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### *Descriptive Finding*

## **Attitudes toward child well-being in diverse families across Europe**

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## **Attitudes toward child well-being in diverse families across Europe**

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### **Abstract**

#### **BACKGROUND**

European families have diversified, with more children raised in single-parent, step-parent, and same-sex parent families. Whereas child outcomes in these families are well-studied, societal attitudes toward family diversity remain underexplored.

#### **OBJECTIVE**

This study examines (1) perceptions of child well-being in nontraditional families compared to traditional ones, (2) their variation by family types in terms of structure and composition, and (3) sociodemographic and international differences in these attitudes across Europe.

#### **METHODS**

We used the “Attitudes toward family diversity” module from the European Social Survey CRONOS-2 online panel study (2022) across 11 countries. We analysed responses on perceptions of child well-being in six family types relatively to traditional families: single mother, single father, stepmother, stepfather, gay male parents, and lesbian parents. Distributions were explored by country, gender, age, education, and income quintiles.

#### **RESULTS**

Generally, nontraditional families were perceived as less favourable to children’s well-being than traditional ones. However, whereas over two-thirds view child well-being growing up in stepfamilies and same-sex families as comparable to child well-being in

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traditional families, positive attitudes vary widely, from 40% in Central and Eastern Europe to 85% in Nordic countries. Single-parent families received less approval. Women and younger individuals showed more favourable attitudes to nontraditional families. Lower socioeconomic respondents had less favourable attitudes toward same-sex families, but they are more open toward lone parenthood.

## **CONCLUSION**

Attitudes toward nontraditional families' ability to guarantee, as traditional families, children's well-being vary across Europe. Stepfamilies and same-sex families receive higher approval than single-parent families. Two-adult forms are preferred to one-adult families. Sociodemographic factors shape these views.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

This study is one of the first to systematically compare attitudes on family diversity for children's well-being across Europe, offering new insights into the relative importance of parental gender, the number of parents, biological relatedness, and gender composition of parents.

## **1. Introduction**

Families have become increasingly diverse in many European countries. Although most children still grow up with their biological mother and father, a growing number of children are raised by single parents and stepfamilies due to the rise in divorce and separation (Bernardi and Mortelmans 2018; Steinbach, Kuhnt, and Knüll 2016). Because of widening legal and medical possibilities, same-sex couples and single people may nowadays become parents. Consequently, more children experience 'nontraditional' parental relationships, such as with step-parents or same-sex parents.

The increase in nontraditional families has fuelled concerns about children's well-being and prompted extensive research on how children fare in different families, typically compared to the 'traditional' family (i.e., different-sex couple of biological mother and father). Results show no difference in child outcomes between children with same-sex and those with different-sex parents (Manning, Fetto, and Lamidi 2014), while less positive child outcomes are generally observed for children in stepfamilies and single-parent families (Brown 2010; Chapple 2013; Saint-Jacques et al. 2018).

Less is known about people's attitudes toward child well-being in diverse family forms (Cheng, Kelley, and Powell 2023). People's views may not align with empirical reality due to misconceptions about children's well-being in different families or morality-driven attitudes (Quadlin et al. 2022). Yet these attitudes shape public discourse on family diversity, attributing normative value to empirical facts and legitimising

policies. Moreover, societal acceptance may be a consequence and a driving force of legal and policy changes that accommodate new family forms (Cheng, Kelley, and Powell 2023). Increased acceptance can reduce associated stigma, likely improving outcomes for parents and children living in nontraditional families (Kalmijn 2010; Rosenthal et al. 2019), while the lack of it has the opposite result (Rossier, Bernardi, and Sauvain-Dugerdil 2023). Therefore, examining the public stance on child well-being in different family forms and how they differ by country is important.

We first aim to give an up-to-date, comprehensive view of people's perceptions of child well-being in nontraditional family forms in European countries. We use unique data from 2022 on 11 countries. People reported how they think children fare in six different family types, as compared to traditional families: single-father families, single-mother families, stepmother families, stepfather families, families with gay parents, and lesbian female parents. These data allow us to extend existing research by considering attitudes on child well-being in various family types. Previous studies often did not focus on child well-being. If so, studies have focused on attitudes toward single parenting (Hakovirta, Kallio, and Salin 2021; Treas, Lui, and Gubernskaya 2014), while attitudes toward child well-being in other nontraditional families, such as same-sex or stepfamilies, have received little attention (Kalmijn 2021; Saint-Jacques, Godbout, and Ivers 2020).

