

Assisted reproduction and family development: The new parents study

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Credit: Bridget Coila

Alice Winstanley and Kate Ellis-Davies, are researchers in the Applied Developmental Psychology Research Group working on *The New Parents Study*, a ground-breaking international project lead by Professor Michael Lamb and Professor Susan Golombok into the experiences of parents who have used assisted reproduction technologies, and the development of their children.

Family structure has changed markedly in the past few decades. Starting a family is now possible for a greater variety of intended parents due to the advances in assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs), allowing

lesbian and gay parents to start families for example.

Despite the increasing numbers of couples and individuals helped by ARTs, these families have not been sufficiently represented in studies looking into how families develop. In order for policy and support to reflect the reality of life for these families, research needs to include all family forms. The science behind ARTs is developing rapidly and as such the science focusing on the psychological, social and emotional wellbeing of these families needs to keep up.

Of the extensive literature on family development conducted over the last century, comparatively little empirical focus has documented the wellbeing of same-sex parents and their children, in particular in families headed by gay dads. Studies including families with lesbian mothers have found children do not show signs of psychological maladjustment, do not have poorer peer relationships and do not show differences in gender identity. Indeed, children of lesbian mothers appear to be functioning well into adult life.

Even fewer studies have focused on gay fathers and their children. The few studies that have followed children of gay fathers have found these children did not show adverse effects, and were well adjusted.

Understanding the development and experiences of these families is important, as increasing numbers of gay men are becoming fathers. Not enough is known about the well-being of these fathers, and the development of their children. Therefore, more empirical evidence and less assumption is needed to understand the effect of gay parents on their families wellbeing and experiences to ensure the correct support is in place, if needed.

This need for empirical evidence to understand the wellbeing of parents and children following ARTs is what drives The New Parents Study, an

ambitious study following families with babies 4 months old are visited at their homes, with a follow-up invitation to Cambridge University when the babies are 12 months old. Families included are those who have gay parents, where the child was born through surrogacy; families with lesbian mothers, where the child was born through Donor Insemination; and heterosexual couples where the child was born through IVF. One father involved with The New Parents Study recently spoke about why he was driven to participate and what it was like being part of the study:

"As a family helped by surrogacy we are a minority, we need studies like this which represent us and our families, at the same time knowing the research is anonymous is also really reassuring..."

"Taking part was enjoyable and speaking about our experiences of becoming parents really gave us food for thought. Normally when you talk to people about your [children](#) there's a ticking clock, most people don't want to hear all about what you've been up to and how we felt about everything! The New Parents Study team were really interested in what we had to say and were empathetic to talk to.

"All in all the visit was really enjoyable and I'd really recommend any first time parents who have been helped by ARTs to get involved."

The New Parents Study is an exciting project to work on as we are following couples who have recently become first time [parents](#) (with babies up to 4 months old), inclusive of gay, lesbian and straight couples. The study brings two groups based in Cambridge, the Applied Developmental Psychology Research Group, and the Centre for Family Research, together with groups based at the University of Paris in France and the University of Amsterdam in The Netherlands. All of the groups involved in the New Parents Study have yielded findings over the years that demonstrate that it is the dynamics of a family that is far more

important than the family structure when we are trying to understand child wellbeing.

Another reason being involved with *The New Parents Study* is so exciting is that we will be able to learn more about fathers who are primary caregivers. In addition, we have the honour of seeing these families grow and develop while hearing about their family stories.

With such an ambitious project we are indebted to the on-going support and assistance we receive in reaching potential participating families, from charities, clinics, agencies and support groups.

Dr. Alice Winstanley and Dr. Kate Ellis-Davies recently attended several national and international events for ARTs, fathering and alternative families, including: the Alternative Parenting Show (London); Paternal Involvement in Pregnancy Outcomes from Preconception to First Year of Life (National Institutes of Health, Maryland, MD); New York Fertility Services (New York, NY); Surrogacy UK AGM (Warwick).

In March 2014, the Applied Developmental Psychology Research Group, alongside the Centre For Family Research, will be organising an event for National Science and Engineering Week on "What Makes A Family", where researchers, clinicians, charities, parent groups and the general public will be able to engage in discussions on recent research into family development, and how researchers can take account of the public's interests in [family](#) development.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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