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Children and parents

Children need adults to be born and to live. Adults are the vehicles by which children are brought into the world and from whom they steadily learn about life. At the time of their birth, babies are helpless and vulnerable. They cannot survive without the care and protection that adults provide. As they grow, infants need to be kept safe from harm until they can avoid injury and defend themselves from aggressors. As responsive beings shaped by the environments in which they grow, children need to be nurtured and educated so they can take their place in the community and derive maximum enjoyment from life. As teenagers, they require reassurance that they are valued and supported while they discover their identity, learn to make their own decisions and begin to accept responsibility for their actions.

Throughout their infant, pubescent and adolescent years, children look to adults for food, shelter, clothing, meaning, direction and acknowledgment. In the majority of instances, the adults who principally meet these needs will be their parents — a man and a woman to whom they refer as their ‘father’ and ‘mother’. This is a special relationship that at its best permits a child to believe that its physical, emotional and spiritual needs are not subordinate to its parents’ wants or of secondary importance to those of all other adults. Whereas adults can be relied upon to pursue their own self-interest, children must be confident that their parents will make personal sacrifices for them without prompting or payment. We are often surprised that even self-centred people find a capacity for selflessness when they become parents and assume responsibility for children. Without the care and nurture that parents provide, children can become anxious and even disturbed. Without the

guidance and discipline that parents impart, children can doubt their worth, suffer from low self-esteem and engage in self-destructive behaviour. Parents are an integral part of a child's life and usually the single biggest influence on what that child will become as an adult. If we wound a child, we scar an adult.

Apart from political or practical considerations such as providing for a dynastic succession or gaining access to welfare benefits, and given what is at stake in raising children, why are men and women willing to become parents? Given the cost, inconvenience and unpredictability of children, and being mindful of the considerable time and money associated with their nurture, what do men and women gain from having children? These are crucial questions in the context of understanding why some people are prepared to invest so much money and energy in becoming parents and why they are willing to expend so much of themselves and their resources on their children and their development.

The pursuit of parenthood

Like most things that are done by human beings, men and women have children for good reasons, bad reasons or for no reason at all. Sometimes they have had no choice. At different points in human history, governments have obliged citizens to marry and procreate to sustain their society and to contribute to its prosperity. After the three Punic Wars fought between Rome and the Carthaginian Empire (264–241 BCE, 218–201 BCE and 149–146 BCE) left women outnumbering men, Rome enacted laws compelling its citizens to marry and awarding them special privileges according to the number of children they produced. Single people were eventually excluded from inheriting properties or positions. If a person's hopes for the future were linked to children and those children's children, a childless person had no future and might as

well be dead already. To have children in those societies was to preserve one's posterity. The childless were a burden to the state and the subject of scorn.

Apart from political and economic imperatives, some modern observers would argue that the desire to have children is nothing more than a Darwinian urge to perpetuate the species. If human beings did not maintain the habit of having children they would, of course, vanish from the face of the earth within a century. As this is contrary to a deeply held survival instinct, producing children merely reflects a biological impulse. While it is true that we need to reproduce if humanity is to avoid extinction, most people would not find this a persuasive or adequate account of why we have children. It certainly fails to explain why there are many people with no interest in having children. The motives for reproduction and parenthood would thus appear to be much deeper and more profound.

Most men and women do not want to be alone or isolated; they seek out others with whom they form close and continuing bonds within which they find mutual sharing and reciprocal care. At the most profound level, a man and a woman have children because children extend the affectionate and compassionate community they established as a couple. Caring for children gives them another opportunity for personal intimacy and a broader experience of companionship. This opportunity and experience provides sublime pleasure and hints at the point and purpose of living: that human beings find meaning and significance for their own lives and for the world in which they live through loving others and being loved by them. Children seem to draw great depths of feeling and a capacity for altruism from their parents that might not otherwise find expression.

