

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-05558-2 - Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms

Susan Golombok

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Modern Families

Modern Families brings together research on parenting and child development in new family forms including lesbian mother families, gay father families, families headed by single mothers by choice, and families created by assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), egg donation, sperm donation, embryo donation, and surrogacy. This research is examined in the context of the issues and concerns that have been raised regarding these families. The findings not only contest popular myths and assumptions about the social and psychological consequences for children of being raised in new family forms, but also challenge well-established theories of child development that are founded upon the supremacy of the traditional family. It is argued that the quality of family relationships and the wider social environment are more influential in children's psychological development than are the number, gender, sexual orientation, or biological relatedness of their parents, or the method of their conception.

SUSAN GOLOMBOK is Professor of Family Research and Director of the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge and Professorial Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge.

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Criticism of the wide variety of newly emerging family arrangements has often been justified by claims that they fail to provide adequate support for the cognitive, social and emotional development of children. In her comprehensive and extremely well-written summary of research evidence, Susan Golombok provides solid, welcome reassurance to parents, policy-makers and family service providers that children growing up in a variety of non-traditional family environments fare equally well and sometimes even better than children growing up in traditional families.

Philip A. Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan
University of California, Berkeley

In this fascinating and very readable book, Susan Golombok has brought together her own research spanning several decades with that of other scholars who have studied lesbian mother families, gay father families and families built through donor conception, surrogacy and other forms of assisted reproductive technology. *Modern Families* takes us inside and across these diverse family structures to focus on what really matters for children – family processes and dynamics much more than visible features such as the number of parents, their sexual orientation, or the method by which the children were conceived. This book underscores the adaptive capacity of families while highlighting the basic ingredients that families need to provide for their children. It should be required reading for family scholars, policy-makers and anyone who cares about child well-being.

Harold D. Grotevant
Rudd Family Foundation Chair in Psychology,
University of Massachusetts Amherst

An absolutely splendid book that provides an understanding of family relationships as a whole, and not just those in new family forms. The book reflects, with appropriate caveats on its limitations, a large research base but it is written using engaging, non-technical language that is easy to follow.

Michael Rutter
Professor of Developmental Psychopathology,
King's College London

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Since the 1970s, when human family forms began to mushroom in variety, Susan Golombok has been at the forefront of every research endeavor concerning the effects upon children of being raised by lesbian or gay parents, or children who have been conceived by the new reproductive technologies. Her and others' work largely confirms that "the kids are alright." In this book, Susan masterfully summarizes the state of scientific knowledge concerning diverse family forms and child outcomes. It is essential to the training of undergraduate and advanced graduate students in developmental and clinical psychology, as well as the allied professions of nursing, pediatrics, family medicine, social work, psychotherapy and public policy as concerns child and family health. This highly accessible book will be a vital core reference for many years to come.

Howard Steele

Professor and Director of Graduate Studies,
New School for Social Research

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To my father

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“ ‘He’s just my *real* dad,’ Sophie Mol said. ‘Joe’s my dad. He never hits. Hardly ever.’ ”

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*

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Preface

In 1976, the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* published an article on the plight of lesbian women who fought for custody of their children when they divorced. Without exception, these women lost. Custody was awarded to their ex-husbands on the grounds that it was not in children's best interests to be raised by lesbian mothers. It was argued that children who grew up with lesbian mothers would develop psychiatric disorders, would be ostracized by their peers and, most troubling of all to the courts, would grow up to be lesbian or gay themselves. The decision to award custody to heterosexual fathers in preference to lesbian mothers is particularly striking, as the custody of children following their parents' divorce, at that time, was always granted to mothers unless their physical or mental health rendered them unfit as parents. These judgments, both in the UK and the USA, were made in the absence of research on what actually happens to children in lesbian mother families.

