Is There an Optimal Environment for Child Development?

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Abstract

Fostering optimal child development outcomes is a complex issue. The author reviews some of the literature on how family structure, family processes, and environmental influences may operate to future positive and healthy child outcomes. However, there is no unanimity among child and family scholars and mental health practitioners on what child outcomes are best. Also, regardless of what child outcomes are considered desirable, there is no agreement on what family structure or what family processes are most likely to produce positive and healthy child characteristics and behaviors. The majority of social scientists and mental health practitioners believe that almost any one or two adults can raise a healthy and well-adjusted child. The author concludes that in today’s scientific, social, and political environment it is difficult to answer the question “Is there an optimal environment in which to raise children?”

Key terms: optimal environment, family types, family structure, lesbian families.
Is There an Optimal Environment for Child Development?

Where is the best place to raise a child? Sounds like an easy question, but it is not\(^1\). Answers are complex and controversial\(^2\). There is no agreement among child and family scholars on what factors contribute in a positive way to child development, the author believes there are five factors that foster healthy human development: (a) family structure (e.g., single parent, foster care, two-bio parent, lesbian parent, stepfamily, etc.), (b) family processes (e.g., family interaction processes including touch, words, gestures, affection, rules, decision making etc.), (c) environmental inputs including TV, friends, internet, schools, religious organizations, and government family policies, (d) human agency, the ability to make choices that begins when a child is about 8-9 years old, and (e) the influence of God, a supreme being who rules and reigns in Earth and in Heaven\(^3\).

There is extensive documentation of major changes in family forms and functioning in the past fifty years\(^4\), but these changes are not necessarily considered to be unhealthy or dysfunctional\(^5\). In addition, many family scholars make it quite clear that there is pathology and dysfunction in the classic nuclear family (i.e. a working father, a full-time homemaker mother, and dependent children) that is often overlooked\(^6\). This perpetuates the “myth” that children are best reared in two, biological parent families\(^7\). We are told by the majority of social and

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1 (Amato, 2005a; Popenoe, 1993)
2 (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010a)
3 (Brody, Murry, Gerrard, Gibbons, Molgaard et al., 2004; Coontz, 2000; Defrain & Asay, 2007; Overman, 2009; Long, 2010)
5 (Demo, Allen, & Fine, 1999; Marsh, 2009; Oswald, 2004; Seccombe, 2004; Stacy, 1998)
6 (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010b)
7 (Marks, Lam, & McHale, 2009)
behavioral researchers that we should not hold up the traditional nuclear family as the ideal environment for raising children.

This message comes across loud and clear in Stephanie Coontz’s book, The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, or in Karen Hansen’s Not-so-nuclear families: Class, gender, and networks of care (Longleaf Service, 2005), or in a text by Valerie Lehr, Queer Family Values: Rethinking the myth of the nuclear family. The seemingly deplorable conditions in many traditional nuclear families are depicted in popular movies such as the 2002, “Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood” or the 2010 indie hit “Blue Valentine”. And the functionality of lesbian families is shown in the new hit movie “The Kids Are All Right”. As Celeste explains:

In The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, the stay-at-home mother, Vivian, is an alcoholic, driven to drinking because she was forced into the role of homemaker when she had wanted to have a career in the city. She married a man she did not love and has children because this was the expectation of the time. She suffers from depression and alcoholism because she is overwhelmed with the responsibility of being the perfect mother and wife.

Commentators on the demise and dysfunction and of the traditional nuclear family are everywhere: in academia, in the medical and mental health fields, in the government, in religion, and in the entertainment media. Rabbi Balfour Brickner (2004) stated:

The nuclear family as we once knew it has crumbled. In its place a new understanding of family is emerging. That mythic television family of yesteryear, the happily married monogamous wife and husband, two drug-free children and a dog, living in a three-bedroom, two-bath house in a quiet suburban neighborhood, hardly exists anywhere, anymore. In fact, the reality is radically different . . . . The most recent US census reveals that the marriage rate is declining precipitously, only 24 percent of households are made up of a married couple and children . . . the number of unmarried couple households continues to rise . . . over 40% of babies are born outside of marriage . . . It is almost the norm for gay, and straight couples to live together unmarried, and more widowed or

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8 (Harding, 2007; Knapp & Williams, 2005; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005)
9 (Basic Books, 1992)
10 (Temple University Press, 1999)
11 (Celeste, 2007)
divorced older folk find new partners and cohabit without marriage . . . gay marriages have erupted across the land creating gay families that raise children in familial settings where, much to the dismay of braying religious fundamentalists, the kids are doing just fine with two mommies or two daddies.