Survey data does not answer the important question of whether children strengthen marriages or weaken them. On the one hand, couples are brought together

when they are obliged to co-operate in the care and nurture of their children. On the other hand, a person's love for their partner might be closer and more intense if it were not divided or dissipated by the presence of children. A poll conducted by the popular American journalist Ann Landers (1918–2002) in her syndicated column in 1975 asked parents whether they would have children if they could choose again. Of the 70 000 respondents, half said 'no'. While one imagines that the forthright feelings of disgruntled parents would have weighed against this being a fair or reliable sampling, the existence of more than 35 000 parents with this attitude is telling. Over thirty years later, in early 2007, a study involving 2020 American adults, conducted by the Pew Research Centre based in Washington DC, asked respondents about the purpose of marriage.¹ By a nearly three-to-one ratio, respondents said it was the 'mutual happiness and fulfilment' of adults rather than the 'bearing and raising of children'. When given a list of nine contributors to a successful marriage and asked to rank them in order of significance, faithfulness, sexual contentment, sharing household tasks, economic factors such as adequate income and good housing, and shared tastes and interests, were ahead of bearing and raising children. In comparison to a similar survey conducted in 1990, the relegation of childbirth and parenthood to a position towards the bottom of the list was, according to the Centre, 'perhaps the most striking finding in the survey'. But in terms of personal fulfilment, 85 per cent of parents with children under eighteen years of age described child–parent relationships as the most fulfilling, slightly ahead of relationships with spouses and partners, and much more satisfying than relationships with their own parents and siblings. Clearly, there are no guarantees that parenting will be a fulfilling experience for every mother or father. But this clearly does not deter people from having children.

To choose to love another adult and then to bring children into the confines of that relationship defies the kind of rational, self-interested decision-making that men and women apply in almost every other facet of life. Loving involves the risk of betrayal and the possibility of rejection. It also requires a different view of oneself in relation to others and assumes the existence and exercising of demanding virtues. The possession of these virtues is presupposed in the well-known words of Saint Paul in his first letter to the divided and strife-ridden Church at Corinth, written around 55 CE:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Although love cannot be explained cogently and its expression might often seem illogical and even counterproductive to furthering individual self-interest, it is within relationships established and maintained by love that men and women, boys and girls become conscious of their worth and significance. Of particular relevance to this book, these loving relationships also help individuals grasp a sense of their identity and destiny. These are important personal markers that impart meaning and disclose obligations.

Families, identity and destiny

The earliest recorded account of human origins and fate is found in the first chapter of Genesis: ‘In the beginning, God created ... and it was good’ (verses 1 and 25). The

universe unfolds according to a plan in which humanity finds its meaning conveyed through two related propositions. The first affirms the sanctity of the human individual *as individual*. Every person is created in the 'image of God'. But the second proposition asserts the *incompleteness* of the individual as individual: 'It is not good for man to be alone' (chapter 2, verse 18). Individuals need the companionship of others to complement their living. Life is enriched in and through interaction with other people, particularly those with whom there is a 'blood connection', because something of the essence of a man and a woman is transmitted to their children through procreation. The individual is always a discrete entity but his or her meaning as a person is understood in relation to others. In answering the question 'Who are you?', there is limited value in an individual responding 'I am me'. More significant are the answers 'I am my father's son' or 'I am my mother's daughter', because these replies disclose something of an individual's identity. These ties are neither unimportant nor are they optional. They are integral to being human.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, close biological relationships expand into bonds of kinship, 'blood ties' which link clans and tribes to the largest and most significant social entity — the nation. But the wellbeing of the nation depends upon the health of families. They are the primary building blocks of a functioning society. In the Genesis account, families are preserved by covenants, which in their simplest form are statements of privileges and obligations. Covenants are maintained by the identity of those they bind: they express the kinds of persons the covenanted people are to be towards one another. By way of example: I am obliged to care for my daughter because she is my daughter. Relationships define responsibilities: my sister is entitled to my assistance because she is my sister. There are some things to which I am entitled because I am part of a family which is maintained by a covenant. It is not

surprising that where biological relationships break down and the privileges and obligations of being part of a covenanted community like the family are disrupted, or even disappear, interactions between all individuals are impaired. There is a loss of trust and respect as each person attempts to assert their significance and to secure their future, very often at the expense of everyone else. It is for these reasons that most societies, including those whose common life is not informed by any religious narrative, place great importance on preserving the biological relationships that undergird the family. History would suggest there must be at least one safe place where people are valued and esteemed on the basis of their personal identity rather than their practical utility.

