

Opinion

Children are happy in LGBTQ families – they should be at the heart of policy decisions to end stigma

Children want others to understand that having LGBTQ parents isn't a problem – it's other people's reactions that are



By [Susan Golombok](#)

November 17, 2020 8:41 am

Since its cultural heyday in the 1950s and 60s, it has been widely assumed that a family with a mother, a father, and their biological offspring is best for children, and the more that families differ from this traditional structure, the more likely it is that the children will suffer. But children tell a different story. They say it's not the make-up of their family, but other people's reactions to it, that they find upsetting, and that it should be up to adults to do something about it.

Families come in all shapes and sizes. There are families with lesbian mothers, gay fathers, transgender parents, single parents by choice, and families created by egg donation, sperm donation, embryo donation and surrogacy.

The research carried out by my team at the University of Cambridge Centre for Family Research, and previously in London, over the past 40 years, has shown that these [new family forms are just as likely to flourish as traditional families](#), and sometimes more so, most likely because of the challenges the parents have faced in their quest for a child.

My early research found that children with lesbian mothers were well-adjusted, in direct contrast to the assumptions made about them in child custody cases, which used to result in them being forcibly removed from their mothers. Our studies of children raised by gay fathers, and, most recently, by transgender parents, came to the same conclusion. We also found children born to heterosexual couples through assisted reproductive technologies including egg donation, sperm donation, and surrogacy, to be flourishing, although they benefitted from being told about their origins at an early age.

In my new book, [*We Are Family*](#), I show that what matters most for children is not the composition of their family. Instead, it is the quality of their relationships with their parents, the support of their wider community, and the attitudes and governance of the society in which they live. So it's despairing to see that, on both sides of the Atlantic, these new families are facing increasing opposition.

In the US, President Trump's latest appointment to the Supreme Court, [Amy Coney Barrett](#), presents a threat to modern families. Her public support for the view that [embryos are persons from the moment of conception](#), and that all embryos created in the laboratory must be given the chance of life, undermines the practice of IVF, which has allowed millions of infertile couples – including Michelle and Barack Obama – to experience the joy of parenthood.

So alarmed were the editors of the leading medical journal, *Fertility and Sterility*, that, for the first time in the journal's 70 year history, they [felt compelled to publish a letter](#) decrying Coney Barrett's position. "We have never felt the need to opine on the seating of a Supreme Court justice by any party. For the reproductive health of all Americans, we do so today," it read.

Amy Coney Barrett's appointment has also caused a frisson of fear among LGBTQ families. From her previous actions, including her [role as a trustee for a school with openly anti-LGBTQ policies](#), and her [connection to the conservative Christian organisation, People of Praise](#), her antipathy to LGBTQ families is not in doubt.

New family forms are also under increasing threat in the UK. In 2019, [protests against teaching children about families with same-sex parents](#) erupted outside primary schools in Birmingham. The schools were exposed to a barrage of abuse from parents and external activists, who objected on religious grounds, with no concern for the feelings of the children with LGBTQ parents listening inside.

LGBTQ parents have also been vilified by the media. When Tom Daley and Dustin Lance Black announced that they were having a baby through surrogacy, Richard Littlejohn, a journalist with, as far as I am aware, no qualifications in child psychology, responded with a hateful column in [the Daily Mail with the headline](#), "Please don't pretend two dads is the new normal".

And legislation has not kept up with changes to the family. Freddy McConnell, a trans man who gave birth to a son in 2018, whose story was sensitively portrayed in the acclaimed documentary, *Seahorse*, had [his application to be his son's legal father or parent, rather than his mother, turned down because the law](#), as it currently stands, does not permit it. The law is similarly out of step with the needs of families with children born through surrogacy, and of surrogates, but this is currently under review by the Law Commission.

The problems faced by children in modern families come from outside their families, not from within them. Children with LGBTQ parents still experience stigmatisation at school. The harmful effects of stigmatisation are sometimes held up as a reason to prevent LGBTQ people from adopting children, or from having children through assisted reproduction. But the onus should be on schools and communities to combat prejudice and discrimination against children whose families don't fit the traditional family model. Legislation that is conducive to the optimal functioning of diverse family structures is essential for lasting change.

In a study that my team conducted in collaboration with Stonewall on the [school experiences of 82 British children with same-sex parents](#), the children told us how to do it. They said that teachers shouldn't assume that everyone has a mum and dad; that families with same-sex parents should be talked about in school and included in lessons; and that schools should clamp down hard on homophobic bullying, something that doesn't always happen.

The children want teachers to understand that having LGBTQ parents isn't a problem – it's other people's reactions that can be the problem. It is only by speaking to children directly that we can understand their perspectives. That is why it is essential that we listen, and respond, to what they say.

It's time for children's views to be taken seriously in forming policy and legislation on the modern family, something that doesn't usually happen. If we don't ask, how will we know that children with LGBTQ parents can feel alienated at school, that some children born through donated eggs, sperm or embryos wish to find out more about

their donors and donor-siblings, and that children can be hugely upset by jibes about their family from complete strangers.

If we really wish to combat prejudice and discrimination against children whose families don't fit the traditional model, we should start by consulting children on matters that affect them.

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