Our second aim is to compare people's attitudes across different family types. As the same question was asked for the six family types, we can see which nontraditional families are accepted most. Furthermore, our data consider various family types at the intersection of family structure (one or two parents) and composition (gender and nature of the parental relationship), which allows us to explore the relative importance of (1) parental gender (i.e., mothers versus fathers), (2) the number of parents (i.e., single parent versus two parents), (3) biological relatedness (i.e., step-parents versus biological parents), and (4) gender composition (i.e., same-sex versus different-sex parents). Prior comparisons of nontraditional families varying on both dimensions are scarce and were done with American data (Cheng, Kelley, and Powell 2023; Quadlin et al. 2022). Most considered one or few family types, often differentiating families based on parental gender (e.g., single mothers versus single fathers) (Bennett and Jamieson 1999; DeJean, McGeorge, and Stone Carlson 2012; Webb, Chonody, and Kavanagh 2017) or family structure (e.g., different-sex versus same-sex families). We expect that views differ by parental gender as mothers are often seen as central to childrearing. Hence, views on child well-being in single-mother and lesbian families may be more positive than for families with a single father or gay parents, though the evidence is mixed on single mothers versus single fathers. We may expect also less favourable perceptions of child well-being in stepfamilies compared to biological-parent families because of negative stereotypes prevailing on step-parents, especially stepmothers (Miller, Cartwright, and Gibson 2018;

Saint-Jacques, Godbout, and Ivers 2020). The traditional two-parent family ideal and its greater resources suggest less positive attitudes toward one-parent families (Quadlin et al. 2022). Stepfamilies and single-parent families often follow separation or divorce, which raises concerns related to these transitions (e.g., less contact of the child with at least one parent). For these reasons, we may expect less positive views on step- and single-parent families. Finally, because of social stigma (Costa, Pereira, and Leal 2018) and concerns about children being exposed to only male or female role models, same-sex parents may be less accepted than different-sex parents. As the six family types differ on these dimensions, a simultaneous comparison highlights which dimensions are (most) critical for people's views.

Our third aim is to explore the variation of people's views across countries and by individual characteristics. Previous international comparisons often used data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) or the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP) (Sani and Quaranta 2022; Treas, Lui, and Gubernskaya 2014). However, items on child well-being in these datasets refer to one specific family type. For instance, ISSP respondents were asked whether they think one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents. We consider people's views on child well-being in several family types across 11 countries from all parts of Europe (Northern, Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe). The countries covered by European Social Survey vary in their family values, the extent of sociodemographic changes related to family life, and the legal rights granted to emerging family forms. We expect that individuals in countries at the forefront of the transition toward greater family diversity (e.g., those with higher divorce rates and more legal recognition of nontraditional families) will hold more positive attitudes than those in countries where such sociodemographic shifts are less pronounced. More specifically, we expect people in Nordic countries to have the most positive views, while those in Central and Eastern European countries are likely to have the least favourable views on child well-being in nontraditional families (See also: Hakovirta and Skinner 2021). Besides country variation, prior research showed sociodemographic variation in attitudes toward nontraditional families, with women, younger, and higher educated persons being more positive (Hakovirta, Kallio, and Salin 2021; Herek 2002). We examine individual differences in views for each family type by sex, age, and socioeconomic status, and extend previous work by assessing whether sociodemographic differentials are similar across family types.

## **2. Data and method**

We use the "Attitudes toward family diversity" module developed by the authors, which was fielded in 2022 as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) CRONOS-2 online panel

survey. CRONOS-2 uses an input-harmonised approach to represent a large-scale, cross-national, probability-based online panel. In all 11 countries where the module was fielded, panel recruitment, setup, maintenance, and data processing followed the same methodological principles. Respondents were 18 years or older, lived in private households, and had access to the internet. They were recruited after ESS round 10 (2020–2022) (Bottoni 2023), so the dataset also contains variables from this wave. The sample included 6,586 respondents in 11 countries with country-specific numbers: Austria ( $n = 647$ ), Belgium (573), the Czech Republic (284), Finland (739), France (724), Iceland (525), Italy (243), Portugal (396), Slovenia (1221), Sweden (847), and the United Kingdom (487). More information about CRONOS-2 can be found in the CROSS-National Online Survey (CRONOS-2) Panel: Data and Documentation User Guide (Bottoni 2023).

