individuals outside of school is associated with more positive attitudes toward LG people (Collier, Bos, & Sandfort, 2012). Similarly, Heinze and Horn (2009) found that among 1,069 adolescents aged 14 to 18 years, having a LG friend was significantly associated with more positive attitudes toward LG individuals, as well as lower tolerance for unfair treatment of their LG peers. Alternatively, negative attitudes among children are possible, as ubiquitous societal stigma toward sexual minorities (Herek, 2016) likely becomes socialized and internalized among children at a young age, consistent with DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007). Moreover, younger adolescents have indicated less comfort interacting with LG peers than older adolescents (Heinze & Horn, 2009), so it is possible that children might express negative sentiments regarding families with LG parents.

## This study

Informed by DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), this study examined children's perceptions of children with same-sex parents. Children were presented vignettes of families varying in couple composition (i.e., female and male same-sex couples, other-sex couples) and their adopted children. Adoptive families were portrayed for uniformity in the pathway to parenthood, and because same-sex parent adoption is increasingly prevalent (Gates, 2015). It is common to use vignettes in studies examining children's stereotypes (Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017; Stone, Brown, & Jewell, 2015), given young children's potentially limited abilities to explicitly describe attitudes toward particular social groups (McKown & Weinstein, 2003; Raabe & Beelman, 2011) and children's tendency to attend to external or peripheral cues in distinguishing social group membership (DIT; Bigler & Liben, 2007).

We expected that children would show prejudicial attitudes toward children with same-sex (LG) parents. This prediction is consistent with (a) DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), which asserts that children attend to perceptually salient groups, and the gender composition of the families would be salient to children and (b) adolescent and adult research demonstrating bias against LG individuals and their families (Collier et al., 2015; Cooley, Payne, Loersch, & Lei, 2014; Heinze & Horn, 2014; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2015; Poteat et al., 2009). We had four specific hypotheses aligned with this general prediction (three focus on the children within the families and one focuses on the family as a whole). We hypothesized that participants would express:

1. greater negative affect (i.e., fear, disgust) toward children with same-sex parents than children with other-sex parents,
2. less positive affect (i.e., warmth, perceptions of normalcy) toward children with same-sex parents than children with other-sex parents,
3. desire for less proximity (i.e., likelihood of friendship or attending school together) toward children with same-sex parents than children with other-sex parents, and
4. less positive affect (i.e., liking) toward same-sex parent families than other-sex parent families (Bos et al., 2012; Cameron, Alvarez, Ruble, & Fuligni, 2001; Gato & Fontaine, 2013, 2016; Herek, 2016; Poteat et al., 2009).

We chose to treat positive and negative affect as distinct subscales to examine attitudes from a bivariate framework versus a bipolar framework (i.e., two distinct variables vs. two ends of the same continuum, respectively), as has been common practice in other research (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1997). Specifically, this approach suggests that the positive and negative processes that underlie attitudes are stochastically independent and have distinct functions that can contribute differently to an overall attitude.

For exploratory purposes, based on previous research (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Bos et al., 2012; Gato & Fontaine, 2013, 2016; McCrary, 2014), we investigated whether participant gender, participant age, participant race, pictured family type

(i.e., female or male same-sex parents; other-sex parents), or pictured child gender would moderate our hypotheses. We also explored moderation by children's knowledge of *gay* or *lesbian* and personally knowing same-sex parent families, because previous research that suggests accurate definitions of social identities or intergroup contact influence children's attitudes toward these groups (Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017). Finally, given that the vignettes portrayed all adoptive families, we explored moderation by whether children personally knew other adopted children.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 131 students (61 girls, 67 boys) from three elementary-school afterschool programs (YMCA-sponsored; program directors approved the study) in a medium-sized Midwest/Southern US city (population approximately 300,000). Afterschool programs took place at children's elementary schools; participants demographically resembled the larger school populations. Participants were about 8 years old on average, ranging from 5 to 11 years, with ages evenly distributed ( $n_{5-6} = 35$ ,  $n_{7-8} = 48$ ,  $n_{9-11} = 45$ ). Self-identified ethnicities were representative of the city population. See Table 1 for further details regarding participants' demographic information. A-priori power analyses revealed that we would need 138 participants to detect a small effect ( $f = .10$ ) with adequate power ( $1-\beta = .80$ ), and we would need 24 participants to detect a medium effect ( $f = .25$ ) with adequate power ( $1-\beta = .80$ ). Our analyses ( $N = 131$ ) were sufficiently powered.

As children were the participants (and not their parents), further demographic information about children's parents or families were not available. Regardless, population characteristics of the county in which the afterschool programs were located are similar to national averages in terms of race, ethnicity, and median household income (US Census Bureau, 2017a, 2017b); in contrast, educational attainment (e.g., Bachelor's degree or higher) is somewhat higher than the national average, and residents lean toward voting Democratic amidst strong Republican

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants.

