



Helping Families Thrive

ARE THE KIDS REALLY ALL RIGHT?

What Research Really Says About The Parents Children Need

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There's been quite a bit of dust kicked up lately about whether boys and girls really need mothers and fathers.

We have this silly Annette Benning/Julianne Moore movie about two quirky lesbians raising two emerging adults; then Judge Vaughn Walker, in striking down California's Prop. 8, pronounces with absolute confidence that "studies ... show conclusively that having parents of different genders is irrelevant to child outcomes"; and now Hollywood starlet-turned-child-development-specialist Jennifer Aniston says women "don't have to fiddle with a man to have that child."

But are human biology and experience changing right under our feet?

Is it really true that mothers and fathers are optional and only sentimental for children? If these folks are to be believed, mothering and fathering really ends at egg or sperm donation.

Based on social science, brain, child-development and anthropological research, nothing could be further from the truth. Let's take a brief tour through the highlights of this literature.

I. Lesbian Parenting Studies Ignore the Larger Body of Research

The research on kids being raised in same-sex homes centers on lesbian-headed homes and is plagued by serious methodological problems. And *none* of the lesbian studies published to date makes *any* reference to the immense body of research conducted over the last three decades on how family change and formation affects the vast array of child outcomes.

The leading and nonpartisan child advocacy organization, Child Trends, examining the question of how family structure affects child well-being, concludes:

An extensive body of research tells us that children do best when they grow up with both biological parents in a low-conflict marriage... Thus, it is not simply the presence of two parents, as some have assumed, but the presence of *two biological parents* that seem to support child development.¹ (emphasis in original)

¹ Kristin Anderson Moore, et al., "Marriage From a Child's Perspective: How Does Family Structure Affect Children, and What Can We Do about It?" *Child Trends Research Brief*, June 2002, p. 1-2.

The more center-left Center for Law and Social Policy examined the same question on family status and child well-being, including same-sex households. It reports:

Over the past 20 years, a body of research has developed on how changes in patterns of family structure affect children. Most researchers now agree that together these studies support the notion that, on average, children do better when raised by two married, biological parents who have low-conflict relationships.²

A diverse team of family scholars from the Universities of Texas, Virginia, Minnesota, Chicago, Maryland, Washington, California at Berkeley; and Rutgers University recently reviewed the literature and conclude that children who live with their married mom and dad live longer, healthier lives, both physically and mentally, do better in school, and are more likely to attend college and graduate. They are less likely to live in poverty, be in trouble with the law, drink or do drugs, be violent or sexually active, or be victims of sexual or physical violence. These children are also more likely to have successful marriages compared to children who don't live with their married mother and father.³

II. Research on Same-Sex Parenting is Too Weak To Draw Reliable Conclusions

William Meezan and Jonathan Rauch, two strong supporters of same-sex marriage, have reviewed the research on how same-sex parenting could affect children. In their fair and careful article — published jointly by Princeton University and the Brookings Institute — they could only recommend four same-sex parenting studies as “methodologically rigorous.” They conclude: “Virtually no empirical evidence exists on how same-sex parents’ marriage might affect their children.”⁴

Nearly all the research on same-sex child-rearing is conducted on white, middle-class moms in larger urban areas, using lesbian mothers who have volunteered to participate in such studies or who were contacted through their use of sperm banks.⁵

Two such studies, published in 2010 in respectable research journals, merit close examination. This first study — by Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey and published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* — belittles the topic itself as a political device to incite division.

The entrenched conviction that children need both a mother and a father inflames culture wars...Research to date, however, does not support this claim. Contrary to popular belief, studies have not shown that ‘compared to all other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children.’ Research has not identified gender-exclusive parenting abilities (with the partial

² Mary Parke, “Are Married Parents Really Better for Children?” *Center for Law and Social Policy Policy Brief*, May 2003, p. 1.

³ W. Bradford Wilcox, et al., *Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences*, (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005).

⁴ William Meezan and Jonathan Rauch, “Gay Marriage, Same-Sex Parenting, and America’s Children,” in *The Future of Children* 15 (2005): 104, 105, 107.

