



## chapter

# 9

## Parents and Children

### Myths and Realities

- **The Social Construction of Parenting**
- **The Social Construction of Childhood**
- **BOX 9.1 Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families:**  
Let the Kid Be
- **Demographic Patterns**
- **Fertility**
- **BOX 9.2 Emergent Family Trends: A Shift**  
to Smaller Latino Families
- **Voluntary Childlessness**
- **Infertility and New Technologies**
- **BOX 9.3 Technology and the Family: Hello,**  
I'm Your Sister. Our Father Is Donor 150

### *Delayed Childbearing*

- ***Family Composition***
- **The Impact of Children on Marriage**
- ***The Transition to Parenthood***
- ***The Benefits of Parenthood***
- ***The Costs of Parenthood***
- ***Gendered Parenting***
- **The Impact of Parents on Children and of Children on Parents**
- **The Structure of the Family Embedded in a Larger Network of Influences**
- ***Family Structure***

### BOX 9.4 Researching Families: Parental Gender Role Nontraditionalism and Offspring Outcomes

#### *Extrafamilial Factors*

- **Parental Time with Children**
- **Parents and Children in Dual-Earner Families**  
*Maternal Employment and Time with Children*  
*Social Supports for Working Parents*
- **Single Parents and Their Children**

### BOX 9.5 Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families: A Single Mother with Children Struggles to Make Ends Meet

- **Reprise: The Duality of Parenting**

**Chapter Review**

**Key Terms**

**Related Websites**

## Myths and Realities

<b>Myth</b>	The parental division of labor is the result of biological imperatives.
<b>Reality</b>	Aside from conception, childbirth, and nursing, parental roles by gender are a social construction, the result of historical, economic, and social forces.
<b>Myth</b>	Contemporary children are similar because they are subject to common parenting styles.
<b>Reality</b>	Parenting styles vary by social class, resulting in children with different traits.
<b>Myth</b>	Children increase marital happiness.
<b>Reality</b>	Research shows that children increase marital happiness in only about one-fifth of marriages.
<b>Myth</b>	Modern fathers share the parenting duties with their working wives.
<b>Reality</b>	Although there are exceptions, the overall pattern is for husbands to leave the child-raising chores to wives. Even among couples who deliberately share parenting equally, mothers do much more of the emotion work than do fathers.
<b>Myth</b>	As more and more mothers enter the labor force, their time with their children decreases.
<b>Reality</b>	Despite the rapid rise in mothers' labor force participation, mothers' time with children has tended to be quite stable over time.
<b>Myth</b>	The socialization process is one-way—children are passive receptors of parental influences.
<b>Reality</b>	Socialization works both ways—children learn from parents and parents learn from children.
<b>Myth</b>	Children raised in nontraditional gender role families are adversely affected.
<b>Reality</b>	Research findings indicate that children raised in families with mothers in the labor force and in which there is a more egalitarian division of labor are not negatively affected.
<b>Myth</b>	Children raised by gay or lesbian parents are harmed in their psychosocial development.
<b>Reality</b>	When the children of gay and lesbian parents are compared with the children of heterosexual parents, there is no difference in their psychosocial development.

In most societies there is a pervasive cultural pressure toward parenthood. There are strong expectations that married couples should not only have children but should also want to have them. Indeed, approximately 85 percent of married couples in the United States have children, and about two-thirds of childless couples want children but are infertile. This chapter examines parenthood, the contours of which have changed dramatically in the past two generations. More children now are being raised in families in which both parents are in the labor force. More children now are being raised by single parents. More children now are being raised by same-sex

parents. More children now are being raised by grandparents. More adult children now are living with their parents. And more children now are in households with a stepparent and stepsiblings (a topic discussed in Chapter 11). What are the causes and consequences of these new and pervasive parenting arrangements? In particular, what are the effects of these diverse family forms on the well-being of children? These questions guide our inquiry in this chapter. We begin with a discussion of the social construction of parenting and childhood. Second, we describe various demographic trends regarding parenting in U.S. society. Third, we consider the effects of children on the marital relationship. Fourth, we describe the impact of parents on children. Finally, we examine two significant types of situations in which many contemporary children are raised: dual-earner families and single-parent families.