	Sample ( $N = 131$ )
Age (years)	$M(SD)$ or $n(\%)$ 7.79 (1.73)
Race/ethnicity	
White	101 (79%)
Hispanic/Latinx <sup>1</sup>	9 (7%)
Black	8 (6%)
Asian	3 (2%)
Other	7 (6%)

Note. Demographic data were missing from three participants.

<sup>1</sup>The term Latinx (pronounced "La-TEEN-ex") is an alternative to the traditional terms Latino/a and Latin@. Latinx broadly describes people of Latin American descent with inclusive and gender-neutral language (Padilla, 2016).

support in the county (Kent, Frohlich, Stebbins, Comen, & Sauter, 2016). According to 2010 Census data, 52.2% of people in the county identify with a particular religion, which is further broken down as: 28.4% Evangelical Protestant, 10.5% Mainline Protestant, 8.8% Catholic, 2.5% Black Protestant, 1.8% other, and .3% Orthodox Christian (Grammich et al., 2012). This religious breakdown is similar to national averages, with Protestant bodies accounting for the most congregations and adherents in the United States (Grammich et al., 2012). Also, according to 2010 Census data, the population of same-sex couple households in the county consists of 899 couples, ranking highest in the state, and 110th nationwide; only 9% of these couples (approximately 81), however, report raising children (Gates & Cooke, 2011).

## **Materials**

### **Vignettes**

Research assistants worked with children individually. First, children were read the instructions aloud by a research assistant (i.e., “We are interested in how elementary school kids feel about other kids from different families. If it is okay with you, I am going to read you a few stories and then ask you questions about them. In these stories, the kids are adopted. That means that you are born into one family, and another family raises you.”). Next, participants viewed six family vignettes featuring a female same-sex, male same-sex, or other-sex couple with a son or daughter (e.g., see Appendix). The order of the vignettes was randomized by the survey software (Qualtrics). Vignettes portrayed a child next to a couple (with body language indicative of romantic attachment, i.e., holding hands, arms around each other). Race was held constant; vignettes portrayed White individuals.

Research assistants rated photographs (purchased from iStock) to ensure similar happiness and attractiveness levels. We chose stock images of people who appeared happy (as opposed to displaying neutral or other emotions) because we wanted the survey to be a generally positive experience for the children participating. We also felt that this approach would generally align with how children might be exposed to different types of families or cultures in a school setting. Because positive, non-neutral photos were selected purposefully for this study, we felt it was important to rate them on dimensions of happiness and attractiveness, as is common in other studies using vignettes and other evaluations of photos (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Payne, 2001; Payne, Cheng, Govorun, & Stewart, 2005). Photos rated outside of one *SD* of the mean were excluded ( $n = 3$ ; 94% agreement across 80 ratings).

Vignettes included fictional descriptions with family members’ first and last names, the child’s age (7–8 years), and one gender-neutral weekend family activity (going to the movies). For example: “This is the Robson family. The dad on the left is named George, and the dad on the right is named Marcus. They have a son named Leon. Leon was adopted when he was a baby. Now he is 7 years old, and his family likes to go hiking on the weekends.” All descriptions specified that the



three pictured individuals comprised a family, that the adults pictured were labeled as *mom* or *dad*, and that pictured children were adopted in infancy.

### **Attitudes**

After viewing each individual vignette and being read the family description, participants responded to eight questions on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little bit*, 3 = *a medium amount*, 4 = *very*). Seven questions regarded pictured children: two assessed *positive affect* (“How normal is this child?”, “How warm/favorable do you feel toward this child?”;  $\alpha = .84$ ), two assessed *negative affect* (“How scary is this child?”, “How gross is this child?”;  $\alpha = .89$ ), and three comprised *proximity* (“How much do you want to be friends with this child?”, “How much do you want to play with this child?”, “How much do you want this child to go to your school?”;  $\alpha = .95$ ). One question referred to the whole family, *family liking* (“How much do you like this family?”;  $n = 103$  for this item, added after data collection began).

As this study was one of the first to examine young children’s attitudes regarding families with same-sex parents, we adapted questions from previous studies examining similar issues among children and adolescents in ways we felt were developmentally appropriate for our sample. We approached the concept of prejudice from a sociofunctional framework (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005), which suggests that people experience a variety of discrete emotions when encountering people from different groups, as opposed to an overall evaluative valence.

