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CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING
OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In 1989 New Zealand is considering legislation which will make discrimination against lesbians, transexuals and gay men illegal. To increase children's understanding of sexual orientations educators need to have some knowledge of what children already understand and how children use their information. The three studies address this issue in spite of the difficulties in obtaining permission to ask children about homosexuality. A homophobia questionnaire was administered to 290 first year psychology students. They were also asked to recall their childhood feelings about gay people when they first met a homosexual and first understood the concept of homosexuality. Older women were the least homophobic. A second study was carried out with 5, 7, and 11 year old children in three schools with a family discrimination task. A third of the 11 year olds could label the couples of the same sex as gay, homosexual or lesbian and gave more positive items to the two-parent families. A third study involved 31 children from two-parent families and 32 from lesbian families. Out of the 63 six to ten year olds, 27 could define 'homosexual' and 'gay' and 37 could define lesbian. Twenty could use a strategy to recognise a lesbian. Although social discrimination against non-heterosexual orientations placed some constraints on this research, it yielded preliminary evidence for the emergence of children's understanding of sexual orientations between 7 and 11 years of age.