Gay families more accepted than single moms

Pew study find Americans are split evenly overall on accepting 'non-traditional families' but disparage single moms

Christopher Green, left, and Palm Springs Mayor Steve Pougnet, right, shown with their 5-year-old twins Beckham and Julia, say gay families have become more public in recent years. When they first began talking about having children 19 years ago, “we didn’t see any gay couples with kids on the streets,” Pougnet said.

By Linda Carroll

When Steve Pougnet was sworn in as mayor of Palm Springs, Calif., in 2007, his husband, Christopher Green, was at his side. In Pougnet’s arms was his then 2-year-old son, Beckham, while Green held the other twin, Julia.

It was a moment neither man could have imagined possible when they met 19 years ago. Even then, they knew they someday wanted to have children, but they didn’t know if it would be possible and couldn’t be sure how their family would be viewed if they did.

“At that time, we didn’t have any idea how to make this happen,” remembers Pougnet, who is now 47. “We didn’t see any gay couples with kids on the streets.”

When the couple eventually found an organization that would link them up with a surrogate, they jumped at the opportunity — and the twins, now age 5, were born soon after.

Highly visible gay families like Pougnet’s may be changing the way Americans view the world. And a new report by the Pew Research Center seems to bear this out. Its nationally representative survey of 2,691 people found that Americans are more accepting of families led by gay and lesbian parents than of single moms.

The survey found that when it comes to opinions overall on non-traditional families, such as those with gay and lesbian parents, single mothers, and unmarried parents, the country is split three ways: a third of Americans (dubbed Acceptors by Pew) are comfortable with a wide variety of family situations, a third (Rejectors) consider non-traditional arrangements to be damaging to the country’s social fabric, while the final third (Skeptics) are mixed in their views — approving of some arrangements, but not others.

When it comes to families like Pougnet’s, the news is all good. The vast majority of Acceptors and Skeptics believe gay and lesbian families are at least OK — and might even bring something positive to society.

But single mothers are less accepted, the poll found. That’s where Acceptors and Skeptics differ the most, says Paul Taylor, executive vice president of the Pew Research Center.
“If you took out the question about single mothers, there would be only two groups: Acceptors and Rejectors,” Taylor says. While 98 percent of Acceptors think there’s nothing wrong with women raising their children alone, 99 percent of Skeptics and 98 percent of Rejectors believe that’s bad for society. (The survey only asked about single mothers, not single fathers.)

Even though it’s been decades since then Vice-President Dan Quayle famously lambasted the fictional TV character, and single mother, Murphy Brown, public sentiment may not have changed significantly. Just two weeks ago, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee called out pregnant Oscar winner Natalie Portman as glamorizing "the idea of out-of-wedlock children."

Experts say the survey results didn’t surprise them.

Studies have shown that kids raised by a single parent don’t do quite as well as those from two parent families, says Margaret Crosbie-Burnett, a professor emerita at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla. But the effect isn’t huge, she said. Crosbie-Burnett blamed the level of negativity found in the report on the fact that the survey asked about single mothers rather than single parents.

Katherine Stamps Mitchell, an assistant professor of human ecology and sociology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, suggested the question hooked into misconceptions Americans still harbor against single moms.

**Shifting attitudes**

Gay and lesbian couples, however, are perceived as better for the kids because they’re providing a two-parent family, says Stamps Mitchell.

“There’s no doubt there’s been a shift in attitudes towards gays and lesbians,” says Charlotte Patterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. “You also see the shift in attitudes towards marriage. Just 15 years ago a Gallup Poll found that 68 percent of Americans said gay marriage should not be legally recognized while 27 percent said it should be. Now the split is 50/50.”

One reason for the attitude change may be the increasing contact people have with gays both socially and at work, Patterson says. “When we have contact with diverse types of people, attitudes change. You saw this with the integration of the military many years ago. When black and white soldiers worked toward a common aims, you saw attitudes change.”

That sort of contact may have led to the easy acceptance Pougnet found among Palm Springs residents. “There’s been an outpouring of warmth,” he says. “Not one negative incident.”

The media may also have played a big role, says Stamps Mitchell.

“You’re seeing gay families more and more on TV in shows like ‘Modern Family’ and in movies like ‘The Kids are All Right,’” Stamps Mitchell says. “The media does help with acceptance.”

For his part, Pougnet believes the change is simply due to people seeing how gay families aren’t different than any others. “We go to our kids’ soccer games like the other parents in America,” he says. “Our kids are in the church choir. And like other parents, we love our children unconditionally.”