

6 Solo mother families



Assisted reproductive technologies were initially developed to enable infertile heterosexual couples to have children and create families that are indistinguishable from the traditional nuclear family – a family comprising a mother, a father and a singleton child or siblings. However, these technologies have increasingly been used for social, rather than medical reasons; that is, because of the absence of an opposite-sex partner rather than the presence of infertility. As described in Chapter 2, the use of donor insemination enables lesbian women to become pregnant without the involvement of a male partner. This chapter focuses on a different type of family created without the involvement of a male partner: families

headed by single heterosexual mothers, also known as “single mothers by choice” or “solo mothers” (Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas, 2002).

The terms “single mother by choice” and “solo mother” refer to a woman who actively chooses to parent a child without a partner. Women who decide to parent alone have a range of possibilities available to them for becoming pregnant, and not all these involve assisted reproduction. Some women have sexual intercourse with a man who will not act as a father to the child, some adopt a child, some undergo self-insemination with a donor who may be known to them or anonymous, and some receive fertility treatment with donor sperm (Bock, 2000; Graham and Braverman, 2012; Hertz, 2006; Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, et al., 2009; Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas, 2002). Although single women who wish to become mothers opt for different methods – according to their circumstances and beliefs – donor insemination at a clinic appears to be an increasingly popular route to motherhood. Donor insemination is favored over adoption by those who wish to experience pregnancy and have a genetically related child, and is favored over sexual intercourse by women who do not wish to have casual sex or to deceive a man in order to become pregnant (Graham, 2014; Hertz, 2006; Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, et al., 2009; Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas, 2002). For those who choose donor insemination, most prefer to use an anonymous or identity-release donor (a donor whose identity can be requested by the child upon reaching adulthood) rather than a known donor, to avoid the potential complications of the donor’s involvement with the family as the child grows up (Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, et al., 2009). Many also prefer to attend a fertility clinic, in countries where this is permissible, than to embark upon self-insemination. Clinics offer single women greater legal protection than is possible with self-insemination, as sperm donors have no parental rights over children conceived at a clinic. Clinics also offer greater medical protection, as a result of the stringent screening process required of sperm donors. However, some women find sperm donors independently of

clinics, either through personal contacts, advertising or matching websites such as Pride Angel in the UK and Family by Design in the USA, which connect men who wish to donate sperm with women looking for sperm donors. Sperm donors are also being found through Facebook. Whereas single lesbian women and single heterosexual women may become single mothers by choice, existing research has largely focused on single heterosexual women (Graham, 2012, 2014; Zadeh, Freeman, and Golombok, 2013).

Although little is known about the characteristics of single mothers by choice, women who choose to parent without men have received a negative press. The past condemnation and denigration by the media of single mother families in general (in that they are often blamed for society's ills) has been extended to include single mothers by choice – with the added reproach that single mothers by choice are selfish. As a journalist in the UK *Sunday Times* newspaper wrote (in an article entitled “Selfish women rule in an era that doesn't need men,” on July 15, 2001):

Apart from the risks of mucking around with the gene pool, this is turning us into a society of repellently selfish women. It is promoting the belief that children are merely the means for (predominantly) female self-fulfillment rather than the embodiment of a society's contract between the past, present and future ... women are choosing to produce fatherless children by way of sperm banks ... no taboo, however ancient, can now frustrate a woman's science-sanctified right to create a child for her personal gratification.

In response to an article in the UK *Daily Mail* newspaper with the headline “Daddies be damned!”, which reported on the rise in the number of single women in the UK who were having children by donor insemination, a reader suggested that these women should “Spend their money on another Prada handbag ... not a person with feelings and needs” (Graham and Braverman, 2012). Similarly, a *New York Times* article entitled “First comes the baby carriage”

stated on October 13, 2005: "Many single women still find the choice to get pregnant met with incomprehension or even hostility from friends, family and some strangers. The most common accusation is that they are selfish, because of the widely held belief that two-parent homes are best for children."

So, who are single mothers by choice? As highlighted by Graham and Braverman (2012, p. 197), they are perceived by their critics as: "Selfish career women who wanted the latest, must have accessory; a baby." But are they really so different from other women who wish to have a child? As one single mother by choice described it: "I think I wanted to have a child because of the same reason that everybody wants to. I wanted to be a mum, I wanted to have that experience, I wanted to feel that kind of love, I wanted to see how good I'd be at it, and have a sort of meaning behind everything."