In the module, respondents reported for six family types: three nontraditional family forms (lone, step, and same-sex parenthood) differentiated by two parental genders about whether growing up in said family form is much worse, worse, equal, better, or much better for children than growing up with both biological parents (mother and father). The Appendix, Table A-1, and Figure A-1 present the exact formulation of the questions and show the weighted frequencies and confidence intervals of the detailed answers for the six family types. Only a few respondents consider the alternative parenthood situation to be ‘(much) better’ (from 3% to 10%), so we grouped them with those considering it is ‘equal,’ as in both instances, they are open to the alternative family form, called ‘positive attitudes’ hereafter. Alternative definitions distinguishing only ‘equal’ answers versus ‘(much) worse’ (Figure A-2) or ‘equal’ versus all other answers (Figure A-3) are provided in the Appendix, giving quite similar results overall and by country.

We can then compare three types of contrasts using these six nontraditional family forms:

**One parent versus two parents:** Respondents were asked whether growing up with a single parent is worse, equal, or better for children than growing up with both parents, and asked separately for a lone mother and a lone father, respectively. This way, attitudes toward one parent versus two parents and lone motherhood versus lone fatherhood were captured. These items are referred to as ‘lone mother’ and ‘lone father.’

**Stepfamilies versus two biological parents:** Using the same wording, items also compared ‘mother with a stepfather’ and ‘father with a stepmother’ with two biological parents, allowing for exploring whether people attach importance to the biological relatedness with children and the gender of the step-parent. These items are abbreviated as ‘father and step’ and ‘mother and step.’

**Same-sex versus opposite-sex parents:** The last two items concern same-sex parents in comparison to heterosexual parents, further distinguishing gay couples and

lesbian couples. We can thus ascertain how respondents weigh the gender composition of parents in their views. These items are labelled ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay.’

We compared people’s views between participating European countries and by respondents’ gender, age, education (three levels), and household income (in five quintiles). Country-specific income deciles are provided by the CRONOS team, which are made comparable across countries. Missing values were rare and less than 1%, except for income (8% of respondents). The descriptive findings below exclude respondents with missing values on the variable(s) of interest. All data are weighted.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Attitudes toward child’s well-being in new family forms in Europe

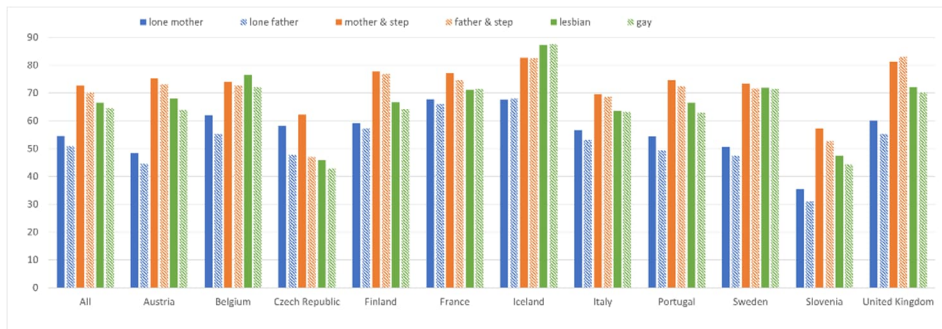
Figure 1 shows the percentages of European respondents who think it makes no difference (or is (much) better) for children to grow up in the six nontraditional family types compared to growing up with both biological parents. Slightly more than half of European citizens believe that growing up with a single mother makes no difference in terms of child well-being compared to growing up with both biological parents. The picture is the same for single fathers, even though this situation is more exceptional. Figure 1 furthermore shows that little over 70% consider step-parent families equivalent to growing up with both biological parents, and this percentage is slightly lower for same-sex parents. These percentages (at the European level and in most countries) are higher than those for lone parents, showing a preference for having two parental figures for a child’s well-being. There is hardly any difference based on the gender of the step-parent or the gender of the same-sex couple.

