

All Shapes and Sizes

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New family forms

Family types that have emerged or have become more prevalent over past 30 years

- Families created by *in vitro* fertilisation
- Families created by egg or embryo donation
- Families created by surrogacy

- Lesbian mother families
- Families created by donor insemination



Multiple parents

Children can now have 5 parents:

Sperm donor

Egg donor

Surrogate mother

Two social parents – mum and dad

(or mum and mum)

(or dad and dad)



Rhodes Boyson MP (1978)

“This evil must stop for the sake of the potential children and society, which both have enough problems without the extension of this horrific practice. Children have a right to be born into a natural family with a father and a mother. Anything less will cause lifelong deprivation of the most acute kind for the child.”



Response to birth of first test-tube baby

“BABY of the century” ran the front-page headline of the *Daily Express* on July 11th, 1978. The paper promised the story of Lesley Brown, who was barricaded inside Oldham and District General Hospital, near Manchester, waiting to give birth. The world’s press was camped outside; the front doors locked and staff forced to sneak in and out via a side entrance. Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards, the obstetrician and physiologist who had, nine months before, taken an egg from one of Mrs Brown’s ovaries under anaesthetic and fertilised it in vitro with her husband’s sperm, were in hiding. It had been, said *Time* magazine after Mrs Brown was delivered of a daughter on July 25th, “the most awaited birth in perhaps 2,000 years”. **The Economist, July 17th 1978.**



Family structure and child development

- Family structure is assumed to play an important role in wellbeing of children
- Ideal structure believed to be two heterosexual parents who are genetically related to their children
- Deviations from this pattern thought to be detrimental to the child



Categories of new family forms

- “High-tech” (IVF & ICSI)
- Gamete donation (egg donation, sperm donation & embryo donation)
- Surrogacy (genetic & non-genetic)
- Same-sex parents
- Single mothers by choice



Interesting questions

- How do children born through surrogacy feel about their surrogate mother?
- Whom do they see as their “real” mother?
- Do children need fathers?
- Will children with lesbian or gay parents become lesbian or gay themselves?
- Should children conceived by donated eggs or sperm be told that their mother or father is not their genetic parent?



Theoretical questions

How important is family structure for children's psychological wellbeing?

- one parent or two?
- father present or not?
- genetic link with parents?
- parents heterosexual or homosexual?



European Study of Assisted Reproduction Families

- Study of 116 IVF and 111 donor insemination families in comparison with 115 adoptive families and 120 natural conception families
- UK, Spain, Italy & the Netherlands
- Children born in mid-80s
- Families assessed when children aged 6, 12 and 18



Findings: Age 6

- ART parents showed greater warmth, emotional involvement and interaction with their child than did natural conception parents
- No differences for any of the measures of children's social or emotional development
- Not one set of 111 parents had told child about donor insemination – although most had told someone else



Findings: Age 12

- Good parent-child relationships characterised by affection and appropriate control
- No evidence of emotional or behavioural problems in assisted reproduction children
- Less than 10% of parents had told children about donor conception



Findings: Age 18

- More positive relationships prevailed between ART mothers and children
- IVF and DI children functioning well
- Less than 10% of parents had told children about donor conception



Conclusions

- Assisted reproduction parents have good relationships with their children, even where one parent lacks a genetic link with the child
- Children are well-adjusted
- Those conceived by donor insemination unaware that father is genetically unrelated
- Main reason for secrecy is fear that child would no longer love non-genetic parent



Unanswered questions

- Have attitudes changed as ART has become more widespread?
- What about egg donation and surrogacy?
- What is the effect of telling the child about his or her donor conception?



Millennium study of ART families

Conducted 15 years later than original study

- 42 surrogacy families
- 50 donor insemination families
- 51 egg donation families
- 80 natural conception families

Families assessed when child aged 1, 2, 3 & 7



Findings

- The differences that existed reflected more positive parent-child relationships in assisted reproduction than natural conception families
 - e.g. mothers showed greater pleasure and competence and less anger, guilt and disappointment
- Children did not differ in social, emotional or cognitive development



Disclosure

- At age 1, 56% of egg donation and 46% of DI parents planned to disclose genetic/gestational origins to child
- By age 7, only 39% of egg donation and 29% of donor insemination parents had actually done so



Donor Sibling Registry (DSR)

- US website by mother and DI child
- To enable donor offspring to search for donor
- Possible in US since donors have a unique ID number
- 10,000 members and 4000 matches made



Online survey

Survey of interest for 2 reasons:

1. Allows study of individuals who know about their donor conception
2. Allows study of individuals who make contact with donor relations

Data obtained from 791 parents and 165 offspring (aged 13-61)



Feelings on disclosure

- Better outcomes for children who had been told when young
- Those told when older more likely to feel upset, angry, shocked and confused.