Studies have shown that single mothers by choice are generally, but not always, well-educated, financially secure women in professional occupations who become mothers in their late thirties or early forties (Bock, 2000; Graham, 2012, 2014; Graham and Braverman, 2012; Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, et al., 2009; Murray and Golombok, 2005a; Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas, 2002). Contrary to popular belief, these women have thought long and hard about having a child alone, have consulted with friends and family and have ensured that they have the financial resources and social support they need. They are also concerned about the absence of a father from their children's lives and many have actively sought out relatives or friends to be male role models (Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, et al., 2009; Murray and Golombok, 2005a).

In spite of the way in which they are portrayed, the majority of women who decide to go it alone as mothers do so not from choice, but because they do not have a current partner and feel that time is running out for them to have a child (Graham, 2012; Graham and Braverman, 2012; Hertz, 2006; Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, et al., 2009; Murray and Golombok, 2005a). As a mother of a young child said:

If I'd been in a long term relationship, one that I thought would be going a long way, and settled, I'd have had children much, much younger. In my little world, when I was a teenager, I was going to get married when I was about 20, and have my first child when I was about 21, 22, and then I was thinking of maybe 4 children. How naïve is that – isn't it? But it was never my intention to have children so late. I just hadn't met the person.

Indeed, many single mothers by choice report that they would have rather had their children within a traditional family setting, but could not wait any longer because of their increasing age and associated fertility decline; because they wanted to be mothers, they did not actually have a choice (Graham, 2014; Murray and Golombok, 2005a; Zadeh, Freeman, and Golombok, 2013).

In an in-depth qualitative study of women thinking about and embarking on single motherhood through the use of donor sperm, Graham (2014) found that the decision to pursue single motherhood was based on a deep-seated desire to become a mother, and that the potential child's well-being was at the forefront of women's minds as they decided upon whether to proceed, what route to take to achieve motherhood and what process they should use to select a sperm donor. Many, but certainly not all, hoped to have a relationship with a man in the future – not just for themselves, but also for their child to have a father. So, contrary to popular perceptions, single mothers by choice do not take the decision to have a child lightly; they want the best for their child, and many would prefer to raise their child with a man. As one mother put it:

I get a real bee in my bonnet, I never ever want someone to think that he was a mistake, or a result of a fling, or that he wasn't wanted, so I would much rather people knew how I became pregnant and my reasons – to know that he was completely wanted. I would hate for someone to think that I just messed up my life by having him, because this was the whole plan, and this is what I wanted.

In recent decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of single-parent families. In the USA in 2008, 29.5 percent of households with children were headed by single parents (US Census Bureau, 2012a). Similarly, in the UK in 2007, 30 percent of children aged up to 14 years were living in single-parent households (Lloyd and Lacey, 2012b). These figures compare with less than 10 percent in the USA and the UK at the beginning of the 1970s. However, single mothers are not a homogenous group. Single-mother families are formed in a number of ways, each with different implications for children. Parental divorce or separation is the most common reason for children to be raised in single-mother families. There has also been a rise in the number of children born to single unmarried mothers as a result of unplanned pregnancies. As described above, the small but growing number of single mothers by choice has resulted from quite different origins. However, the concerns that have been voiced about the children of single mothers by choice have arisen from research on children in single-mother families that have been created by divorce or unplanned pregnancies. How relevant are the experiences of children in these single-mother families to children raised by single mothers by choice? In order to address this question, research on the outcomes for children of being raised by divorced and unmarried single mothers will be examined to establish whether growing up under these circumstances is psychologically harmful for children and, if so, why this is the case. This will be followed by consideration of the extent to which findings relating to the children of divorced and unmarried single mothers can be extrapolated to children of single mothers by choice. The findings of the few empirical studies that currently exist of the development and well-being of children of single mothers by choice will also be discussed.

DIVORCED SINGLE MOTHERS

Since the 1970s, there has been an increase in the proportion of marriages ending in divorce. Approximately 40 to 50 percent of married couples in the US divorce (Kazdin, 2000), with around 5 percent of US

marriages ending in divorce in 2008 (US Census Bureau, 2012b). In the UK, the proportion of married couples who have divorced before reaching their fiftieth wedding anniversary has increased by around one-third since 1979, reaching 45 percent in 2005 (Lloyd and Lacey, 2012a). As noted in Chapter 1, divorce statistics do not tell the whole story as there are no official registries of relationship breakdown among cohabiting couples, and thus of the number of children who experience the separation of cohabiting parents (Amato, 2000).