Whereas acceptance of same-sex families is relatively high (by two persons out of three) overall, the percentages thinking it is similar (or better) than having opposite-sex parents are higher, around 70%, in Sweden, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France, and reach a maximum of 87% in Iceland. These countries also ranked among the highest regarding legal recognition of same-sex couples in the early 2000s (Waldijk et al. 2017). Acceptance levels are lowest in the Czech Republic and Slovenia (43% and 47%). Portugal, Italy, Austria, and Finland fall in between, with percentages close to the European average. A similar pattern is found for attitudes toward stepfamilies, with the lowest percentages observed for the Czech Republic and Slovenia (48%), with more positive attitudes for mother and stepfather than father and stepmother, especially in the Czech Republic (62% and 47% respectively). Iceland again ranks top, followed by the United Kingdom and Finland (around 80%). Percentages in the other countries are around the European average (70%). Regarding lone parenthood, Iceland and France stand out:



Two out of three respondents think that lone parenthood is not different from growing up with both biological parents, followed by Finland (58% to 59%), Belgium, and the United Kingdom. Slovenia (around one respondent out of three) and Austria (around 46%) score lowest. Other countries score around average (50% to 58%).

**Figure 1: Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents: Overall and by country**



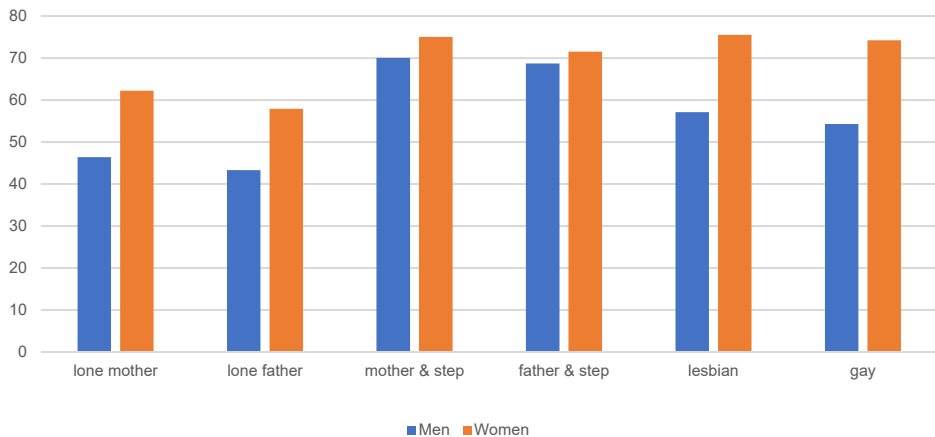
*Note:* 54.5% of respondents perceive children growing up in each nontraditional family type as being equal or (much or very much) better off than children in traditional families.

*Source:* CRONOS-2.0 module "Attitudes toward family diversity." Weighted data.

### 3.2 Sociodemographic differences in attitudes

Figure 2 (based on pooled country data) shows that women are consistently more open to alternative family forms for child's well-being than men ( $p$ -values  $< 0.000$  for the six family forms). Differences are most pronounced for same-sex parents, where women's acceptance rates are almost 20 percentage points higher than men's. For instance, over half of the men consider children to fare as well with male gay parents than with opposite-sex parents, whereas nearly three-quarters of women think so. Women also more often (by 15 percentage points) think it makes no difference to grow up with a single parent, but the gender gap is small for stepfamilies.

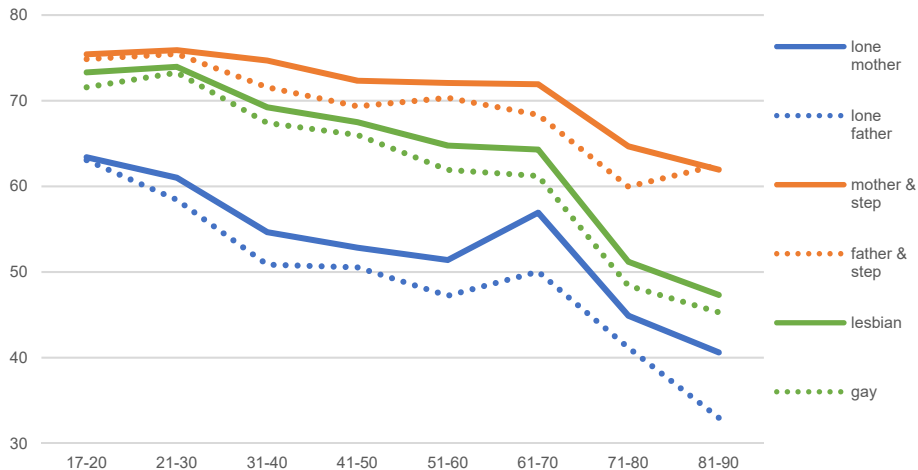
**Figure 2: Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents: by gender**



Source: CRONOS-2.0 module "Attitudes toward family diversity." Weighted data.

