

To: The Vermont Commission on Family Recognition and Protection
Thomas A. Little, Esq., Chair

c/o: Legislative Council
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Date: Tuesday, March 04, 2008

I am writing to you on behalf of myself and my social scientist colleagues identified below, to offer our support for extending marriage rights to same-sex parented families. I am an Associate Professor at The University of Vermont with a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology (with a focus on Developmental Psychology) earned in 1993 (from The University of Vermont). My professional organization is the American Psychological Association. My teaching, research, and professional service focus on adult development and family issues, with particular attention paid to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) development and family issues. I teach courses on these issues as part of UVM's Human Development & Family Studies Program, and many of my courses are also accepted for credit within UVM's Women's & Gender Studies Program as well as the newly established minor in Sexuality & Gender Identity Studies.

A Review of the Literature on Same-Sex Parented Families

Rather than replicate already existing literature reviews and analyses, I wish to briefly summarize the current state of the research, drawing primarily upon my review and analysis of individual studies and critical reviews, including especially work of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns (CLGBC); Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (CYF); and Committee on Women in Psychology (CWP) (2005); Cahill and Tobias (2007); Golombok and Tasker (Golombok, 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Tasker, 1999); Patterson (2000, 2000a; Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004); Pawelski et al. (2006); and Stacey and Biblarz (2001).

Five Common Concerns: I start by noting that five major areas of concern are typically identified by those who oppose extending marriage and other rights to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals; these are:

- 1) Sexual identity concerns that children raised in same-sex parented families are more likely to grow up to be gay, lesbian or bisexual, than children raised in male-female parented families.
- 2) Gender identity and gender role-related behavior concerns that children raised in same-sex parented families are more likely to develop confusion regarding their gender identities and/or to express non-stereotypical gender role-related behaviors.
- 3) Parental fitness of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people concerns regarding the general mental health of individuals with these sexual identities, as well as the abilities of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people to attend to and care for children in a nurturing, developmentally appropriate manner.
- 4) Sexual abuse concerns that children raised in same-sex parented families are more likely to be abused than children raised in other-sex parented families.
- 5) Psychological health and social relationship concerns that children raised in same-sex parented families are more likely to experience psychological and relationship problems, in part due to the discrimination, teasing and bullying they are likely to experience because of their family form.

The State of the Scholarly Evidence: Before sharing with you the research evidence that challenges each of these concerns, let me state directly and emphatically that there is simply no empirical support for any of these five areas of concern.

- 1) Sexual identity concerns: The research evidence to date indicates that most children raised in same-sex parented families describe themselves as heterosexual, as do most children raised in other-sex parented families. Furthermore, among those studies that have included adolescent and adult children, there is no evidence of any pattern of romantic relationships or sexual behavior associated with one or the other family type.
- 2) Gender identity and gender role-related behavior concerns: The research evidence to date indicates that children raised in same-sex parented families are no more likely than children raised in other-sex parented families to experience gender identity concerns. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that gender role-related behaviors are no different among children raised by same-sex parents and those raised by other-sex parents.
- 3) Parental fitness of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people: As noted above, the general concern here is with the mental health and stability of lesbians, gay men and lesbians. Specific concerns typically focus on gay men as too preoccupied with sex to be good parents, and lesbians as too masculine to be able to be nurturing as mothers. But the research evidence clearly indicates that lesbians, gay men and bisexual people are as mentally healthy as heterosexual people, and that those who are parents focus their attention as necessary on parenting. They are no more likely to be preoccupied with their partner relationships and sex within these relationships than are heterosexuals. Furthermore, child rearing approaches appear to be quite similar across sexual identities. Finally, there is simply no evidence that being in a same-sex partnership detracts from the ability to care for children

- 4) *Sexual abuse concerns*: There is simply no support for this concern; sexual abuse is a serious issue for all of us to be concerned about, but children raised by same-sex parents are at no greater risk of sexual abuse than children raised by other-sex parents.
- 5) *Psychological health and social relationship concerns*: There is simply no empirical support for this concern that children raised in same-sex parented families are more likely to experience problems in their social relationships or with their individual psychological health. Indeed, some of the research findings actually indicate that children raised by same-sex parents may demonstrate improved psychological health and relationships with others, as a result of developing better coping skills, ways of expressing emotions, and deeper understandings regarding the negative effects of bias, discrimination and oppression.

More to the point, when we step back from examining particular concerns and instead consider the underlying concern that (a non-heterosexual) sexual orientation of parents per se impacts parenting capabilities and child outcomes, the answer is clear: it does not. As Dr. Charlotte Patterson, an internationally respected researcher in the field, concluded after critically reviewing the available research to date for the 2005 report on “Lesbian and Gay Parenting” published by The American Psychological Association’s Committees on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns; Children, Youth, and Families; and Women in Psychology (see <http://www.apa.org/pi/parent.html>),

There is no evidence to suggest that lesbian women or gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychosocial development among children of lesbian women or gay men is compromised relative to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. *Not a single study¹ has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents.* Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth. [Italics added.]