There is now a large body of research on the psychological consequences of divorce for children. These studies have consistently shown that children whose parents divorce are more likely to show emotional and behavioral problems and are less likely to perform well at school than are children in intact families (for reviews see Amato, 2000, 2001, 2005; Amato and Keith, 1991; Coleman and Glenn, 2009; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). One of the most highly regarded of these studies was conducted by Mavis Hetherington and her colleagues in the USA. The researchers followed up 4-year-old children from the time of their parents' divorce and compared these children to a group of children whose parents were happily married and also to a group of children whose parents had remained together in spite of marital problems. The behavior of the children in all three family types was assessed over a period of 6 years. In the first year, the children from divorced families not only showed higher levels of conduct problems than did the children whose parents were happily married, but also than those whose parents were in conflict but remained together. This was found to be the case both at home and at school. By the end of the second year, however, the behavioral difficulties shown by the children of divorced parents had declined, although the boys still showed higher levels of conduct problems than did the boys from happy two-parent homes (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982). The findings were similar 6 years following the divorce. Compared with children in non-divorced families, girls whose mothers had not remarried remained well-adjusted. Sons also

showed more positive adjustment than they had previously, although they still showed a tendency toward higher rates of conduct problems (Hetherington, 1988).

As most studies of children in single-parent families have investigated families formed by divorce, it is difficult to conclude whether it is having only one parent that is psychologically harmful for children, or whether children's difficulties result from other aspects of the divorce. One factor that has consistently been shown to be related to children's adjustment problems is conflict between parents (Amato, 1993, 2000, 2005; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). It is interesting to note that longitudinal studies have found that children whose parents divorce can develop psychological problems years before their parents separate – sometimes even before they have considered separation (Cherlin, Furstenberg, Chase-Lansdale, et al., 1991). This suggests that the psychological problems shown by children in single-parent families may not result from the absence of a parent, but instead may arise from conflict and hostility between parents before the divorce takes place.

The financial hardship that is often experienced by single-parent families following divorce is another factor that has been found to be associated with children's psychological problems (Amato, 1993, 2000, 2005; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Pryor and Rodgers, 2001; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). From their detailed examination of four large, nationally representative samples in the USA, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) concluded that the lower and sudden drop in income that results from single parenthood is the most important factor in the underachievement of young people from single-parent homes. They found that adolescents who had lived apart from one parent during some period of their childhood were twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before the age of 20 and 1.5 times more likely to be out of work in their late teens or early twenties than were those from comparable backgrounds who had grown up with two parents at home. Similar findings were reported from an earlier study of 16,000 children born in England and

Wales in one week in March 1958 (Elliot and Vaitilingam, 2008; Ferri, 1976). A comparison between the children in single-parent families and the children in two-parent families around the time of their eleventh birthday showed that those in single-parent families were more likely to show emotional and behavioral problems, as well as poorer academic achievement. However, the difficulties experienced by children in single-parent families were explained almost entirely by the low income associated with single parenthood, rather than the absence of a parent. When family income was controlled for in the statistical analyses, children with single parents were not found to differ from children with two parents in the family home. Rodgers and Pryor (1998) reviewed more than 200 studies of the effects of divorce on children and concluded that the low socio-economic status of single-parent families was largely responsible for the lower educational achievement of children whose parents had divorced. As well as the direct effects of low income, the financial hardship experienced by many single parent families following divorce often necessitates a move to a poorer neighborhood and a change of school, each of which is associated with negative outcomes for children (Amato, 2000, 2005).

In addition to financial support, social and emotional support are often lacking for single mothers. As Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (2002) pointed out, it is not unusual for mothers to feel anxious, depressed, lonely and lacking in confidence when they divorce. At the same time, children become more demanding, less compliant, more aggressive and more withdrawn. For newly single mothers, the demands of looking after difficult children while in a poor emotional state can impair their ability to function as effective parents. They may be less affectionate, less communicative, less consistent, more irritable and more punitive in disciplining their children than before, which may exacerbate their children's difficulties (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992). A number of studies have demonstrated a link between parental depression, poor parenting and negative child outcomes in single-parent families following

divorce (Amato, 2000; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, et al., 1998; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002). However, improvement in the emotional well-being of single mothers following divorce is associated with improvement in children's adjustment. Two years after divorce, three-quarters of divorced women reported that they were happier in their new situation than they had been in their final year of marriage, and most felt that it was easier to raise their children alone than in partnership with a disengaged, undermining or acrimonious husband (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 2002).

Although divorce has consistently been found to have an adverse effect on children's functioning, the differences between children in divorced and intact families are relatively small (Amato, 2000, 2001, 2005; Amato and Keith, 1991). Not all children whose parents divorce experience problems, and some show improved functioning (Amato, 2000, 2001, 2005; Amato and Keith, 1991). Of those who do exhibit problems, some experience short-term distress, which may last from a few months to 2–3 years, whereas others face long-term difficulties (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1989). Whether or not children develop problems, and how quickly they recover, depends on a number of factors – the most significant of which appears to be the effect of divorce on the relationship between their parents (Amato, 2000, 2001, 2005; Amato and Keith, 1991; Coleman and Glenn, 2009; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). When parents remain in conflict after divorce, children are more likely to continue to have problems, especially if they are drawn into their parents' disputes. However, if parents are able to cooperate, children are more able to cope.

