

Vive La Difference: Gender & Parenthood

W. Bradford Wilcox

Director of the National Marriage Project
Associate Professor of Sociology
The University of Virginia





California Dreaming

- The new elite wisdom, articulated in California last year, is that mothers and fathers are fungible.
- San Francisco Judge Vaughn Walker: It is beyond “any doubt that parents' genders are irrelevant to children's developmental outcomes.”
- Hollywood Star Jennifer Aniston: “Women are realizing it more and more knowing that they don't have to settle with a man just to have that child.”



Vive La Différence

- Regardless of the elite wisdom, a large and growing body of social science indicates that
 - Mothers and Fathers bring distinctive talents to the parenting enterprise; and,
 - Children are most likely to thrive and even survive when they are raised by their own mother and father;
 - Children long to know and be known by the man and woman who brought them into this world.

Mothers' Talents

- Breastfeeding
- Understanding children
- Communicating with children
- Nurturing children

Breastfeeding

- Only moms can breastfeed
- Health benefits for mother
 - Lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer
- Health benefits for children
 - Protects against at least 15 maladies
 - 2005: American Academy of Pediatrics recommends infants be breastfed until 1
- Breastfeeding helps cement the biological foundations for a unique maternal-child bond that lasts into and beyond adolescence.



Understanding Children



- Mothers excel in interpreting expressions, utterances of children
- From infancy
 - Distinguish cries of hunger and pain from babies
- To adolescence
 - Adolescents report that mothers are more in tune with their moods

Communicating with Children



- Mothers have an advantage in communication
 - They use more words, use them more precisely
 - Better at interpreting tone & content of children's words
 - Less likely to forget content of conversations
- Biological basis?
 - Women have more cells in Left Brain
 - Women have a larger corpus callosum
 - Women have more dopamine in language center of brain

Nurturing their Children



- Mothers excel in nurturing their children
 - Better at reading/communicating with their children
 - More emotionally attached to their children
- Biological basis?
 - Women have much more estrogen
 - Women have more oxytocin
 - Both hormones promote nurturing behavior

The Motherhood Role



- Women's advantages in breastfeeding, understanding, communicating, & nurturing help explain why the *role* of motherhood tends to be more strongly tied to the care of children the world over.

Fathers' Talents

- Providing
- Discipline
- Play
- Challenging children
- Loving Mom

Providership



- Fathers excel in providing
 - After kids arrive, dads work more hours, wives work less
 - In the U.S., about two-thirds of family income typically comes from Dad
 - Their providership plays an important role in securing food, shelter, health care, & education for their children

Discipline



- Fathers excel in disciplining children
 - Strength, size, voice telegraph toughness
 - More assertive, less willing to bend rules than mothers
 - Especially effective with teenage boys
- Biological basis?
 - Testosterone associated with male size, strength, voice, & dominance

Play



- Fathers excel in physical play
 - More inclined to engage in rough play
 - More likely to surprise or excite children
 - Children more likely to be stimulated by father & to learn how to deal with aggression from father
- Biological basis?
 - Testosterone is associated with energy level, strength, physical activity

Challenging their Teens

- Fathers excel in pushing their children to embrace challenges, difficulties, outside world
 - Encourage kids to engage in novel activities & be independent
 - More likely to introduce children to work, sports, civil society/politics
 - Teen boys & girls who have active, engaged dads more confident



Loving Mom



- One of most important influences Dad can have on kids is indirect
 - Loving Mom
- Moms who are happily married are
 - More involved, nurturing, better at monitoring
- Dads who treat mom with respect & affection
 - More likely to teach boys to deal with girls/women in a respectful manner
 - More likely to teach girls to expect to be treated well by boys/men in their life

