4.5: Sexual Orientation

A person's sexual orientation is their emotional and sexual attraction to a particular sex or gender. A continuing pattern of romantic or sexual attraction (or a combination of these) to persons of a given sex or gender. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) (2016), sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions. Some specific orientation is defined in many ways, including:

- Heterosexuality: attraction to the opposite sex/gender
- Same-sex attraction: previously referred to as homosexuality, which is an outdated term that many people find offensive because it was previously classified as a mental illness
- Bisexuality, polysexuality, or pansexuality: attraction to two, multiple, or all sexes/genders respectively
- Asexuality: no sexual attraction to any sex/gender

Sexual Orientation on a Continuum

Sexuality researcher Alfred Kinsey was among the first to conceptualize sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight. To classify this continuum of heterosexuality and homosexuality, Kinsey et al. (1948) created a seven-point rating scale that ranged from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. Research done over several decades has supported this idea that sexual orientation ranges along a continuum, from exclusive attraction to the opposite sex/gender to exclusive attraction to the same sex/gender (Carroll, 2016).

A more contemporary look at sexual orientation as infinite variations of attraction. A closer examination of The Genderbread Person v2.0 introduced earlier in the chapter illustrates this:

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Child_Family_and_Community_(Laff_and_...
According to current scientific understanding, individuals are usually aware of their sexual orientation between middle childhood and early adolescence. However, this is not always the case, and some do not become aware of their sexual orientation until much later in life. It is not necessary to participate in sexual activity to be aware of these emotional, romantic, and physical attractions; people can be celibate and still recognize their sexual orientation. Some researchers argue that sexual orientation is not static and inborn, but is instead fluid and changeable throughout the lifespan.

There is no scientific consensus regarding the exact reasons why an individual holds a particular sexual orientation. Research has examined possible biological, developmental, social, and cultural influences on sexual orientation, but there has been no evidence that links sexual orientation to one factor (APA, 2016). Biological explanations, that include genetics, hormones, and birth order, will be explored further. Excess or deficient exposure to hormones during prenatal development has also been theorized as an explanation for sexual orientation. One-third of females exposed to abnormal amounts of prenatal androgens, a condition called congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), identify as bisexual or lesbian (Cohen-Bendahan, van de Beek, & Berenbaum, 2005). In contrast, too little exposure to prenatal androgens may affect male sexual orientation (Carlson, 2011).

The United States is heteronormative, meaning that society supports heterosexuality as the norm. Consider, for example, that homosexuals are often asked, "When did you know you were gay?" but heterosexuals are rarely asked, "When did you know you were straight?" (Ryle, 2011). Living in a culture that privileges heterosexuality has a significant impact on the ways in which non-heterosexual people are able to develop and express their sexuality.

Open identification of one's sexual orientation may be hindered by homophobia, which encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). It can be expressed as antipathy, contempt, prejudice, aversion, or hatred; it may be based on irrational fear and is sometimes related to religious beliefs (Carroll, 2016). Homophobia is observable in critical and hostile behavior, such as discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientations that are non-heterosexual. Recognized types of homophobia include institutionalized homophobia, such as religious and state-sponsored homophobia, and internalized homophobia in which people with same-sex attractions internalize, or believe, society’s negative views and/or hatred of themselves.

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people regularly experience stigma, harassment, discrimination, and violence based on their sexual orientation (Carroll, 2016). Research has shown that gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers are at a higher risk of depression and suicide due to exclusion from social groups, rejection from peers and family, and negative media
portrayals of homosexuals (Bauermeister et al., 2010). Discrimination can occur in the workplace, in housing, at schools, and in numerous public settings. Much of this discrimination is based on stereotypes and misinformation. Major policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation have only come into effect in the United States in the last few years.[2]

**LGBT Parenting**

LGBT parenting refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people raising one or more children as parents or foster care parents. This includes: children raised by same-sex couples (same-sex parenting), children raised by single LGBT parents, and children raised by an opposite-sex couple where at least one partner is LGBT. LGBT people can become parents through various means including current or former relationships, coparenting, adoption, donor insemination, reciprocal IVF, and surrogacy.

Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are parents. In the 2000 U.S. Census, for example, 33 percent of female same-sex couple households and 22 percent of male same-sex couple households reported at least one child under the age of 18 living in the home. As of 2005, an estimated 270,313 children in the United States live in households headed by same-sex couples.

![Figure](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Child_Family_and_Community_(Laff_and_...)

Figure: Here is an example of the 33% of female same-sex families that choose to become parents[3]

Scientific research consistently shows that gay and lesbian parents are as fit and capable as heterosexual parents, and their children are as psychologically healthy and well-adjusted as those reared by heterosexual parents despite the reality that considerable legal discrimination and inequity remain significant challenges for these families. Major associations of mental health professionals in the U.S., Canada, and Australia have not identified credible empirical research that suggests otherwise.

Children of LGBT parents do not have any differences in their gender role behaviors in comparison to those observed in heterosexual family structures. In fact, a study by Bos and Sandfort (2009) also revealed that children raised by same-sex couples felt less pressured to follow gender stereotypes. But children may struggle with negative attitudes about their parents from the harassment they may encounter by living in society.

Check-in Time!
What challenges might LGBT families face? What role might early childhood educators and their programs play in supporting these families?

[1] Image by it’s pronounced METROsexual

[2] Lifespan Development: A Psychological Perspective by Martha Lally and Suzanne Valentine-French is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 3.0;

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[3] Image by stepaniehaynes is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0