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## Same-sex parent can help child in divorce, study says

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After a divorce, girls reared by their mothers and boys reared by their fathers are more like children from a two-parent family, a Texas A&M University study shows.

Children do better in the custody of the parent of the same sex, agree researchers at the University of Texas-Dallas who also studied children reared by mothers alone, fathers alone and intact families.

The studies showed that boys reared by their mothers are less mature, more anxious and have a poorer self-concept than boys reared by their fathers.

Girls reared by their fathers alone were rated more insecure and impulsive and tended to be less responsible than girls reared by their mothers.

However, the sex of the parent with custody is not the most important factor in the healthy development of children after a divorce, the UT-Dallas study concluded.

The capabilities of the parent rearing the child — more than whether it's the mother or the father — affect how well children adjust after divorce, says Dr. Richard Warshak, UT-Dallas research scientist.

"There are just more roadblocks for the opposite-sex child.

"We found no evidence to support the popular notion that mothers always are better suited to care for children after a divorce," says Warshak.

"In our study, the boys did better in the care of their fathers and the girls did better in the care of their mothers," Warshak said.

Children reared by the parent of the same sex, the UT-Dallas study shows, have higher self-esteem and are more cooperative.

"We're not recommending custody decisions just on the basis of the same-sex parent," Warshak said, "but it's an important factor to consider."

Texas A&M child psychologist Dr. William S. Rholes says that when custody decisions are made, "the sex of the parent should be de-emphasized, not disregarded, and the individual characteristics of each parent should get more emphasis."

The parenting style should be considered, Warshak says. "Regardless of whether the mother or father had custody, the parent who is able to act in an authoritative manner — warm and loving with expectations for mature behavior," he says, will rear better-adjusted children.

Neither psychologist is recommending that brothers and sisters be split up and go with the parent of the same sex.

"There hasn't been any research on the effect of siblings for the child's ability to cope with divorce," says Warshak. "Intuitively, I'd say it's more important to keep them together."

The way parents get along after the divorce is a factor, too, in the healthy development of the children. "If there is a continued high level of conflict, the children are at risk of developing emotional disorders," Warshak says. "Kids with the most access to the other parent are doing best."

It helps children to have a role model and spend time with the parent of the same sex, agrees a single-parent mother of three children.

Children want to love the other parent, says Jutta Sharpe of Georgetown, and "if you take that away, you're doing a disservice to them. Just because you're living differently doesn't mean you have to discredit the other parent."

Sharpe thinks there are two kinds of divorced parents: "those who use the kids as pawns to get at each other and those who are genuinely concerned about the welfare of their kids."

The decision about child custody, Sharpe says, should be an "arrangement of convenience, not vindication."

"With time," Sharpe says, children "feel secure that both parents are available."