In addition to the quality of the relationship between parents, the quality of the relationship between children and parents following divorce has also been found to be influential in children's psychological well-being, with a warm and supportive relationship with at least one parent acting as a protective factor for the child (Amato, 2000; Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Where children remain with the mother, there is growing evidence for the psychological benefits of a

positive relationship with the non-resident father (Dunn, 2004, 2008; Dunn, Cheng, O'Connor, et al., 2004).

Whether or not the gender of the child or the age at which the child makes the transition into a single-parent family makes a difference to the impact of divorce on children remains inconclusive (Amato, 2000, 2001; Amato and Keith, 1991; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). Although boys seem to be more vulnerable than girls, it has been suggested that girls may show distress in different ways. In terms of children's age at the time of divorce, adolescence is often considered an especially difficult time. However, few studies have identified a clear link between children's age at the time of divorce and psychological outcomes (Amato, 2000).

An important question is whether the difficulties experienced by children in single-parent families following divorce result from selection effects, rather than the divorce, itself. Individuals with psychological problems may be more likely to marry each other and to transmit psychological problems to their children through inheritance or poor parenting, irrespective of marital breakdown. Parents' psychological problems may also contribute to marital breakdown. Thus, the difficulties shown by children may not be directly related to divorce. Amato (2000) concluded from his review that the negative outcomes for children whose parents had divorced had resulted largely from marital breakdown, rather than selection effects, and, to the extent that pre-existing factors were involved, divorce exacerbated these difficulties.

A further issue that is often raised regarding children in single-mother families is whether the absence of a father results in less typical gender role behavior, particularly for boys. More specifically, are boys less masculine in their identity and behavior, and girls less feminine, than are boys and girls who grow up with a mother and a father in the family home? Although early studies produced contradictory results, a meta-analysis by Stevenson and Black (1988) concluded that there were no effects for boys or girls

when the highest quality studies were examined. In an investigation of 5- to 12-year-olds in the USA, no differences in sex-typed preferences were identified according to the presence or absence of a father in the home (Serbin, Powlishta, and Gulko, 1993). Similarly, in a study of 3-year-old children participating in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood, a large epidemiological study in the UK, no differences in gender role behavior were found between father-absent and father-present families for either boys or girls (Stevens, Golombok, Golding, et al., 2002). The children in single-mother families had not lived with their father since they were 12 months old or younger. Taken together, these studies suggest that growing up in a single-mother family does not influence children's gender development.

UNMARRIED SINGLE MOTHERS

In addition to the increasing number of children raised by divorced single mothers, there has been a sharp rise in the number of children raised by unmarried single mothers, many of whom have had unplanned pregnancies. Today, around 20 percent of babies in the USA (McLanahan, 2012) and 15 percent of babies in the UK (Kiernan, 2006) are born into single-mother families. In contrast, in the 1960s, the proportion of children born to single mothers was less than 5 percent. In the USA, the rates are highest for children born to African American mothers. However, there has been an increase in single mother families across many ethnic-racial groups. Whereas in the UK the large majority of unmarried single mothers are white, a higher proportion of black Caribbean mothers are single at the time of their child's birth, relative to mothers from other ethnic groups (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010). Rather than race or ethnicity, the factor most associated with the rise in single unmarried mothers is social disadvantage. Whereas college-educated women continue to have children in the context of marriage, women who have not received an education beyond high school are much more likely to have children as single unmarried mothers (Kiernan, 2006; McLanahan, 2012).

Although single at the time of their children's birth, many unmarried mothers experience transitions in and out of cohabiting relationships, rather than remaining stably single (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010; McLanahan, 2012).

An influential study of the consequences of unmarried single-motherhood for children is the Fragile Families Study, a longitudinal investigation of approximately 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000 in the USA. The study recruited participants in medium to large cities, and included an over-sample of births to single and cohabiting unmarried mothers ("fragile families") (Reichman, Teitler, and McLanahan, 2001). In-depth data have been obtained on children's cognitive development and behavior problems. More negative cognitive and mental health outcomes have been found for children born to single unmarried mothers than to married parents, even after differences in parental resources have been adjusted for (Waldfoegel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010). The more negative outcomes in terms of cognitive development appear to have resulted from a high level of family instability, rather than single motherhood, in itself, whereas growing up with a single mother seems to have mattered more than family instability for children's emotional and behavioral problems. As discussed above, in relation to single-mother families formed by divorce, a number of possible mechanisms have been identified to account for the more negative outcomes for these children, including economic disadvantage, parental mental health problems and poor parenting quality. Again, selection effects may have also operated such that the pre-existing characteristics of parents might have led to poorer outcomes for children of unmarried single mothers. The extent to which each of these factors shapes children's outcomes in single unmarried mother families is, as yet, uncertain (Waldfoegel, Craigie, and Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

