

## **New families, old values: considerations regarding the welfare of the child**

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In spite of the changes that have taken place to the structure of the family in the latter part of this century, it remains the case that a family headed by two heterosexual married parents who are genetically related to their children represents the ideal, and that deviations from this pattern are commonly assumed to result in negative outcomes for the child. Families created by assisted reproduction depart from the norm in two important ways. Firstly, the children may be genetically unrelated to the father (when conceived by donor insemination), to the mother (when conceived by egg donation), or to both parents (when conceived using a donated embryo). In the case of surrogacy, whereby one woman hosts a pregnancy for another woman, the child may be genetically related to neither, one or both parents depending on the use of a donated egg and/or spermatozoa. Secondly, a growing number of single heterosexual women and lesbian women are opting for assisted reproduction, particularly donor insemination, to allow them to conceive a child without the involvement of a male partner. Children in these families grow up in the absence of a father from the outset, and many children in lesbian families are raised by two mothers.

In the UK, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990) requires the welfare of the child to be considered, including the need of that child for a father, in the decision of whether or not to offer assisted reproduction, although there are no specific criteria for acceptance or rejection of prospective parents. In the article by Blyth and Cameron (1998), it was argued that the welfare of the child test is problematic in a number of ways including the use of different criteria by different licensed centres, lack of knowledge about what factors are likely to place the child at risk and of how to obtain the necessary information to make a fair judgement of risk, and the potential for this test to be used as a means to exclude certain social groups from treatment. The aim of the present paper is to add to this debate by considering what aspects of parenting matter most for children's optimal psychological development, whether conception by assisted reproduction is likely to place children at risk, and what can be learned from empirical studies of the development of children conceived in this way.

### **Parenting: what really counts?**

From a psychological perspective, the quality of children's relationships with their parents, and particularly how securely attached they are to their parents, is considered to be central to their emotional well-being throughout childhood and into adult life (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978; Main *et al.*, 1985; Rutter, 1995). Attachments form when an infant is ~6 months old. It is at this age that they begin to show distress when separated from a parent, and at the same time begin to show wariness of strangers – or even outright protest when left with someone they do not know. Except in severe cases of social deprivation, all children become attached to their parents. It is the nature of their attachments that can vary; some attachment relationships are secure whereas others are insecure, and the child may be securely attached to one parent while insecurely attached to the other. Securely attached children use their parents as a base from which to explore the world and can obtain comfort from them when distressed. In contrast, insecurely attached children cannot depend on their parents to be emotionally available when they need them. Infants and young children who are securely attached to their parents (or to at least one parent) have been shown to fare somewhat better than insecurely attached children in many aspects of psychological development; they have higher self-esteem, they are more popular, and they are more co-operative at school (e.g. Suess *et al.*, 1992; Youngblade and Belsky, 1992; Belsky and Cassidy, 1994). It has even been shown that they are more likely to have securely attached children themselves (Fonagy *et al.*, 1991).

Studies of differences in children's attachments have shown that the involvement of a person (usually but not necessarily a parent) who is warm and responsive to the child, and who is sensitive to the child's needs, is associated with the development of a secure attachment relationship, although characteristics of the child, such as how irritable or sociable he or she is, may influence that person's behaviour towards the child. Thus, from the perspective of attachment theory, it is parental responsiveness, rather than biological relatedness, that is considered to be important for the development of secure attachment relationships (Grossmann *et al.*, 1985; Isabella *et al.*, 1989). Further evidence for the relatively greater importance of parental responsiveness comes from the lack of difference between adopted and non-adopted infants in the proportion classified as securely attached to their mother (Singer *et al.*, 1985). Bowlby (1969, 1973) argued that it is through their experiences with attachment figures that children develop self-esteem; children whose parents are sensitive and responsive

are likely to view themselves as loveable and have a positive sense of self whereas children whose parents are emotionally unavailable or rejecting are more likely to develop a lack of self-worth.