## The Social Construction of Parenting

Typically, we think of families as biological units based on the timeless functions of love, motherhood, and childbearing. Moreover, parenting activities are viewed as “natural” behaviors found universally. This idealized version of the family assumes a gendered division of labor, a husband/father in the workforce, and a wife/mother at home nurturing her husband and children. This image of the family does not fit historical fact nor contemporary reality—only 7 percent of U.S. households currently fit this description—yet it continues to be the ideal. Actually, dual-income families with no children at home outnumber the traditional family by almost two to one (AmeriStat, 2003a). The idealized image is inaccurate because “family forms are socially and historically constructed, not monolithic universals that exist for all times and all peoples, and . . . the arrangements governing family life are not the inevitable result of unambiguous differences between women and men” (Baca Zinn et al., 1997:255).

Supporting this view are the social constructionist and social structural theoretical approaches (the following depends on Coltrane, 1998:1–9). The social constructionist approach argues that what seems “natural” or “real” depends on time, place, and social location. What is sexy, feminine or masculine, or even a family depends on the historical period, the society, and the social stratum within that society. Consider an example provided by Sociologist Scott Coltrane: “Among noblemen in 17th-century France, it was manly to wear perfume, curly wigs, high-heeled shoes, and blouses with frilly lace cuffs. Today, the same attire would be considered unmanly or effeminate” (1998:7). The point is that the meaning of gender (or family, or motherhood, or fatherhood) changes in response to differing cultural and historical contexts. Hence, it is socially constructed. These social constructions are the result of economic and other social forces. In short, people’s lives and behaviors are shaped by social forces. As Coltrane says, “Only by looking at the structural constraints people face—such as access to education or jobs—can we understand how cultural definitions and practices governing gender and families have developed” (Coltrane, 1998:3). Summing up this important and sociological way of looking at families, Coltrane states, “In our nostalgia for a mythical past, we tend to envision an ideal family that transcends time and place. In reality, families are very specific forms of human organization that continually evolve and change as they respond to various pushes and pulls” (Coltrane, 1996:22).

To examine the social construction of parenting further, let’s consider some related questions: Why is child care and housework obligatory for women and mothers, yet still optional for men and fathers (Coltrane, 1996:7)? Why is being a housewife

acceptable and choosing to be a househusband much less so? Why are women who voluntarily release custody of their children to their former husbands defined much more negatively than men who give up the custody of their children to their former wives? Similarly, why do we feel much less incensed when a father abandons his family than when a mother deserts her family? Why does the verb “to mother” include in its core meaning the caring of children, whereas the verb “to father” does not (Shehan, 2003:317)? In short, why are a father’s family obligations less important than a mother’s?

Biological differences (e.g., genetic programming, hormones, size, strength, and traits such as nurturance and aggressiveness) do not explain these inconsistencies by gender. Beyond conception, giving birth, and nursing the infant, there are no biological imperatives concerning parenting. Mothering and styles of mothering are tied to social rather than biological sources (much of the following is from Glenn, 1994). This assertion questions the presumed universals of motherhood as the most important source of a woman’s fulfillment, mothers as nurturers, and even maternal instinct. There are variations on each of these themes, thus belying their universality. A few examples make this point.

We typically assume that the White, middle-class experience is the norm (Collins, 1990). To do so promotes mythology. Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988) shows how mothering has differed historically along racial and class dimensions. Privileged women (usually White), historically, have been able to escape the more difficult parts of mothering by having other women (White working-class women and women of color) do the tedious child-rearing tasks for them. This frees the privileged mothers for leisure or career pursuits while retaining the status of “mother,” and forces much less privileged surrogate mothers to spend less time with their own children. In effect, institutional racism and economic necessities required lower-class women to give precedence to the care of the children of others over their own. Thus, the responsibility for their own children often had to be shared with other family members or other women from the minority community. This “shared mothering” or “othermothering” has been and continues to be characteristic in African American communities (Collins, 1990:119–132).

This chain of “othermothering” extends to other societies as well, as noted in Chapter 4. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2000) illustrates the globalization of child care as mothers from poor countries hire poor women to take care of their children while they migrate to the United States to work to care for someone else’s children for better wages.