In the UK, the Millennium Cohort Study (Hansen, Johnson, Joshi, et al., 2008), a longitudinal investigation of a nationally representative sample of approximately 18,000 children born at the turn of the century, has also provided data on children of unmarried

single mothers. The study includes an over-sample of disadvantaged families, and 15 percent of the children in the sample were born to unmarried single mothers. In a comparison between children born to single mothers, cohabiting mothers and married mothers over the first 5 years of life, children born to single mothers who did not marry the child's biological father and children born into cohabiting families in which the parents have since separated have shown the highest rates of behavioral and emotional problems (Kiernan and Mensah, 2010). The single mothers have also experienced the highest levels of economic disadvantage and poorest mental health. After the family's socio-economic status and the mothers' levels of depression have been taken into account, no significant differences have been found across family types for children's emotional problems. However, although reduced, raised levels of behavioral problems have remained for the children of single mothers.

SINGLE MOTHERS BY CHOICE

How relevant are the findings of research on the psychological adjustment of children in single-mother families created by divorce or unplanned pregnancy to the children of single mothers by choice? Unlike divorced or unmarried single mothers, single mothers by choice make an active decision to parent alone, and thus differ from those who unintentionally find themselves in this situation. The studies examined above show the children of divorced and unmarried single mothers to be at greater risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems than are their counterparts from two-parent families. However, the more negative outcomes for children in single-parent families formed as a result of divorce or unplanned pregnancy appear to be largely associated with parental conflict, socio-economic disadvantage, maternal depression and lack of social support – none of which is characteristic of families formed by single mothers by choice. Children of single mothers by choice have not been exposed to parental conflict or separation from fathers with whom they have shared their daily lives. Neither have they experienced the economic

disadvantage, lack of social support or maternal psychological problems that commonly accompany marital breakdown or unplanned single parenthood (Hertz, 2006; Jadva, Badger, Morrisette, et al., 2009; Murray and Golombok, 2005a). Nevertheless, they grow up without fathers from the start and, perhaps more significantly, do not know their father's identity, unless a known donor was used. Even in countries where the use of anonymous donors is prohibited, children are not able to discover the identity of their donor until adulthood. This makes them distinct from most other children of single mothers, whose fathers may be absent but whose identity is known.

There is, as yet, little research on the development and well-being of children raised by single mothers by choice. The two controlled studies that exist have focused on families created by donor insemination at a clinic, rather than by sexual intercourse, adoption or self-insemination. In one study, conducted in the UK, a comparison was conducted between 27 single heterosexual mother families and 50 married heterosexual parent families, all with a 6- to 12-month-old infant who had been conceived by donor insemination (Murray and Golombok, 2005a). The mothers were administered an interview designed to assess their quality of parenting, which produced standardized ratings of expressed warmth toward the infant, emotional over-involvement with the infant, interaction with the infant, sensitive responding to the infant's signals, enjoyment of motherhood and social support. They also completed questionnaire assessments of anxiety, depression, feelings of attachment to the infant and stress associated with parenting. No differences were identified between the two family types in terms of mothers' psychological well-being, adaptation to motherhood, expressed warmth, emotional involvement or bonding with their infants. However, the single mothers showed lower levels of interaction and sensitive responding to their infants than did the married mothers, possibly because the presence of a partner allowed the married mothers more time with their babies. The differences between the two family types did not indicate parenting problems in the single-mother families

but, instead, reflected a difference between “moderate” and “good” mother–child interaction and “average” and “above average” sensitive responding for the single and two-parent families, respectively. It was concluded that, in the child’s first year of life, the single mother families were generally functioning well.

The families were followed up at the child’s second birthday. By the age of 2, children have fully established attachment relationships to parents and understand that they are members of a family (Edwards and Liu, 2002). At this age, children also show an increase in resistant and angry behavior – often described as “the terrible twos” – which has been associated with parenting difficulties (Belsky, Woodworth, and Crnic, 1996). The mothers were administered the Parent Development Interview (Slade, Belsky, Aber, et al., 1999), an in-depth interview assessment of the emotional bond between parents and their children that produces ratings on variables such as joy, anger, guilt, overprotectiveness and disappointment in the child. Mothers also completed questionnaire assessments of anxiety, depression and stress associated with parenting, as well as a questionnaire measure of the socio-emotional problems and competencies of their children, the Brief Infant–Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (Briggs-Gowan, Carter, Irwin, et al., 2004). The families continued to function well as the children reached 2 years old (Murray and Golombok, 2005b). With 2-year-old children, the single mothers were no more likely to be experiencing parenting stress, anxiety or depression than were the married mothers. Although mothers from both types of family showed positive relationships with their children, the differences that were identified between the single and the married mothers indicated greater joy among the single mothers and less anger toward their children, accompanied by a perception of their children as less clingy. Thus, in direct contrast to the concerns raised about the quality of parenting of single mothers by choice, the findings showed more positive and less negative maternal feelings toward their children. With respect to the children, those with single mothers showed fewer emotional and behavioral problems than

