

# The Rocket Man is right to go ballistic — gay fathers are best

Sunday Times 22/3/15 Review Section, Pg 7.

*Dolce and Gabbana enraged Elton John with their dismissal of 'synthetic children'; research is on his side, finds Josh Glancy*

The celebrity world was consumed by an epic bitchfight last week, as Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana denounced gay adoption, "chemical offsprings" and "synthetic children". For the Italian designers, despite being gay themselves, "the only family is the traditional one".

Sir Elton John, father of two sons from a surrogate mother, was furious and took to Instagram to call for a boycott of the fashion house. Madonna was also outraged. "There is nothing synthetic about a soul," she wrote on her own Instagram account under the hashtag #livingforlove. "So how can we dismiss IVF and surrogacy? Every soul comes to teach us a lesson."

To settle this spat, the feuding slebs might have been better taking some time off social media and reading a new book by a softly spoken Cambridge professor. *Modern Families*, by the child psychologist Susan Golombok, brings together decades of research on child development in different family structures.

Her conclusions support the Rocket Man's position and go even further: not only do gay parents bring up children just as well as straight ones, statistically they may be better parents.

The research on gay-father families is in its early stages, but a report published by Golombok last year showed that relative to lesbian and

heterosexual couples, gay fathers came out best. "They are more involved with their children's lives and on average have lower levels of depression," says Golombok.

Her book divides families into three categories: "traditional", which is heterosexual married couples; "non-traditional", families headed by single parents, cohabiting parents or step-parents; and "new" families, which include lesbian-mother families, gay-father families and families created by IVF and surrogacy.

John and his partner, David Furnish, will be pleased to hear that statistically, it is the heads of new families that tend to make the best parents. "When there are differences between new families and traditional families," says Golombok, "studies show it's the new families that show more involved, committed, positive parenting."

When these new types of families began to emerge in the 1970s, there was concern about how children would fare without a traditional mother and father. Indeed, Golombok began studying the subject after reading an article in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* about women divorcing men for a lesbian relationship and then losing custody of their children.

Golombok has been married to the same man since the 1970s and has a grown-up son, but she decided to devote her

professional life to testing whether children brought up outside conventional family structures suffered.

"There were lots of concerns about how new families might be bad for children, but when you think about it, the parents of these families are people who have often gone through years of infertility or faced a lot of social disapproval, or sometimes both," she says. "So only people that really, really want to be parents stay the course. It's often so difficult that if you weren't committed, you'd just drop off along the way."

It also helps that the children of new families are always planned. It is impossible for them to have children by accident, so each new birth is desired and prepared for, which is a good start for any child.

Golombok's overriding point is that the factors that contribute to a good environment for children — the quality of the parents' marriage, their psychological wellbeing, their attachment to the children and commitment

to parenting — are just as likely, if not more likely, to be present in a new family than in a traditional family.

But what about gender development? Does a boy not want a father to take him to football? Does a girl not want a mother to go shopping with?

"What we know about children's gender development now is that parents don't have much influence at all," says Golombok. "It is a complicated interaction between biological and social factors. Parents are just one part of that and really make very little difference."

In fact it turns out the only real obstacle facing children with gay or lesbian parents is social stigma. Society is far more accepting over the past three decades, but there is still some stigma.

"When we speak to children with lesbian or gay parents, depending on where they live and what school they go to, stigma can be an issue," says Golombok. "In many schools 'gay' is used to mean stupid so children with gay or lesbian parents find that upsetting. Also, children get fed up having to constantly explain their family."

This is why Golombok joined Madonna and John in being cross with Dolce and Gabbana last week. "As well as being disloyal to their community, their views are extremely uninformed," she says. "These are the kinds of beliefs and attitudes that can be harmful to children from new families, not what happens within the actual families themselves."

*Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms* by Susan Golombok is published by Cambridge University Press at £18.99

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Golombok: gay parents tend to be committed and involved