

Family Structure and Child Adjustment in Spain

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Abstract This paper presents the results of a study carried out in Spain with 214 families with children aged between 3 and 10, comparing the quality of family context and the internal and external adjustment of children living in six different types of family structure: traditional, single-parent, stepfamilies, adoptive, same-sex parent and multiple-birth. Members of the research team interviewed the families in their homes and administered the assessment instruments (Development History, HOME inventory, Parenting Stress Index and Behavior Assessment System for Children). The results indicate that although some significant differences were observed between families (children living in same-sex parent families scored higher for internal and external adjustment, and those from stepfamilies scored lowest in these same measures), these differences disappeared when the effects of sociodemographic and contextual variables were statistically controlled in a covariance analysis. It can therefore be concluded that it was not family structure itself that was related to children's adjustment, but rather the sociodemographic and contextual variables associated with it. Thus, all the family structures analysed in the study are capable of promoting positive child development and adjustment, providing they meet the necessary conditions, such as good-quality care and a stimulating environment free from conflict and stress.

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Introduction

The fact that an increasing number of children grow up in non-traditional families has sparked a fierce debate in the field of social science regarding the suitability of different family structures as environments in which to bring up children. The position adopted by experts in relation to this question has changed from an initial stance in which the intact or traditional family model was considered the most capable of guaranteeing adequate child development, with the rest being viewed as lacking to some degree or another, to the current view in which diverse types of families are seen as just as suitable as the traditional model, providing they are able to satisfy the needs of the children living in them (Daly 2005; Patterson and Hastings 2007).

Single-Parent Families

Before beginning our review of the scientific literature with an analysis of single-parent families, it is important to note that many of these families are the result of a divorce, which in itself entails certain difficulties, such as the absence of a parental figure or a reduction in the quality of interaction with that figure, a greater exposure to conflict between parents, reduced economic resources and increased stress of the parent living with the children. Nevertheless, Kesner and McKenry (2001) show how, once the effects of socioeconomic status are controlled, no differences are observed between preschool children from traditional families and those from single-parent families as

regards social skills and strategies for coping with conflict. The results of the longitudinal study carried out by Riciutti (2004) indicate that the adverse effects of single parenthood are clearly mitigated by the presence of positive maternal attitudes and diverse resources for childrearing.

Some studies have compared the academic, cognitive and social competence of children from single-parent and two-parent families, finding slight differences in favor of the latter, although the effect sizes were generally very small, as was the variance explained by the type of family structure. Indeed, these differences usually disappear altogether when certain contextual variables are controlled (Jackson et al. 2000; Lipman et al. 2002; Yarber and Sharp 2010).

One aspect particularly worth highlighting is the heterogeneity of this type of family, since single-parent families may be the result of divorce or widowhood, or simply the result of a woman's decision to have a child on her own. Thus, Biblarz and Gottainer (2000) found that adults who had been brought up in single-parent families resulting from divorce had lower educational levels and occupational status and scored lower in life satisfaction than those reared in families in which one parent had died. Similarly, a study by Breivik and Olweus (2006) compared the psychological adjustment of adolescents from four different post-divorce family structures: single-mother, single-father, step parents and shared custody; the results showed that adolescents from single-father families scored lowest in behavioural adjustment.

Stepfamilies

Stepfamilies are also characterised by their diversity, evident in both their composition and in the process followed during reconstruction. In relation to these families, Dunn (2002) points out that exposure to conflict prior to the family transition, the transition itself with its multiple interactive changes and the need to cope with new conflicts within the stepfamily all contribute to generating a scenario to which children will respond, at least at first and until a new balance is struck, by manifesting diverse problems which, despite not usually reaching clinical levels, nevertheless affect them both emotionally and behaviourally (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). According to Jenkins et al. (2005), these problems include aggressive, impulsive and antisocial behaviour and poor school attendance and academic achievement.

The relationship between children and the new parental figure is particularly complicated, especially when that figure is a woman and when the reconstruction takes place during early adolescence, since the child's initial reaction is generally to reject the new situation (Dunn 2002).

