

Children growing up in solo mother families are well adjusted and developing well

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The number of children born to single women is increasing, partly as a result of social and legislative changes (in most jurisdictions) in the rights to parenthood. While technology has been readily able to meet this rising demand through donor insemination and even IVF, little is known about how children think, feel and fare growing up in the families formed by single women.

A study performed at the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge, UK, and presented as a poster here in Helsinki at the Annual Meeting of ESHRE suggests that the children are generally well adjusted, with positive feelings about family life, although they do raise questions about the absence of a father in their families. "Indeed," said researcher Dr Sophie Zadeh, "at the age at which children begin to understand their family circumstances, they continue to function well."

The study was an evaluation of 51 solo mother families who were compared (both quantitatively and qualitatively) with 52 heterosexual two-parent families with at least one donor-conceived child aged 4-9 years. The participating families were matched in terms of the age and gender of the target child, and on demographic factors including the mother's educational level. The study, said Dr Zadeh, is the first to examine child adjustment and children's perspectives in solo mother families at an age at which children are old enough to understand their family circumstances and what it means to grow up without a father - and the only study to assess children's own reports about their social and family experiences.

Mothers in both groups answered standardised questionnaires of child adjustment and parenting stress. In addition, the solo mothers completed an interview which asked about their children's feelings about a father, and whether or not this was a topic of family discussion. A total of 47 children within these solo mother families agreed to be interviewed. They were asked about family life and friendships.

There was no significant difference between the two family types when assessed for child adjustment according to a standardised questionnaire. However, higher levels of financial difficulties within the solo mother families, and higher levels of parenting stress, were each associated with [higher levels](#) of child adjustment problems. Moreover, mothers mostly reported that their children had neutral (39%) or mixed (28%) feelings about the absence of a father, although qualitative analysis of mothers' reports showed that conversations about fathers were a prominent feature of [family life](#).

As for the children themselves, most (89%) who answered a question about changing their family circumstances either expressed a desire for just trivial changes (38%) or no change (51%). Children mostly (59%) reported high (19%) or very high (40%) levels of enjoyment of school. All reported having at least one friend, and most (51%) named five or more friends. The majority (63%) had not been teased at school, or had experienced only trivial teasing (34%).

"Between the ages of 4 and 9, donor-conceived children in solo mother families generally seem to be doing well," said Dr Zadeh. "However, we don't yet know how these children will fare over time, or what they will think and feel about being donor-conceived and/or growing up without a father in the home as they grow older.

"In general, our findings seem to suggest that what matters most for children's outcomes in solo mother families is not the absence of a

father, nor donor conception, but the quality of parenting, and positive parent-child relationships. These findings therefore echo much of what we already know about the determinants of [children's](#) psychological adjustment in other family types."

More information: Abstract P-535, Monday July 4, 2016: Children's adjustment and perspectives in solo mother families

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