Aspects of parent-child relationships other than security of attachment have also been shown to shape children's development, the most widely studied of which is parental style. Baumrind (1989) has demonstrated that an authoritative style of parenting, i.e. a combination of warmth and discipline (as opposed to an extremely authoritarian or an extremely free-and-easy parenting style) has the most positive outcomes for children's psychological development, with children of authoritative parents the most likely to be self-reliant, socially responsible and co-operative. It is important to remember, however, that parental style may, to some extent at least, be a product of the child's personality. After all, it is a much easier undertaking to adopt an authoritative style with a co-operative child than with a child who tends to be aggressive or defiant. In addition, factors other than parental style such as shared feelings and connectedness of communication are thought to be important aspects of children's relationships with their parents (Dunn, 1993).

It is not just the quality of parents' relationships with their children but also the quality of their relationship with each other that influences children's psychological well-being. Recent research has pointed to a link between marital conflict and the development of psychological problems in children, most commonly the development of antisocial behaviour and conduct problems particularly among boys (Emery, 1988; Grych and Fincham, 1990; Cummings and Davies, 1994). Although the mechanisms through which parental conflict results in psychological difficulties for children are not fully understood, there are thought to be both direct effects resulting from the child's repeated exposure to hostility between the parents (Cummings and Cummings, 1988; Harold and Conger, 1997) and indirect effects resulting from the poorer quality of parenting of mothers and fathers who are locked in conflict with each other (Fauber and Long, 1991). An association also exists between parents' psychological well-being and the psychological well-being of their children such that children whose parents have psychological problems are more at risk for psychological problems themselves. For example, there is growing evidence that a mother's depression produces an increased risk of difficulties for her child with recent research pointing to a link between post-natal depression, the mother's lack of responsiveness to her infant, and the infant's insecure attachment to the mother (Murray, 1992).

### **Parenting children conceived by assisted reproduction**

From the above discussion it appears that several aspects of parenting are related to children's psychological well-being; sensitive responding, emotional availability, and a combination of warmth and control are associated with positive outcomes whereas marital conflict and parental psychiatric disorder can have a negative effect. Although it is impossible to predict just which children will experience difficulties, not least because some children show remarkable resilience in the face of multiple adversities (Rutter, 1985; Zimmerman and Arunkumar, 1994), there is substantial empirical evidence that these factors play a part in influencing the course of children's social, emotional and identity development. In considering the welfare of a child born through assisted reproduction we may therefore examine whether these families deviate from the ideal family unit in ways that are likely to have a negative impact upon the aspects of parenting that matter most for children's psychological well-being. In so far as such parents do not differ with respect to quality of parenting, difficulties would not necessarily be expected for the child.

### ***Absence of a genetic link***

A major concern regarding the potential negative consequences of the absence of a genetic link between the child and one or both parents is that the practice of keeping information about genetic origins secret from the child may have an adverse effect on the quality of parent-child relationships and consequently on the child (Daniels and Taylor, 1993; Schaffer and Diamond, 1993). As few children are told that a donated spermatozoa or egg had been used in their conception, the large majority grow up not knowing that their father or their mother is genetically unrelated to them.

Findings suggestive of an association between secrecy about genetic parentage and negative outcomes for children have come from two major sources: research on adoption and the family therapy literature. It has been demonstrated that adopted children benefit from knowledge about their biological parents, and that children who are not given such information may become confused about their identity and at risk for emotional problems (Sants, 1964; Triseliotis, 1973; Hoopes, 1990; Schechter and Bertocci, 1990). In the field of assisted reproduction, parallels have been drawn with the adoptive situation and it has been suggested that lack of knowledge of, or information about, the donor may be harmful for the child (Snowden *et al.*, 1983; Clamar, 1989; Snowden, 1990). From a family therapy perspective, secrets are believed to

be detrimental to family functioning because they create boundaries between those who know and those who do not, and cause anxiety when topics related to the secret are discussed (Karpel, 1980). In examining the particular case of parents keeping secrets from their children, Papp (1993) argued that children can sense when information is being withheld due to the taboo that surrounds the discussion of certain topics, and that they may become confused and anxious, or even develop symptoms of psychological disorder, as a result. Experimental studies provide some support for this suggestion by demonstrating that people who are deliberately trying not to disclose information often give themselves away by their tone of voice, body posture or by saying less than they normally would in a similar situation (De Paulo, 1992).