Caryl Rivers, a professor of journalism at Boston University, looked back through American history and noted:

Conservatives extol the mom, pop, and kids family model and describe it as traditional. But Americans throughout history were not particularly child-friendly or chaste. Serial marriages and illicit sex were common, as were births to unmarried women.\(^\text{12}\)

Dr. Katherine Rake, the British government chief spokesperson on children and families and head of the UK’s Family and Parenting Institute, in 2009 warned that the traditional family model is no longer the norm and any Government attempts to rescue it are futile\(^\text{13}\).

Thus, in the age of sophisticated science and in a society that values diversity and pluralism, it is irresponsible and disingenuous to hold on to old stereotypes and ideals about traditional families without scientific data to support their veracity\(^\text{14}\). For example, a typical heterosexual two married, parent family with three kids, and a dog could have problems: the dad is overworked and absent, the mother is alcoholic and neglectful, and there is constant marital conflict seen by the children.

Thus, professionals concerned with children and families (e.g., therapists, lawyers, teachers, doctors, social workers) should be careful and cautious about what is held up to the public as the ideal environment for raising children. According to many child and family scholars, there is not much one can say about what is best for children in terms of family form or functioning. Child well-being depends upon a myriad of factors (or variables) that play out in a

\[^{12}\text{2001}\]
\[^{13}\text{cited in Borland, 2009}\]
\[^{14}\text{Marsh, 2009}\]
variety of contexts and no single prescription can be written for turning out a happy and healthy child\textsuperscript{15}.

On the other hand, it is hazardous to believe everything published in scientific journals and scholarly books. It has long been known that scientific data always has limitations\textsuperscript{16}. We assume the authors are unbiased and objective, and that their statistics have not been manipulated to support a pet theory, but scientists are value driven and they have their social and political agendas to pursue like everyone else. If scientists pick the right samples, and get a large enough sample, and use preferred measurement instruments and statistics, a social scientist can find support for whatever he or she is looking for. Scientists and scholars of any stripe are not to be completely trusted because they are human and inevitably have biases and personal values that influence their work—whether they admit it or not\textsuperscript{17}. Psychologist have “shared, professional values and not empirically backed” that they use to promote their social and political agendas\textsuperscript{18}. Their public statements on gay and lesbian issues may be grounded in personal belief rather than in empirical data\textsuperscript{19}. Walter Schumm reviewed much of the literature on lesbigay parenting and concluded, “It appears clear that value biases have dramatically influenced how social scientists evaluate scientific literature, how they develop their theoretical models, and how they conduct their research in the area of lesbigay parenting”\textsuperscript{20}.

**Example of Scientific Bias in Favor of Homosexual Families**

Here is recent example of what I believe to be scientific bias. The paper I will critique is, “How Does the Gender of Parents Matter” published by Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey in

\textsuperscript{15} (Schudson, 1993; Shucksmith, Hendry & Glendinning, 2002; Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2008)
\textsuperscript{16} (Callaham, Wears, Weber, Barton & Young, 2011; Price & Murnan, 2004; Shipman, 1981)
\textsuperscript{17} (Alcock, 2009; Sherif, 1998; Slife & Reber, 2009; Slife & Whoolery, 2004)
\textsuperscript{18} (Martel, 2009, p. 110)
\textsuperscript{19} (Martel, 2009)
\textsuperscript{20} (p. 25)
the prestigious *Journal of Marriage and the Family*,\(^{21}\). There are several reasons why I believe their paper is flawed.

**First:** biased samples in much of the research. There are serious sampling problems with many of the studies that underlie their thesis that lesbian couples are superior to heterosexual couples in couple satisfaction and in parenting ability\(^{22}\). For example, take the research by Gartrell and Bos (2010) which compared children’s development in homosexual and heterosexual families\(^{23}\). Dr. Dean Bryd a clinical psychologist criticizes the sample by saying that the lesbian mothers were not randomly selected and were composed of mostly white, college-educated, highly paid professionals\(^{24}\). They were recruited from lesbian venues and probably would not have volunteered if their children were not well-adjusted. The comparison sample of two parent families was poorer and less educated and contained more minorities.\(^{25}\) Comparing the children from such discordant groups is not appropriate and gives advantage to the lesbian parent’s children. Non-probability sampling issues have plagued gay and lesbian research studies for decades\(^{26}\).

In another study by Bos and Sandfort\(^{27}\) comparing children’s gender identity in lesbian and heterosexual families the lesbian families were recruited from “a Dutch interest group for gay/lesbian parents, and by presenting information about the study during meetings organized by Dutch healthcare centres about lesbian and gay parenthood”\(^{28}\). The process of selecting the heterosexual families was not explained. Of those contacted only an average of 35% of the

\(^{21}\) February 2010, volume 72, pages 3-22

\(^{22}\) (Carroll & Dollahite, 2008)

\(^{23}\)

\(^{24}\)

\(^{25}\)

\(^{26}\)

\(^{27}\) (2010)

\(^{28}\) (p. 5)
heterosexuals families were willing to participate\textsuperscript{29}. So again, as evident in the Biblarz and Stacey paper there is a sampling bias in favor of lesbian volunteers who know the state and condition of their children in advance of the survey.