Questions were modified from similar studies of children’s attitudes toward minority groups (e.g., Bos et al., 2012; Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017), referencing common cultural stereotypes about sexual minorities and their families (e.g., fear, disgust, normalcy; Heinze & Horn, 2014; Herek, 2016; Tapias, Glaser, Keltner, Vasquez, & Wickens, 2007) and prejudicial attitudes toward LG individuals (e.g., desiring less proximity; Poteat et al., 2009). For example, in a study examining stereotypes about Arab Muslims, children 6–11 years old viewed pictures of Arab Muslim individuals and were asked, “How scared are you of this person?” (Brown et al., 2017). Similarly, Bos et al. (2012) explored the role of disgust in negative attitudes toward LG individuals, and asked children (10–13 years old) how much they agreed with statements such as, “It is disgusting when two boys/men kiss each other” and “Boys/men who are in love with other boys/men are sick.” Other research suggests that some adolescents believe LG individuals are abnormal. Heinze and Horn (2009, 2014) examined adolescents’ attitudes toward the acceptability or wrongness of homosexuality, and found that the belief that LG individuals deviate from the natural order and norms of the society was used as a justification for homophobia. Other justifications included: individual rights (i.e., people have the right to be whoever they want), religious convention (i.e., goes against scripture), biological (i.e., people are born LG), and negative stereotypes (i.e., LG people caused AIDS to exist). Considering our sample was younger, and

likely unable to fully understand most of these justifications, we felt that the natural order/norms category would be developmentally appropriate to assess.

### **Demographics**

Participants were asked if they knew children with two mothers or two fathers married to each other and if they knew what the terms *gay* or *lesbian* mean (*yes/no*). Drawing from Farr, Crain, Oakley, and Cashen (2015) work, children with same-sex parents who can define what it means to be LG very commonly insert *marriage language* as a way to describe same-sex couples and parents, despite the actual marital status of the couple in question. We chose to use marriage language to make it clear we were asking about a romantic relationship between two women or two men. No other studies have looked at this question in this way, so we chose to use marriage language because we believed it would be an accessible script for children in understanding the concept of a romantic partnership. Our Institutional Review Board suggested the wording of this question because they believed that simply asking children if they knew anyone with two moms or two dads could be interpreted as knowing children who have stepparents, which is very common. If children indicated *yes* to the question of what the terms *gay* or *lesbian* meant, they were then asked to explain their definition; research assistants transcribed responses. Children who responded *no* or *I don't know* were not asked this follow-up question.

An accurate definition included referencing two same-gender people liking, dating, or marrying each other (e.g., “If you are a boy and are married to a boy,” or “Boy and boy date and girl and girl date”). Definitions considered inaccurate included descriptions that were factually incorrect, including those that referenced homophobia (e.g., “It means stupid”). Other examples of responses coded as *inaccurate* were “Gay means to act like a girl, or a girl acting like a boy” or, simply, “I don't know.” These definitions, coded as *accurate* or *inaccurate*, were rated by two of the authors with 100% agreement. Children were also asked if they knew other children who were adopted (*yes/no*). Demographic questions asked included children's age, gender, and racial identities. Additional demographic information was not collected, a limitation that is further addressed in the discussion section.

### **Procedure**

After approval from University of Kentucky Institutional Review Board, data were collected at three elementary afterschool programs. Parents provided written consent; all were given thorough information about the study and opportunities to ask questions. The three afterschool programs contained approximately 190 children and we received affirmative parental consent for 146 children (77%). Of those for whom we had consent, 131 children participated in the study (69% of overall population).

Once children provided oral assent to participate, research assistants worked with children individually to complete the study via Qualtrics on iPads. Each family vignette appeared on individual survey pages, followed by two questions per screen (Appendix). The order of the vignettes was randomized within Qualtrics, and the questions accompanying each vignette always appeared in the same order. To control for reading ability, research assistants read questions and response options aloud to all participants. Research assistants administering the survey also had two visual aids to help illustrate the concept of lower versus higher options in response to the questions if children had trouble. These visual aids included a photo of a thermometer and a scale represented by four smiley faces going from sad to happy. Similar visual aids have been used in other studies of children's attitudes using vignette methods (e.g., Stone et al., 2015). Halfway through, children received a piece of candy, and once completed (approximately 15–20 min), children chose a small prize (e.g., stickers).

When children finished the survey, research assistants thanked them and asked them if they had any questions and reminded them that they could talk about the experiment with whomever they wanted, but we would not tell anyone their answers. No children expressed any form of discomfort during the actual survey, although some noted boredom or wanting to return to their afterschool activity. In cases of the latter, children were assured that they did not need to continue if they wanted to stop. We did not receive any complaints from parents or guardians of children who participated in the survey.

### ***Preliminary analyses***

To examine potential nesting effects by afterschool program ( $N = 3$ ), repeated measures mixed ANOVA were conducted with pictured family type (i.e., two mother, two father, and other-sex parent families) and pictured child gender as within-subjects factors and afterschool program as a between-subjects covariate. The three-way interaction between pictured family type, pictured child gender, and afterschool program was not significant for negative affect, positive affect, proximity, nor family liking.