A further concern raised by the use of gamete donation is that parents may feel or behave less positively toward a nongenetic than a genetic child. It has been argued that the child may not be fully accepted as part of the family, and that the absence of a genetic tie to one or both parents may have an undermining effect on the child's sense of identity (Burns, 1987). Studies of adopted children who are aware of their origins (Brodzinsky *et al.*, 1995), and of children in stepfamilies (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington, 1993), have shown that the lack of genetic relatedness between a child and one, or both, parents can be associated with alienation and hostility between the parents and the child. However, adopted children have to face that they were given up by their biological mother, and children in stepfamilies not only have to cope with their new stepparent alongside the loss of a biological parent with whom they had shared their daily lives but often acquire step brothers and sisters as well. Children born through egg or sperm donation do not experience the loss of an existing parent. Nor do they need to negotiate relationships with new family members. Thus genetic unrelatedness has a different meaning for children conceived by gamete donation than for children in adoptive families or in stepfamilies. It is also important to remember that the large majority of children who are adopted in infancy, the situation that most closely resembles conception by egg or sperm donation, do not experience psychological difficulties as they grow up (Brodzinsky and Schechter, 1990).

In spite of the expectations that children conceived by gamete donation may be at risk for psychological problems, research on children conceived by egg or sperm donation shows not only that these children are functioning well, but also that they have better relationships with their parents than children who have been naturally conceived (Cook *et al.*, 1995; Golombok *et al.*, 1995, 1996, 1998). This suggests that a strong desire for parenthood seems to be more important than genetic relatedness for fostering positive family relationships, and that conception by gamete donation does not appear to have an adverse effect on the socio-emotional development of the child. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the average age of children studied was 6 years. In addition, not one of the 111 donor insemination parents interviewed, and only one of the 21 egg donation parents, had told their child about his genetic origins.

### ***Single heterosexual mothers***

On average, children in single parent families do less well than those in two-parent households in terms of both psychological adjustment and academic achievement (Ferri, 1976; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). They are also less likely to go on to higher education and more likely to leave home and become parents themselves at an early age. But it is not simply being raised by a single parent that leads to these outcomes. Children in single parent families are more likely to suffer economic hardship, and many will have been exposed to the conflict, distress and family disruption that is commonly associated with their parents' separation or divorce.

Experiencing their parents' separation or divorce can be extremely upsetting for children, and for 2 years afterwards they are more likely to develop psychological problems than children in intact families (Amato and Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1988, 1989; Hetherington *et al.*, 1982, 1985). Boys, in particular, can become aggressive and difficult to manage both at home and at school. Various explanations have been given for the rise in children's emotional and behavioural difficulties at this time including reduced family income and the mother's distress which may reduce her ability to look after her children. But the single most important factor leading to problems for children appears to be hostility between the parents before, and around the time of, the divorce (Amato, 1993). It is these factors that accompany single parenthood, rather than single parenthood itself, that are largely responsible for the disadvantages experienced by children in one-parent homes.

One question that is often posed regarding single mother families is whether the negative consequences for children result from the absence of a father in particular or the absence of a second parent from the home. This is a difficult question to answer as the two go hand-in-hand making it difficult to conclude whether it is one, or the other, or both that make the difference for the child. Factors such as parental conflict and financial hardship are clearly linked to the father but we cannot say whether it is the lack or loss of a parent in general, or of a male parent in particular, that is associated with the difficulties faced by children in single mother homes.