Similarly, Pawekski et al. (2006, p. 361) put it this way:

More than 25 years of research have documented that there is no relationship between parents’ sexual orientation and any measure of a child’s emotional, psychosocial, and behavioral adjustment. These data have demonstrated no risk to children as a result of growing up in a family with 1 or more gay parents. Conscientious and nurturing adults, whether they are men or women, heterosexual or homosexual, can be excellent parents.

¹ To be clear, some studies do exist that have been used to demonstrate negative outcomes to children raised in same-sex parented families. But these studies have been strongly critiqued in terms of sampling and data analysis methods. See, e.g., American Psychological Association’s Committees on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns; Children, Youth, and Families; and Women in Psychology (2005); Herek (1998).

Quality of Family Life Is More Important Than Family Structure

Thus far, I have focused only on summarizing the research evidence that challenges the typical concerns raised by those who oppose extending marriage rights to same-sex couples, and to the more general concern regarding the impact of sexual orientation on child outcomes. Now I would like to take a more critical look at the attention placed on family structure itself compared to focusing on the quality of family processes.

There is one particular study (included in the review by Patterson referred to above) that is particularly useful for Vermonters as we consider the question of extending marriage rights to same-sex couples. Wainright, Russell and Patterson (2004) compared 44 adolescents parented by same-sex couples and 44 adolescents parented by opposite-sex couples and found that the adolescents in the two groups did not differ significantly on almost any of the many variables they measured related to psychosocial adjustment and school outcomes. Instead, the researchers found that regardless of family type, adolescents were more likely to show positive adjustment when their parents described close relationships with them, and when the adolescents themselves perceived more caring from adults.

I do not wish to ignore the limits to this and most other studies of same-sex parented families that have tended to be based upon relatively small sample sizes. Yet in this particular case, the study actually drew its sample from a national federally funded survey and most importantly, it used matched groups of adolescents—meaning that the adolescents' same-sex and opposite-sex parented families did not differ on various other demographic characteristics. This is one of the most common and serious flaws of studies that aim to compare two-parent families with other types of families. That is, they typically do not match the families on various other demographic characteristics such as economic resources, time resources, and number of parents versus the gender composition of parents. Thus, most of these studies are unable to help us truly understand the impact on children of being raised in a diversity of family forms.

But beyond these limitations, what I would like to ask you to consider is that comparing child outcomes across diverse family forms is not what we should be focusing on in this debate. If we as Vermonters are mainly concerned with the welfare of all children, we would take heed of the broadly accepted conclusion among social scientists based upon the available knowledge to date, that “family structure, in itself, makes little difference to children’s psychological development. Instead, what really matters is the quality of family life” (Golombok, 2000, p. 99).

If we combine this conclusion with the prior one that sexual orientation per se is not related to parenting and child outcomes, we would recognize the importance of extending marriage to same-sex couples. This would allow such couples to receive the legal and social benefits of marriage, and thus to improve the quality of the family context within which to raise children.

Professional Organizations and Professionals Who Support Same-Sex Marriage

This is precisely the conclusion reached by a large number of major professional organizations, religious institutions, community leaders and others (for a listing of such endorsements, see, e.g., Marriage Equality U.S.A., 2008; and the Professional Association Policies section of “Lesbian and Gay Parenting,” the 2005 APA document (<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgb/publications/lgpprofessional.html>)). Among these are the Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1999), the American Academy of Family Physicians (2002), American Academy of Pediatrics (2002; see also Pawelski et al., 2006), American Anthropological Association (2004), American Medical Association (2004), American Psychological Association (2004, 2005), American Psychiatric Association (2005) and the National Association of Social Workers (2002).

Let me highlight here policy excerpts from just two of these organizations. My own professional organization, The American Psychological Association, put forth a simple resolution in 2004 that states that the “APA supports the provision to same-sex couples of the legal benefits that typically accrue as a result of marriage to same-sex couples who desire and seek the legal benefits.”

Similarly the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (2002) statement notes that:

Children deserve to know that their relationships with both of their parents are stable and legally recognized. This applies to all children, whether their parents are of the same or opposite sex. The American Academy of Pediatrics recognizes that a considerable body of professional literature provides evidence that children with parents who are homosexual can have the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment, and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual. When two adults participate in parenting a child, they and the child deserve the serenity that comes with legal recognition.