Figure 3 shows age differences (also corresponding to generational cleavages) in attitudes. The continuous decrease in acceptance rates indicates that young people are more open to new family forms than older people. Almost three-quarters of those under 30 years old consider stepfamilies or same-sex families equivalent to a traditional family. Acceptance decreases slowly until age 61 to 70 and sharply thereafter for those 71 and over. The same decrease across ages is observed for lone parenthood. Regardless of age, a preference for two-parent families versus one-parent families is observed. As indicated by the difference between the dotted and continuous curves, the maternal figure is more highly valued by older generations than the paternal figure. In contrast, maternal and paternal figures are perceived as similarly important for child well-being among younger generations.

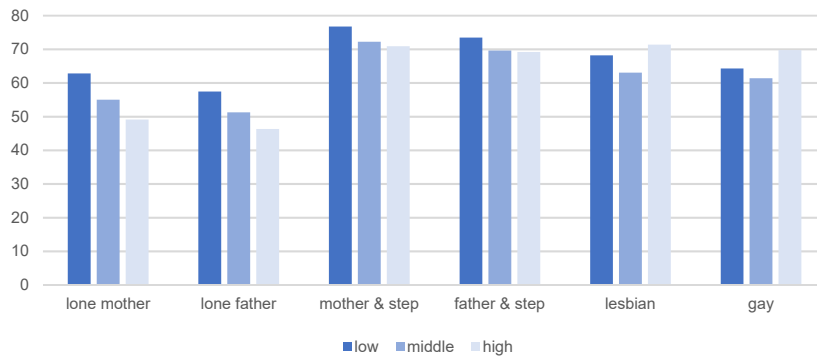
**Figure 3: Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents: by respondent's age categories**



Source: CRONOS-2.0 module "Attitudes toward family diversity." Weighted data.

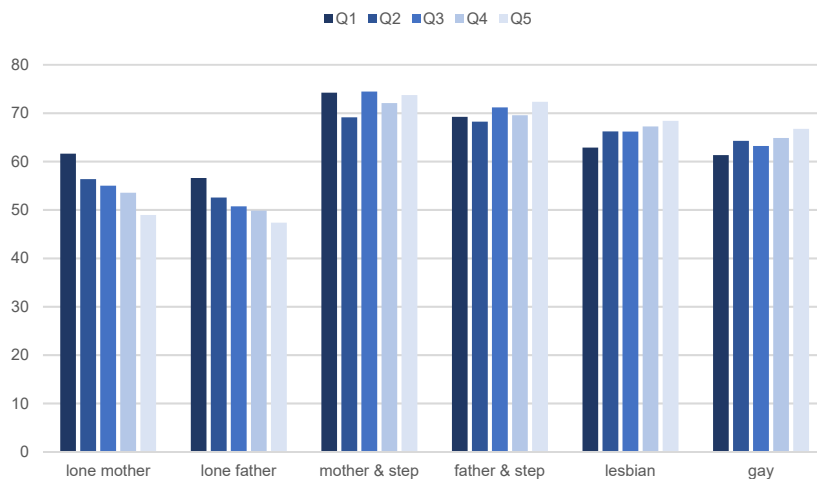
Figures 4 and 5 show the role of socioeconomic status (SES). The SES gradient follows the same direction regardless of whether we look at educational attainment or household income. A negative gradient is found for single parenthood. Higher educated people are less likely to think children fare as well in single-parent families than in two-parent families (Figure 4). Accordingly, the income gradient steadily decreases (Figure 5). For same-sex parenthood, the gradient is reversed, although of a smaller magnitude and clearer for income than for educational differences. The higher the income, the more progressive one's attitudes about same-sex parenthood. The attitudes toward stepfamilies shown in the SES gradient are less salient.