did those with married mothers. This suggests that the use of donor insemination to have a child as a single mother does not adversely affect children's socio-emotional development. However, it is important to remember that, at age 2, the children of single mothers were too young to understand the meaning of their non-traditional family structure; they were unaware of the social significance of not having a father.

In the study of 7-year-old children conceived by donor insemination discussed in Chapter 2, comparisons were carried out between the single mother (heterosexual and lesbian) families and the two-parent (heterosexual and lesbian) families (Chan, Raboy, and Patterson, 1998). Parents completed questionnaire assessments of depression, self-esteem and stress associated with parenting, and parents and teachers completed questionnaire assessments of children's social competence and behavioral adjustment. No differences in conduct or emotional problems, social competence or adaptive functioning were identified between the children of single and partnered mothers. Moreover, when compared with a large, normative sample, the children were found to be well adjusted, as rated by parents and teachers, and, when compared with a clinical sample, they showed higher social competence and lower behavioral problems. Growing up with a single mother by choice was not associated with greater behavioral problems for children. Instead, children's behavioral problems were associated with greater parenting stress, irrespective of family type.

At present, no studies have been carried out on the adjustment of the children of single mothers by choice beyond the age of 7 years. As noted in Chapter 4, it is at the age of 7 years that children acquire a more complex understanding of family relatedness (Gregg, Solomon, Johnson, et al., 1996; Richards, 2000; Williams and Smith, 2010), and it is at adolescence that issues associated with identity become more relevant and relationships with parents may become more difficult (Steinberg, 2001; Steinberg and Morris, 2001; Steinberg and Silk, 2002). Thus, it cannot necessarily be assumed that the apparent absence of problems in parent-child relationships

or child adjustment in the families of single mothers by choice that have been studied so far will continue as the children grow older. A qualitative study of 35 stable single-mother families with 38 children aged between 8 and 17 years sheds some light on the nature of mother–child relationships in families in which the mother has been parenting alone continuously from early in the child’s life, though not all of the families in this study were headed by single mothers by choice (Nixon, Greene, and Hogan, 2012). The children were interviewed about various aspects of their relationship with their mother, including communication, conflict, confiding and perceived obligations, and about what it was like to be raised in a single-parent household. Mothers were interviewed about their experiences of parenting alone and their relationship with their children – again, in relation to communication, conflict, confiding and perceived obligations. The children described having a close emotional bond with their mother, characterized by open communication, shared activities and trust. The majority of mothers described their relationship with their children as intense and exclusive, but did not always view this as positive – particularly when boundaries between the parent and child roles became blurred. These findings suggest that mothers and children may be more dependent on each other in stable single-parent families, although firm conclusions cannot be drawn in the absence of a comparison group of two-parent families.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a study that included a group of children raised in stable single-mother families from infancy – although not necessarily by single mothers by choice – followed up children from early childhood (Golombok, Tasker, and Murray, 1997) through early adolescence (MacCallum and Golombok, 2004) to early adulthood (Golombok and Badger, 2010). Although the focus of the study was on comparisons between lesbian mother families and the other family types, the families headed by single heterosexual mothers were found to be functioning well. The majority of young adults who grew up with single heterosexual mothers said they did not miss having a father, with comments such as: “I am

very happy in my life and my mum's been 2, 3, 4 parents to me, she's been everything"; "I still got all the love I needed really, still always had enough support"; and "I am just happy, I don't feel like I missed out. I don't feel like I need anything from him." However, reflecting on their childhood, some did recollect times when they missed having a father: "There are vague memories of school on Father's day ... when you are really young it's kind of like 'well why don't I have that'"; "I've never done father-son things that other people have done"; and "I think there is a lot I haven't learned just from not having a dad around, I missed out on the relationship between a son and a father."