**Second**, Biblarz and Stacey dismisses two decades of research that shows that fathers and mothers make unique and important contributions to child development\textsuperscript{30}. It is quite clear, however, that Biblarz and Stacey, and many other social scientists, believe that fathers are not essential to child development\textsuperscript{31}. For example, Alicia Crowl, Soyeon Ahn and Jean Baker\textsuperscript{32} state in their meta-analysis of studies comparing children reared in heterosexual and non-heterosexual families: “Children raised by same-sex and heterosexual parents were found to not differ significantly in terms of their cognitive development, gender role behavior, gender identity, psychological adjustment, or sexual preference”.

**Third**, Biblarz and Stacey claim the superiority of lesbian families over heterosexual parents on a variety of child outcomes. In Table 1 the authors display quite a list of published research studies that seem to indicate the superiority of lesbian mothers. Yet, they make this curious statement at the end of Table 1: “For every finding of significant differences [between lesbian families and heterosexual families] there were roughly four or more findings of no significant difference that we do not display”\textsuperscript{33}. In other words, for every one study that indicates lesbian couples make better partners and parents than a husband and wife, there are four or more studies that found no differences in child outcomes!

\textsuperscript{29} (p. 5)
\textsuperscript{30} (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010; Lamb, 1975; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; McLanahan, 1998; Parke, 1996; Popone, 2009; Pruett, 2001; Raikes, Summers & Roggman, 2005)
\textsuperscript{31} (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Goldberg, & Allen, 2007)
\textsuperscript{32} (2007) (p. 398)
\textsuperscript{33} (2010, p. 8)
Yet, batting only 1 out of 4, they proceed to extol the virtues of lesbian parents over heterosexual parents. First, lesbian couples “enjoy greater equality, compatibility, and [relationship] satisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts”\(^{34}\). In addition, Biblarz and Stacey claim that lesbians are superior parents because “Co-mothers typically bestow a double dose of caretaking, communication and intimacy” above and beyond heterosexual parents\(^{35}\). They claim the data indicates that lesbian parents are more available to their children, set less strict limits on children, use less harsh punishment, show more respect for a child’s autonomy, are more aware of what’s going on in their children’s lives, spend more time in play with their children, and show more “warmth, affection, and attachment”\(^{36}\). The authors even assert that “growing up without a father did not impede masculine development but enabled boys to achieve greater gender flexibility,” which to me means that boys raised by lesbian mothers are more likely to consider homosexuality and casual sex as viable choices.\(^{37}\)

Biblarz and Stacey summarize their paper by stating unequivocally that lesbians provide a “double dose of middle–class feminine parenting” superior to heterosexual parenting\(^{38}\). They conclude, “In fact, based strictly on the published science, one could argue that two women parent better on average than a woman and a man”\(^{39}\). Fiona Tasker, a colleague adds: “Non-heterosexual parents on average indicated significantly better relationships with their children than did heterosexual parents”.\(^{40}\) Biblarz and Stacey believe that “research to date . . . does not support the claim that compared to other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children”.

\(^{34}\) (p. 11)  
\(^{35}\) (p. 17)  
\(^{36}\) (p. 7)  
\(^{37}\) (p. 14, c.f., Table 1 and p. 11)  
\(^{38}\) (p. 11)  
\(^{39}\) (p. 17)  
\(^{40}\) (Tasker, 2010, p. 36.)
They conclude: “To be true to the best scientific evidence, one should say: Compared to all other family forms, families headed by two committed, compatible parents are generally best for children.”\textsuperscript{41} This blanket statement is made despite the views of many other family researchers that “There is near-uniform agreement that offspring who grow up in two-biological-parent families have fewer behavioral problems . . . more self-esteem and better grades than children with absent [or without] fathers.”\textsuperscript{42} This reminds us: “Twenty-four million American children now grow up without fathers, a phenomenon that is directly linked to every major social pathology our time, from violent crime to substance abuse”.\textsuperscript{43}

There are hundreds of published papers and books that demonstrate the advantages of a two-biological parent family in raising healthy and high achievement children. Figure 1 provides a visual picture of this. There are two bell curves in the graphic, one representing children from intact, two-biological parent families, and one curve representing children in all other types of families. The horizontal axis indicates the number of children beginning at zero at the bottom and hundreds of thousands at the top. The vertical axis represents child achievement, in almost any area of psychosocial, cognitive, or interpersonal development. Achievement could be any variable such as school grades, relationship with peers, entry into college, self-esteem, volunteerism, or low rates of alcohol, delinquency and drug use. The average effect of hundreds of studies has clearly shown that children from two-biological parent families, on average, do better than children raised in other environments. And this if reflected in Figure 1.