Studies of two-parent families show that fathers spend much less time with their children than mothers, but it seems that this matters less than what they do when they are with them. The more that fathers are actively involved in parenting, the better the outcome for children's social and emotional development, and fathers appear to be particularly valued by their children as playmates (Parke, 1996; Lamb, 1997). However, it does not

seem to be their maleness that matters. If their gender was important we would expect children without fathers, and children with highly involved fathers, to differ in terms of their masculinity and femininity from children in traditional two-parent families. There is no evidence that this is the case. Girls in such families are no less feminine, and boys no less masculine, in their identity and behaviour than children who grow up in more traditional homes, and children of highly involved fathers hold less conventional attitudes about male and female roles (Stevenson and Black, 1988; Radin, 1994). Instead, it seems that fathers have a positive effect on their children's development in the same way as mothers do. Fathers who are affectionate to their children, who are sensitive to their needs, and who respond appropriately to their emotions, are more likely than distant fathers to have well-adjusted children (Lamb, 1997). So it appears that it is their role as an additional parent, not as a male parent, that is beneficial to the child.

Children born to single mothers following donor insemination differ in important ways from children who find themselves in a one-parent family following divorce in that they are raised by a single mother right from the start and have not experienced their parents' divorce and the departure of their father from the family home. Although little is known about children conceived by single women through donor insemination, studies of children raised in fatherless families from the outset (sometimes described as 'solo' mother families) are now beginning to appear. Whether or not these children do less well than those from two-parent homes seems to depend on their financial situation and the extent to which their mother has an active network of family and friends to offer social support (Weinraub and Gringlas, 1995; Golombok *et al.*, 1997). From the evidence that exists so far, family circumstances, rather than single parenthood *per se*, appears to be the best predictor of outcomes for children in solo mother homes.

### ***Lesbian mothers***

Lesbian families are similar to families headed by a single heterosexual mother in that the children are being raised by women without the presence of a father, but differ in the sexual orientation of the mother. There are two common assumptions about children in lesbian families. The first is that they will be teased and ostracized at school, and will develop psychological problems as a result. The second is that the boys will be less masculine, and the girls less feminine, than their peers from heterosexual homes, and also that they will grow up to be lesbian or gay themselves, an outcome that is often considered undesirable by courts of law and policymaking bodies. The early investigations of lesbian families focused on women who had become mothers in the context of a heterosexual marriage before adopting a lesbian identity, and thus the children studied had lived with their father during their early years (Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Hoeffler, 1981; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Green *et al.*, 1986; Huggins, 1989; for reviews, see Patterson, 1992; Golombok and Tasker, 1994). No differences between children of lesbian and single heterosexual mothers have been identified for emotional well-being, quality of friendships or self-esteem. It has also been shown that the sons and daughters of lesbian mothers are no different from the sons and daughters of heterosexual mothers in terms of their masculinity or femininity. Regarding the parenting ability of the mothers themselves, it has been demonstrated that lesbian mothers are just as child-oriented (Pagelow, 1980; Miller *et al.*, 1981; Kirkpatrick, 1987), just as warm and responsive to their children (Golombok *et al.*, 1983) and just as nurturing and confident (Mucklow and Phelan, 1979) as heterosexual mothers. A longitudinal study of adults who had been raised as children in lesbian families has found these young men and women to continue to function well in adult life and to maintain positive relationships with both their mother and her partner, and contrary to popular assumptions, the large majority identify as heterosexual (Tasker and Golombok, 1995, 1997; Golombok and Tasker, 1996).

Perhaps surprisingly, rather more is known about children born through assisted reproduction to lesbian mothers than through assisted reproduction to single heterosexual mothers as controlled studies of lesbian couples who conceived their child through donor insemination have recently been reported. In the UK, 30 lesbian mother families were compared with 41 two-parent heterosexual families using standardized interview and questionnaire measures of the quality of parenting and the socio-emotional development of the child (Golombok *et al.*, 1997). Similarly, Brewaeys *et al.* (1997) studied 30 lesbian mother families in comparison with 68 heterosexual twoparent families in Belgium. In the US, Flaks *et al.* (1995) compared 15 lesbian families with 15 heterosexual families, and Patterson *et al.* (1998) studied 55 families headed by lesbian and 25 families headed by heterosexual parents. Unlike lesbian women who had their children while married, these mothers planned their family together after coming out as lesbian. The studies are of particular interest because they allow an investigation of the influence of the mothers' sexual orientation on children who are raised in lesbian families with no father present right from the start.

