



Rock star Elton John's family form is no longer uncommon

FAMILIES

MAKING WAVES

What do new family forms mean for the parents and children involved?

FAMILIES COME IN many forms. Some parents are same-sex; others are single by choice. And growing numbers of children are conceived through assistive reproductive technology.

What do these developments mean for the parents and children involved? 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? Will children born to gay fathers through egg donation and surrogacy be less likely to flourish than children conceived by IVF to genetically related heterosexual parents?

Professor Susan Golombok of the University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research has examined new family forms within a context of four decades of empirical research in her new book *Modern Families: Parents and children in new family forms*. She found that the growing body of research into the wide range of family forms, undertaken in the UK, USA and around the world shows that it is the quality of relationships that matters most to the wellbeing of families, not the number, gender, sexual orientation or genetic relatedness of the parents, or whether the child was conceived with reproductive technology.

For example, in studies of children born through assisted reproduction, their mothers have consistently been found to show more warmth and emotional involvement, and less parenting stress, than natural conception mothers. A key factor in the positive functioning of children in these new family forms appears to be that they are very wanted as their parents have struggled to have children due to infertility or in the face of social disapproval.

Looking at the issue of surrogacy, although attitudes to it have softened, it remains the most

controversial form of assisted reproduction. But studies report that relationships between intended parents and surrogate mothers are generally enduring and positive. And children born through surrogacy sometimes form relationships with the surrogate's own children.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

Many parents in new family forms fear that telling children about their donor conception will jeopardise the loving relationship that has developed between the child and non-genetic parent. But research has shown that parents who are open with their children when young – before they reach school age – say that their children accept this information and are not distressed by it. Finding out in adolescence or adulthood appears to be more difficult.

Attitudes towards same-sex parent families in the UK have changed enormously. In less than half a century we have moved from a situation in which lesbian mothers were ostracised, and gay men were at risk of imprisonment, to a time where same-sex couples can marry, adopt children jointly, and become the joint legal parents of children born through assisted reproductive technologies.

Today families are both fluid and flexible, and there is more variation within family types than between them. Many of the newer routes helping people to fulfil their desires to have a family are still in their infancy. While progress is never smooth – and innovations in conception are bound to be a matter for public debate – it is important to overcome the misconceptions that new family forms do not benefit the children, or parents, within them. ■

Attitudes towards same-sex parent families in the UK have changed

www.cam.ac.uk/research/features

NEWS IN BRIEF

VOLUNTEER VIEWS

Very occasional volunteering is the most common form of volunteering in the UK, according to the first British study to use longitudinal survey data to track volunteering behaviours and attitudes over time. The study shows that more than two-thirds (71 per cent) of British Household Panel/Understanding Society (BHPS/US) survey participants who reported volunteering between 1996 to 2011 did so on only one or two occasions. In contrast, the proportion of volunteers who had undertaken voluntary activity over many of those 15 years was relatively small: less than a third (29 per cent) of those surveyed. These long-term volunteers, however, contributed over half (54 per cent) of the total amount of voluntary activity reported by BHPS/US respondents over time. longitudinalvolunteering.wordpress.com

*Dr Rose Lindsey,
University of Southampton*

GOODBYE 'GENERATION A'

The Church of England is losing the unique contribution provided by 'Generation A', the group of Anglican women born in the 1920s and 30s who have provided not only numbers in the congregation but also a kind of labour, leadership and knowledge that has quietly kept churches going. The passing of Generation A signals an inevitable decline of the Church of England and Anglican Communion of the Global North due to Generation As not being able – amid widespread cultural revolutions – to transmit specific skills, beliefs and practices to their 'baby-boomer' children and churches. Priests may need to think quickly about how to replace the kind of leadership provided by Generation A instead of trying to attract young people to the church. gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/project/A4499CD6-759B-40DB-8ED6-BBCE5F712812

*Abigail Day, Goldsmiths,
University of London*