\textsuperscript{41} (p. 17)  \textsuperscript{42} (Booth, Scott & King, 2010, p. 585; also Mallers, Neupert, Charles, & Almeida, 2010; Peres, Rutherford, Borges, Hudes, & Hearst, 2008). Steven Baskerville (2009)  \textsuperscript{43} (p. 178)
Fourth, the authors downplay the fact that lesbian and gay couples, especially male couples, have higher rates of breakup, infidelity, substance abuse, and spouse abuse than married heterosexual couples; and when a family breaks apart, children are at greater risk for a variety of ills. Walter Schumm in a recent review of relationship stability of lesbian mothers vs. heterosexual mother families concluded, that after about 10 years in a couple relationship, “37.8% of lesbian couples separated compared with 15.7% of heterosexual couples . . . . It appears that the odds of lesbian couples breaking up are over three times greater than the odds of heterosexual couples breaking up”.

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44 (Kerby, Wilson, Nicholson, & White, 2005; Kurdek, 2005; Kurdek, 1998; McKenry, Serovich, Mason, & Mosack, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Potoczniak, Mourot, Crosbie-Burnett, & Potoczniak, 2003; Smith, Markovic, Danielson, Matthews, Youk, 2010)
45 (Brown, 2004; Oman, Vesely, Tolma & Aspy, 2007)
46 (2010a)
47 (p. 504)
The authors seem to assume or imply that all lesbian couples get along well and have great parenting skills\textsuperscript{48}, but the data is tentative because of small, non-random samples\textsuperscript{49}. If Biblarz and Stacey’s main argument comes down to kids do better with a “double dose of mothering” then the authors have failed to consider the effects on children in polygamist families. If two mothers are better than a mother and father, then why not have 3, 4, or 5 mothers with different temperaments, talents, and strengths to care for all the children? In addition, if you follow their logic, then gay fathers would be the worst parents because there are no women involved.

\textbf{Fifth,} Biblarz and Stacey fail to take an ecological perspective on child development and disregard how environmental factors affect how children turn out.\textsuperscript{50} Figure 1 shows a variety of family structures, but structure alone does not make a healthy child. Figure 2 shows a variety of family processes which exist inside every family type and recent research indicates that healthy family processes are more important than family structure.\textsuperscript{51} A child resides within a specific family structure (that is either an advantage or disadvantage to development) that changes over time, and is influenced by various family processes (for good or ill).

But structure and processes exist within a large ecological environment of friends, schools, the media, the internet, religion, and the macro level cultural norms and behavioral expectations.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, one cannot say with confidence that a particular family structure (e.g., lesbian family) is the optimal child environment. It is much more complex and child outcomes (healthy or unhealthy) result from an interaction of (1) structure, (2) function (i.e., family processes), and (3) environmental influences as presented in Figure 3.

\textsuperscript{48} (Buffardi, Thomas, Holmes & Manhart, 2008; Kotchick, Shaffer, Forehand, & Miller, 2001)
\textsuperscript{49} (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004; Davis, & Friel, 2001)
\textsuperscript{50} (Mandara, Murray, & Bangi, 2003; see Figure 3)
As part of an ecological perspective, there is another element that is rarely or never considered by social and behavioral scientists as a determinate of human behavior, and that factor is human agency.\(^{53}\) A child’s development is not just an outcome of what others do to the child, but a child (after about the age of 8-10) possesses agency, the ability to make independent choices and decisions in whatever environment the child resides.\(^{54}\) Yes, past family and environmental factors restrict and constrain personal choices and freedom of action, but future moral behavior is not absolutely determined by the past or present contributors to child development. Children (after a certain age), like adults, can make choices and decisions independent of past or present conditioning and experiences.\(^{55}\)

**Limitations of Scientific Research**

My last reproof is a more general in scope, but it applies to many of the studies cited in the Biblarz and Stacey paper. There is a dirty little secret in social science research that most non-scientists don’t understand, but is critical when the layperson tries to interpret social science research reports. Social scientists are often like the five blind men feeling the elephant.

The story of the Blind Men and the Elephant is a parable about how people tend to understand only a small part of any specific thing, but claim their individual interpretation is correct. It’s an ancient story told by the Buddha, the Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, circa 450 BC:

A number of disciples went to the Buddha and said, ‘Sir, there are living here in Savatthi many wandering hermits and scholars who indulge in constant dispute, some saying that the world is infinite and eternal and others that it is finite and not eternal, some saying that the soul dies with the body and others that it lives on forever, and so forth. Sir, what would you say concerning them?’ The Buddha answered, ‘Once upon a time there was a certain raja called to his servant and said, ‘Come and gather together in one place all the men who were born blind . . . and show them an elephant.’ ‘Very good, sire,’ replied the servant. He said to the blind men, ‘Here is an elephant,’ and to one man he presented the trunk, to another the tusk, to another the ear, to another the leg,
and to another the tail; saying to each one that that was the elephant. When the blind men had felt the elephant, the raja went to each of them and said to each, 'Well, blind man, Tell me, what sort of thing is an elephant?' The man who held the trunk answered, 'Sire, an elephant is like a snake'. The man who touched the tusk replied, 'An elephant is like a ploughshare'. The one who felt the ear replied, 'An elephant is like a basket.' The one who held the leg said it was like a tree, and the one who felt the tail, a broom. Then they began to quarrel, shouting, 'Yes it is!' 'No, it is not!' The raja was delighted with the scene and said, 'Just so are the preachers and scholars holding various views of the elephant, but are blind and unseeing. In their ignorance they are by nature quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus.'

When social and behavioral scientists study a child or family phenomenon (i.e. an elephant), they discover only parts of the elephant, yet make exaggerated claims about the nature of the beast from only knowing a portion of its true reality. Biblarz and Stacey claim they know the reality of a lesbian family and how it produces better child outcomes than a dual gender biological family, yet they only hold the trunk, or the ear, or the tail of the elephant.

When scientists do comparison between groups, or do correlations between variables, the typical outcomes are small group differences or small correlations between variables. For example, in a fictional comparison study the math scores of children for a non-random sample of children from three family types could produce these results: kids in lesbian families scored an average of 55.3 on the math exam; those in heterosexual two-parent families scored 53.8, and kids in single parent mother families scored 47.2. On the surface it looks like the kids from lesbian families win.

In a comparison study, depending on how the sampling was done (random or convenience samples) and the number of kids in each group (e.g., 20, 40, 80, or 120), these scores could be significantly different or not. Such a study would need to be replicated, which is rarely done. And even if the scores were statistically different, the practical value of a one point

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56 (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant)
difference (55 for the lesbian kids vs. 54 for the heterosexual kids) may not have any practical relevance in school because both scores are above average.

In addition to comparison studies, the other method of studying elephants (e.g., any child or family phenomenon) is *correlational research*.\(^\text{57}\) The approach is used because researchers can’t manipulate the independent variables they want to study\(^\text{58}\). For example, let’s say researchers want to study the effects of divorce on child well-being or the difference between children who have a single mother or a single father. The independent variable is “divorce” in the first case or “sex of single parent” in the later. Scientists can’t create these situations; they cannot cause some families to divorce and make other families stay married, or they cannot create single parent families some with dads and some with moms. If one can’t control the independent variable then an experiment can’t be done and the only recourse is a correlational study\(^\text{59}\).

The typical outcome of a correlational study, even with large random samples is small, averaging about \(r = .20\).\(^\text{60}\) The risk of teen suicide, let’s say was measured on a 1 to 5 scale (1 being low risk and 5 indicating high risk), and one’s sexual orientation was measured on a 1 to 5 point scale (1 indicating an exclusively heterosexual orientation and 5 indicating an exclusively homosexual orientation). A correlation can range from \(r = 0\) that indicates that two variables are not related to each other, up to \(r = 1\), indicating the one variable completely predicts the other variable\(^\text{61}\). A correlation of \(r = .58, p < .001\) would indicate that sexual orientation is a very good predictor of teen suicide. The implication of this correlation is that the more likely teen reports

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being exclusively homosexual, the more likely the teen would think about to try to commit suicide.

Now let say, some researchers did a study on teen suicide and sexual orientation using a random sample of 10,000 teenagers across the US. They have a large representative sample and excellent methodology. The correlation between risk of suicide and sexual orientation turns out to be $r = .28$, $p < .001$. That is a significant finding. Yet, to interpret the correlation, one must square the number .28, which then becomes .08 which means that roughly 8% of the variation in risk for suicide can be predicted or explained by knowing the teen’s sexual orientation score.

It also means that 92% of the risk for suicide cannot be understood by knowing the teen’s sexual orientation score. In other words, knowing 8% of the elephant isn’t much! There is a lot more to the elephant than knowing only the sexual orientation (e.g., the tail of the elephant). The point of this example is this: Just because one study finds significant differences between groups, or a significant correlation between variables, the results in reality, may be very limited and have little practical relevance. One must look at the overall picture of the elephant painted by hundreds of studies over many years.

**Summary So Far**

Let me summarize what I have said so far. Healthy child development can occur (1) in a variety of family types (or structures), (2) when exposed to a variety of healthy family processes such as warm supportive parents who use inductive discipline, (3) when protected or sheltered from harmful environmental factors (e.g., poor, high crime neighborhoods; toxic air, food, and water; inadequate schools, anti-social peers, pornographic media, etc.), and (4) when exposed to healthy environment influences (e.g., high quality schools, benevolent religions, enlightening
educational media, high functioning peers, supportive government child and family policies, etc.).