## **Results**

### ***Children's attitudes***

To assess the first three hypotheses, a MANOVA was conducted for the three dependent variables assessing attitudes toward the pictured child (negative affect, positive affect, proximity) with a 3 (pictured family type: two mothers, two fathers, or other-sex parents)  $\times$  2 (pictured son or daughter) design. An ANOVA with the same 3  $\times$  2 design was conducted for the dependent variable that assessed pictured family liking. Omnibus tests for main effects and interactions (pictured child gender, pictured family type), along with planned contrasts to compare groups, were

conducted separately for each dependent variable. Children generally had more positive than negative perceptions (Table 2), but several differences were uncovered.

The MANOVA results revealed a significant multivariate main effect for pictured family type (across negative affect, positive affect, and proximity), Wilks'  $\lambda = .72$ ,  $F(6, 124) = 8.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .28$ . MANOVA results also revealed a significant multivariate main effect for pictured child gender, Wilks'  $\lambda = .82$ ,  $F(3, 127) = 9.01$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .18$ . There was no significant multivariate interaction effect between pictured family type and pictured child gender across negative affect, positive affect, and proximity. Given that the overall  $F$  tests were significant for the multivariate main effects, we next describe the univariate results for the individual dependent variables.

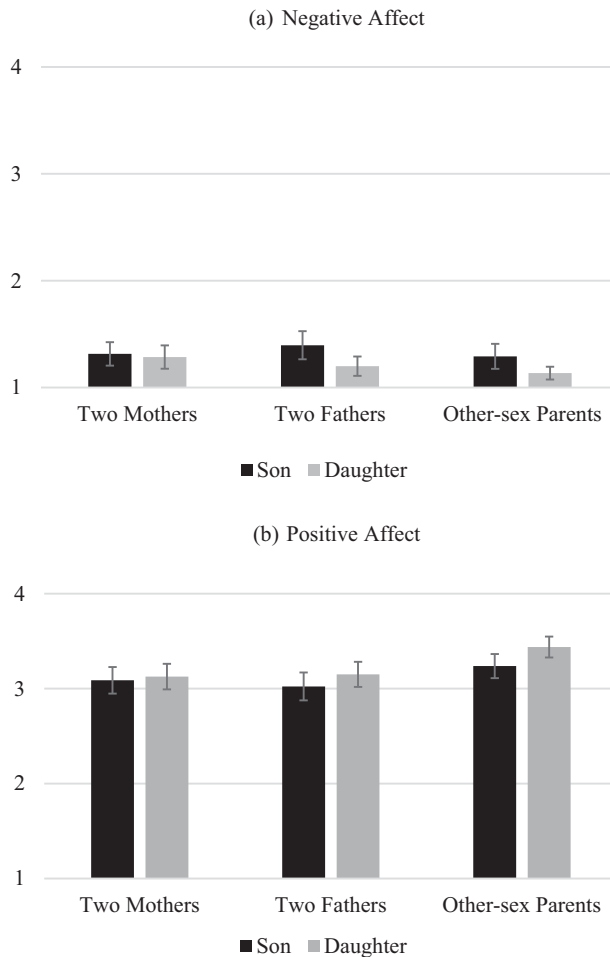
Regarding the first hypothesis, negative affect involved main effects for pictured family type,  $F(2, 258) = 3.48$ ,  $p = .032$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ , and pictured child gender,  $F(1, 129) = 13.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .10$  (Figure 1a). As anticipated, compared to children with other-sex parents, participants felt more negative toward children with two mothers,  $F(1, 130) = 4.93$ ,  $p = .028$ , and two fathers,  $F(1, 129) = 5.63$ ,  $p = .019$  (Table 2). Children with two mothers versus two fathers, however, were not perceived differently,  $F(1, 129) < .01$ ,  $p = .96$ . Across all vignettes, boys were perceived more negatively ( $M = 1.34$ ,  $SD = .05$ ) than girls ( $M = 1.21$ ,  $SD = .04$ ). The main effects were qualified by a significant interaction between pictured child gender and family type,  $F(2, 258) = 3.07$ ,  $p = .048$ . Daughters (but not sons) were perceived differently by pictured family type,  $F(2, 258) = 4.78$ ,  $p = .009$ . Paired sample  $t$ -tests indicated more negativity toward the daughter of two mothers versus other-sex parents,  $t(130) = -2.95$ ,  $p = .004$ . There were no significant differences in perceptions of daughters with two mothers versus two fathers, nor between those with two fathers versus other-sex parents; perceptions of sons did not differ among family types.