Adoptive Families

Adoptive families are another common family type, and one that has been widely studied. Golombok (2000) concludes that although it cannot be stated that all adopted children are bound to experience socioemotional problems, it does seem that all else being equal, the proportion of adopted children with problems is higher than that of their non-adopted counterparts (Rueter and Koerner 2008). Nevertheless, many adopted children develop adequate levels of psychological adjustment and present no problems whatsoever (Stams et al. 2002). Indeed, although over half of all adopted children arrive in their new families with serious developmental problems, 3 years after adoption the severe physical problems have disappeared and the psychological ones have been considerably reduced, mainly because these families tend to offer a high-quality context for child development (Palacios and Brodzinsky 2010).

Same-Sex Parent Families

Another family structure that exists today is that of same-sex parent families, i.e. families formed by gay or lesbian couples who live with children of diverse ages who may be either offspring from previous heterosexual relationships, adoptees or children born to one of the partners using assisted reproduction techniques. There is therefore a great degree of diversity within this group also. As regards the analysis of the variables which may justify the emergence of psychological adjustment problems in children, Tasker (2005) found that none of the risk factors associated with psychological adjustment problems were specifically connected to parents' sexual orientation, and were no more or less likely to occur in same-sex parent families as they were in traditional families or families with other types of structures. Over recent years, a considerable number of studies have been published which have failed to find any significant differences in the psychological adjustment of children brought up in same-sex parent families, in comparison with those brought up in other family structures (Golombok et al. 2003; González et al. 2004; Tasker 2005). The longitudinal studies by Gartrell et al. (2000, 2005, 2006) also failed to find differences in either psychological or social adjustment in children raised in lesbian families, and moreover, pointed out that the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse in these families is lower than the national mean. As a counterpoint we should mention the study by Bos and Van Balen (2008), which found a significant association between high levels of social stigmatisation and hyperactivity problems in boys, and low self-esteem in girls, in a study with children aged between 8 and 12 from lesbian families. The authors found that peer acceptance

and contact with other children from lesbian families were protective factors against the development of adjustment problems.

Multiple-Birth Families

As regards multiple-birth families, diverse studies have confirmed the presence of high stress levels in these families as the result of the intense demand for care and the economic strain involved in raising two, three or more children all born at the same time (Golombok et al. 2007; Olivenness et al. 2005). The presence of stress has a series of systemic effects, such as the greater possibility of the mother suffering from postnatal depression (Choi et al. 2009) or an increase in conflict between parents which makes it more difficult for children to adjust to the family system (Becker et al. 1998; Groothuis et al. 1982; Tanimura et al. 1990). Epidemiological data reveal that the probability of suffering from some kind of deficiency with psychological repercussions is significantly higher in multiple-birth children than in singletons (Blickstein 2002; Blickstein and Ketih 2003).

Despite the accumulated empirical evidence, however, only a very few studies have compared a broad variety of family structure types at the same time, taking both children's development and adjustment into account, along with the most important family context variables. This study aims to adopt a new approach and make a modest contribution to redressing this lack, by comparing six different types of family structure. Thus, the aim of the study was to compare both the quality of the development contexts provided, and the psychological adjustment levels of children living in six different family structures: traditional, single-parent, stepfamilies, adoptive, same-sex parent and multiple-birth.

Method

Participants

The sample group comprised by 214 families with children aged between 3 and 10, belonging to six different structural categories: traditional, single-parent, stepfamilies, same-sex parent, adoptive and multiple-birth. The distribution of the different family structures was as follows: 39 traditional families (18.22 %), 39 single-parent families (18.22 %), 31 same-sex parent families (14.49 %), 31 stepfamilies (14.49 %), 39 multiple-birth families (18.22 %) and 35 adoptive families (16.36 %). In only one of the single-parent families did the child live with his/her father. Twenty-two were the result of divorce or separation, 15 were women who had decided to have a child without a

partner and 2 were widows. In the stepfamilies also, the majority of children lived with their biological mother and her new partner. This was the situation in 24 families, while in the remaining 7, the children lived with their biological father. As regards same-sex parent families, 26 were formed by lesbian couples and 5 by gay couples. Of the multiple-birth families, 22 had given birth to twins and 17 to triplets. All adoptive, stepfamilies and multiple-birth families were formed by two heterosexual parents and their children.

In stepfamilies, the children were required to be the fruit of a previous relationship and must have lived for at least 1 year with their biological parent and his/her new partner. In the case of adoptive families, the adoption must have taken place at least 1 year earlier, and in the case of single-parent families, when this situation was the result of a divorce or separation, said break-up must have occurred at least 1 year prior to the interview. A single child was studied belonging to each sort of family, in multiple birth families a child was randomly chosen.

