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Making babies in modern times

Children today can be created under circumstances that were inconceivable a short time ago. Does the concept of "intentional parenthood" objectify children? A new report takes a look.

Marquardt, E. (2011). *One Parent or Five: A Global Look at Today's New Intentional Families*. New York: Institute of American Values. Available online by [clicking here](#).

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Advances in the treatment of infertility have opened up previously unimaginable options for adults wanting to be parents. But are these advances in the best interest of the children they help produce?

One Parent or Five: A Global Look at Today's New Intentional Families, released in October 2011 by the Institute for American Values examines the nature of "intentional parenthood" through the reality of one, two, three, four and even five parent families.

Principle investigator Elizabeth Marquardt traces the importance of "intentional parenthood" from its beginnings with Margaret Sanger and planned parenthood (the concept, not the organization). At its root, "intentional parenthood" says that a wanted child whose birth is planned will necessarily be better off than one whose birth is unplanned.

Today, Marquardt argues, this concept is central to the push to create new family types through various forms of fertility engineering.

In the place of accidental children to two biological parents, she identifies that we have intentional children through various combinations of egg and sperm donors to gay men, lesbian women and single mothers and fathers. There are also surrogate mothers who carry children for parents unable to conceive by virtue of infertility or sexual orientation.

She goes on: Single parents can be men or women who buy sperm or eggs, then hire a surrogate to carry the child. Single mothers can become pregnant with their husband's sperm, even after his death.

Finally, getting into a realm once firmly consigned to science fiction, in the future cloning may become a reproductive option. This would allow a parent to have a child who is completely and only their own.

In fact, James Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA, argues that there is "nothing inherently wrong with cloning." He goes on: "I'm in favour of anything that will improve the quality of an individual family's way of life." [1]

These children, by intent and design, can't know one of their biological parents even before they are conceived. And while not needing to share your child with any partner may be a boon for some individuals, is it really a gift to the child?

Two parent families

Marquardt identifies a number of types of two parent families.

Married mothers and fathers can, of course, still be found throughout the world. Indeed, in spite of scientific developments allowing for other options, research shows that the children of married mothers and fathers have increased mental and physical health, better academic and intellectual performance, and better behaviour at school.[2] They are less likely to live in poverty and less likely to suffer physical or sexual abuse. [3], [4]

Marquardt references research into step families, and adoption. She gets into unique parenting arrangements, including two people who choose to form a family by establishing separate living arrangements before the child arrives. Marquardt argues the resulting children will know neither the pain of divorce nor the love of a mother and father within a family unit.

Three parent families

Three parent families are those who through sperm or egg donation and surrogacy add a third legal parent to the family. This is not a case where a child in a step family comes to have a step dad or mom. These are cases where three parents are put on the baby's birth certificate from the start.

This happened in Ontario in 2007 when a court agreed that a five-year-old boy could have three parents - his biological mom and dad and his mother's partner. [5] In decisions such as these the court has assumed the power to define parenthood as distinct from biology. If a sperm donor can be a parent, why can't the egg donor? If an egg donor can be ruled a parent, then why can't a surrogate mother?

Five parent families

Marquardt discusses the possibility of five parents when we consider that the sperm donor, egg donor, surrogate mother, and the two intentional parents could all have a place in the life of the resulting child. [6]

In short, in fertility and child bearing, intentional parenting advocates will claim that we must make available the option of children to absolutely everyone, regardless of gender or marital status.

The question is, is this in the best interests of the child? Marquardt makes clear it is not. She shows that intentional parenthood is really about the desire of an adult to have a child. She asks whether children are a commodity bought and sold to appease adults? Or are they instead individual human beings worthy of dignity and protection? This is a question the fertility industry ignores as it charges on to see how it can satisfy the desires of adults for children assuming all along that a planned birth automatically means a healthy childhood.

Unfortunately, it's just not that simple.

Endnotes

[1] Jha, A. (2005, May 20). Process holds out hope for childless couples, *The Guardian*. Retrieved October 13, 2011 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2005/may/20/genetics.science>

[2] Stack, S, Eshleman, J.R. (1998, May). Marital status and happiness: A 17-nation study. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Vol. 60, no. 2, pp. 527-36; Dawson, D.A. (1991). Family structure and children's health and well-being: Data from the 1988 National Health Interview Survey on Child Health. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. Vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 573-84; Popenoe, D. (1996). *Life without father*. (New York: Free Press); Stanton, G.T. (1997). *Why marriage matters: Reasons to believe in marriage in postmodern society*. Colorado Springs, Co: Pinon Press; Rohner, R.P., Veneziano, R. A. (2001, December). The importance of father love: History and contemporary evidence. *Review of General Psychology*. Vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 382-405; McLanahan, S., Sandefur, G. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[3] McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*.

[4] Popenoe, *Life without father*; Stanton, *Why marriage matters*

and

Putnam, F. (2003, March). Ten-year research update review: Child sexual abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 269-79; Stiffman, M. et al. (2002, April). Household composition and risk of fatal child maltreatment. *Pediatrics*. Vol. 109, no. 4, pp. 615-21.

[5] CBC News. (2007, January). Ontario court says boy can have dad, mom and mom. Retrieved October 20, 2011 from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/story/2007/01/03/twomom-court.html>

[6] See recent Canadian court case: <http://www.albertacourts.ab.ca/jdb%5C2003-%5Cqb%5CFamily%5C2009%5C2009abqb0438.pdf>