

If choice required, same-sex parent is the best, study says

By Maury M. Breecher

JUDGES IN CHILD custody cases should consider new psychological evidence indicating that children reared by same-sex parents do better than children raised by opposite-sex parents, human behavior experts say.

Dr. John Santrock, chairman of the Department of Psychology at the University of Texas at Dallas, along with Dr. Richard A. Warshak, a research scientist at the university, is conducting an ongoing study of divorced parents and their children to determine the effects of custody arrangements on children. Authorities have described the work as "pioneering."

"In most states there is a presumption favoring mothers in child custody cases," Santrock explained. "Judges assume that mothers are uniquely suited to care for children. However, our study indicates that sons generally do better with their fathers."

"Many judges do still believe mothers are better qualified to rear children," agreed Doris Jonas Freed, a New York City attorney, head of the American Bar Association's Child Custody Committee and an expert on child custody and divorce laws in the 50 states.

"The presumption that the mother automatically is the best parent to rear children is an outmoded viewpoint," she continued. "It is not actually written into the law of most states, but in reality, mothers usually do win custody unless they are shown to be unfit."

FOCUSING ON 72 families, the University of Texas study, which began in 1978, demonstrates that the presumption is uncalled for—at least in the case of fathers rearing sons.

"In our study, children living with opposite-sex parents were, on-the-average, less well-adjusted than children living with the same-sex parent," Santrock explained. "Our study revealed that children reared by same-sex parents generally show greater maturity and independence than those reared by opposite-sex parents. Boys who lived with their fathers and girls who lived with their mothers generally seemed to be warmer, less demanding, more mature, independent and seemed to have higher levels of self-esteem than children living with a parent of the opposite sex."

There are several reasons why this may be so, Warshak said. One is that same-sex parents are able to be gender-role models to their offspring.

"A mother isn't able to provide a masculine role

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Children benefit from same-sex parent

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model to her son, and a father can't provide a feminine one for a daughter," he explained.

STUDY ARRANGEMENTS giving children to same sex parents also avoid the emotional tangles that can arise between parent and child when the child becomes an emotional substitute for a spouse.

"Parents seem to know how to interact more effectively and feel more comfortable with a child who is of the same sex as they are," Santrock said. "On the other hand, the expectations and interactions of the custodial parent to the opposite sex child too often lead to a relationship that is overly coercive and demanding in some cases or become too smothering or overly protective in others."

"For instance," Warshak elaborated, "after the father leaves the home, a mother may give the implied expectation or actually even tell her son that he is the 'man of the house' when he isn't ready to accept adult responsibilities. A mother also may—without being conscious of it—take her anger at the father out on the child. Some mothers, on the other hand, may be too protective of, inhibit the growth of, their sons toward independence. I have seen children suffering these problems in my clinical practice."

THE FINDINGS of the University of Texas study are important and should be considered by judges in the approximate 1.1 million cases involving child custody each year, authorities say.

"Of course, each case has to be considered on its individual merits; but all other things being equal, this data ought to be weighed pretty heavily by judges when they consider which parent should

be awarded custody," Santrock said.

"We aren't saying that fathers should always get custody of male children and that mothers should always get custody of daughters," Warshak emphasized. "That would be exchanging the presumption that the mother is uniquely qualified to care for children for the equally unsupported presumption that there's a simple formula based on sex."

"What we are saying is that we have strong evidence that favors a match between the child and the same sex parent and that this evidence should be considered by a judge before awarding custody."

A STUDY BY a Texas A&M University professor also provides evidence that sons raised by fathers may turn out better.

"We studied 120 college students—40 who had lived with their fathers, an equal number who had lived with their mothers and 40 students from two-parent families," explained Dr. William S. Rholes, an assistant professor of psychology.

"Each group of 40 students consisted of 20 males and 20 females, so we studied equal numbers of males and females who had lived with their fathers, plus equal numbers of males and females who had lived with their mothers. We compared both single-parent reared student groups to students reared by two-parent families.

"One of the factors we looked at is social maturity," he explained. "A person who scored high on social maturity is a person who is independent, able to accept responsibility and who generally finds it easy to live up to the expectations of society for someone of their age."

"WHAT WE FOUND was that males

who had been reared by their fathers, and females who had been reared by their mothers, were better off on this particular measure than were students who were raised by opposite-sex parents. The students who were raised by same-sex parents were just as well adjusted as the children reared in two-parent homes.

"When you boil it down, my study and the research done by Drs. Santrock and Warshak provide findings that show that fathers can generally do a better job raising sons, and mothers can generally do a better job in raising daughters. These findings certainly should be made available to judges in child custody cases because they destroy the notion that mothers are uniquely qualified for child care."

Attorneys increasingly are seeking to introduce psychological evidence supporting same-sex parenting.

"Since we published preliminary results of our study in the *Journal of Social Issues* in 1979, I've been getting three or four calls a day from attorneys from around the country, many of whom want me to testify as an expert witness," Santrock said. "I don't accept any of these invitations, but I encourage them to get copies of our published work."

OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL factors that should be considered, according to the experts, include the child's preference of the parent he or she wants to live with, and whether the custody would disrupt the child's school attendance, friendship patterns or participation in sports or social activities, such as Boy Scouts.

Courts have been awayed by psychological evidence, said Freed, the ABA child



Studies show a child reared by a parent of the same sex fares better

custody and divorce expert.

"I think judges should, and will, consider the new psychological studies in their deliberations," she said. "Courts have been influenced by psychological evidence. For instance, it is because of the weight of psychological evidence that most modern-day courts consistently rule that the parent without custody be allowed continuing, frequent and meaningful access to their children."

"This viewpoint took time to evolve and be accepted. It will take time for courts to accept the possibility that fathers may make good single parents. I think this is gradually happening. No longer is it automatic for custody to go to the mother."

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