I have also stated that social science research has flaws and limitations and cannot be completely trusted to be unbiased and objective. Often times the results of research are small group differences or small correlations which reveal only a small part of the phenomenon under study.

**A Different Approach**

Let’s go back to the original question: “What is the best environment for optimal child development”? The first problem becomes what are healthy, functional child outcomes most wanted by parents and by society? All environments produce outcomes, but not all outcomes are equally regarded as desirable by all parents, psychologists, teachers, government officials, religious leaders, and social scientists. For example, in the Biblarz and Stacey article a prized outcome of lesbian parents is a child with a “flexible gender identity” (Am I male or female), and “flexible sexual orientation” (Am I straight, gay, bisexual, or something else), and the “freedom to experiment” with both gender identity and sexual orientation. That would not be considered a positive or healthy outcome by many parents.62

So let’s begin with a list of desired child outcomes—that most reasonable and rational people could agree upon—and then work in reverse by then asking what family processes are most likely to produce these desired child outcomes, and in what family structures are these family processes most likely to occur? Let me give you an example of what I’m talking about. A few years ago I published a paper entitled, “Family Predictors of High-Functioning Teens”.63 I

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62 (Slife & Reber, 2009)
63 (Abbott, Hall, & Meredith, 2005)
sent out 300 surveys to the teens that were listed in local newspapers as being outstanding because of four characteristics: (1) a high GPA (82% had a 4.00 GPA), (2) involvement in extra-curricular activities, (3) leadership qualities, and (4) high moral character or integrity as perceived by high school teachers\textsuperscript{64}. These kids possessed four highly desirable outcomes. When I looked at the demographic data on the sample, I discovered that 90% of these high achievement teens came from families with two-biological parents\textsuperscript{65}. And the teens in this study rated their parents high on parental warmth and support\textsuperscript{66}. In this study, the family process was “parental warmth and support” and the family structure was “two biological parent family”\textsuperscript{67}. Of course one study does not prove a point, but it’s an example of looking at the question of what’ best for children from a different angle.

A scientist could pick any group of smart, emotionally healthy, accomplished teens or young adults, and ask about their families. What types of families do the majority come from? What emotional processes are common in these families? Also, ask the youth if their fathers were \textit{instrumental or incidental} in their development\textsuperscript{68}.

If this approach to research was used more often, I believe we would find more direct answers to the question of what is the optimal environment for children. This type of research might cut through all the smoke and mirrors of social science research that tends to show few if any differences in child outcomes for children raised in any type of family environment\textsuperscript{69}.

\textsuperscript{64} (Brotherson & White, 2007)
\textsuperscript{65} (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998)
I believe that such data would support the proposition that healthy, high functioning children are most often found in the two biological parent families. 70 Certainly, children in other family types can and will excel emotionally and intellectually, but I believe that such positive outcomes are less likely to occur in other family types. There are, however, many who would disagree and they will cite many published studies to support their view 71.

I asked seven colleagues in child development and family studies this question: “List your top five teen development outcomes.” Here is a composite list of a dozen characteristics in no particular order. 72

1. Interpersonal skills (communicates positively with parents, friends, and others)
2. Pro-social (is cooperative and helpful to others)
3. Interpersonal competence (is empathic, sensitive, and compassionate)
4. Honest and truthful, has high integrity
5. Kind and compassionate, willing to help others in need
6. Self-regulated (able to control self and direct life towards positive outcomes, and able to resist peer pressure)
7. Moral, has a belief in a higher power and lives by a moral code of conduct
8. Models healthy and wholesome behaviors, avoids risky dangerous behaviors (drugs, sex, etc.)
9. Motivated, has a sense of purpose and is achievement orientated
10. Culturally competent (has knowledge of and comfort with people of diverse ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds).

70 (c.f., Booth, Scott, & King, 2010; Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Vandell, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Halpern-Meekin, 2008; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Lewis & Lamb, 2003)
72 (also see Search Institute, www.search-institute.org, and Kalil & DeLeire, 2004)
11. Responsible, dependable, and trustworthy
12. Goal oriented, knows how to plan ahead and make wise decisions, feels in control of life

If we can tentatively agree that these are creditable and worthy teen outcomes, then the question becomes: “How do we raise kids to possess these characteristics?” One must think about both family processes and family structure and take into consideration that all children have agency or freedom to choose. Regardless of the health and functionality of the family a child in a great environment can still make bad choices.

So what are the conditions that would elicit these outcomes? Consider the ten listed below. Think of a swimming pool. What would you fill the pool with, assuming that the water will interact with the children’s movements to produce positive outcomes outside the pool. Note that I’m taking a leap of faith implying that these 10 conditions are directly related to the previous 12 child outcomes. I have no research to support this. It would take hundreds of studies to demonstrate the connection between any one outcome and any one of the conditions. So I know I’m out on a limb with my opinion. In my defense, I’m just trying to simplify things and look logically at a very complex issue.