⁵ Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, “How Does The Gender of Parents Matter?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 3-22, p.6, 10; Nanette Gartrell and Henny Bos, “US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Psychological Adjustment of 17-Year-Old Adolescents,” *Pediatrics*, 126 (2010) 1-9.

exception of lactation). ...At this point, no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for child well-being.⁶

This study compares the literature on children raised by same-sex parents with a small fraction of the literature of those raised by moms and dads. They admit that the studies on the heterosexual homes are methodologically “stronger” national representative samples, while those on lesbian parenting are “weaker” snowball samples.⁷

Thus, nothing can be concluded by comparing the two types of samples. Professor Mark Regnerus, a research sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin, explains the qualitative difference between these two samples:

The bottom line is that snowball samples are nice for undergrads to learn about data collection, but hardly high-quality when you're a professional sociologist working on a complex research question with significant public ramifications. It's not fair, not even close, to compare parenting and child outcomes from a national probability sample of hetero parents and a snowball sample of lesbian parents.⁸

III. **The *Journal of Marriage and Family* (Biblarz/Stacey) Study**

This study goes further than merely claiming children raised by two mothers do just as well as children raised by a mother and father:

Based strictly on the social science, one could argue that two women parent *better on average* than a man and a woman, or at least a woman and man with a traditional division of labor.⁹ (emphasis added)

The authors claim this superior value in lesbian families is because two mothers provide “a double dose of caretaking, communication, and intimacy.”¹⁰

But this “double dose” of mother-care can be, the authors admit, toxic to the relationship, causing these homes to break up at disturbingly high rates:

... A double dose of maternal investment sometimes fostered jealousy and competition between co-mothers which the asymmetry of the women's genetic, reproductive, and breast-feeding ties to their infant could exacerbate.¹¹

They cite one major comparative study between mom-dad homes and lesbian homes where, in the 5-year period of the study, 6 of the 14 lesbian headed homes had broken up compared to only 5 of the 38 mom-dad homes.

These scholars fail to make any mention of how the greater break-up rate of lesbian relationship profoundly affects children in negative ways. This is concerning given a study of same-sex homes in Norway and Sweden found lesbian homes break up at

⁶ Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, “How Does The Gender of Parents Matter?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 3-22, p. 16, 17.

⁷ Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 6.

⁸ Correspondence between Dr. Regnerus and the author, August 12, 2010.

⁹ Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 17.

¹⁰ Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 17.

¹¹ Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 11.

twice the rate of male same-sex homes and both have a dramatically higher likelihood of break-up compared to heterosexual marriages.¹²

IV. The *Pediatrics* (Gartrell/Bos) Study

The second study appeared in June 2010 in the journal *Pediatrics* – published by the American Academy of Pediatrics – and also found that kids do better with two moms:

According to their mothers' reports, the 17-year-old daughters and sons of lesbian mothers were rated *significantly higher* in social, school/academic, and total competence and *significantly lower* in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive and externalizing problem behavior than their age-matched counterparts in [a] normative sample of American Youth.¹³ (emphasis added)

And when their moms broke up, the researchers found *no effect* on the children:

Within the lesbian family sample, no...differences were found among adolescent offspring...whose mothers were still together and offspring whose mothers had separated.¹⁴

This conclusion is in dramatic contrast to what mountains of research have consistently found when mothers and fathers end their relationships: The negative impact upon children is significant both in degree and duration.¹⁵

The methodological problems in this second study are also clear and troubling. The data was collected on only 78 children through the mothers' *self-reporting* on their-welfare. The study also used snowball samples -- mothers recruited by volunteering for the study (rather than randomly selected) via announcements at "lesbian events, women's bookstores, and in lesbian newspapers throughout metropolitan areas of Boston, Washington DC and San Francisco."¹⁶

Is it possible these mothers, knowing they were participating in something called the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), could have felt inclined to be overly positive in their self-reporting?

V. Fathers Do Matter

There has been an absolute wealth of research over the past 40 years on how important fathers are for healthy child development.

In an analysis of over 100 studies on parent-child relationships, it was found that having a loving and nurturing father was *as important* for a child's happiness, well-being, and

¹² Gunnar Andersson, *et al.*, "The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriage in Norway and Sweden," *Demography* 43 (2006) 79-98.

¹³ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 1.

¹⁴ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 1.