With support for the second hypothesis regarding positive affect, main effects were significant for pictured family type,  $F(2, 258) = 17.80$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .12$ , and pictured child gender,  $F(1, 129) = 6.90$ ,  $p = .010$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$  (Figure 1b). As expected, participants felt more positively toward children with other-sex parents than those with two mothers,  $F(1, 130) = 24.05$ ,  $p < .001$ , or two fathers,  $F(1, 129) = 30.36$ ,  $p < .001$  (Table 2). Children were not perceived differently, however, in

**Table 2.** Descriptive information by family type in vignettes.

	Female same-sex couples	Male same-sex couples	Other-sex couples
Child items:	<i>M(SE)</i>	<i>M(SE)</i>	<i>M(SE)</i>
Negative affect	1.30 (.05)	1.30 (.05)	1.21 (.04)
Positive affect	3.11 (.06)	3.09 (.06)	3.34 (.05)
Proximity	3.09 (.07)	3.17 (.07)	3.31 (.05)
Family items:			
Family liking	3.27 (.08)	3.26 (.08)	3.51 (.07)

Note. Items rated on 1–4 scale.

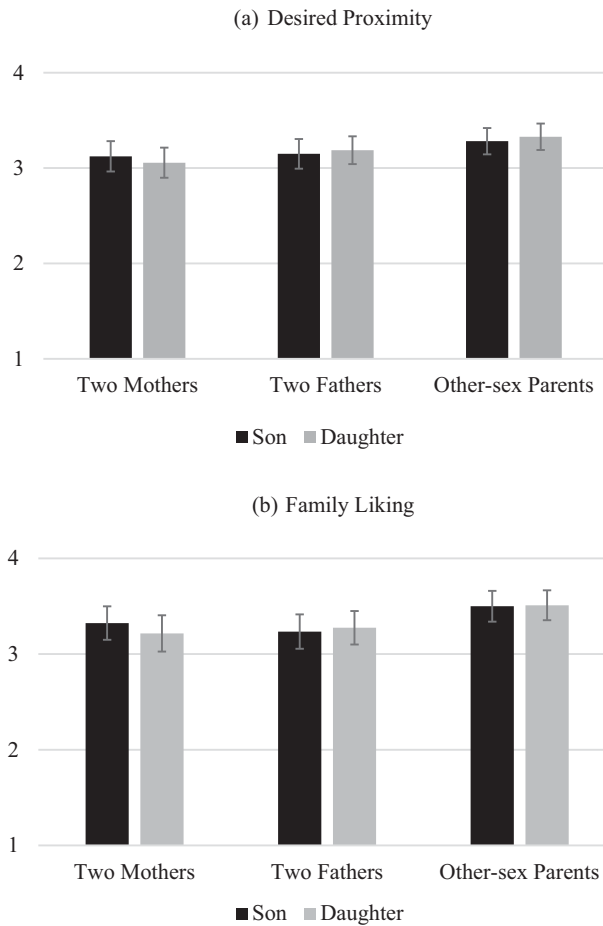


**Figure 1.** Negative and positive affect toward pictured children. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

families with two mothers or two fathers,  $F(1, 129) = .20, p = .66$ . Across vignettes, participating children felt more positively toward girls ( $M = 3.24, SD = .05$ ) than boys ( $M = 3.12, SD = .06$ ). The interaction was not significant.

Addressing the third hypothesis about proximity, there was a main effect for pictured family type,  $F(2, 258) = 12.99, p < .001$  (Figure 2a), partial  $\eta^2 = .09$ . As predicted, children desired less proximity to children with two mothers,  $F(1, 130) = 20.83, p < .001$ , and two fathers,  $F(1, 129) = 14.04, p < .001$ , as compared to those with other-sex parents (Table 2). Although not significant, children trended toward feeling closer to children with two fathers versus two mothers,  $F(1, 129) = 3.17, p = .08$ . The main effect of pictured child gender and the interaction were not significant.

Finally, with regard to the fourth hypothesis, there was a main effect of pictured family type for family liking,  $F(2, 202) = 10.31, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .09$  (Figure 2b). As hypothesized, children liked families more with other-sex parents



**Figure 2.** Desired proximity to pictured children and reported liking of families. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

than with two mothers,  $F(1, 102) = 12.16, p = .001$ , or two fathers,  $F(1, 101) = 15.38, p < .001$  (Table 2). Families with two mothers and those with two fathers were not distinguishable,  $F(1, 101) = .08, p = .78$ . Pictured child gender and the interaction were not significant.

### **Exploratory moderation analyses**

There were 47 children (37%; data were missing for 4 children on this item) who attempted to define *gay* or *lesbian*; the remainder of participating children reported *no* or that they did not know what these terms meant. Of the 47 children who attempted to define the terms, only 31 (24%) provided accurate definitions. Moreover, only 29 participants (23%; data were missing for 4 children on this item) reported that they personally knew children with two mothers or fathers, yet 52 participants (42%; data were missing for 9 children on this item) reported that they personally knew other adopted children.