**Conditions Hypothesized to Produce Positive Child Outcomes**

1. Adults who model healthy lifestyles
2. Appropriate discipline, rules and supervision
3. Love and support from primary caretakers
4. Education, opportunities to learn and explore
5. Safe home and neighborhood
6. Financial support and resources
7. Friends and positive peers
8. Religious and/or spiritual influences
9. Opportunities to work with and help others
10. Wholesome leisure activities (fun things to do)

The writer hypothesizes that the following four factors will help produce these ten desired outcomes. **Teen vs. Young Adult.** Adults age 23-25 have optimal brain development, especially in the frontal cortex which makes them better decision makers, more likely to control impulses, able to recognize consequences to their actions, and so forth\(^73\). Older parents are more likely to be highly educated and have good paying jobs\(^74\). So this eliminates teen parents as candidates for best family environment.

**Two vs. one parent.** Two adult caretakers are better than one for a variety of reasons. Consider these advantages of two parents: (a) There is more supervision, (b) There is more money, (c) There are two role models for ethical behavior and occupational example, (d) A viable family is modeled (assuming low marital conflict and good parenting skills), (e) A larger network of kith and kin to support the children, (f) A “double doze” of support and unconditional love. So, in general, two parents are potentially better than a single parent in getting desired child outcomes.

**Opposite-sex vs. same–sex parents.** Here is where much of the contention and controversy lies given all the new research about gay and lesbian families. I propose that dual gender parents (e.g. a father and a mother) have several advantages over same-sex parents: (a) One would avoid the issues of adoption, surrogacy and in-vitro fertilization which can cause

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\(^{73}\) (Giedd, 2004, 2008)  
\(^{74}\)
identity problems later for the child.\(^{75}\) (b) Two bioparents model procreation which is important if one wants the human race to continue. Lesbian and gay men don’t reproduce enough of their own blood related children to replace themselves.\(^{76}\) (c) Males and females often have different temperaments and talents that can benefit children.\(^{77}\) (d) Mothers and fathers help feminize girls and masculinize boys so children are more likely to establish a stable gender identity and traditional sexual orientation which would eliminate much of the stress and anxiety experienced by gay youth.\(^{78}\) and (e) children raised by gay or lesbian couples are “more likely to experience homoerotic attraction and homosexual relationships”\(^{79}\), and (f) Adults and children in gay and lesbian families are more likely to experience mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and thoughts of suicide and substance abuse.\(^{80}\) In sum: advantage to two bio-parents. 

**Marriage vs. cohabitation.** Legal marriage appears to benefit children over parents living together for several reasons: (a) Married parents are less likely to separate or divorce than cohabiters\(^{81}\), (b) Children are less likely to be abused or neglected than children in cohabiting families especially if the father is not blood related to the children\(^{82}\), (c) Married parents are more likely to be better educated and have higher paying jobs than partners who are cohabitating\(^{83}\), (d) Even if married parent eventually separate or divorce they are more like than cohabiters to remarry and provide a more stable family\(^{84}\), (e) Married parents are more likely to

\(^{75}\) (Carroll & Dollahite, 2008)  
\(^{76}\) (Carlson, 2004)  
\(^{77}\) (Byrd, 2010b)  
\(^{78}\) (Knafo, Iervolino & Plomin, 2005; Kuvalanka, & Goldberg, 2009; Mitchell, Baker, & Jacklin, 1989)  
\(^{79}\) (Redding, 2008, p. 150; see also Schumm, 2010b for excellent review of literature on this point)  
\(^{80}\) (Alexander, 2002; Trocki, Midanik, & Drabble, 2009; Wang, Hausermann, Ajdacic-Gross, Aggleton, & Weiss, 2007)  
\(^{81}\)  
\(^{82}\)  
\(^{83}\)  
\(^{84}\)
have a network of kith and kin that will help care for and support the children\(^85\). All said: marriage is better for children than cohabitation\(^86\).

**Conclusion**

Where is the optimal place to produce healthy and positive child outcomes? As you can see, that is not an easy question to answer anymore. There is strong opposition in the social sciences and among mental health professionals to say anything approaching this, “The best place to raise children is a two-biological, heterosexual parent family”\(^87\). Politically correct and liberal minded social scientists huff and puff and try to blow down the traditional family with a barrage of bombs: (1) the two bio-parent family is pathological, (2) it is unstable, (3) abuse of children is common, (4) fathers don’t help much around the house and their parenting is inferior to mothers. The litany of attacks against the two biological parent family goes on and on.\(^88\) Yet there is a sizeable quantity of published research on the value of mother-child and father-child relationships.\(^89\)