Although individualism — the belief that the location of meaning and purpose in this world is to be found through individual self-fulfilment — is influential in many Western societies, the family has not dissolved as a social entity or been displaced from centrality in the lives of most people. As social commentator Julianne Shultz has noted:

Not so long ago conservative commentators were predicting that the permissiveness of a generation — and what they saw as the accompanying rise in divorce, drop in marriage and declining birthrate — would fatally threaten the family unit. Left-wing analysts were inclined to see the rise of individualism in a ‘me first’ society, coupled with wider recognition of the dark side of many patriarchal families, as undermining the family as a viable social unit. The family was predicted to be on its last legs — to be replaced by an individualistic self-society in which traditional values were jettisoned

and random couplings and groupings replaced mum, dad and the kids ... the dire warnings have not materialised.²

Families matter to the young and the old, and to men, women and children. Whenever a person achieves a personal milestone or negotiates a new direction in life, such as graduating from university or becoming married, they seek to mark and celebrate these occasions in the company of their family. To be separated from one's family on Christmas Day is deemed a great personal misfortune and something deeply regrettable. To be absent from family on one's birthday is a source of disappointment and even sadness. Of those who participated in the 2003 Survey of Australian Social Attitudes, 74 per cent of respondents said that 'family remains central to personal identity'.³ The survey also revealed that in the minds of most Australian men and women, children rather than marriage appear to define a modern family. But is this necessarily so?

Who constitutes a family?

Defining the family is neither trivial nor straightforward. It has become, in fact, something of an ideological battleground, with assertion and counter-assertion about what are the necessary components of a 'real' family. In the absence of formal statements outlining the minimum requirements for a group of people to be designated a family, most Western governments pursue policy agendas that acknowledge and advantage some domestic living arrangements and not others. These policies relate to taxation rebates, childcare subsidies, superannuation payments, property acquisition and probate settlements. Some families, mostly those which include dependent children, receive welfare payments or varied forms of financial assistance. Other

domestic groupings are overlooked or ignored as either not justifying support or falling outside official definitions of the family. What, then, is a family?

The English word 'family' derives from the Latin *familia*, which is more properly translated 'household' because in Roman times it included the servants or *famuli* and others who were dependent on the head of the household for security and sustenance. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides four non-metaphorical meanings for 'family':

- (1) a group consisting of two parents and their children living together as a unit,
- (2) a group of people related by blood or marriage,
- (3) the children of a person or couple,
- (4) all the descendants of a common ancestor.

When people talk about family in Western societies they usually have in mind the first meaning: parents and children living together rather than any other combination of participants. To my mind this constitutes an unreasonably restricted definition because I am not convinced that the presence of children necessarily defines a family.

For the purposes of this book, a family is essentially constituted and effectively maintained by relationships with four principal features. Firstly, the individuals involved regard these relationships as permanent. Secondly, the relationships embody a commitment to the total wellbeing of everyone else involved in them. Thirdly, the relationships are based on a person's identity and not on their utility. In the fourth place, the relationships have an intimacy about them that is not encountered in other attachments. It is possible for these relationships to involve a large number of people, perhaps as many as twenty adults and children, and to span several generations, or to be small and encompass a couple or even two siblings living

together. The number of participants is irrelevant. A community sustained by relationships with the four features outlined above is a family and ought to be recognised and supported as such.

The existence of dependent children is not, in my view, the defining characteristic of a family despite popular perceptions in the community and the assumptions of much public policy. But I am conscious that a majority of people, for the time being, will continue to believe and insist that the presence of children defines a ‘real’ family or a social entity that deserves special consideration in terms of administrative law and public policy. Furthermore, because children purportedly define a family and, by an extension of the same thinking, everyone is entitled to a family, it is frequently asserted that men and women have a right to children by whatever means are available, including ART, at public expense. Denying anyone access to ART effectively constitutes, so the argument continues, the violation of a basic human right. But do men and women have a right to children? What are we to make of this purported right?

