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Kids thrive just as well in non-traditional families, new book says

A Cambridge University psychologist Susan Golombok explores the upside of unconventional parenthood.



Nine-month-old Jasmine Chan and her two dads Ewan French, left, and Paul Chan are an example of modern families that break the traditional mold. Jasmine was conceived using Chan's sperm while one of French's sisters donated eggs and the other was surrogate.

By: [Andrea Gordon](#) Feature Writer, Published on Fri Mar 20 2015

Baby Jasmine Chan delivered the ultimate Valentine's Day gift to her parents this year. It was her first word, clear and deliberate.

"Daddy," she said, beaming across the dinner table.

Music to her two dads' ears.

When they met 12 years ago, Paul Chan and Ewan French never imagined they would one day answer to Daddy or Papa.

Chan had recently come out to his family. It was a tough period and his mother was heartbroken. She wanted grandkids. He assumed his own dream of being a father would never come true.

It wasn't until they married two years ago that the couple started to explore the idea of parenthood. Chan, 33, was confident they could be good, loving parents. French was on the fence.

"I always knew we'd have a strong community around us," says French, 34, who was born and raised in Scotland.

"But I didn't want (our child) to face any challenges because of having same-sex parents. Would we be putting her at an unfair advantage because of it?"

According to a new book from University of Cambridge developmental psychologist Susan Golombok, the answer is a resounding "No."

Golombok, director of the university's [Centre for Family Research](#), has been studying the impact of evolving family structures on children for almost 40 years.

[Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms](#), which rounds up research from around the world, concludes that children raised by same-sex parents and solo moms by choice or born as a result of donor conception or surrogacy fare just as well as kids raised by a two-parent, heterosexual married couple.

"The main conclusion is that what matters for children is not so much the structure of the family — the gender or sexual orientation of their parents, the number of parents or whether parents are biologically related to their children," Golombok said in a phone interview from England.

"What seems to be more important is the quality of the relationships within the family."

In other words, while the traditional model of mom, dad and biological kids was once considered "the gold standard," four decades of research doesn't bear that out.

All other things being equal, children manage just as well — and face the same difficulties — whether they have two dads and no mom, or two moms and no father as they do with two heterosexual parents. There is no evidence they have more psychological problems, difficulty adjusting or atypical gender development, Golombok found.

Organizations like [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) and the [American Psychological Association](#) have already endorsed findings that the sexual orientation of parents has no bearing on child-rearing abilities or the well-being of kids.

What's new about *Modern Families* is it brings together empirical research involving many thousands of families from around the world and explores some of the reasons that more unorthodox families seem to do so well.

Golombok's career has spanned an evolution in family life, starting in the late 1970s as lesbian moms came out and divorced husbands fought for the right to raise their children, followed by the arrival of the first test-tube baby in 1978.

The book comes amid a huge shift in how society recognizes and accommodates the assortment of families created as a result of assisted reproductive technologies. Modern kids may have a "solo mom" who chose to have a child on her own using donated sperm, or relationships with as many as five parents, including two legal parents, a sperm donor, egg donor and a surrogate.

The careful planning and lengths these parents go to in order to have children may be one reason their kids do well, says Golombok.

It can require years of fertility treatment and facing other barriers like social disapproval. The less motivated give up along the way.

"These are generally very wanted children with very committed parents," says Golombok, who raised her own son, now an adult, with her husband.

This is a different dynamic from non-traditional households formed as a result of separation or divorce or as blended families, which are more likely to cause difficulties for children, she adds.

[Paul Chan and Ewan French's journey](#) to parenthood is a case in point; it involved soul-searching, researching their options, spending time with other gay dads and their kids, and money.

There was also heartbreak, when their first attempt with a surrogate ended with the loss of twins in the first trimester.

Jasmine, now nine-months old, was conceived using Chan's sperm and donor eggs from French's younger sister in Scotland. French's older sister in Arizona was the surrogate, delivering the baby by caesarean section in Markham last June, with both daddies by her side.

The couple agrees that ongoing research and discussion are important. Golombok notes that with every new type of family, the question of children's well-being comes up all over again.

For example, while it has been well-documented that kids of lesbian moms do just as well or even better than peers raised by heterosexual parents, "these very same questions are now being asked about the children of gay fathers."

Because the phenomenon is newer, there are far fewer studies. But her review of research to date finds "their children flourish."

[One of the largest studies of children of same-sex parents](#), released in 2014 by the University of Melbourne and involving 500 Australian kids, found they measured higher for health and well-being than their peers from traditional families. The lead researcher attributed it to more harmonious households.