**Figure 4:** Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents: by respondent's educational level



Source: CRONOS-2.0 module "Attitudes toward family diversity." Weighted data.

**Figure 5:** Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents: by household income



Source: CRONOS-2.0 module "Attitudes toward family diversity." Weighted data.

## 4. Conclusion

This study highlights the variations in attitudes toward child well-being in diverse family forms across Europe. The most central finding is that stepfamilies and same-sex parent families received relatively high levels of approval, but single-parent families faced far greater scepticism. These findings suggest that the presence of two parental figures, regardless of biological relatedness or gender composition, is generally viewed more favourably than growing up with only one adult. This underscores the enduring societal preference for two-parent households, even when nontraditional structures are involved. Though there are few European studies to compare our results with, American findings show more similar rates of approval when comparing single and same-sex parents (Cheng, Kelley, and Powell). Interestingly, gender biases in attitudes toward parenting appear to be diminishing, as respondents showed no substantial differences in preferences for parenthood by their gender (e.g., lesbian versus gay male parents). The more substantial role of dual parenting over the other dimensions (parental gender, gender composition, and biological relatedness) may be due to different motives for varying attitudes (Quadlin et al. 2022). Whereas moral values may drive attitudes toward same-sex parenting, it is possible that these families, because they are not necessarily previously dissolved, receive a positive attitudinal premium compared to family forms typically emerging after parental separation. Single parenthood may be viewed as less beneficial for many reasons, including economic concerns such as a lack of financial resources (Quadlin et al. 2022). However, our data do not directly question differences among nontraditional families types, and ignores multiple factors that can influence perceptions of a child's well-being, such as the dynamics of children's family structures or the relationship with and visits to the noncustodial or biological parent.

Individual and cross-European differences were found, with younger generations and women expressing much greater acceptance of family diversity, which aligns with prior research (Herek 2002). Country variation also aligns with previous work (Hakovirta, Kallio, and Salin 2021). Northern and Western European countries – particularly Iceland, the United Kingdom, France, and Finland – were most positive in their views, while Central and Eastern countries (the Czech Republic and Slovenia) consistently were the least positive. Surprisingly, Sweden ranked average (except for same-sex couples), and Austria was relatively negative about single parenthood.

The inclusion of a wider array of family forms revealed an interesting contrast in social acceptance of lone parenthood versus same-sex parenthood, shaped by education and income level. The SES gradient was reversed for lone parenthood and same-sex parenthood: Whereas highly educated (or high-income) people were more open to same-sex parenthood, they were less open to lone parenthood. Perhaps higher SES classes have higher economic standards for parenthood, or they are less positive because lone

parenthood is a less common experience than among lower SES classes. Child well-being is, however, a very complex concept, and in this study, we rely solely on individual perceptions, which may vary depending on respondents' beliefs about what constitutes essential elements of children's development. Another limitation is that we compare only two different static family forms while family types are much more diverse, can change over a child's life course, and be combined simultaneously for a child in joint physical custody, and this trajectory may affect child well-being.

Overall, Europe shows high acceptance levels of nontraditional families as concern for a child's well-being. In many countries, a (large) majority viewed nontraditional parenting positively for children. Still, lone parenting is viewed more sceptically, and over one-third of respondents still prefer children to grow up with two different-sex parents, indicating that traditional family ideals remain a strong norm across Europe. These findings remain descriptive and need to be further followed by a multivariate approach and other determinants of attitudes toward nontraditional families. The results underscore the need for continued policy efforts to challenge stigmas and ensure equal recognition and support for all family types.

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## Appendix: Details of the questions used

The exact question has the following formulation: In the next questions, we would like to ask your opinion about different types of families. When we refer to parents in the first set of questions, we refer to both biological parents and heterosexual parents who have adopted children.

Compared to growing up with both parents, do you think it is better or worse for children to grow up with *their mother only*?