Repeated measures mixed ANOVA were conducted to examine effects of participating child gender, age (mean-centered), race (coded as White vs. racial minority due to small sample size), knowledge of *gay/lesbian*, personally knowing children with same-sex parents, and personally knowing adopted children on our four dependent variables. Each covariate was entered as between-subjects factors with pictured family type (two mothers, two fathers, or other-sex parents) and pictured child gender entered as within-subjects factors. None of these potential covariates moderated effects of negative affect, positive affect, proximity, or family liking (i.e., there were no significant three-way interactions). Descriptive statistics broken down by age group are included in Table 3. Together, these results suggest that participant gender, age, race, knowledge of the terms LG, or first-hand experience with LG parent families or adopted children were not influential in children's judgments of these families.

## Discussion

This study sheds light on how children perceive children from families with LG parents. Consistent with hypotheses and aligned with expectations from DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), although most children expressed generally positive feelings, they were relatively more negative toward those pictured children with same-sex versus other-sex parents. Indeed, DIT predicts that children are particularly likely to have prejudicial attitudes toward individuals from perceptually distinct or salient groups, such as children with same-sex versus other-sex parents. These results mirror adolescents' and adults' negative attitudes toward sexual minorities and their families (Heinze & Horn, 2014; McCrary, 2014) and extend findings to elementary school-age children. Despite demonstrating a preference

**Table 3.** Descriptive information by age of participant and family type in vignettes.

		Female same-sex couples	Male same-sex couples	Other-sex couples
Child Items:	Age (years)	<i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>M</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Negative Affect	5–6	1.36 (.09)	1.39 (.10)	1.29 (.07)
	7–8	1.41 (.08)	1.32 (.08)	1.28 (.06)
	9–11	1.15 (.08)	1.22 (.09)	1.10 (.07)
Positive Affect	5–6	2.93 (.11)	3.04 (.12)	3.23 (.10)
	7–8	3.03 (.10)	3.09 (.10)	3.30 (.08)
	9–11	3.32 (.10)	3.14 (.10)	3.45 (.09)
Proximity	5–6	3.19 (.14)	3.35 (.13)	3.40 (.11)
	7–8	3.04 (.12)	3.18 (.11)	3.29 (.09)
	9–11	3.08 (.13)	3.02 (.11)	3.27 (.09)
Family Items: Family Liking	5–6	3.25 (.16)	3.23 (.16)	3.33 (.13)
	7–8	3.33 (.13)	3.39 (.13)	3.61 (.11)
	9–11	3.21 (.14)	3.11 (.14)	3.51 (.12)

Note. Items rated on 1–4 scale.

for families with other-sex versus same-sex parents, most children did not accurately define *gay* or *lesbian*, consistent with findings among similarly-aged children from same-sex parent families (Farr, Crain, Oakley, & Cashen, 2015). These findings are also consistent with those among children who demonstrate bias toward other social groups in the absence of understanding group membership (e.g., prejudice toward Muslims despite inaccurate definitions of *Muslim*; Brown et al., 2017). Although the results of this study demonstrate relatively small differences in attitudes toward families with other-sex versus same-sex parents, research has demonstrated that subtle attitudes and behaviors, such as microaggressions, can compound and affect individuals in real and meaningful ways; it is not only the presence of overt discrimination, explicit attitudes, or antipathy that are capable of imparting harm (Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2004). Given millions of children with LGBT parents in the United States (Gates, 2014), and that homophobic attitudes can cultivate discriminatory behaviors (Nadal & Griffin, 2012; Poteat & Rivers, 2010), this research indicates the potential need for early intervention to minimize potential bias toward same-sex parent families.

Negative affect was relatively low across all family types, but children expressed more negative affect and less favorable feelings toward children with same-sex parents relative to those with other-sex parents. Although demographic information on participating children's family structures was not collected, only 81 out of 899 same-sex couples in the county reported raising children in the 2010 US Census (Gates & Cooke, 2011). Thus, it is unlikely that many of our participants came from families with same-sex parents and, as such, the results are aligned with evidence that young children show in-group positivity bias (less positivity toward out-groups) and out-group derogation (more negativity toward out-groups) in the presence of explicit socialization (e.g., pervasive negative cultural stereotypes about sexual minorities; Cameron et al., 2001; Herek, 2016). Children reported desires for greater proximity to children with other-sex parents relative to those with same-sex parents, aligned with findings that younger versus older adolescents are less likely to want to go to school with LG peers (Poteat et al., 2009). Children reported they liked families less with same-sex parents relative to those with other-sex parents, aligned with research among adults (Gato & Fontaine, 2016). These results support developmental trends of prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minorities among young children (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Smith, Shepperd, Miller, & Graber, 2016) and may reflect socialization of ingrained cultural stereotypes held by Americans toward LGBT individuals (Herek, 2016) despite increasing favor of LGBT rights over time (Gates, 2015). Indeed, according to DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2006, 2007), children form stereotypes, independent of explicit instruction, by attending to observable patterns in society that connect psychologically and perceptually salient attributes with members of social groups (e.g., prevalent stereotypes about LG people based on fear, disgust, and normalcy; Herek, 2016).