A typical global care chain might work something like this: An older daughter from a poor family in a third world country cares for her siblings (the first link in the chain) while her mother works as a nanny caring for the children of a family migrating to a first world country (the second link) who, in turn, cares for the child of a family in a rich country (the final link). Each kind of chain expresses an invisible human ecology of care, one care worker depending on another and so on. (Hochschild, 2000:33)

Another false universal of motherhood is maternal instinct (that is, the assumption that there is a biological imperative of mother love that compels mothers to protect their children from harm against any odds). This is a myth because historians, anthropologists, and sociologists find that mothers do not protect their children universally in all stages of history and across all cultures (Pinker, 1997). Some cultures accept infanticide, usually the killing of girl babies because they are considered a

financial burden to the family. Other societies permit the killing of one or all multiple-birth babies because of the belief that animals have multiple births, not humans. There is also the widespread practice in some societies of poor parents selling their offspring as slaves or prostitutes.

Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes presents an interesting case of accepted infanticide in northeast Brazil. She found that when infants and toddlers from poor families were quite sick from diarrhea and dehydration, mothers could not be convinced to use medicines to save their children. These mothers would not even accept back into their homes those children who recovered on their own. They believed that these children were sickly and fragile and would always be a burden. Thus it was better to let them die, so the family's few economic resources would be more generously divided among the healthy. When this occurred, parents accepted their sickly child's death with stoicism and equanimity. Scheper-Hughes concludes that mother love is not absent (because it is lavished on other children), but that maternal thinking and practices are shaped by overwhelming economic and cultural constraints: "Mother love is anything other than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments, and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced" (Scheper-Hughes, 1992:340).

As a final illustration of the social construction of parenting, let's look at the changing views of motherhood and fatherhood in the United States during different historical periods. The expectations of mothers and fathers have changed throughout U.S. history, paralleling economic conditions (see Chapters 2 and 3). When the economy was based on agriculture, parenting (and the farm work) was a joint venture for all family members. Child rearing in this historical setting was not the defining characteristic of wives. Mothers and fathers cared for children because both worked at home. So did other relatives because households often included grandparents, older sons and daughters, and perhaps hired help. Fathers were responsible for the educational, moral, and spiritual development of their children. During this era fathers were patriarchs, with complete authority in the home. Child rearing involved instilling submission to authority. There are two interesting differences from the present. First, in divorces involving children, custody was usually given to the father. Second, the literature on child development during colonial times was directed at fathers, not mothers.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a philosophical movement called the Enlightenment changed child-rearing practices. Fathers were still expected to rule the family sternly, but with more sensitivity than in earlier times.

With the Industrial Revolution, fathers became removed from their children as they commuted to jobs, leaving their wives alone to care for children. In this arrangement fathers became the "sole economic providers" (except for single mothers, poor women, working-class women, and women of color), and mothers became responsible for the educational and moral development of their children. Fathers, on the other hand, became more disengaged from their children, and their direct authority over family members declined. Now the great majority of custody suits ruled against fathers, and the child-rearing literature now placed mothers at the center of families and fathers on the periphery.

Since the 1960s, family life has changed in response to global and domestic economic restructuring. As noted in Chapter 4, wages for working people stagnated or declined since 1973 while the costs of housing, health care, transportation, education, and consumer goods increased, sometimes dramatically. This was also a time characterized by corporate downsizing, contingent work, and declining work benefits. Moreover, the men were much more likely to lose their jobs during the Great

Recession. Thus, in the last generation, mothers in most families have become essential to supplement the economic resources by working in the paid labor market. Moreover, the ideological terrain shifted as various oppressed groups sought equality, including women. Included in this new way of thinking was that women can be fulfilled in a number of ways, not just through mothering. As a result of the economic and ideological changes, there has been a rapid shift in women's employment since 1960, when only one out of four mothers was employed outside the home. Now some 78 percent of mothers with school-age children are in the paid workforce (thus, a shift in 40 years from 75 percent stay-at-home mothers to 22 percent). Now it is acceptable for women to have babies and return to work soon thereafter because their incomes are so necessary for family survival. Now, commonly, child care during the day is shifted from parents to other caregivers, sometimes kin and otherwise to day-care providers, preschool, and school. More fathers are "helping" with domestic chores and child care, but the bulk of these duties is still left to mothers. Thus, in response to changes in the responsibilities of mothers, there is a shift, still slight but real nonetheless, for fathers to move toward more equal partnering in parenting.