Families and children

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: ‘Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and found a family.’ The first part of this right (to marry) is largely free from controversy, the second part (to found a family) less so, because it is susceptible to a range of interpretations. Clear violations of the second part would certainly include the forced sterilisation of married women or the mandatory termination of pregnancy. It might even be possible to declare the long-standing ‘one child’ policy in China to be a violation of human rights, because the state has decreed that it will

disadvantage families that have more than one child. But what should we make of situations in which a couple cannot achieve pregnancy without assistance from a third party? Does the denial of this assistance constitute a violation of the couple's right to found a family, given that Article 16 links marriage with founding a family?

It must first be noted that no-one has a legitimate right to something that is impossible for them to obtain. There is a memorable scene in the 1979 satire *Life of Brian* depicting a disparate group of first-century Jewish revolutionaries plotting the overthrow of Roman imperial rule in Judea. The purpose of the film-makers is to mock the ludicrous and unrealistic demands of extreme political radicals in every generation when their ideals are completely divorced from reality. One of the male characters announces that he has changed his name from Stan to Loretta. He goes on to announce that he wants to have a baby. The leader of the group is incredulous: 'Where is the fetus going to gestate? Are you going to keep it in a box?' The only female member of the group suggests that they agitate for the right of Stan-Loretta to have a baby. It is, of course, an exercise in utter futility. Men cannot claim a right to give birth because they cannot become pregnant. It is crucial to distinguish between actually producing children and attempting to produce children. Even with all the assistance that science can offer and the best help money can buy, there may be factors that preclude a couple from producing any children.

Reproductive rights

The existence or otherwise of certain reproductive 'rights' was considered by an official inquiry into human fertilisation and embryology established by the British Parliament in 1982. The moral philosopher Professor (later Baroness) Mary Warnock of Oxford University served as its chair. Its report, entitled 'Question of Life', was

delivered to the UK Government in July 1984.⁴ In a subsequent study entitled *Making Babies: Is There a Right to Have Children?*, Warnock summarises her own thinking on this question. She notes that ‘a right is an area of freedom for an individual that someone else has a duty to allow him to exercise, as a matter of justice. It is a freedom that one claims, for oneself or for another, and that one can properly prevent other people from inhibiting’.⁵ She points to the need to separate legal and moral issues by maintaining a distinction between the language of law and rights on the one hand, and moral principles and obligations on the other. If one claims that a right to children comes from nature, the infertile would be obliged to accept that nature was denying them that right unless some non-natural factor was a cause for their infertility. She also notes that no-one needs to have children to express their identity or to fulfil their destiny. Children are not indispensable to life and happiness because those without children ‘have a life’ and the majority claim to be happy. According to Warnock there is, then, no absolute or even partial right to have children.

But she also noted that more than two decades of media reporting on near-miraculous technological achievement had encouraged the mistaken belief that all adults had a right to children whatever their circumstances. She remarked:

I would deplore any tendency for people to become so obsessed with their right to have a child, and to have it in the way they want, even with the characteristics they would prefer, that they forget the old sense of astonishment and gratitude that came with the birth of a child. Gratitude to whom? Well, to God or nature, or the midwife or the doctor, or the principle of continuity and the renewal of life itself. It does not matter.

But, as I have said, gratitude is something you do not feel when all you have got is what is owed.⁶

Dr Brian English, a former senior lecturer in social work at the University of New South Wales, has made a similar observation in relation to Australian attitudes: ‘It is fair to speculate that many people now believe, with whatever justification, that everyone has a right to parenthood and a right to expect the State to help them achieve it by one means or another’.⁷

There is, however, strenuous denial of this purported right within some segments of Australian society. Tangled Webs, a support and advocacy group for those born through donor conception (DC), is adamant that no-one has a right to children:

To claim the right to a child is to treat that child, another human being, as an end to satisfying one’s own desires, as an object and not a person. To claim the right to a child is to claim jurisdiction over another human being’s life when they have no say in the matter, when they have not given their consent, informed or otherwise.⁸

If, then, parenthood is more of a privilege than a right, attention must be focused on the purpose for which parents exist and on those who are its subjects (that is, children) to ensure the privilege is not abused.