In contrast to earlier research (e.g., Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Bos et al., 2012; Gato & Fontaine, 2016), there were no effects of participant gender nor age on attitudes toward children with same-sex parents. Perhaps aspects of gender socialization or perspective-taking, proposed as mechanisms for changes in adolescent attitudes toward disadvantaged groups (Smith et al., 2016), are not as (or yet) influential to younger children. Also, counter to previous research about adult and adolescent attitudes toward sexual minorities and their families (Gato & Fontaine, 2013, 2016; Horn & Szalacha, 2009; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2015), children felt more negatively toward girls with two mothers (versus those with other-sex parents) rather than feeling more negatively toward boys with two fathers (versus those with other-sex parents). Similarly, although not significant, children trended toward preferring proximity to children with two fathers versus two mothers. Although little research has examined these possible preferences and no previous research, to our knowledge, has found similar findings, these results may be easier to interpret within the context of another one of our findings, in which girls were generally perceived more favorably than boys across all families. When girls had two mothers, however, they were not regarded as highly as girls with other-sex parents. Future research could probe possibilities of children showing differential bias toward lesbian mother families versus gay father or other-sex parent families.

Few children accurately defined the concept of being gay or lesbian, paralleling research about young children who actually have same-sex parents and cannot accurately define these terms (Farr et al., 2015). It is likely that children are socialized around negative stereotypes of being gay or lesbian before understanding the meaning of those words, consistent with constructivist perspectives of stereotype development (Bigler & Liben, 2007; McKown & Weinstein, 2003) and indications that children demonstrate prejudicial attitudes without accurate knowledge of particular social identities (e.g., Brown et al., 2017). It might also be the case that children endorse incorrect alternative definitions of what it means to be gay based on cultural slurs, such as using the phrase “that’s gay” to refer to something as bad. Given that participating children likely had heterosexual parents, in-group preferences for other-sex versus same-sex parent families may also reflect the finding that so few participants knew children with same-sex parents, aligned with research about children’s attitudes toward other social groups in the absence of direct experience (e.g., immigrants, Muslims; Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017).

### ***Strengths and limitations***

This study is among the first to examine young children’s attitudes about children with sexual minority parents. Consistent with studies about similarly-aged children’s attitudes toward other marginalized groups (Brown, 2011; Brown et al., 2017), we assessed children’s attitudes through evaluation of responses to vignettes varying only in the gender of parents and children pictured. Recruiting participants from afterschool programs, however, may limit the generalizability of results. All vignettes

portrayed White family members and adopted children; future projects could examine children's perceptions of more racially diverse families (given US trends of increasing racial diversity, Saulny, 2011) and whether attitudes vary based on adoption versus biological relatedness to parents. Similarly, our sample was predominantly White, which limits the generalizability of the results. Race of the participant (coded as White vs. racial minority due to small sample size) did not modify the findings, and our sample lacked the diversity necessary for a meaningful analysis by participant race. Future research could explore the role that race plays in children's attitudes toward LG parent families in a more nuanced way, including both the race of the children and families portrayed, as well as the race of the children participating. Finally, our study only included mention of terms such as *lesbian* or *gay*, rather than other sexual identities, such as *bisexual*. The same-sex couples pictured in our vignettes could have also depicted individuals who identified as bisexual, rather than strictly lesbian or gay. It is important that we acknowledge that participating children's attitudes were reflective of children with male or female same-sex parents, rather than individuals who specifically identified as LG within same-sex couples. Future research should be more inclusive of the broader array of sexual and gender identities comprising families diverse in parental sexual orientation, so as not to perpetuate problems of bi-invisibility in conducting research about LGBTQ parent families (Hackl, Boyer, & Galupo, 2013).

To assess children's knowledge of same-sex couples, they were asked if they knew children who had "two moms who are married" or "two dads who are married." Although there is no existing precedent for how to phrase this question in the context of research, children's potential misunderstanding of the question limits the interpretation of the results. Future research could explore different ways to ask this question and how children come to understand and describe the concept of a same-sex relationship. Only children who indicated they knew what the terms *gay* or *lesbian* meant in a multiple choice format were asked to define the terms in an open-response format, which resulted in a total of 47 open responses. As we had a low number of responses, we coded these responses as accurate versus inaccurate. Although knowledge of these terms did not moderate our effects, future research could examine children's definitions of the terms *gay* and *lesbian* in a more nuanced way. We also neglected to collect additional demographic information about the structure of children's own families, which could affect how children perceived the families portrayed in the study. Future research could explore factors mitigating or exacerbating bias, including more information about or from children's parents or families, as well as the efficacy of interventions designed to minimize bias toward diverse families.