More recently, this organization has expanded its policy statement to the following:

Civil marriage is a legal status that promotes healthy families by conferring a powerful set of rights, benefits, and protections that cannot be obtained by other means. Civil marriage can help foster financial and legal security, psychosocial stability, and an augmented sense of societal acceptance and support. Legal recognition of a spouse can increase the ability of adult couples to provide and care for one another and fosters a nurturing and secure environment for their children. Children who are raised by civilly married parents benefit from the legal status granted to their parents. Gay and lesbian people have been raising children for many years and will continue to do so in the future; the issue is whether these children will be raised by parents who have the rights, benefits, and protections of civil marriage.... There is ample evidence to show that children raised by same-gender parents fare as well as those raised by heterosexual parents.... The rights, benefits, and protections of civil marriage can further strengthen these families (Pawekski et al., 2006, p. 361).

This is the conclusion we the undersigned have also reached. Civil Unions do not offer same-sex parented families the full extent of the rights, benefits and protections of civil marriage. It is time, now, to extend marriage benefits to same-sex couples, for the welfare of Vermont's children. The scientific evidence is unequivocal and lends itself to no other conclusion.

Respectfully submitted,

Jacqueline S. Weinstock, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Human Development & Family Studies, UVM

Additional Professional Signatories

On the following page I have listed the names of other UVM Faculty members who endorse the arguments and support the conclusion articulated here. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list of UVM faculty members in the social sciences and education who support the arguments articulated in this letter, but only those I was able to reach to review and endorse this letter in the past two days. Please also note that UVM affiliation and title/department information are provided for informational purposes only.

Lynne A. Bond, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology

Heather A. Bouchey, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Psychology

Susan Comerford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Social Work
Associate Dean, College of Education
and Social Services

Anne Geroski, Ed.D.
Associate Professor and Program
Coordinator; UVM Counseling Program

Jennifer Hurley, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Early Childhood
Special Education

Justin Joffe, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology

Beth Mintz, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology
Interim Director, Women and Gender
Studies

Jane Okech, Ph.D., NCC., LPC
Assistant Professor of Counselor
Education & Counseling

Denise L. Pickering, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Counselor
Education & Counseling

Susan Roche, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Social Work

David Shiman, Ed.D.
Professor of Education

Sherwood Smith, Ed. D.
Lecturer, Integrated Professional Studies
Director, Center for Cultural Pluralism

Laura J. Solomon, Ph.D.
Research Professor of Psychology
Research Professor of Family Medicine

Thomas Streeter, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology

Efleda Tolentino, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Early Childhood Pre-K to 3 Program

Gary Widrick, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Chair and Research Associate Professor
of Social Work

References

- American Psychological Association's (APA) Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns (CLGBC); Committee on Children, Youth, and Families (CYF); and Committee on Women in Psychology (CWP) (2005). Lesbian and gay parenting. Retrieved March 1, 2008 from <http://www.apa.org/pi/parent.html>
- American Psychological Association (2004, July). APA policy statement on sexual orientation and marriage. Accessed from <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbc/policy/marriage.html> on March 3, 2008.
- American Psychological Association Council of Representatives (2004). Resolution on sexual orientation, parents, and children. Retrieved March 2, 2008 from <http://www.apa.org/ppo/issues/plgbi.html>
- American Psychiatric Association (2005, July). Support of legal recognition of same-sex civil marriage: Position statement. Retrieved March 3, 2008 from http://archive.psych.org/edu/other_res/lib_archives/archives/200502.pdf
- Cahill, S., & Tobias, S. (2007). *Policy issues affecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Herek, G. M. (1998). Bad science in the service of stigma: A critique of the Cameron group's survey studies. In G. M. Herek (Ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals* (pp. 223–255). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marriage Equality U.S.A. (2008). Supporters of marriage equality. Retrieved March 3, 2008 from <http://www.marriageequality.org/meusa/supporters.shtml>
- Patterson, C.J. (2004a). Lesbian and gay parents and their children: Summary of research findings. In *Lesbian and gay parenting: A resource for psychologists*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Patterson, C. J. (2004b). Gay fathers. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.), *The role of the father in child development* (4th ed.). New York: John Wiley.
- Patterson, C. J., & Redding, R. (1996). Lesbian and gay families with children: Public policy implications of social science research. *Journal of Social Issues*, 52, 29-50.
- Pawelski, J. G., Perrin, E. C., Foy, J. M., Allen, C. E., Crawford, J. E., Del Monte, M., Kaufman, M., Klein, J. D., Smith, K., Springer, S., Tanner, J. L., & Vickers, D. L. (2006). The effects of marriage, civil union, and domestic partnership laws on the health and well-being of children. *Pediatrics*, 118, 349-364. Retrieved March 3, 2008 from <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/118/1/349>

Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T. J. (2001). (How) does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review*, *66*, 159-183.

Tasker, F. (1999). Children in lesbian-led families - A review. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *4*, 153 - 166.

Tasker, F. L., & Golombok, S. (1997). *Growing up in a lesbian family: Effects on child development*. New York: Guilford.

Wainright, J. L., Russell, S. T., & Patterson, C. J. (2004). Psychosocial adjustment, school outcomes, and romantic relationships of adolescents with same-sex parents. *Child Development*, *75*, 1886-1898.