A crucial question regarding children born to single mothers by donor insemination is how they will feel about not knowing the identity of their biological father. How best to respond to children's questions about their father is a major concern of single mothers by choice (Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, et al., 2009; Mattes, 1997). In a study of single mothers by choice with children aged between 4 and 8 years, the mothers reported that their children had begun to ask about their father from the age of about 2 to 3 years (Zadeh, Freeman, Smith, et al., unpublished data). One mother said:

When he was about two and a half, and he was just saying to me ... she's got a daddy... she's got a daddy, and she's got a daddy and I haven't, and I just said that's right, and he said why? So that was probably the first time that we had any sort of discussion.

Another mother recalled the first time her son asked about his father:

He was about three, and we were coming home from swimming and this little voice in the back of the car said "Mummy, why don't I have a daddy?" ... And so I said, "You don't have a daddy," and I reiterated all the people he does have and stuck with that, and then he asked "What's for lunch?"

For other mothers, conversations with their children focused on the sperm donor, rather than the absence of a father:

I said to my friend, what am I gonna say, what are the words that I'm gonna use, and she said, "your dad's a donor." ... and she [child] used to think I was saying donut, I think, at the beginning, and we used to laugh whether it was a chocolate one or a jam one. And I said no, don-or, don-or, and we'd explain about a kidney donor or a blood donor, well this was a, a seed donor.

For another mother:

The conversation was along the lines of why can't he know the sperm donor that we used, and I sort of had to explain that he was anonymous ... I was explaining that we know that the sperm donor is a very kind man, and his comeback was how do you know? You've never met him, which I thought was very sensible. And he also said if he was so kind and nice, why can't you just marry him?

Some mothers felt that their child was upset by not having a father (Blake, Zadeh, Statham, et al., 2014). As one mother said, "She does ask for a daddy ... it is a hole. But it's not a constant thing. She only tends to mention it when she's spent some quality time with someone else's daddy." Another mother said:

She has been upset that she hasn't got a daddy. That started when she was in nursery. They often have circle time and they'll talk about, you know, daddy or what my daddy is and I think she probably just felt a bit left out that she couldn't say "my daddy does this" or "my daddy does that," and so she would make up things that her daddy did.

However, other mothers reported that their children were quite matter-of-fact about it:

I didn't really know what effect the story was having on him until a little girl his age said to him, "Where's your dad?" And I wasn't sure what he would respond, and he turned around and said, "I don't have one." And I was looking at him, and he said it

really blasé, really matter of fact, and he wasn't bothered in the slightest, and I think that, at that moment then I thought, well that's good, because it's not something that he feels he needs to feel sad about. He was so matter of fact about it.

One mother described her daughter announcing in public that she was donor-conceived:

We were on the London underground. This drunkard man came up to us. We were taking photographs, me and my mum, at the time. And he was really drunk, he sort of came over and he said don't you ever fall out, don't you ever lose touch with your father. He obviously had children problems. And she went, "My dad's a donor," like that, and the whole carriage heard, and swung round and me and my mum just chuckled to each other. It was brilliant.

Another mother reported a similar experience with her son:

It's really funny actually because we went to a local park with typical east London ladies who started chatting with [child], and one said I bet your daddy really dotes on you, and [child] turns to her and goes, no, I've got a donor daddy, and the face, I mean I just wish I had a picture, she just looked and asked what, what did he just say? And I said he has a donor daddy. She goes oh, one of those! But we're really friendly with her now, she says hi and everything but it obviously kind of threw her rather.

Single mothers have been found to be more likely than heterosexual couples to be open with their children about their use of donor insemination (Murray and Golombok, 2005a, b). This is not surprising, as single mothers must explain the absence of a father to their children. They are also more likely to tell their children about their donor conception at an earlier age. In the study discussed in Chapter 4 of 165 adolescents and adults who were searching for their donor and donor siblings through the Donor Sibling Registry, a website designed to

help donor-conceived people find their donor and donor siblings, 87 percent of participants from single-mother families had been told about their donor conception by the age of 7 years, compared with only 25 percent of those from two-parent heterosexual families. Moreover, all of those who had not found out about their donor conception until adulthood were from families headed by heterosexual couples (Freeman, Jadvá, Kramer, et al., 2009). In a later study of 741 donor-conceived adolescents and adults who were members of the Donor Sibling Registry, disclosure was again found to have occurred earlier in single-parent than in two-parent heterosexual families, with 75 percent of respondents from the former stating that they had always known they had been donor-conceived, compared with only 24 percent from the latter (Beeson, Jennings, and Kramer, 2011).