The rights of children

Plainly, parenting does not exist for itself although people derive pleasure and satisfaction from parenting. Parenting is primarily about caring for children. Therefore, the first concern of parenthood must always and everywhere be the promotion of the best interests of children. This is reflected in the preamble to the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959. It recognises the principle that ‘the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth’. This principle is restated in the preamble to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was signed by most United Nations member states in 1989. Article 3 states that in all matters concerning children ‘the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’.⁹ It asserts that these interests are not comparable to those of adults, nor are they to be balanced with them. The interests of the child are primary.

While this important principle is rarely repudiated, it is susceptible to being undermined in subtle ways. An example can be found in a speech given by a former Victorian Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Dr Diane Sisely, who claimed that ‘in spite of popular belief, there is not a hierarchy of rights. One person’s rights do not automatically override another’s; a child’s rights do not automatically override the mother’s or potential mother’s ... We are required to make difficult choices and strike a balance among competing rights and interests’.¹⁰ Her point would seem to be that the best interests of a child are never primary or paramount and that whatever interests children may have need to be harmonised with those of adults. The notion that the interests of children and adults are competing or that they need to be balanced is, however, contrary to the intention of both United Nations documents quoted above.

If we conceded that the interests of children needed only to be balanced with those of adults, who would speak on behalf of children when decisions are made about parenting arrangements that might in the longer term disadvantage them with respect to other children – such as being denied information about their biological father or any opportunity to be nurtured by him? If the child were given a choice about being born with a known father or an unknown sperm donor, one imagines that a child would always prefer to have a known father. As I will argue, it is in the child's best interests to have a known mother and father and to be raised by them. Tangled Webs argues:

The fact that donor conceived children cannot give consent because they are not yet alive is not an argument for putting their interests to one side; rather it is a powerful argument for ceasing the practice of DC altogether, or at the very least for being extremely careful about and limited in the ways we practice it ...

[In the clash] between two sets of rights — the rights of the gamete [reproductive material] provider and the rights of the child — the rights of the child must prevail over those of the provider. The child cannot have his or her rights limited by an implied contract to which they were not a party.¹¹

Therefore, Tangled Webs argues that sperm donors should not be allowed to remain anonymous because the best interests of children are served by a child having two known parents. The child's immediate right to information is, they claim, superior to the donor's continuing right to privacy.

The position espoused by Tangled Webs draws attention to what has become the principal point of disagreement in debates about alternative parenthood: are the best interests of children always and everywhere best served by a child being raised by the man and the woman to whom it is genetically related? More specifically, given current attitudes and practices which have tended to dispense with fathers and the nurture they provide, do children require a known father who is active in their parenting for their best interests to be served? If so, does this mean that every child actually has the right to a biological father and his love and care, and that to deny them this effectively violates their rights?

Families and fathers

There is no doubt that the role of men in parenting and their social significance as fathers has diminished over the past century. This has been both deliberate and inadvertent. In his famous 1957 work *Marriage and Morals*, philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) foreshadowed the arrival of a ‘new morality’ in which the patriarchal family would disappear as the father’s duties were gradually assumed by the state.¹² Because the protective, economic and educative tasks previously undertaken by fathers were now the domain of government, the only thing left to sustain the family was an emotional tie which, Russell believed, was insufficient to preserve the family as a viable institution. While he was concerned that the decline of the family as the foundational social institution might mean that people would no longer have children, there were some tangible benefits in having the state assume the responsibilities of fathers, including a higher level of general education and the provision of superior health care. But there was a notable downside: parents are usually fond of their children and are unlikely to exploit them for political or financial

purposes. With greater state control being exercised over them, Russell feared that children would become more patriotic and more willing to engage in the kind of militaristic activities promoted by the state that, as a thoroughgoing pacifist, he deplored. Until a new internationalist order was established, Russell found himself left with ‘grave apprehensions’ about a better world that had not yet come of age.

Notwithstanding Russell’s concerns, social think-tank founder David Blankenhorn claims in *Fatherless America* that laws in the United States encourage some women to exercise a preference for donor sperm — what he calls ‘sperm fathers’ — over known men.¹³ This preference infers, in Blankenhorn’s mind, that ‘children do not need fathers’. He regards the desire to make fathers irrelevant as something of a surprise, because it comes at a time when men are being encouraged to take their family responsibilities more seriously. He alleges: ‘the rise of the Sperm Father constitutes nothing less than father killing, the witting enactment of cultural patricide. For the individual man, being a Sperm Father is ... the collaboration of the male in the eradication of their fatherhood’. For some women the deliberate exclusion of men from families and parenting is an important ideological objective.