¹⁵ E. Mavis Hetherington's, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: Norton, 2002); Judith Wallerstein, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

¹⁶ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 3.

social and academic success as having a loving and nurturing mother. Ronald Rohner and Robert Veneziano explain:

Much of this evidence suggests that the influence of father love on offspring's development is as great as and occasionally greater than the influence of mother love. ...Overall, father love appears to be as heavily implicated as mother love in offsprings' psychological well-being and health, as well as in an array of psychological and behavioral problems.¹⁷

Confident Problem Solvers - Another study, published in the journal *Child Development*, looked at "Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century" and speaks to important and unique contributions fathers make to their children, such as encouraging them to become more confident, safe risk-takers, more empathetic and better problem-solvers. It concludes that fathers' "absence from their families will have dire consequences for their children's development."¹⁸

Empathy Development - Probably the most sophisticated study on how empathy is developed in children, initiated in the mid-1950s and concluded in 1990, found the strong influence fathers have on children developing a sense of concern and compassion "quite astonishing." The research concluded that the strongest factor in determining whether children demonstrated greater levels of empathic concern in their 30s and beyond was a father's participation in child care. The 26-year study concludes with the recognition, "These results appear to fit with previous findings indicating that pro-social behaviors such as altruism and generosity in children were related to active involvement in child care by fathers."¹⁹

Language and Smarts- A 2004 study on the effect of fathers' play involvement on 2- and 3-year-olds' language and cognitive development found "direct and indirect effects of fathering on child development."²⁰

General Well-Being- In a 1999 review of studies on father involvement and child well-being published since 1980, 82% found "significant associations between positive father involvement and offspring well-being..."²¹

Educational Development- Data published in the *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, looking at the role fathers and mothers play in the educational developmental of children, found that "fathers in two-parent households indeed affect their children's development in diverse and significant ways."²²

¹⁷ Ronald P. Rohner and Robert A. Veneziano, "The Importance of Father Love: History and Contemporary Evidence," *Review of General Psychology* 5.4 (2001): 382-405.

¹⁸ Natasha J. Cabrera, et al., *Fatherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, *Child Development* 71 (2000): 127-136, p. 133.

¹⁹ Richard Koestner, Carol Franz and Joel Weinberger, "The Family Origins of Empathic Concern: A 26-Year Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58 (1990): 709-717, p. 713.

²⁰ Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, et al., "Fathers and Mothers Play With Their 2- and 3-Year Olds: Contributions to Language and Cognitive Development," *Child Development* 75 (2004) 1806 – 1820, p. 1806.

²¹ Paul R. Amato and Fernando Rivera, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 375-384.

²² Charlie Lewis and Michael E. Lamb, "Fathers' Influence on Children's Development: The Evidence from Two-Parent Homes," *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 18 (2003) 211-228, p. 220.

Early Infancy Development- Michael Yogman conducted a study of the role fathering plays in overcoming the effects of premature birth in Latino, African-American and other inner-city populations. When he followed up with these preemies at 3 years of age, Yogman found that kids with highly involved fathers had substantially higher cognitive skills than those children who didn't have involved fathers.²³

VI. Brain Research Shows Big Mother/Father Differences

The past two decades have been remarkably rich and fruitful in the advancing our understanding of the complexity of the human brain. And the more sophisticated this brain research becomes, the more we continue to learn that men and women are very different in deep and meaningful ways. Their brains are different from before birth.

One of the more popular books on the subject is Dr. Anne Moir and David Jessel's *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men & Women* (1991). They explain that men and woman are indeed different, warning that "to maintain that they are the same in aptitude, skill or behavior is to build a society *based on a biological and scientific lie.*"²⁴ (emphasis added)

They wisely warn,

[T]he truth is that virtually every professional scientist and research into the subject has concluded that that brains of men and women are different. There has seldom been a greater divide between what intelligent, enlightened opinion presumes – that men and women have the same brain – and what science knows – that they do not. [So], it is time cease the vain contention that men and women are created the same. They were not, and no amount of idealism or Utopian fantasy can alter the fact. It can only strain the relationships between the sexes.²⁵

Other books, like Deborah Blum's *Sex on the Brain: The Biological Differences Between Men & Woman* (Penguin, 1997) and Doreen Kimura's *Sex and Cognition*, (MIT Press, 2000), delve deep in explaining hormonal differences between the sexes. Kimura opens her book with a quote by Kenneth H.W. Hilborn, professor emeritus at the University of Western Ontario:

When science ignores facts in favour of ideology...it ceases to be science and becomes propaganda for a dogma.