Other consequences of so many women working in the paid labor force are that (1) the isolated homemaker is no longer dominant; (2) compulsory motherhood is weakening as more women choose not to marry, postpone marriage, or elect to remain childless; and (3) the relationship between marriage and childbearing is weakening, as increasing numbers of women are becoming parents without husbands.



## The Social Construction of Childhood

Childhood is not a biological stage of life that is universal and unchanging. Like parenting, it is a social construction, because the experience of childhood varies by time, place, and social location.

Every aspect of childhood—including children's relationships with their parents and peers, their proportion of the population, and their paths through childhood to adulthood—has changed dramatically over the past four centuries. Methods of child rearing, the duration of schooling, the nature of children's play, young people's participation in work, and the points of demarcation between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood are products of culture, class, and historical era. (Mintz, 2004:36)

Several social forces have changed the way children are raised now compared to earlier times in U.S. history. First, the family used to be a work unit, with each family member a responsible part of the work team. The children worked under careful supervision of one or both parents. Now children, for the most part, are separated from work roles, giving them more leisure time and more time away from parents. A word of caution: The following describes some forces that have affected children of all social classes, but mostly they depict those that affect children of the middle class. Working-class and lower-class children will be considered shortly.

Second, whereas in the past most families lived in rural areas or small towns, now most children are being raised in large cities and their suburbs. This urbanization of families, coupled with children no longer part of the family work unit and having more leisure time, increased the likelihood of children spending more time with and being influenced by peers.

Third, generations ago children were under the almost total influence of their parents. Beginning about a century ago, children became more and more involved in

adult (nonparent) organized activities. There was more formal schooling. There was involvement in church activities, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, YMCA, YWCA, private lessons, camps, and sports. In effect, these organizational activities segregated children away from their parents more and more hours of the day and increased outside influences on them. Moreover, these modern overscheduled children were losing the spontaneity and creativity of curious children as adults organized more and more of their lives and activities.

Fourth, there have been massive technological innovations that have dramatic effects on the children of today. Contrast what the lives of children must have been before electricity, television, DVDs, cell phones, iPods, computers, YouTube, text messaging, and digitalized games with the lives of children today. Over one-fourth of contemporary two- to four-year-olds, for example, have a television in their bedrooms (Hulbert, 2004). The average child 8 to 10 years old spends six hours a day sitting in front of a television or computer, or playing a video game. Is that child's childhood different from the child reading by a kerosene lamp?

Fifth, family size is much smaller now compared to a century ago. The sharp reduction in the birth rate allows parents now to lavish more time, attention, and resources on each child (Mintz, 2004). For example, today's children are much more likely to have their own bedrooms than those of a few generations ago, where children might even have to share beds. Similarly, children today are more apt to travel with their parents than in earlier generations.

A sixth social force affecting childhood is consumerism. A century ago children did not have many things. Their clothes were often hand-me-downs. They had few toys. Today's children, in sharp contrast, except for the very poor, have many things. Corporate America recognizes the market that children represent, spending \$15 billion annually for advertising directed at children. As a result, the average child in the United States sees some 40,000 commercials a year. The spending power of the childhood market is enormous (Chu, 2006; Kelly and Kulman, 2004). For example, "tweens" (those in the 8 to 12 age group) spend \$11 billion a year just on apparel (Cohen, 2007).

The demand for things is not only the result of advertising but also the confluence of peer pressure and the behaviors of parents and other adults, which give the not-so-subtle message in the culture that self-worth is measured in what we possess.

Over the past generation or two parenting style has become more flexible and less authoritarian. The social world revolves

Children learn to measure self-worth by their possessions.



around children. As a result, children today are less inhibited and many have a sense of entitlement. They are freer to express their opinions. Actually, their opinions are solicited regarding such things as what to eat, where to go on vacations, and what to buy. They press their parents for more freedom and more consumer goods. They tend to get their way because of the nag factor. “A 2002 survey found that on average kids ages 12 to 17 ask nine times before parents give in, and more than 10 percent of 12- and 13-year-olds reported nagging parents more than 50 times for an item” (reported in Kelly and Kulman, 2004:49). The behaviors of children today are in sharp contrast to the children a century ago when their parents were the authorities to be obeyed or suffer the consequences, usually physical. Children then were, as a consequence, more obedient, more passive, and more compliant than the children of modernity. Now children are indulged with fewer parental controls, but this, too, is changing (see Box 9.1).