As regards the socio-demographic situation of the family, the mothers analysed were aged between 23 and 58 ($M = 38.7$) and the fathers between 24 and 58 ($M = 40.47$). The children (102 boys and 112 girls) were aged between 3 and 10, with a mean age of 6 years 6 months. The gender distribution of the children in the sample was as follows: traditional (53.8 % boys and 46.2 % girls), single-parent (48.7 and 51.3 %), same-sex (41.9 and 48.1 %), stepfamilies (48.4 and 51.6 %), multiple (43.6 and 56.4 %) and adoptive (48.6 and 51.4 %).

As regards educational level, 19.6 % of mothers and 22.7 % of fathers had received a secondary education degree, while 52.9 % of mothers and 38.7 % of fathers had university degrees. 27.5 % of mothers and 38.6 % of fathers had basic primary education. In order to simplify the analyses, a variable was created which encompassed the educational level of both parents.

The distribution of income levels per family unit ranged from under €1,000 per month (6.8 % of the families studied) to over €2,500 (36.6 %). 18.5 % of families had an income of between €1,000 and €1,500, and 20 % said they earned between €1,500 and €2,000. Finally, 18 % of households received a monthly income of between €2,000 and €2,500.

Measures

Development History (Pettit et al. 1997). A semi-structured interview consisting of 36 questions which is administered in the presence of, at least, one parent and the child him/herself. This paper only presents the results obtained in relation to the general assessment of the family situation, which gathers information regarding aspects such as mother's health during pregnancy period, stability of the

marital relationship, job security and stability of family income, existence of medical or legal problems and level of conflict both within and outside the home, etc. A total score was obtained; each family was given a raw score in strict accordance with the assessment criteria contained in the instrument's handbook, which was kindly provided by their authors ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.01$, range: 1–5). Higher scores indicate better situations.

HOME Inventory (Home observation for measurement of the environment, Caldwell and Bradley 1984), early childhood and middle childhood versions. Spanish versions of the inventory (Palacios et al. 1994). The HOME inventory provides information regarding the quantity and quality of stimulation, experiences and materials of the family context in which the children live. The scale was applied during a visit to the child's house, during which the child and at least one principal caregiver were present in order to enable information to be gathered about the patterns of interaction between the caregiver and the child. Items are scored on the basis of the information obtained from the answers provided in response to the semi-structured interview and from direct observation of the home environment by a trained assessor. As Bradley and Corwyn (2005) pointed out, the two versions of the HOME scale intend to match the measurement of family environment to the developmental stage of children, with the aim that both versions of the scale are easily comparable. The use of the HOME scale fitted properly the objective of obtaining an accurate and comparable measurement of the family context of children belonging to different developmental stages. That way, the difficulty generated by the fact of comparing data from different instruments was controlled by all possible means.

The version for preschool children (early childhood version) consists of 55 items clustered into the following dimensions: (1) materials for stimulating learning, (2) language stimulation, (3) physical environment, (4) pride/affection/tenderness, (5) academic stimulation, (6) modeling and stimulation of social maturity, (7) variety in experience and (8) acceptance. The total score was calculated by summing the scores on the above dimensions. ($M = 47.68$, $SD = 5.98$, range: 31–73, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$).

The version for school-aged children (middle childhood version) contains 59 items clustered into the following dimensions: (1) verbal and emotional response, (2) encouraging maturity, (3) emotional climate, (4) materials and experiences designed to stimulate development, (5) active stimulation and family participation in experiences which stimulate development. The following statistics were obtained: $M = 48.94$, $SD = 6.85$, range: 30–74, Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$. In order to ensure that the two versions were comparable, raw scores were standardised to IQ scores).

Parenting Stress Index (PSI, Abidin 1986), Spanish version (Lucía-Solis and Abidin 1991). This instrument provides two global stress level scores, one corresponding to the stress generated by children's and parents' own characteristics, termed "family stress", and one corresponding to the stress generated by the occurrence of stressful life events outside the control of the family members, termed "stressful life events". The level of family stress was taken as the mean of the scores obtained by both members of the couple, or by just one member, depending on how many caregivers completed the instrument. In the cases when both parents completed the questionnaire, the average score was used as far as the analysis found no significant differences between partners' perceptions ($t = 1.35$, $p = .18$).

