1 Introduction

The popular American sitcom *Modern Family*, featuring the trials, tribulations and, in many ways, very ordinary lives of three related contemporary families, including Jay, a middle-aged father who is remarried to a much younger Columbian woman who has a son from a previous marriage, Jay's daughter and her traditional family with a hands-on father and their three children, and Jay's gay son, his male partner and their adopted Vietnamese daughter, highlights the diverse ways in which families are formed today. Although *Modern Family* is a parody of present-day family life, the reality is even more extraordinary. The traditional nuclear family of a heterosexual married couple with biologically related children is now in the minority. Instead, a growing number of children are raised by cohabiting, rather than married, parents, by single parents, by

stepparents and by same-sex parents, with many children moving in and out of these different family structures as they grow up. More remarkably, it is now possible for a child to have up to five "parents" instead of the usual two. These may include an egg donor, a sperm donor, a surrogate mother (who hosts the pregnancy) and the two social parents who are known to the child as mum and dad. Recent years have also seen the emergence of co-parenting arrangements, whereby a man and a woman who are not in a relationship together – who may live in different households or who may have met over the Internet with the sole purpose of becoming parents – raise children jointly. These real modern families are the subject of this book.

THE RISE OF NEW FAMILY FORMS

Changes to the structure of the family have been taking place since the 1970s. Whereas less than 10 percent of families were headed by single parents at the beginning of the 1970s, this figure has now risen to around 30 percent in both the USA (US Census Bureau, 2012a) and the UK (Lloyd and Lacey, 2012a, b). The increase in single-parent families has been paralleled by a decline in marriage rates and a rise in divorce rates in both the USA and in Europe (Amato, 2014; US Census Bureau, 2012b). Although divorce rates are now decreasing, divorce statistics do not give the whole picture, as there are no official statistics on separation rates among cohabiting couples. Across the USA and Europe, cohabitation has become commonplace. Around half of the children born to unmarried mothers in the USA are born to mothers who are cohabiting with their children's father (McLanahan and Beck, 2010), and rates of cohabitation are also high in Western Europe (Wik, Keizer, and Lappegard, 2012). In an examination of the marital status of first-time mothers, only 59% in the USA and 53% in the UK were married, whereas 24% and 31%, respectively, were cohabiting and 17% and 16% were single (Amato, 2014). There has also been a striking increase in the number of stepfamilies in many Western societies. Forty percent of all marriages

in the UK are remarriages for one or both partners (Lloyd and Lacey, 2012a, b), and approximately 10 percent of children in the USA live with a stepparent (Kreider and Ellis, 2011).

Families headed by single parents, cohabiting parents or stepparents are often referred to collectively as "non-traditional families," and result largely from parental separation or divorce and the formation of new cohabiting or marital relationships. The impact on children of being raised in such families has been widely studied (for a review, see Golombok and Tasker, 2015). However, the focus of the present book is on "new families," rather than "non-traditional families." The term "new families" is used to refer to family forms that either did not exist or were hidden from society until the latter part of the twentieth century, and that represent a more fundamental shift away from traditional family structures than do non-traditional families formed by relationship breakdown and reformation. These include lesbian mother families, gay father families, families headed by single mothers by choice and families created by assisted reproductive technologies involving in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg donation, donor insemination, embryo donation and surrogacy. Some of these families became visible following the growth of the women's liberation and gay rights movements in the 1970s, and others only became possible following the introduction of in vitro fertilization (IVF) in 1978. Although new families are distinct from non-traditional families, they are not mutually exclusive. It is not unusual for new families also to be non-traditional – for example, when parents of children born through egg or sperm donation divorce and remarry to form stepfamilies.

In spite of the rise in new family forms, the traditional nuclear family is still generally considered the best environment in which to raise children, and remains the gold standard against which all other family types are assessed. It is commonly assumed that the more a family deviates from the norm of the traditional two-parent heterosexual family, the greater the risks to the psychological well-being of the children. But is this really the case? Are children less likely

to thrive in families headed by same-sex parents, single mothers by choice or parents who conceived them using assisted reproductive technologies? And will children born to gay fathers through egg donation and surrogacy be less likely to flourish than children conceived by IVF to genetically related parents? The answer to these questions depends on the extent to which these new families differ from traditional families in the aspects of family life that matter most for children's healthy psychological development and, particularly, the extent to which they provide a less supportive family environment for children. Before exploring parenting and child development in new family forms, it is therefore important to examine factors associated with the optimal development of children in traditional families. Family influences on child development are often conceptualized in terms of three interrelated components: the psychological well-being of the parents; the quality of parent–child relationships; and the psychological characteristics of the child. Each of these must be viewed in the context of the social environment in which the family is based.