The previous description is half right. Generally it describes children of the middle class and, therefore, is incomplete. The experience of childhood differs by social class. Sociologist Annette Lareau (2003) has conducted research that notes the important differences between middle-class children and those from working-class and poor households. Lareau describes how middle-class parents engage in a process of “concerted cultivation” designed to develop a child’s talents through arranged activities, while working-class and poor families rely on “the accomplishment of natural growth,” where the child’s development unfolds more or less spontaneously. In this latter instance, children are left to find their own recreation (e.g., pick-up basketball and makeshift percussion ensembles) rather than in organized sports and formal music lessons. In working-class and poor families, parents do not reason with the child but are more authoritarian. Middle-class parents, in contrast, negotiate with their children.

Each parenting style produces different traits in children, with each having benefits and drawbacks. The following summarizes the differences:

The poor and working-class kids are in many ways more attractive than the middle-class ones. They obey their parents’ (relatively infrequent) instructions without whining. . . . They are creative and skillful in organizing their own activities, including complex games. They are almost never bored. They fight with their siblings much less than middle-class children do—in fact, they rely on their relatives for support and entertainment, and enjoy one another’s company. They play happily in groups of mixed ages. Their parents like them to have free time because they don’t want them exposed (yet) to the daily grind of adult life.

In contrast, the middle-class kids are immediately bored when not provided with organized activities. They compete for attention with their siblings. . . . They constantly bargain with adults, including authority figures. They have a pervasive sense of entitlement to expensive goods and individualized services. They lack experience working with others of different ages or solving problems without adult intervention. . . .

Although the middle-class kids are less attractive than the poor and working-class children, their parents’ investment will probably pay off for them. These children have precocious skills of verbal expression and negotiation, time-management, and public performance that will serve them well in the white-collar world. They consider themselves entitled to excellent services and demand it [sic] from adults and institutions. Their expectations and behavior are perfectly in synch with those of middle-class professionals (teachers, coaches, and physicians), who respond to their needs. As kids, they are tired and quarrelsome. As grownups, they will prosper. (Levine, 2006:1–2)

BOX  
9.1

## Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families

### Let the Kid Be

By Lisa Belkin

Perhaps you know it by its other names: helicoptering, smothering mothering, alpha parenting, child-centered parenting. Or maybe there's a description you've coined on your own but kept to yourself: Overly enmeshed parenting? Get-them-into-*Harvard*-or-bust parenting? My-own-mother-never-breast-fed-me-so-I-am-never-going-to-let-my-kid-out-of-my-sight parenting?

There are, similarly, any number of theories as to why 21st-century mothers and fathers feel compelled to micromanage their offspring: these are enlightened parents, sacrificing their own needs to give their children every emotional, intellectual, and material advantage; or floundering parents, trying their best to navigate a changing world; or narcissistic parents, who see their children as both the center of the universe and an extension of themselves.

But whatever you call it, and however it began, its days may be numbered. It seems as though the newest wave of mothers is saying no to prenatal *Beethoven* appreciation classes, homework tutors in *kindergarten*, or moving to a town near their child's college campus so the darling can more easily have home-cooked meals. (O.K., O.K., many were already saying no, but now they're doing so without the feeling that a good parent would say yes.) Over coffee and out in cyberspace they are gleefully labeling themselves "bad mommies," pouring out their doubts, their dissatisfaction, and their dysfunction, celebrating their own shortcomings in contrast to their older sisters' cloying perfection.

After all, that is the way it is with parenting—which I bet was never used as a verb before the 20th century, when medicine reached the point where parents could assume their babies would survive. At its core, raising children is about instinct and biology, yes, but on top of that, we build an artificial scaffold, which supports what we have come to think of as parenting truths but are really only parenting trends.

Going way back, the Spartans probably thought they were oh, so modern when they left defenseless infants on wild mountain slopes. So did wealthy Norse mothers who had poor women foster their children, and European aristocrats who employed wet nurses. More recently, as Ann Hulbert chronicles in her book *Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children*, rigid feeding schedules were all the

rage in the United States in the 1920s. The next two decades brought an emphasis on discipline.