The *Spare Rib* article called for someone to conduct an objective study of the development of children in lesbian mother families. I volunteered. At that time, I was a young student of developmental psychology with an interest in women's issues and thought that this would be a novel and worthwhile topic for my Master's dissertation. Little did I know that I would still be researching this topic today! As attention turned from custody disputes to adoption by lesbian women, to access to assisted reproduction by lesbian women, to same-sex marriage, the same questions about the well-being of children arose, over and over again. These very same questions are now being asked about the children of gay fathers. In the intervening period, as a result of scientific advances in assisted reproductive technologies, other new

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family forms have emerged, including heterosexual parent families created through in vitro fertilization (IVF), donor insemination, egg donation, embryo donation and surrogacy. Yet again, questions have been raised about the development and well-being of children in these families. The aim of this book is to bring together the findings of research on parents and children in all of these new family forms.

The present book follows an earlier volume on this topic, *Parenting: What Really Counts?*, (2000). In that book, I examined the aspects of parenting that matter most for children's psychological well-being, as well as the available research on new family forms. Since that time, there has been an explosion of research on new family forms, which is the primary focus of this book. In spite of conceptual and methodological advances in family research over the past 15 years, the characteristics that are generally considered to represent good and bad parenting remain largely the same, and the summary in Chapter 1 closely resembles that of the earlier volume. My thanks to Taylor & Francis for permission to draw from this material. The quotations from family members (both published and unpublished) come from participants of studies carried out by the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge.

Unlike other areas of academic study, most people have views on modern families, not least because they have a family of their own. These views are often based on speculation and assumption, rather than empirical research. It is hoped that this book will enhance the debate by shedding light on modern family life.

Acknowledgments

Much of the research on modern families described in this book would not have happened without the insight, expertise and enthusiasm of the outstanding researchers with whom I have had the privilege and pleasure to work at the University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research – John Appleby, Shirlene Badger, Lucy Blake, Polly Casey, Irene Daly, Sarah Evans, Tabitha Freeman, Susanna Graham, Zeynep Gurtin, Elena Ilioi, Susan Imrie, Humera Iqbal, Vasanti Jadv, Sarah Jennings, Pamela Jimenez-Etcheverria, Nishtha Lamba, Laura Mellish, Sherina Persaud, Elizabeth Raffanella, Jennifer Readings, Jenna Slutsky and Sophie Zadeh – and at the former Family and Child Psychology Research Centre at City University, London, in particular, Rachel Cook, Emma Goodman, Emma Lycett, Fiona MacCallum, Claire Murray, Lucy Owen and Fiona Tasker. This research depends on innovative funders as well as innovative people and also would not have been possible without a series of project and program grants from the Wellcome Trust dating back to the 1980s and most recently in the form of a Senior Investigator Award which has provided the freedom and flexibility to study new family forms as they emerge. I am also indebted to Sir Michael Rutter for supporting this fledgling area of research from the very early days, at a time when few other academics saw it as interesting or worthwhile, and to the late Sir Robert Edwards who encouraged research on the psychological wellbeing of IVF children right from the start.

My heartfelt thanks go to my colleagues at the Centre for Family Research: Helen Statham for enabling me to take time off to complete the book, Claire Hughes for knowing just the right

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reference at just the right time, Martin Richards for always being willing to talk, and Abby Scott for keeping everything calm and under control. Special thanks are due to Kathy Oswald for carrying out the lengthy and painstaking task of compiling the reference list with her insatiable good humor. I am also very fortunate to have Melissa Hines and Michael Lamb as close colleagues and appreciate our conversations about aspects of modern family life that are covered in this book. Thanks are also due to Michael Attwell and Douglas Chirnside for the title and for showing me that interest in research on modern families extends beyond the world of academia, and to my Editor, Hetty Marx, for encouraging me to write this book in the first place.

Our studies would not have been possible without the collaboration of fertility clinics of which the London Women's Clinic, CARE Fertility and Bourn Hall deserve special mention, as well as the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. I am especially grateful to all of the parents and children who have spoken to us over the years about their families and trust that their experiences have enhanced the lives of others. Last but not least, I would like to thank John and Jamie for giving me a family of my own.