The scale corresponding to family stress is made up by 101 items grouped into 13 dimensions. The first six are linked to the child (hyperactivity, adaptability, mood, etc.) while the remaining 7 are linked to the parents (parenting competence, health, marital relationship, social isolation, etc.). Total score is the sum of all items, $M = 180.84$, $SD = 34.96$, range (101–359), Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$ (mothers)/.95 (fathers). The second part of the instrument is made up by 22 items related to the stressful life events (SLEs) experienced by parents over the last year. $M = 3.57$, $SD = 2.99$, range (0–22), $\alpha = .52$ (mothers), .75 (fathers).

Behaviour Assessment System for Children, BASC; (Reynolds and Kamphaus 1992; version: TEA Ediciones, 2004). This assessment system was used to obtain information from parents about the socioemotional adjustment of the children in the sample group. It is a multidimensional approach for assessing the behaviour and self-perception of children aged between 3 and 18. It measures a number of different aspects of the behaviour, emotions and personality of the individual, using different scales. The BASC enables researchers to assess the adaptive and maladaptive aspects of children's behaviour. In other words, it evaluates both positive and negative aspects. In specific terms, it assesses the following dimensions: *Externalising problems* ($M = 48.23$, $SD = 10.25$, range = 26–91); *Internalising problems* ($M = 47.01$, $SD = 9.39$, range = 24–80) and *Adaptive skills* ($M = 49.96$, $SD = 10.10$, range = 18–73). The reliability of the Spanish version of the instrument was .88, .82 and .81, for the dimensions of the preschool scale, and .97, .82 and .89 for the dimensions of the school-age children's scale.

Although the scales for preschool (3–5 years) and school-aged (6–10 years) children are different, they nevertheless provide information about the same global dimensions. The use of standard scores provided by the Spanish adaptation enabled us to work with the complete sample group.

Procedure

All the families were selected using a mixed, incidental sampling process in infant and primary schools located in Andalusia and the Basque Country, as well as by recruitment through various associations, especially in the case of same-sex parent families. Members of the research team interviewed the families in their homes and administered the assessment instruments. The interviews lasted, on average, 2 h.

Following the interview, each family was sent a personalised report with the results of the assessment and a series of recommendations for optimising the quality of their family context.

Results

Table 1 shows the correlations between all the variables included in the study, indicating a significant association between the sociodemographic family variables and many of the contextual and child adjustment variables. Thus, families with more economic and educational resources were found to provide better development contexts. The variables related to children’s adjustment were found to correlate significantly only with parental stress levels and children’s age.

Sociodemographic Variables

The distinct family types differed significantly in parental education level, $\chi^2 (10, N = 214) = 25.18, p = .005$. Same-sex parents displayed the highest level and reconstituted families showed the lowest level.

There were also differences in family income level, $\chi^2 (20, N = 214) = 48.12, p = .000$, with the gay and lesbian families having a higher income level, and single-parent families had lower incomes than the rest.

The results also revealed significant differences in relation to the children’s age, $F (5, 208) = 6.97, p = .000, \eta^2 = .14$. Post hoc analyses were carried out using Tukey’s test indicated that children living in same-sex parent families were younger than those living in traditional families ($p = .008$), single-parent families ($p = .001$), stepfamilies ($p = .000$) and multiple-birth families ($p = .006$).

The Quality of Family Context

The quality of the family situation, assessed using the Development History, established significant differences between the different family types, $F (5, 204) = 6.36, p = .000, \eta^2 = .15$. Stepfamilies scored lower on this scale than traditional families ($p = .000$), adoptive families ($p = .000$), same-sex parent families ($p = .004$) and multiple-birth families ($p = .011$). Adoptive families scored higher than traditional families ($p = .039$).

The scores on the HOME inventory also revealed significant differences, $F (5, 207) = 2.65, p = .024, \eta^2 = .06$, although the post hoc analyses indicated that the only significant differences were to be found between adoptive families, which scored highest on this scale, and multiple-birth families, which scored lowest ($p = .023$).