The most significant recent contribution to this area of knowledge is the work of Louann Brizendine, M.D., a neurobiologist from the University of California, San Francisco. She has written two excellent and well-researched books: *The Female Brain* (Broadway, 2007, translated into 14 languages) and her new *The Male Brain* (Broadway, 2010). In the *Female Brain*, Brizendine tells the experience of a mom determined to raise her daughter in a gender-neutral way:

²³ Michael Yogman, *et al.*, "Father Involvement and Cognitive/Behavioral Outcomes of Preterm Infants," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 34 (1995): 58-66.

²⁴ Anne Moir and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference Between Men & Women* (New York: Random House, 1991) p. 5.

²⁵ Moir and Jessel, 1991, p. 8, 9.

One of my patients gave her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter many unisex toys, including a bright red fire truck instead of a doll. She walked into her daughter's room one afternoon to find her cuddling the truck in a baby blanket, rocking it back and forth saying, "Don't worry little truckie, everything will be all right."

Brizendine explains:

This isn't socialization. This little girl didn't cuddle her "truckie" because her environment molded her unisex brain. There is no unisex brain. She was born with a female brain, which came complete with its own impulses. Girls arrive already wired as girls, and boys arrive already wired as boys. Their brains are different by the time they are born, and their brains are what drive their impulses, values and their very reality.²⁶

What this growing body of research teaches us is that, in human experience and cultures, there is something distinct and important called womanhood. There is also something important and distinct called manhood. As the distinguished professor Alice Rossi told the American Sociological Association in 1983 in her presidential address to the annual convention:

Men bring their maleness to parenting, as women bring their femaleness.²⁷

VII. Anthropology

Anthropology, the study of how humans develop, form and live their lives together, has long examined how family forms develop in cultures throughout history. Research finds that the participation of married male and female parents in the lives of their children is a part of all human cultures, primitive and developed, ancient and modern.

In her book *Male and Female*, anthropologist Margaret Mead explains the fundamental and consistent appearance of husbandry and fatherhood in human cultures. She explains:

When we survey all known human societies, we find everywhere some form of the family, some set of permanent arrangements by which males assist females in caring for children while they are young... In every known human society, everywhere in the world, the young male learns that when he grows up, one of the things he must do in order to be a full member of society is to provide food for some female and her young. [E]very known human society rests firmly on the learned nurturing behavior of men.²⁸

Celebrated anthropologist Ward H. Goodenough, in his Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester, says about family across cultures:

²⁶ Louann Brizendine, *The Female Mind*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2006) p. 12.

²⁷ Alice S. Rossi, "Gender and Parenthood," *American Sociological Review*, 49 (1984):1-19, p. 10. Rossi's article was the American Sociological Association 1983 Presidential Address delivered in Detroit, MI, September 1983.

²⁸ Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study for the Sexes in a Changing World*, (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1949), p. 188, 189.

Thus seen, marriage is a contractual union of a man and a woman and involves sexual privilege, economic cooperation, cohabitation, the production of children, and responsibility for the children's care, socialization, and education. Marriage...a union of a man and woman in which they are the jural father and mother of the children.. [M]arriage establishes the jural basis for a group consisting of a man, a woman, and their children...²⁹

Donald Brown, a leading anthropologist in the area of human behaviors and practices that are truly culturally universal, found:

The universality of kinship terminologies provides a further case of cultural reflection or recognition of physical fact. A kinship terminology is...found among every people, in which domain most or all terms are translatable by the terms required for sexual reproduction, or combinations of them: father, mother, son, daughter... Accordingly, the father and mother of an individual are normally husband and wife.³⁰

VIII. Conclusion

It is either dishonest or badly uninformed to say that married mothers and fathers don't matter for healthy child development as Judge Vaughn Walker and others claim. The social sciences and the brain research show that men and women are importantly different in very meaningful and profound ways. And these differences are not only needed in *creating* new life, but *raising* that new life to healthy maturity.

Husbands and wives becoming mothers and fathers and raising their children together in committed marital relationships transcend culture, race and religion. It is not merely a Christian or Jewish ideal. It is not a white, Western ideal. It is a human ideal.

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²⁹ Ward Hunt Goodenough, *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), p. 4.

³⁰ Donald Brown, *Human Universals*, (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1991), p. 93.