Although the children investigated in the above studies are still quite young (around 5–6 years on average), taking the findings together, the evidence so far suggests that they do not differ from their peers in two-parent heterosexual families in terms of gender development. It seems, therefore, that the presence of a father is not necessary for the development of sex-typed behaviour for either boys or girls, and that the mother's lesbian identity, in itself, does not have a direct effect on the gender role behaviour of her daughters or sons. The

children were not cut off from men, however, and many had a close relationship with one or more of the mothers' male friends. In terms of socio-emotional development, the children appear to be functioning well; there is no evidence of raised levels of emotional or behavioural problems among the children raised in a lesbian mother family. It is possibly of relevance that, unlike the majority of children in studies of father absence, almost all of those investigated lived in an intact two-parent family with a good relationship between the parents, and had not experienced family disruption as a result of parental separation or divorce. The most significant finding to emerge so far from the studies of lesbian families with a child conceived by donor insemination is that co-mothers in twoparent lesbian families are more involved with their children than are fathers in two-parent heterosexual families.

## Conclusions

Studying families created by assisted reproduction allows us to address questions about the relative importance of family structure on one hand, and the quality of family relationships on the other, for children's psychological adjustment, as well as interactions between them. What existing findings appear to suggest is that aspects of family structure such as genetic relatedness, number of parents and the mother's sexual orientation, may matter less for children's psychological adjustment than warm and supportive relationships with parents, and a positive family environment. New families, it seems, flourish on old values. Nevertheless, research on the consequences for children of growing up in these new family forms is in its infancy and many questions remain unanswered. For example, although keeping the method of conception secret from young children conceived by egg or sperm donation does not appear to have a negative impact upon family relationships or on children's psychological development, it remains to be seen whether nondisclosure leads to difficulties as these children grow up. It could be expected that problems are most likely to arise in adolescence, the time at which issues of identity, and difficulties in relationships with parents, become more salient. Certainly, it is the case that adopted children show a greater increase in behavioural and emotional problems at adolescence than nonadopted children (Maughan and Pickles, 1990), alongside an increased interest in their biological parents (Hoopes, 1990). A further issue relates to the controversy about the provision of assisted reproduction for single heterosexual women to enable them to have a child without the involvement of a male partner (Englert, 1994; Shenfield, 1994). A small, uncontrolled investigation of 10 single women requesting donor insemination (cited by Fidell and Marik, 1989) found that an important reason for opting for this procedure was to avoid using a man to produce a child without his knowledge of consent. Donor insemination also meant that they did not have to share the rights and responsibilities for the child with a man to whom they were not emotionally committed. Although rare, women who have never experienced a sexual relationship with either sex have also been given access to donor insemination (Jennings, 1991). Children born to single mothers as a result of donor insemination have not experienced parental divorce and are generally raised without financial hardship. However, no study as yet has specifically examined the development of these children. In making predictions about the consequences for children in such families, it seems important to take social context into account. Single mother families are not all the same, and factors such as the mother's financial situation, and social support from family and friends, are likely to have an impact on the child. Also of future interest will be the outcomes for children conceived by gamete donation as they progress through adolescence and into adulthood. How will they feel about their upbringing once they themselves become parents? And what will be the influence of their family experiences on their own parenting behaviour? What will be the effect of finding out that one or both parents is genetically unrelated to them? Or, in families created by egg donation or by surrogacy, that the person they thought of as an aunt or uncle is their genetic mother or father? There is a great deal of speculation about these issues. Instead of uninformed opinion, what is needed are systematic studies to establish what actually happens to children and their parents in these new family forms.

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