No significant differences between family structures were found in relation to the level of family stress, assessed using the PSI, although differences were observed in relation to the number of stressful life events experienced, $F (5, 207) = 2.65, p = .024, \eta^2 = .09$, with stepfamilies reporting significantly more stressors than multiple-birth ($p = .006$) and adoptive families ($p = .024$).

Child Adjustment

As mentioned earlier, child adjustment was assessed using the BASC scale, administered to parents. The comparison between the level of externalising problems revealed

Table 1 Correlations between the study variables

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X
I. Child’s age										
II. Parents’ education level	-.21**									
III. Family income	-.07	.48**								
IV. Development History	-.08	.26**	.26**							
V. HOME inventory	-.06	.27**	.25**	.16*						
VI. Family stress	-.06	-.12	-.11	-.31**	-.03					
VII. Stressful life events	-.13	.01	-.12	-.15*	.01	.29**				
VIII. Externalising problems	.31**	-.13	-.05	-.13	.01	.31**	.01			
IX. Internalising problems	.27**	-.11	-.07	-.11	-.06	.21**	.07	.58**		
X. Adaptative skills	-.13	.14*	.08	.03	.02	-.31**	.09	-.33**	-.18*	

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .01$

Table 2 Externalising and internalising problems of children from different family structures (means, standard deviations and 95 % confidence intervals)

	Externalising problems			Internalising problems		
	Mean	SD	95 % confidence interval	Mean	SD	95 % confidence interval
Traditional	47.89	8.92	44.96–50.83	47.61	10.12	44.27–50.93
Single-parent	48.24	10.81	44.68–51.79	47.97	9.25	44.93–51.01
Stepfamilies	55.03	13.42	50.11–59.96	53.10	10.39	49.29–56.91
Same-sex	43.57	6.22	41.16–45.99	43.43	6.58	40.88–45.98
Multiple	46.89	9.38	43.81–49.98	45.89	8.75	43.02–48.77
Adoptive	47.71	8.81	44.69–50.74	44.03	7.92	41.31–46.75

significant differences, $F(5, 202) = 4.37$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, with the post hoc analyses indicating differences between children from stepfamilies, who were found to have the most behavioural problems, and those from same-sex parent ($p = .000$), multiple-birth ($p = .010$), adoptive ($p = .034$) and traditional families ($p = .036$). These results are presented in Table 2.

Significant differences were also found in relation to internalising problems, $F(5, 202) = 4.73$, $p = .000$, $\eta^2 = .11$, with children living in stepfamilies once again scoring highest and those living in same-sex parent ($p = .000$), adoptive ($p = .001$) and multiple-birth ($p = .014$) families scoring lowest (Table 2).

In the case of adaptive skills, although children from stepfamilies once again scored lowest, in this case the differences did not reach significance level.

Since Table 2 shows the means of the standard scores calculated in accordance with the scales provided by the authors of the Spanish version of the BASC, they enable the situation of the children in the sample group to be compared to that of the general population. A standard score of between 40 and 60 indicates that the subject is located within the mean range for the population; scores either higher or lower than said interval are considered outside the population mean, with scores of over 70 being clinically significant (i.e. usually indicating the presence of disorders related to the behaviour in question). As shown in Table 2, the mean scores obtained by subjects from all the family structures studied are all located within normal limits. Only two children from stepfamilies, two from adoptive families and one from a traditional family scored over 70 in externalising problems. Only one child from a stepfamily scored over 70 in internalising problems.

The analyses carried out revealed an association between family structure and children's adjustment, with children from stepfamilies experiencing more externalising and internalising problems. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that family structures differ in accordance with various sociodemographic and contextual variables. It is

therefore highly likely that it is these contextual differences that are responsible for the differences in children's adjustment observed between the different types of family.

To determine whether or not it was indeed these contextual variables rather than family structure itself that influenced external and internal adjustment, two analyses of covariance were conducted. This type of analysis enables researchers to determine whether or not the relationship existing between an independent variable (family type) and a dependent variable (children's adjustment) is the result of the influence of other variables, known as covariables. It therefore enables the effect of these variables to be statistically controlled. Furthermore, it provides information regarding the individual effect of each of the variables introduced into the model.

As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the differences observed in the externalising and internalising problems experienced by children from different family structures stopped being significant when demographic and contextual variables were controlled. Child's gender was also included as a fixed factor. Children's age and family stress were the only variables that remained significantly associated with children's adjustment. In the case of externalising problems an interaction effect was detected between gender and type of family structure: externalising problems of children from stepfamilies were significantly higher in boys than in girls, $F(1, 29) = 10.52$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .27$. Gender differences were not significant in other types of families.