Outcomes



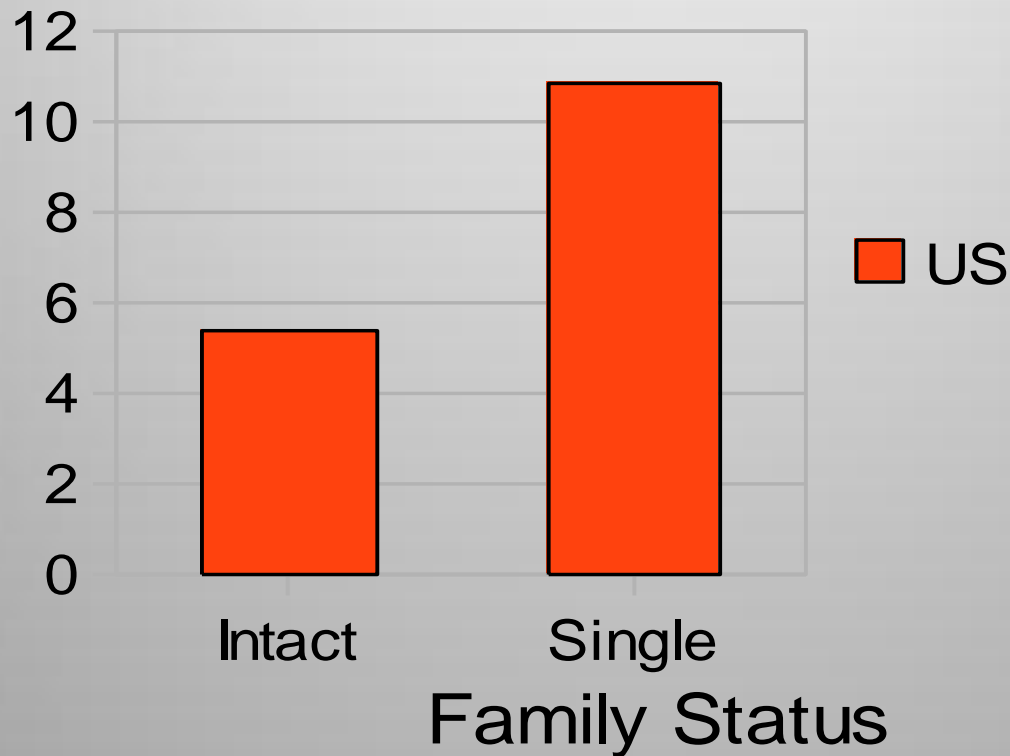
Fatherless Homes

Teens reared in single-mother homes are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes.