Radical separatist lesbians have demanded access to anonymously donated sperm because dismantling the cultural and social authority of the patriarchal father in the traditional heterosexual nuclear family is one of their organising principles. Australian Lesbian activist Heather Grace Jones asserts that ‘the father can be either sex; it is the emphasis on what is taught that matters’.¹⁴ She draws this somewhat curious notion from Andrew Samuels, a Jungian analyst and Professor of Analytical Psychology at the University of Essex, who imagines a ‘sort of psychological information pool or resource for women bringing up children on their own or together with other women. Such women are truly fathers of whatever sex when the father is

revised as less like a patriarch'. Jones comments: 'In this model, good-enough does not imply second-best fathering; it means that the fallibilities of all fathers are factored into the expectations of the fathers of either sex.'¹⁵

Although neither Jones nor Samuels makes their meaning plain, I think they are simply asserting that men are entirely unnecessary and ultimately dispensable to the nurture of children because gender is irrelevant to parenting, although, if I read Jones correctly, someone in the family home apparently still needs to be the 'father-figure'. But the more recent trend among lesbians is to obtain sperm from a known donor because these women 'favour the children's right-to-know over the earlier focus on women's right to autonomy'.¹⁶ Radical feminists say they are giving nothing away to men or to patriarchy in this significant concession. Feminist advocate Renate Klein insists that 'two women as main care-givers can give a child a very broad view of the world'.¹⁷ Klein declines to say whether this arrangement serves the best interests of children or is merely a potential disadvantage that children will learn to overcome.

The preference for anonymous sperm donors over known biological fathers has not attracted much public attention despite its bearing on the lives of women and its potential effect on the best interests of children. Writing in the *Utah Law Review*, the American legal philosopher Daniel Callahan notes:

Women have been hurt throughout history by males who abandon their parental duties, leaving to women the task of raising the children. A sperm donor is doing the same thing. The fact that he does it with social sanction does not change the outcome: one more male has been allowed to father without taking up the duties of fatherhood. Perhaps it was the case that

fatherhood had already sunk to such a low state and male irresponsibility was already so accepted, that no-one saw a problem. It is as if everyone argued: ‘Look, males have always been fathering children anonymously and irresponsibly: why not put this otherwise noxious trait to good use?’¹⁸

Fathers and their children

Although men have long been accused of wilfully neglecting their parental duties and being absent from the family home (charges that can be readily sustained), there is a continuing conviction that men still matter when it comes to raising children and that children are entitled to a father because it serves their best interests. The British *Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act* (1990) states:

a woman may not be provided with treatment services unless account has been taken of the wellbeing of any child who may be born as a result of the treatment (including the need of that child for a father), and of any other children who may be affected by the birth.

But what evidence exists to demonstrate the importance, if not the necessity, of children having a known father active in their nurture?

In his review of research data, John Snarey, Professor of Human Development and Ethics at Emory University in Atlanta, concludes:

Fathers who are available provide important experiences and models for children that can help them gain greater competence and maturity ... the responsive participation of fathers in their children’s lives, both when they

are young and when they are adolescent, has a significant impact on those children's later lives and will be evident years later during their children's early adult years.¹⁹

Fathers deal with their children in different ways to mothers; they emphasise different aspects of living and have distinct ways of teaching their children about life. The games that fathers play with their boys and girls are usually rougher and more competitive. From this form of play children gain an experience of when acceptable assertive conduct becomes unacceptable aggressive behaviour — and to know when 'enough is enough' — and they learn to lose in sport with good grace and without becoming vindictive. Fathers can teach their children team-bonding, the rudiments of leadership and the necessity of taking risks. They exert a different kind of discipline and elicit a different kind of response from their children.