So where has all the criticism of the two biological parent family come from? Is it valid science or is it the socio-political values of society and the elites in academia and the entertainment media industry? Many believe it is better science that has demonstrated there is no inherent advantage to children raised in a two biological parent families. Yet, I believe it’s the shift in the socio-political and moral culture that emphasizes diversity, moral pluralism, and political correctness, that has undermined the veracity of the traditional family. It is clear that on certain issues (e.g., gay and lesbian families) “psychologists and psychological organization may

\(^{85}\) (Huston, & McLoyd, 2002; McMunn, Nazroo, Marmot, Boreham, & Goodman, 2001; Mistry, Vandewater, Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2005)

\(^{86}\) (Bruce, 2001; Johnson, Moore & Judd, 2010)

\(^{87}\) (Biblarz & Evren, 2010; Cootz, 2000; Fineman, 1993; Kamsner, & McCabe, 2000)

\(^{88}\) (c.f., Byrd, 2010b)
decide to back certain social [issues] on the basis of their shared ethical principles and values rather than on the basis of empirical evidence . . . [thus] psychologists should be clear about the distinction between their personal opinions and values and their professional, scientific claims”.

This, I believe is what is happening in the case of the rise, elevation, and advancement of the lesbian family. There are child and family scholars who want to destroy all vestiges of the traditional, biological, two parent family because their amoral ideology will not permit it to be placed on a normative pedestal.

It is the new values and morals of entertainment media executives, Hollywood stars, and many in academia and the mental health professions that seek revolutionize the traditional fabric of American families and overthrow millennial old Judeo-Christian values of chastity, fidelity, and heterosexuality.

As Miriam Grossman, MD, explains (2009):

[These] experts are hiding their goal of bringing about radical social change, one [family] at a time. Their mission is to mold each [individual] . . . into a sexually healthy adult, as if there were universal agreement on what that is . . . It would appear . . . that a sexually healthy individual is one who has been desensitized, who is without any sense of embarrassment or shame . . . whose sexuality always positive and open, who respects accepts diverse lifestyles and who practices safer sex with every partner . . . They insist they’re neutral and free of agendas . . . but those claims are bogus.

These elite, liberal, and often atheist men and women don’t want to exclude any family type from functionality! Therefore, every family type has to be shown to be equal in value to the heterosexual, two-biological parent family; otherwise, we (as a collective) are unfair, biased, racist, prejudiced, intolerant, and bigoted.

Thus, I am still left with a question: “What is the best environment to raise kids?” The current socio-political climate will not tolerate the old-fashioned belief that a two biological

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90 (Martel, 2009, p. 109)
91 (Slife & Reber, 2009)
92 (Barr, 2003; Overman, 2009; Socarides, 1995)
93 (p. 8, 15)
parent family is an advantage to a child’s growth and development. So we are left with the premise or supposition that almost any loving and caring environment, with at least one or more competent adults, can bring up a child to be a sensitive, altruistic, compassionate, tolerant, and achievement oriented. That’s what most people in my field of child development and family studies believe, but I do not, and I am not alone.  

Robert Lerner and Althea Nagai (2001) reviewed 49 original research reports published in journals or book chapters regarding homosexual parents and their children and found no support for the hypothesis that of gay families provide a superior environment for raising children because the studies were “so deeply flawed pieces of research”. From my point of view it appears that, in general, children reared in two-biological, low–conflict marriages do better, on average, than children raised in other environments”.}

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94 (Doherty & Gottman, 2002; Lerner & Nagai, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000)
95 (p. 9.)
96 (Hawkins, 2007, p. 5; c.f., Amato, 2005b; Lerner & Nagai, 2001; Moore, Jekielek, & Emig, 2002)
References


Appendices

Figure 1: Children Living in Various Family Structures

*Further structural variations: Relative families could include children living with aunts and/or uncles, with grandparents, or being taken care of solely by an older sibling. Stepfamilies could be composed by one never married partner with no kids married to a previously divorced spouse with kids; or both partners could have been divorced and both bring children to the blended family. Gay spouses could be married or not legally married. Marital status of parents can make a difference to child outcomes. Single parent families could be living alone or living with grandparents, or living alone but with lots or little help from grandparents and other relatives. Heterosexual cohabiting couples could have children from one or both partners. Foster parent families could have only foster children or natural children and foster children. Adoptive families could have only adopted children, or adoptive and natural children.
Figure 2: Family Processes

- Verbal Communication
- Non-Verbal Communication
- Power and Authority
- Problem Solving
- Love & Affection
- Family Rituals
- Child Discipline
- Stress & Coping Skills
- Family Leisure Activities

10 Family Processes
  - Family Rules
Figure 3: Environmental Influences on Child Development

*Family structure could be represented by various shapes. For example:  
= Lesbian couple,  = Stepfamily,  = Adoption  = Single parent,