Discussion

The results of this study showed significant differences amongst the six types of families assessed; this is true for socio-demographic variables, for contextual variables and for the variables assessing children psychological adjustment. However significant differences were observed in the external and internal adjustment of children living in different types of family structures, these differences were no consistent when

Table 3 Analysis of covariance regarding children's externalising problems

	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Type of family structure	1.66	.15	.05
Child's gender	1.72	.19	.01
Child's age	15.90	.00	.09
HOME inventory	.32	.57	.00
Development history	.22	.64	.00
Family stress	26.18	.00	.14
Stressful life events	1.83	.18	.01
Type of family \times gender	2.90	.01	.08

$R^2 = .36$

Table 4 Analysis of covariance regarding children's internalising problems

	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Type of family structure	1.61	.16	.46
Child's gender	.57	.45	.00
Child's age	8.73	.00	.05
HOME inventory	.49	.49	.00
Development history	.59	.44	.00
Family stress	9.93	.00	.06
Stressful life events	1.96	.16	.01
Type of family \times gender	1.29	.27	.04

$R^2 = .23$

family variables were statistically controlled. Therefore, our data do not allow us to state that differences in child adjustment are due to the type of family structure.

The family structures studied differed in relation to some of these conditions, with the most favourable profile being found for same-sex parent families and the least favourable for stepfamilies. This is consistent and explains why it was children from stepfamilies who were found to have most problems, while those from same-sex parent families were the best adjusted, although they were also the youngest children in the sample group. It is also important to remember that the mean scores for children from stepfamilies, as with those from the other types of families, were located within normal limits, and on average, clinically problematic levels were not observed.

The greater degree of maladjustment among children brought up in stepfamilies has been widely documented in scientific literature. Nevertheless, two clarifications should be made: firstly, the differences observed between these children and those living in other types of family structures are usually fairly small; and secondly, there is an enormous amount of variation between different types of stepfamilies, resulting in some very drastic differences between the children living in this type of family structure. Although

rebuilding a family may provide a way out of a situation of risk, such as a conflictive marital relationship, for example, empirical evidence indicates that the majority of children experience emotional and behavioural problems during the months following reconstruction (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002). The difficulties experienced by these children cannot solely be due to the fact that the majority have been through a separation or divorce, since when they are compared with those living in single-parent families resulting from a marital break-up, the latter group tends to be better adjusted (Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

The results of this present study support this idea, since children from single-parent families were found to have fewer internalising and externalising problems and better adaptive skills than those living in stepfamilies. Nevertheless, some of single-parent families studied here were not the result of a divorce, but rather the product of a woman's free choice to have a child without a partner, and many of these mothers had an extremely positive socio-cultural profile. In other words, there are at least two types of different families within the single-parent group, one with a better profile than the other, and this may render the differences observed between this type of family structure and the others less acute. In any case, it is worth noting that although in single-parent families resulting from divorce the mothers stated that the separation process was conflictive and expressed concern over the impact of said conflict on their children, the level of conflict observed in this type of family was no higher and nor were more child adjustment problems found, even though the income level of these families was the lowest in the whole sample group. This finding supports the idea expressed by Kesner and McKenry (2001) that the situation of single parenthood cannot be classed as a risk factor in itself.

The analysis of the profile of stepfamilies situates these families in last place in the development history. Moreover, these families tend to report more stressful life events. These findings indicating a lower quality of relations in these families coincide with those found by other similar studies (Dunn 2002). The family transitions associated with separation and the formation of new couple force children to cope with a series of changes and potential stressors, such as a change of residence, family relationships, school and friends, as well as possible economic problems. As Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (2002) point out, family reconstruction implies the establishment of new roles and relationships and the search for a new balance which may generate stress and conflict for all members of the new family, partly because the members of a stepfamily will have different prior histories, rituals and habits which may clash at first (Cooper et al. 2009). Moreover, these families often have a more complex structure than traditional families: they tend to have more members, are spread over

more than one household and include diverse figures (stepfather, step-grandparents and step-siblings, etc.).