Children who have greater contact with their fathers are capable of greater empathy with other people because it is from fathers that children usually gain a clearer sense of boundaries. A group of researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London found that 'more frequent and more regular contact [between children and their biological father] was associated with closer more intense relationships ... and fewer adjustment problems in children' than with children separated from their fathers.²⁰ When children feel secure they are better able to attend to the needs and interests of others. Men have a different view of other people and assist children in gaining a wider ability to interpret the world and negotiate their position within it.²¹ In families where the father is present and involved in the nurture of his children, children tend to do better at mathematics and sciences, their overall performance at school is enhanced, and they are more likely to complete their

secondary education before seeking some tertiary level study or post-matriculation vocational training. David Popenoe, Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University in New Jersey, contends:

Through identification and imitation, sons learn from their fathers, as they cannot from their mothers, how to be a man. Making the shift from boyhood to constructive manhood is one of life's most difficult transitions, especially since boys as they grow up must break away from the comfortable female arena of their mothers. They typically do this through identifying and bonding with their fathers.²²

The rates of suicide for boys with a live-at-home father are also reduced, as are rates of violent crime. As for teenage girls, they want to be adored and admired by fathers willing to praise their beauty and grace. Young women tend to do better in the workforce and in romantic relationships when they are assured of their father's respect and encouragement, and when their father is willing to act as a mentor.²³

As children grow, their bodies change and their minds develop. Having a member of the same sex who understands and can explain the subtleties of these changes is vital as they enter a very unsettling and even confusing phase of life. As children form friendships and then close relationships with members of the opposite sex, they need some empathetic advice on how to negotiate these relationships and, at times, some guidance on what constitutes proper conduct.

It is not enough to say, as some advocates of parenting arrangements that exclude fathers often do, that fatherless children will have plenty of significant male figures with whom they will interact as virtual substitute fathers. Children need the

devotion, care and love of their father as an everyday continuing reality. In blended families where custody arrangements might be bitterly contested, most Western societies still make room for the child's father and insist that he has a right to see his child and that his child has a right to see him. The point I want to make here is not, of course, that men are better parents or that fathers are more important than mothers to the healthy development of a child; it is simply that the contribution of men is different to that of women and, it would appear, vital to the child's wellbeing in a number of respects. In his survey of studies into the effectiveness of 'traditional' nuclear families, Popenoe concludes: 'Based on accumulated social research, there can now be little doubt that successful and well-adjusted children in modern societies are most likely to come from two-parent families consisting of the biological mother and father'.²⁴

In this chapter I have tried to show that the active participation of two biological parents in the life of a child usually puts that child at an advantage over children living in other parental arrangements.²⁵ Conversely, the absence of such participation can put a child at a distinct disadvantage. But should the possibility of advantage or the potential for disadvantage preclude a certain parenting practice or procedure on the grounds that it is necessarily contrary to the best interests of a child? Such judgments depend greatly upon the child and the situation. Some children can easily squander the advantage they enjoyed from parental arrangements just as another child can readily overcome whatever disadvantage they might have endured. I am inclined to think that the existence of possible advantage and potential disadvantage does not of itself constitute adequate reason or sufficient grounds for prohibiting certain kinds of family formation, such as single-parent or same-sex families. Some methods of

achieving parenthood, such as the use of donor sperm by a single lesbian, might not be encouraged, based on concerns that the child could be disadvantaged by this parenting arrangement, that is, having one parent rather than two. Other more drastic forms of alternative parenthood, such as the use of IVF by a single, older-aged post-menopausal woman who could well die before her child reached adulthood, might be more strongly discouraged because there is a much greater likelihood of the child being orphaned and this would be contrary to its best interests.

Judgments about whether something should be permitted or prohibited become easier to make, however, if it can be shown that a practice or procedure is potentially or positively harmful to a child. In the next chapter I ask whether the complete absence of information about one's biological mother or father and the impossibility of experiencing a relationship with that person — which is one consequence of most forms of alternative parenthood — might actually be harmful to a child's medium-term wellbeing, its long journey into adulthood, and its eventual capacity to form a healthy sense of self.

¹ The survey and its findings were first reported in the *Washington Post* with a syndicated version appearing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 2007.

² Julianne Shultz (ed.), 'Family First', *Griffith Review*, Summer 2005–06, pp. 6–7.

³ Deborah Mitchell, *Australians' Social Attitudes*, UNSW Press, 2005.

⁴ *Question of Life: Report of the committee on human fertilisation and embryology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985.