Young Men in Prison



% Young men in prison

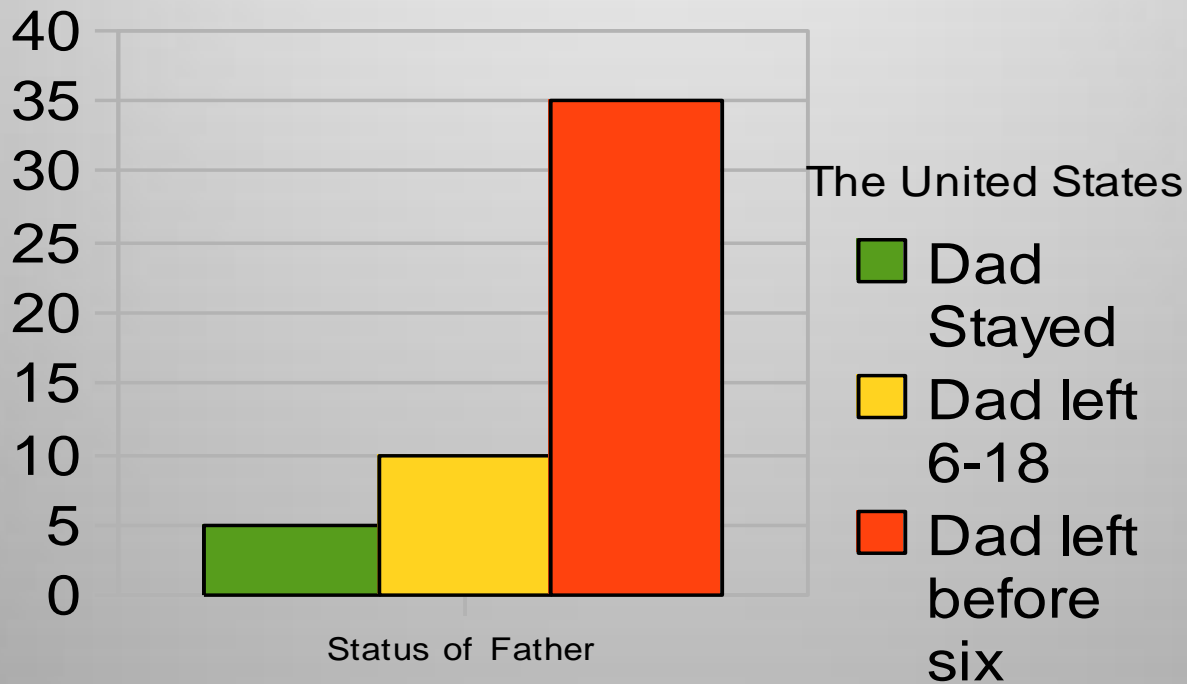


Source: Harper and McLanahan 2004

Teenage Girls Pregnant



% Teenage girl pregnancy



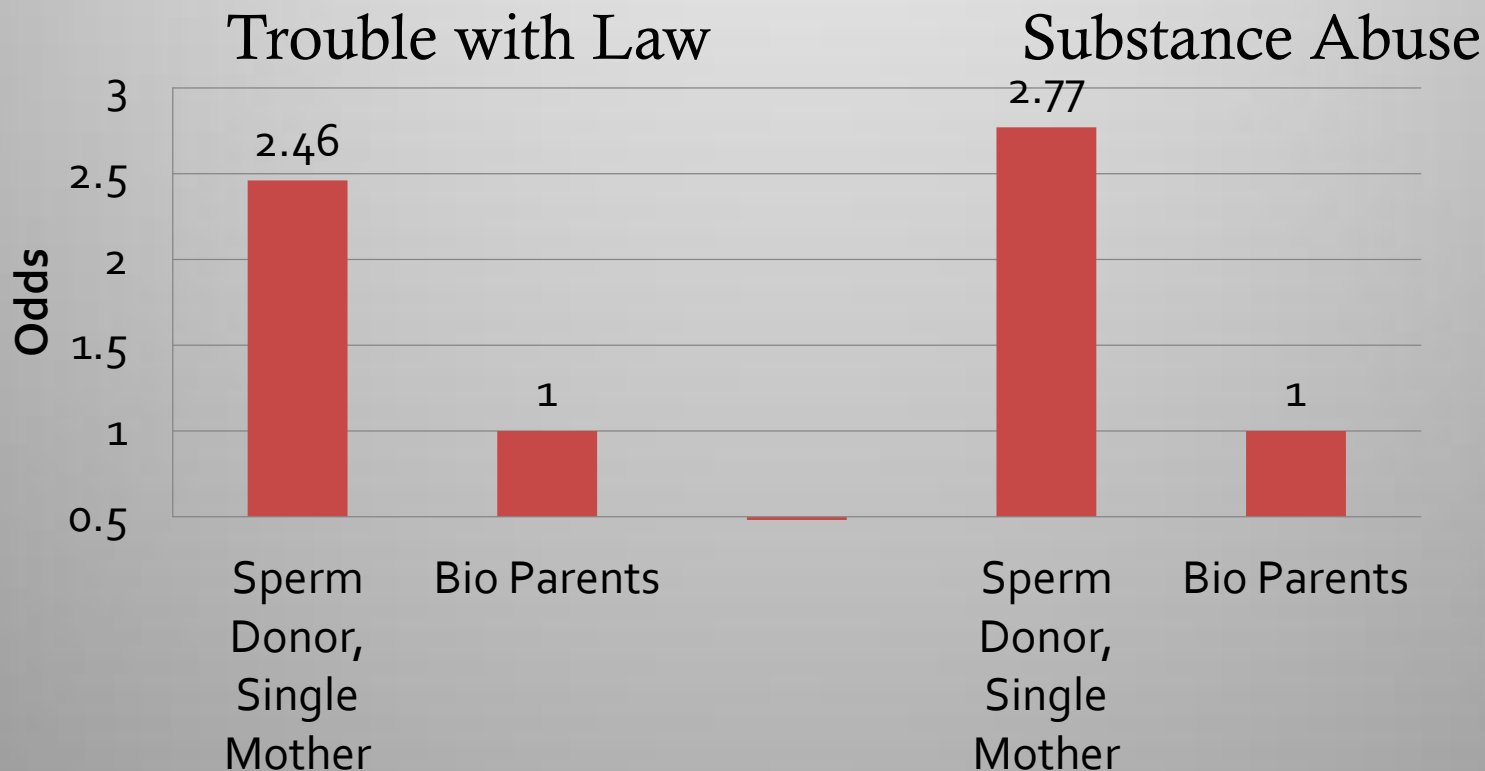
Family Status

Source: Ellis et al., 2003

Jennifer Aniston is Wrong



- Sperm Donor Children of Single Moms much more likely to have problems (Marquardt et al. 2010)



Vive La Différence

- Best psychological, sociological, & biological evidence suggests that men & women bring different talents to the parenting enterprise.
- We ought to organize parenting to best take advantage of the different gifts that moms and dads bring to the parenting enterprise.



Conclusion

- The elite wisdom articulated in California last year is wrong. Children are most likely to thrive when they are raised by their own mother and father.
- We need to strengthen marriage to ensure that children have the benefit of being in communion with the man and woman who brought them into this world.