But the study also noted children are frequently stigmatized, something Golombok stresses is a product of societal attitudes rather than parenting. Surveys of young adults have found that while they do report having gone through adversity because of their non-traditional families, they grow into people who tend to be more open-minded and tolerant of all differences.

In the meantime, the number of “new family forms” is growing exponentially.

The explosion of same-sex households prompted Chan, an administrator at University of Toronto, and French, a marketing manager who works from home, to create a real estate agency catering to that market. Modern Family Realtor will open next month.

Last summer, Toronto dads Brian Rosenberg and Ferd van Gameren founded GaysWithKids.com for men navigating fatherhood. Traffic was so high following the launch that it crashed the website.

The couple adopted their son Levi five years ago and a year later, their twin daughters Sadie and Ella were born to a surrogate. At the time, they had few role models or places to turn to find out how other dads were doing it.



Brian Rosenberg, (green shirt), and husband Ferd van Gameren of Toronto with son Levi and twin daughters, Ella (in sleeveless top) and Sadie. For Life story by Andrea Gordon on new book *Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms*. Credit: Robert Figueroa photos

So they decided to build their own community online. Today it attracts readers and contributors from around the world, with discussions on everything from coping with homophobic parents at preschool to circumcision, bi-racial children and shout-outs to supportive grandparents.

Golombok's findings were also timely for Toronto parenting editor Brandie Weikle, founder of TheNewFamily.com.

"It's validating to hear that your kids can thrive no matter what your family looks like," says the mother of two sons, who is divorced but lives next door to her children's father and his wife, allowing them to move freely between houses.

Weikle, a former Star editor, set up the website last summer to champion diverse households and profile them one by one in the [1,000 Families Project](#).

The fluidity of partnerships and family is also the subject of a soon-to-be-released book by Hollywood [actress Maria Bello](#).

[Her memoir, Whatever...Love is Love](#), follows [her 2013 Modern Love column in the Sunday New York Times](#), which drew accolades. Titled "Coming Out as a Modern Family," it told the poignant story of how Bello explained to her 12-year-old son that she was in love with her best friend, a woman.

The piece, which made the list of the top 10 Modern Love columns ever written, highlights the resilience and adaptability that kids can demonstrate when they have trusting relationships with parents.

It's something Chantal Saville has seen in her 6-year-old daughter Nikki, who she's now raising with the help of her own mom.



Chantal Saville, left, and her mother Jocelyne Newberry are partners when it comes to caring for 6-year-old Nikki. The three have been living together in Newberry's Toronto home since Saville's marriage broke up in 2013. Aaron Harris photo.

After Saville's marriage broke up two years ago and the couple sold the business they ran outside Peterborough, she wondered how she'd make ends meet.

Her mother, widowed a decade earlier, was still living in the Toronto bungalow Saville grew up in as an only child. The two had always been close.

"Now we are effectively co-parenting Nikki," says Saville, 42, a writer.

In the early days, mom and grandma occasionally locked horns over discipline when the era of, "because I said so" clashed with modern refrain of, "sweetie, here's why I need you to do what I ask."

But they've learned that communication is key and that whoever is in charge at a given moment gets the final word.

In her book, Golombok notes that kids of single mothers have often fared worse in studies than those in two-parent homes. But she notes it isn't the notion of one parent per se that's the issue, but factors that so commonly go with that: conflict prior to a parental breakup, financial hardship and maternal depression.

Living with mom and grandma means Nikki has the benefit of stability and two supportive, loving relationships.

"She's in a nice home in a nice neighbourhood with nice friends and two people who love her," says Saville. "And she knows we've got her back."

She's also learned to adjust to two parenting styles and resolve differences. "And isn't that the world?" she says.

Sara Lanthier, 45, is part of a newer and less studied group of parents — single women who decide to have children on their own, often referred to as "choice moms."

At 39, she gave birth to her son, Will, courtesy of a donor from a U.S. sperm bank — a process she compares to shopping for a bathing suit in a catalogue, [in her humorous blog DIY on the website UrbanMoms.ca](#).

The emergence of families like Lanthier's is giving rise to a new wave of research looking at the long-term effects of surrogacy and donor conception on children, says Golombok.

She says the evidence so far suggests that when parents talk to children at an early age about how they were conceived, the kids are better able to integrate that information into their developing sense of identity.

Lanthier has already told 6-year-old Will that his dad "is a great guy who helped me to have you."

“I don’t make a big deal about it,” she says. The details will come later. But every Father’s Day, she and her son release a couple of blue balloons into the sky in his honour and talk about how lucky they are to have each other.



Sara Lanthier is one of a growing number of single women choosing to raise a child on their own. Will, 6, was born when she was 39.