⁵ Mary Warnock, *Making Babies: Is there a right to have children?*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 17.

⁶ Warnock, *Making Babies*, p. 113.

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- ⁷ Brian A. English, 'Intercountry adoptions: the context of recent developments and the need for research', *Children Australia*, pp. 16–20, 15(1), March 1990, p. 18 quoted.
- ⁸ Tangled Webs website: www.tangledwebs.org.au/dc.php
- ⁹ United Nations General Assembly, A/Res/44/23, 1989.
- ¹⁰ Heather Grace Jones and Maggie Kirkman, *Sperm Wars: The rights and wrongs of reproduction*, ABC Books, Sydney, 2005, p. 124.
- ¹¹ Tangled Webs website: www.tangledwebs.org.au/dc.php
- ¹² Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, Liverwright, New York, 1957, p. 89.
- ¹³ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting our most urgent social problem*, Basic Books, New York, 1995, p. 18.
- ¹⁴ Andrew Samuels, 'The good-enough father of whatever sex', *Feminism & Psychology*, no. 5, 1995, p. 528.
- ¹⁵ Heather Grace Jones, 'High heels, fur collars and foul creeds', pp. 31–51 in Jones and Kirkman, *Sperm Wars*, p. 46.
- ¹⁶ Jones and Kirkman, *Sperm Wars*, p. 193.
- ¹⁷ Jones and Kirkman, *Sperm Wars*, p. 106.
- ¹⁸ Daniel Callahan, 'Bioethics and fatherhood', *Utah Law Review*, 1992, pp. 735–46.
- ¹⁹ John Snarey, *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1993, pp. 163–64.
- ²⁰ Judy Dunn, Helen Cheng, Thomas G. O'Connor and Laura Bridges, The Avondale Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, reported in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2004, pp. 553–66.
- ²¹ See Trevor Cairney, 'The Role of Fathers' Case Quarterly, no. 12, 2007, pp. 10–15; J.H. Pleck & B.P. Masciadrelli, 'Parental Involvement by US Residential Fathers: Levels, Sources and Consequences', in M. Lamb (ed.), *The Role of the Father in Early Childhood Development*, fourth edition, John Wiley, New Jersey, 2004; Rebecca Goldman, *Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Education*, National Family and Parenting Institute, London, 2005.
- ²² David Popenoe, *Life Without Father*, Harvard University Press, Harvard, 1996, p. 142. See also David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990.
- ²³ See Victoria Secunda, *Women and their Fathers: The Sexual and Romantic Impact of the First Man in Your Life*, Cedar Books, London, 1993.

²⁴ David Popenoe, 'Can the nuclear family be revived?', *Society*, no. 36, pp. 28–30, p. 28 quoted.

²⁵ Over a number of years and according to a number of measures, researchers from a range of disciplines have attempted to measure the existence of potential advantage and actual disadvantage in relation to parenting arrangements and family structure. While a child raised in a single-parent family might not be adversely affected by the experience, there is a greater statistical likelihood that the child will suffer disadvantage and even harm. The following is a cross-section of reports, studies and literature surveys. L. Remez, 'Children who don't live with both parents face more behaviour problems', *Family Planning Perspectives*, vol. 24, no. 1, Jan-Feb 1992, pp. 41-43; 'Children with single parents-how they fare', *Census Brief*, no. 1, September 1997, United States Department of Commerce; Jan Pryor and Bryan Rodgers, *Children in Changing Families*, Blackwell, 2001; David Wroe, 'Children more at risk living with one parent', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 2003; Lauren Martin, 'Single, still sane, with kids', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 February 2004; Bob Birrell, Virginia Rapson and Claire Hourigan, 'Men and Women Apart – Partnering in Australia', Monash University and the Australian Family Institute, March 2004; Anu Sauvola, 'The association between single-parent family background and physical morbidity, mortality and criminal behaviour in adulthood', <http://herkules.oulo.fi/isbn9514259416/html/index.html>; Rosemary Bennett, 'Proof marriage is good for you', *The Times* (London), 6 October 2007, quoting data published by the British Office for National Statistics showing that children who live with their married parents are, on average, healthier and stay in full-time education for longer irrespective of their economic background.