1. Much worse to grow up with *their mother only*
2. Worse to grow up with *their mother only*
3. Makes no difference
4. Better to grow up with *their mother only*
5. Much better to grow up with *their mother only*
6. No answer

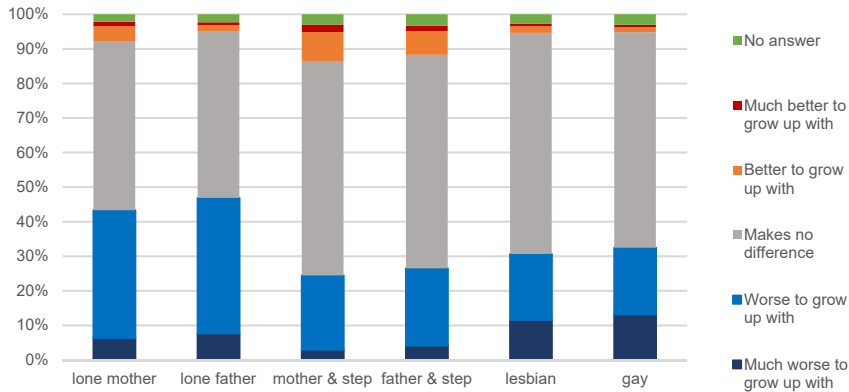
The same question is replicated with the following types of families instead of with their mother only: their father only, their father and stepmother, their mother and stepfather, lesbian parents, and gay male parents.

**Table A-1: Weighted frequencies and 95% confidence intervals of detailed responses about child's well-being in the six family types ( $N = 6,586$ )**

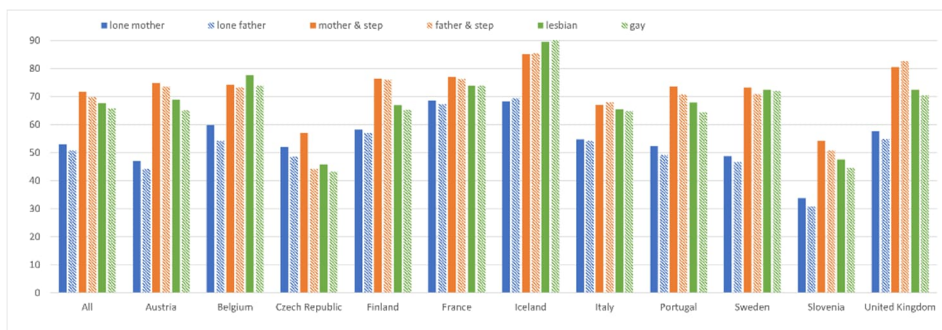
	lone mother	lone father	mother and step	father and step	lesbian	gay
Much worse to grow up with	6.40 [5.81–6.99]	7.75 [7.11–8.40]	3.00 [2.59–3.41]	4.16 [3.68–4.65]	11.61 [10.84–12.39]	13.24 [12.42–14.06]
Worse to grow up with	36.90 [35.74–38.07]	39.13 [37.95–40.31]	21.43 [20.44–22.42]	22.35 [21.34–23.35]	19.05 [18.10–20.00]	19.23 [18.28–20.18]
Makes no difference	48.93 [47.71–50.13]	48.27 [47.07–49.48]	62.01 [60.83–63.18]	61.74 [60.56–62.91]	63.96 [62.80–65.12]	62.36 [61.19–63.53]
Better to grow up with	4.30 [3.81–4.79]	1.65 [1.35–1.96]	8.42 [7.75–9.09]	6.89 [6.28–7.50]	1.86 [1.54–2.19]	1.43 [1.14–1.71]
Much better to grow up with	1.27 [1.00–1.54]	0.87 [0.65–1.10]	2.16 [1.81–2.52]	1.52 [1.23–1.82]	0.72 [0.52–0.93]	0.73 [0.52–0.93]
No answer	2.20 [1.84–2.55]	2.31 [1.95–2.68]	2.98 [2.57–3.39]	3.34 [2.91–3.77]	2.79 [2.39–3.19]	3.02 [2.61–3.44]

Note: Values in brackets are 95% confidence interval, assuming each category's proportion as independent of the others.

**Figure A-1: Weighted frequencies of detailed responses to the six opinions on children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents ( $N = 6,586$ )**



**Figure A-2: Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents (% of respondents answering 'makes no difference' versus 'worse' or 'much worse'), overall and by country**



**Figure A-3: Percentages of respondents who think that children growing up in each nontraditional type are equally or (much) better off than children growing up with both parents (% of respondents answering ‘makes no difference’ versus all other answers), overall and by country**