TRADITIONAL FAMILIES

Psychological well-being of parents

Quality of marriage. What are the consequences of an unhappy marriage for children, and just how bad does it have to be before they are affected? It is surprising to note that studies of the association between bad marriages and negative outcomes for children have found the link between the two to be weaker than expected. A closer look shows that much of the research has examined whether or not parents are satisfied with their relationship with their partner, and findings have shown that marital dissatisfaction appears to have little effect on children. What does make a difference is marital conflict (Cummings and Davies, 1994, 2010; Grych and Fincham, 1990, 2001; Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, et al., 2014). Children whose parents are in conflict have been found to be more aggressive, disobedient

and difficult to control, more likely to become involved in delinquent behavior and to perform poorly at school, more likely to be anxious and depressed, and more likely to have difficulty in getting on with peers relative to children whose parents are happily married (Cummings and Davies, 1994, 2010; Emery, 1988; Grych and Fincham, 2001; Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, et al., 2014).

But just because parents are in conflict does not mean that their children will suffer psychological problems. Almost all children see their parents argue and most are not affected by this. Indeed, it is thought that it can be good for children to be exposed to arguments, because they will learn how to resolve disagreements and make up. Thus, what seems to matter for children is not whether their parents fight, but *how* they fight. Aspects that are harmful to children include the following: frequent fighting; a belief that the fighting is heralding their parents' separation; severe hostility (especially physical violence); being the subject of their parents' rows; and parents' inability to make up (Cummings and Davies, 1994, 2010; Davies and Cummings, 1994; Grych and Fincham, 1993, 2001; Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, et al., 2014).

The process through which marital conflict affects children has been the subject of much debate (Cummings and Davies, 2010; Grych and Fincham, 2001; Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, et al., 2014). Some believe that marital conflict is bad for children because of its indirect effects on parenting. Parents who are wrapped up in their own disputes may show hostility toward their children or may not properly monitor or discipline their children or give sufficient attention to them. Marital conflict may also interfere with parents' emotional relationships with their children. As discussed below, parents who are emotionally available to their children, sensitive to their needs and appropriately responsive to them are most likely to have securely attached children. Conflict between parents may undermine children's sense of emotional security, and may jeopardize the security of children's attachment to their parents (Cummings and Davies, 2010). Exposure to parents' fighting also has a direct

effect on children's psychological well-being, in that seeing parents argue is, in itself, distressing (Cummings and Davies, 1994; Emery, 1988). Confirmation that parental conflict has a direct effect on children comes from a series of experiments by Mark Cummings and his colleagues, in which children were exposed to arguments between adults and their reactions were monitored. It was consistently found that being exposed to adults' arguments, even if the arguments did not involve the children, was distressing for children (Cummings and Davies, 1994). It is now generally agreed that marital conflict may have both indirect and direct effects on the psychological well-being of children (Reynolds, Houlston, Coleman, et al., 2014). As well as interfering with the relationships between the parents and the child, hostility between parents appears to be upsetting in its own right. Evidence that both processes are at work comes from a study of young adolescents who were followed up over a period of 2 years (Harold and Conger, 1997). An indirect effect of marital conflict on the relationship between parents and children was found, in that parents who were more hostile to each other were also more hostile to their children. There was also a direct relationship between the frequency of marital conflict and the degree of child distress.

Investigations of the impact of the quality of the parents' marriage on the development of their children have focused on the adverse effects of hostile marriages, rather than the beneficial effects of harmonious marriages. However, there is growing evidence that the more favorable outcomes for children of happily married parents do not simply result from the absence of serious conflict, but, instead, are more directly associated with positive aspects of the relationship, such as the way in which parents communicate with each other and show each other affection (Goldberg and Carlson, 2014; Ratcliffe, Norton, and Durtschi, 2014). This emerging area of research has the potential to increase our understanding of the types of marriage that are good for children and not just those that are bad.

Parents' psychological state. Parents' psychological adjustment can also affect the psychological well-being of children (Goodman

and Brand, 2008; Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey, 2005; Zahn-Waxler, Duggal, and Gruber, 2002). Among the many studies of the consequences for children of parents' psychiatric disorder, the impacts of parental depression have received the greatest attention. Children of depressed parents have consistently been found to show elevated rates of behavioral, social and emotional problems. Studies that have diagnosed the presence or absence of psychiatric disorder in both children and their parents have shown that children whose parents are depressed are not only more likely to show a wide range of psychological problems, but are also more likely themselves to become depressed (Orvaschel, Walsh-Altis, and Ye, 1988; Weissman, Gammon, Merikangas, et al., 1987; Weissman, Warner, Wickramaratne, et al., 1997).

It is perhaps not surprising that depression in parents is associated with psychological problems in children. Of particular interest to psychologists are the mechanisms involved in this association. One explanation is that depression reduces a parent's ability to parent effectively (Cummings and Davies, 1994; Cummings and Davies, 2010). Just as with marital conflict, depression is thought to interfere with parents' control and discipline of their children, and also with their emotional availability and sensitivity to them, thus jeopardizing children's security of attachment. Studies have shown that depressed parents tend to be either very lenient or very authoritarian (in terms of monitoring and disciplining their children's behavior), and often switch between the two (Kochanska, Kuczynski, Radke-Yarrow, et al., 1987). Detailed analyses of video-recordings of mothers interacting with their babies have also shown that, compared with other mothers, depressed mothers are less warm and less responsive (Tronick, 1989). Furthermore, when depressed and non-depressed mothers were observed playing with their 1- and 2-year-old children, depressed mothers were less likely to adjust their behavior to that of their children (Jameson, Gelfand, Kulcsar, et al., 1997).