### ***Implications for practice, policy, and law***

Our results have several implications. As predicted by DIT (Bigler & Liben, 2007), preferences children show for children with other-sex versus same-sex parents

could lead to discrimination against children with same-sex parents. From middle childhood to adolescence, peer socialization influences, including prejudicial attitudes, are likely to strengthen (Poteat, 2007). Given that homophobic attitudes are linked with homophobic behaviors among adolescents and adults (e.g., Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001; Franklin, 2000; Poteat, 2007), and because homophobic attitudes in adolescence are likely to become more extreme in adulthood (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012), prevention efforts may be particularly important among children.

In light of laws permitting discrimination toward LGBT persons based on moral or religious beliefs (e.g., McLaughlin, 2016), it is perhaps not surprising children's attitudes could reflect cultural and societal biases. Our results highlight the problematic cultural messages underlying discriminatory laws and policies, and could inform interventions addressing bias and preventative efforts to educate children about diversity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Smith et al., 2016; Vasiljevic & Crisp, 2013). Inclusive curricula, policies, and practices toward LGBT-parent families across US schools are needed (Hegde, Averett, White, & Deese, 2014; Russell & Horn, 2016). Safe-school practices, such as LGBT-inclusive curricula and other administrative efforts, can minimize heterosexual students' sexual prejudice and discrimination (Horn & Szalacha, 2009; Russell & Horn, 2016).

One such effort to reduce prejudicial attitudes toward LGBT issues is the use of children's books in primary school classrooms that are more inclusive of family diversity, yet there is some indication that few teachers do so (Kelly, 2012). Kelly's study indicated that although young children (3- to 5-year-olds,  $N = 21$ ) often appear receptive about and can understand family diversity, some teachers are hesitant to delve deeper into children's questions about different family forms. Similarly, another study highlighted common feelings among preschool teachers of being challenged by how and when to incorporate LGBT-parent families in their classrooms (Glass, Willox, Barrow, & Jones, 2016). As such, some teachers might find it easier to use children's books that are already commonly found in primary classrooms to incorporate new themes related to LGBT issues. Indeed, Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2013) provided examples of how four award-winning children's books, including Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, can be incorporated into classrooms to give students a framework for discussing, questioning, and challenging the marginalization of particular social groups, such as LGBT people or families.

Finally, few children in our study reported knowing children with same-sex parents. From research with young adolescents, contact with LG individuals outside of school is associated with more positive attitudes toward LG people (Collier et al., 2012; Heinze & Horn, 2009). It may be that intergroup contact becomes increasingly important to children's attitudes toward family diversity as they grow older, but additional research is needed to address this question. Moreover, young children can engage in dialogue about individual differences and

diversity, with and without adult involvement (e.g., Bigler & Wright, 2014; Kang & Inzlicht, 2012). Thus, attention to benefits of instruction and applied experience in influencing children's attitudes about diverse groups is imperative (Collier et al., 2012; Heinze & Horn, 2009).

## Conclusion

Given that prejudice and discrimination may be rooted in perceptions of *otherness* and in-group versus out-group, it is critical to understand children's attitudes toward a variety of social groups as a way to effectively intervene early to reduce potential bias. As numbers of children with LGBT parents approach four million in the United States (Gates, 2014), it is imperative that research examines the attitudes not only of adolescents and adults, but also of younger children, toward this growing demographic group. Fitting within the broader framework of DIT research (Bigler & Liben, 2007), our findings indicate that elementary school-age children demonstrate less positive attitudes toward children with same-sex parents relative to those with other-sex parents. Heeding calls for social justice research to understand children's social acceptance of cultural diversity (Barbarin & Odom, 2009; Killen & Smetana, 2010), it may be important that young children are exposed to inclusive and positive notions of who constitutes a family. As children learn ways of understanding different social groups, reduced in-group bias or outgroup hostility and greater acceptance of family diversity are possible.

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## Appendix



This is the Lipton family. The mom on the left is named Tammy, and the mom on the right is named Christine. They have a daughter named Madison. Madison was adopted when she was a baby. Now she is seven years old, and her family likes to play with their pets on the weekends.

1. How normal is this child?

1 Not at all normal	2 A little bit normal	3 A medium amount normal	4 Very normal
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2. How scary is this child?

1 Not at all scary	2 A little bit scary	3 A medium amount scary	4 Very scary
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