Although the biggest mismatch of children belonging to stepfamilies occurred both in boys and girls, our data indicated a higher incidence of externalizing problems among children. This result is consistent with previous studies (Dunn 202), while other researchers found a greater mismatch in girls, although they are mainly linked to internalizing problems (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 2002). Girls are more likely to experience as much stress as boys throughout the separation and family reconstitution, but they may tend to react passively or even with good behavior, in order to provoke a positive change in the family system. Moreover they tend to show stress with depressive disorders. Instead boys often behave more aggressively and generate more conflicts, which are easily detected by parents and educators.

In the case of the association found between growing up in a same-sex parent family and better adjustment in children, it is obvious (as with stepfamilies) that it is the variables associated with the specific profile of this type of family structure, rather than the family structure itself, that explain the good adjustment scores observed. If we analyse the profile of the same-sex parent families that participated in this study, it becomes clear that they have the highest income level and the highest educational level, two variables that are significantly correlated with the indicators of context quality and children's adjustment. We can therefore state that the better adjustment observed in children reared in same-sex parent families is due to the effect of the demographic and contextual variables that characterise these families.

Perhaps the finding that is most worth highlighting is that the results obtained in this research project coincide with those available in the empirical literature in that no adjustment difficulties were observed in children brought up in same-sex parent families (Bos et al. 2007; Tasker 2005). In the future, longitudinal studies should be carried out in order to determine whether or not problems appear later on, as the children in question grow older, and whether or not any negative effects of social stigmatisation are observed on children's adjustment, as described by Bos and Van Balen (2008).

Given the incidental nature of the sampling process used, it was not possible to compare same-sex parent families of different economic and educational levels. These families are mainly formed by lesbian couples who have either undergone artificial insemination or have adopted their children. Gay couples also underwent a process of adoption in order to legalise their relationship with their children. This means that these families have already been assessed in terms of the quality of the family context they are able to provide. Also, it is highly likely

that the individuals forming these families are acutely aware of their rights, and have proved sufficiently capable of coping with homophobic prejudice to openly declare their sexual orientation and live and raise a child with their chosen partner. It can therefore reasonably be assumed that the situation described in relation to same-sex parent families in this study is not due to biases in the sample group, but rather is a fairly accurate reflection of the true situation of these families in Spain.

In relation to adoptive families, their profile is consistent with that described in the scientific literature: they tend to be families selected on the basis of assessment, with good educational and income levels (Johnson 2002). This explains their high scores on the HOME scale and the absence of adjustment problems in the children raised in these families. In other words, despite the difficulties that many of these adopted children may have experienced during their pre-adoption stage, the high-quality care provided by their current families has served to compensate for any previous lacks. This coincides with currently available empirical evidence (Rutter et al. 2007).

As regards multiple-birth families, we should point out that although many of them had recourse to assisted reproduction techniques (ARTs), this was not the case for all of them. This explains why the results obtained do not coincide with current literature on ARTs, but rather with current literature on multiple-birth families. On the one hand, the fact that these families had recourse to ARTs means that they are generally highly motivated and generate adequate family contexts; however, as multiple-birth families, they were found to face very specific problems, namely high (although not significant) stress levels and low scores on the HOME scale. It should also be remembered that the results obtained coincide with those of other studies, none of which observed adjustment problems in children belonging to these families (Golombok 2000).

Finally, we should conclude by highlighting some of the limitations of this study. Firstly, the selection of families was not random, as this is extremely complicated and even impossible in the case of certain family structures. The kind of sampling procedure used gave rise to a number of biases, such as the high educational level of same-sex parent families or the older age of children living in stepfamilies. Another limitation is related to the small size of each sub-sample, which made it difficult to analyse the diversity existing within each structure type, something which would have been interesting to analyse and which is particularly evident in the case of single-parent families (formed by choice or as the result of a divorce), stepfamilies (paternal or maternal custody; with children belonging to just one or both members of the current couple) and same-sex parent families (gay or lesbian couples). This analysis of diversity would require a number of studies,

each focusing on one single family structure, thus enabling the use of a broader sample group.

Despite these limitations, however, the authors believe that this is a pioneering study in this field, which provides relevant information regarding the effect of diverse processes which take place in families (regardless of their specific structure) on the children growing up in them. One of the most significant contributions of this study is that it applied the same family context and child adjustment assessment protocol to a sample group of six different family structures and the children living in these families.

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