The extent to which children of single mothers by choice feel the need to know the identity of, have information about or even form a relationship with their donor as they grow older is unknown, as no studies of representative samples have been carried out. However, donor-conceived adolescents and adults with single mothers appear to be more likely than those with two heterosexual parents to seek out their donor and donor siblings. A study of 29 adolescents aged 12 to 17 years with identity-release donors found those from single-mother families to be more likely than their counterparts from two-parent families to plan to request the identity of their donor at the age of 18 (Scheib, Riordan, and Rubin, 2005). This suggests that finding out about donor relations is more important to adolescents from single-mother families than it is for adolescents from two-parent families. Furthermore, the study reported above of adolescents and adults who were searching for their donor relations through the Donor Sibling Registry found differences in the reasons donor-conceived persons gave for searching between those from single-parent and those from two-parent homes; those from single-mother families were more likely to give the wish to find new family members as their main reason for searching (Jadvá, Freeman, Kramer, et al., 2010). Similar findings

have been reported from data obtained from their parents. Scheib and Ruby (2008) found that single mothers were the most interested in contacting other families with children who had been conceived with the same identity-release donor, and wished to do so to create a sense of family for their child. Furthermore, in the study of 791 parents who were members of the Donor Sibling Registry discussed in Chapter 4 (Freeman, Jadva, Kramer, et al., 2009), single mothers formed the largest group of parents in the sample and were the most likely to state that they wished to search for donor relations in order to enhance their child's sense of identity. However, like those with two parents, the majority of donor-conceived adolescents and adults who had been born to single mothers by choice searched for their donor because they were curious, and not because they wanted a father-like relationship with him (Beeson, Jennings, and Kramer, 2011; Jadva, Freeman, Kramer, et al., 2010; Mahlstedt, LaBounty, and Kennedy, 2010).

SINGLE FATHERS

In addition to single mothers, single fathers are also on the rise. In 2013, a ninefold increase in single fathers since 1960 was reported in the USA, with almost one-quarter of single parent households headed by single fathers, rather than single mothers (Pew Research Center, 2013). Although the study defined single fathers as single men living with their own children – and included those living with a partner – more than half of the single fathers identified lived alone with their children. Single-father families are most likely to be formed following parental separation or divorce, or, less commonly, following the death of the mother (Weinraub, Horvath, and Gringlas, et al., 2002). Although it is unusual for a father to be awarded sole custody of his children following divorce, this is becoming more widespread – often because the mother is unable to care for the children herself. There are also small but growing numbers of unmarried single-father families.

Little research has been conducted on the quality of parenting shown by single fathers or the consequences of single fatherhood for children's psychological adjustment. As Biblarz and Stacey (2010) pointed out in their review of existing studies, comparisons between single-father and single-mother families have been confounded by the very different processes that select men and women into single parenthood. Studies have shown that single-father households are more likely to have been recently formed through children switching custody arrangements owing to difficulties in their relationships with their mother or their mother's new partner. Moreover, children in this situation are more likely to be boys, to be older and to have behavioral problems. The few existing studies of single fathers have shown that most are committed and competent parents. However, where differences have been identified, single mothers have tended to show more positive parenting than have single fathers, in terms of closeness, involvement, communication, supervision and control, and their children have shown more positive outcomes in terms of behavior and achievement (Biblarz and Stacey, 2010). The different pathways to single parenthood for men and for women are likely to have influenced these findings, but the extent to which they have done so is currently unclear.

The new phenomenon of "single fathers by choice" was first reported in 2012. Like their female counterparts, single fathers by choice are men, both heterosexual and gay, who actively choose to parent alone. The most common route for them to achieve this is adoption. Although inconceivable just a few years ago, single men are also beginning to have children through surrogacy and egg donation. An article in *Men's Health* magazine entitled "You don't need a woman to have a child" told the story of single men who had enlisted egg donors and surrogate mothers in order to become fathers. As yet there is no research on single fathers by choice, so it is not known to what extent they differ from single mothers by choice in terms of their motivations and experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Although children in single-mother families formed by divorce are more likely to show lower levels of psychological well-being and lower levels of academic achievement than their counterparts in two-parent families, their difficulties appear to be largely associated with aspects of the divorce, rather than single-parenthood per se. Several factors appear to be involved, including parental conflict before, during, and sometimes after the divorce, financial hardship, maternal depression and poor parenting, all of which may interact with and exacerbate each other. Although some children are adversely affected by divorce, most recover over time, especially where divorce improves family relationships. Similar processes appear to be at play in families headed by unmarried single mothers. The higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems, and lower levels of cognitive development, of children raised by unmarried single mothers appear to be largely associated with socioeconomic disadvantage, mothers' mental health problems and parenting difficulties, with each adversely influencing the other. Studies of single mothers by choice provide an opportunity to examine the impact of single-motherhood on children in the absence of these risk factors, and will be informative in the future in addressing the question of whether being raised by single mothers, in itself, has negative consequences for children. A potential risk factor for these children is not knowing the identity of their fathers. Little research has been conducted on children in single-father families and nothing is yet known about the children of single fathers by choice.