When mothers are depressed, their unstimulating and unresponsive behavior is reflected in their babies, who also seem

depressed. These babies are more withdrawn, less active, more irritable and less smiley than are other babies. It is interesting to note that when mothers who are not depressed are asked to "act depressed," their babies immediately become distressed and look away, which shows that a mother's behavior toward her infant has a marked effect on the infant's emotional state. It is not just with their depressed mother that babies seem withdrawn; they also appear less happy and less active when interacting with other adults, and can even cause non-depressed adults to act in a less animated and enthusiastic way toward them (Field, 1995). Studies have shown that children of depressed mothers are more likely than children of non-depressed mothers to be insecurely attached (Murray, 1992; Radke-Yarrow, Cummings, Kuczynski, et al., 1985).

Another explanation is that the greater marital conflict in couples in which one partner is depressed – rather than the depression itself – is responsible for the behavioral and emotional problems of the children of depressed parents. But whether marital conflict, on its own, can account for the psychological difficulties experienced by children of depressed parents remains an open question. In a review of relevant studies, Downey and Coyne (1990) found that, although marital discord was linked to conduct problems such as aggression and disruptive behavior in the children of depressed parents, it could not explain the high rates of childhood depression. It was concluded that marital conflict in families with a depressed parent increases children's risk for conduct problems, and the parent's depression – rather than the associated marital discord – increases children's own risk for depression. To complicate the issue further, depression and marital conflict may each be caused by external factors, and these external factors may, in themselves, be implicated in children's development of psychological problems. Depressed parents and their children often experience a range of difficulties, including financial hardship, poor housing and a lack of social support. These stressors not only increase the risk of both depression and marital conflict in parents, but also

pose a direct threat to the psychological adjustment of children, as discussed below.

Children whose parents are dependent on alcohol or drugs are also at a disadvantage (Mayes and Truman, 2002). Compared with other children, they are more likely to show conduct problems, including antisocial behavior and delinquency. An obvious explanation is that parents who are often drunk or drugged, or whose attention is focused on obtaining their next supply, cannot properly care for their children. But this is not the only reason why these children are at risk. Parents who become dependent on alcohol, or on addictive drugs such as heroin or cocaine, often live in conditions of extreme poverty. They may also suffer from a psychiatric disorder such as depression, which, as already discussed, is associated with the development of psychological problems in children. A high rate of neglect and abuse has been found among the children of alcoholic and drug-addicted parents. It is not unusual for these children to grow up in an atmosphere of threat and violence, and many end up living apart from their parents – either with other family members or, as discussed in Chapter 7, with foster or adoptive parents. A study that followed up babies born to mothers on heroin found that half were living elsewhere by the time they were 1 year old (Wilson, 1989). In addition to the life experiences that place these children at risk for psychological problems, they may also inherit a vulnerability toward alcohol or drug dependence themselves (Schuckit and Smith, 1996).

For children whose mothers consume large amounts of alcohol or drugs during pregnancy, there are additional risks (Mayes and Truman, 2002). In addition to reduced birth weight, many babies of alcoholic mothers show delayed development in infancy, as well as intellectual impairment, hyperactivity and difficulty in concentrating throughout their childhood and adolescent years. Infants whose mothers are dependent on heroin are born addicted to this drug. Not only do these newborns experience unpleasant withdrawal symptoms beginning in their first days of life, but they may also suffer

from long-lasting effects such as poor physical coordination, poor attention and hyperactivity as they grow up. The effects of prenatal exposure to cocaine are less clear-cut, although there is evidence that babies whose mothers took cocaine during pregnancy are slower to develop (Singer, Arendt, Farkas, et al., 1997). It is not certain whether the problems experienced by school age children whose mothers were addicted to alcohol or drugs during pregnancy result from their exposure to these substances in the womb or from being raised by an addicted parent. Once again, it seems most likely that several factors contribute to the difficulties of these children. Prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs makes infants difficult to handle, which, in turn, results in less sensitive and responsive parenting by drug- or alcohol-dependent parents, who may have difficulty coping with even the easiest of babies. Investigations of the ways in which addicted mothers interact with their infants have shown them to be less involved and more hostile than other mothers, and their infants more likely to be insecurely attached (Mayes and Truman, 2002).

Quality of parent–child relationships

The question of what it is to be a good parent has been a major focus of psychological enquiry since the days of Sigmund Freud. Whereas much of the research on parenting has stemmed from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) other researchers have examined the influence of parenting on children's psychological adjustment more generally (for reviews see Bornstein, 2002, 2006; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, et al., 2000; Lamb, 2012; Lamb and Lewis, 2011; Maccoby, 2000).

Attachment theory. Much of the knowledge we have today about the aspects of parenting that matter most for children's psychological adjustment comes from the ground-breaking work of the psychiatrist John Bowlby and the psychologist Mary Ainsworth, who highlighted the importance for children of feeling secure in their relationships with their parents. According to Bowlby, infants have an innate tendency to use their parents as a secure base from which to explore the world and as a source of comfort when they are distressed.