Examples of negative feelings

“I would have appreciated revelation of this information much earlier in my life. Learning of my biological identity at 17 years of age was a traumatic event.”
30 year old, **found out at age 17**

“I am angry because I asked about being 'adopted' several times throughout my childhood and adolescence and told that I was being foolish. I knew.”
found out at age 50

“Either tell your kid from the beginning or don't tell them at all, it was one of the most shocking and upsetting moments of my life. I felt alone.”
19 year old, **found out at age 12**



Examples of positive feelings

“I was so young I don't remember feeling much more than interested and curious.”

13 year old, found out at age 4

“...people always ask me, is it weird not having a father, or knowing your father? My response is, how can you miss something you have never had? I am no different then any other person. How we are born, doesn't make us who we are. I do not define myself by that trait. It is more of just how I came to be.”

17 year old, found out at age 3



Donor siblings

- Children finding around 5 half-siblings
- Many are finding more than 10
- Maximum number found so far is 55!



Experiences of contact

- Majority maintained regular contact
- For almost all offspring and donors contact with donor relations has been a positive experience



New phenomenon exposed

Family relationships based on genetic connections between children are being formed across multiple family units



Lesbian mother families

- Children will be teased and rejected by peers and will develop psychological problems as a result
- Children will show atypical gender development, i.e. boys will be less masculine and girls less feminine than boys and girls from heterosexual homes.



Findings from early studies

- Children not at risk for emotional or behavioural problems or difficulties in peer relationships
- No evidence of gender identity confusion
- No differences in sex role behaviour between children in lesbian and heterosexual families for either boys or girls
- In adulthood, no difference in psychological wellbeing
- Large majority identified as heterosexual



Studies of lesbian families created through donor insemination

- No difference in psychological well-being of children
- No difference in gender development of children
- Co-mothers are more involved with children than fathers



Gay fathers

- Much less research
- Most had children while married/cohabiting
- Some father children with lesbian women
- Some become parents through surrogacy
- No studies of children living with gay fathers



Single mothers by choice

- Concerns stem from existing literature on negative consequences of single parenthood for child development
- Difficulties associated with parental conflict, economic hardship and lack of social support
- Circumstances of solo mothers by donor insemination are different



Findings from US study

- Online survey of 331 mothers through “Choice Moms” website
- Only 9% were experiencing marked financial difficulties
- 86% had a university degree
- 93% had social support when baby was young
- 82% of children had male role model



Findings from UK study

- Longitudinal study of children in single mother families from birth or very early childhood
- Followed up to young adulthood
- Found to be highly successful and creative young adults who had a positive relationship with their mother (in spite of turbulent teenage years for some)



Change in social attitudes

“School was one big nightmare really, because I got picked on so much. I had cigarettes stubbed out on the back of my neck, and high-heeled shoes thrown at me, and bits of hair cut off, and my head chucked down the loo and that sort of thing. They would say to everyone “Oh, your mum’s a lesbian.” They were just doing it for a laugh. But by the final year people thought it was really cool. They would say “It’s great! Your mum’s a lesbian! Wow!” It was almost respected by the end of the year. Everyone thought my mum was cool ‘cos she was a lesbian, so it worked out alright.”



Policy implications

- Child custody disputes
- Adoption
- Removal of donor anonymity
- Access to assisted reproduction – new Human Fertilisation & Embryology Bill substituted clause on “Need for a father” with “Need for supportive parenting”



Theoretical implications

Findings have challenged deeply rooted beliefs in child psychology

- presence of a father is not essential for development of sex-role behaviour
- Genetic and gestational ties less important than assumed from research on divorce, stepfamilies and adoption



Parenting: what really counts?

Shape and size of family is less important for the psychological wellbeing of children than the quality of family life