In 1946, Dr. Spock came along and told parents to trust their instincts. Later, parents became buddies with their kids, and by the end of the last century, the debate was about the quality versus the quantity of time spent with your children. That was followed by the concept of mothering as an all-consuming identity. Mothers chose their gurus—T. Berry Brazelton (touchy-feely parenting), William Sears (attachment parenting), and John Rosemond (Christian parenting)—then diligently wore their babies in slings and nursed them into toddlerhood, all the while judging (and feeling judged by) those who did not do the same.

After a decade of earnest immersion in parenting, though, the times are ripe for a change. The first sign was the wave of confessionals—from anonymous Web sites like *truumomconfessions.com* (where mothers admit to transgressions like feigning stomach cramps to steal quiet time hiding in the bathroom) to bylined blogs like the wildly popular *dooce.com* (where Heather B. Armstrong chronicled her postpartum depression and continues to write about her struggles as the mother of a charming but somewhat high-strung 5-year-old) to memoirs like Ayelet Waldman's (in which she cops to such "sins" as using disposable diapers and loving her husband more than her children).

But in the past few months, a second wave has taken hold—writers are moving past merely venting and are trying to gather the like-minded into a new movement. Carl Honoré is one. He calls it "slow parenting"—no more rushing around physically and metaphorically, no more racing kids from soccer to Suzuki. Lenore Skenazy is another. She calls it "free-range parenting," a return to the days when childhood was not ruled by the fear (overblown, she says, with statistics to prove it) that children would be maimed, kidnapped, or killed if they did something as simple as riding their bikes alone to the park.

By far the most chipper is Tom Hodgkinson, whose book *The Idle Parent: Why Less Means More When Raising Kids* was just published in England, and whose cover—Mum and Dad lounging with martinis while their well-trained toddler sits on the floor mixing up the next batch—illustrates his message that parents should just chill. Pay attention to your own needs, he writes, back off on your children and everyone will be happier and better adjusted.

(continued)

(Box 9.1 continued)

All this certainly dovetails nicely with new economic realities. When you can't afford those violin lessons or a baby sitter to accompany your 10-year-old to the park, you can turn guilt on its head and call it a parenting philosophy. But is it fundamental change? Or is the apparent decline of overparenting (and its corollaries: feelings of competition and inadequacy) actually the same obsession donning a new disguise?

The one constant over the past century has been parents' determination to find the right answers when

it comes to raising their children. In this latest chapter, we have replaced the experts who told us what a good parent worries about with experts who tell us that a good parent doesn't worry so much. We may even see parents stop aiming to prove how perfect they are and start trying to prove how nonchalant they are. But worry is worry. The search to keep from messing up goes on.

Source: Belkin, Lisa (2009). "Let the Kid Be." *New York Times* (May 31, 2009). Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/magazine/31wwin-lede-t.html>.

Thus, parenting styles vary by social class, shaping children in different and crucial ways. They contribute to the reproduction of class inequality. That is, middle-class children develop traits that lead to success in school and later in jobs and the marketplace, whereas working-class and poor children develop skills that, for most of them, replicate their parents' class positions.

As a final example of the social construction of childhood, let's consider the transition from childhood to adulthood. A common assumption is that one leaves adolescence and becomes an adult by leaving home, finishing school, starting work, getting married, and becoming a parent (Shanahan et al., 2005). In the past, these occurred for most in the late teens or early 20s. But since about 1970 it has taken birth cohorts

longer to achieve these markers of adulthood. There appears to be a gap between adolescence and adulthood today not present a generation or two ago. These "twixters" are not children, but they are not adults either. They take longer to finish school, to decide on a career, to marry, and, for many, to leave home.

In the past, people moved from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood, but today there is a new intermediate phase along the way. The years from 18 until 25 and even beyond have become a distinct and separate life stage, a strange transitional never-never land between adolescence and adulthood in which people stall for a few extra years, putting off the iron cage of adult responsibility that constantly threatens to crash down on them. (Grossman, 2005:44)

Scholars are now identifying a new stage in the life course between adolescence and adulthood, termed "emerging



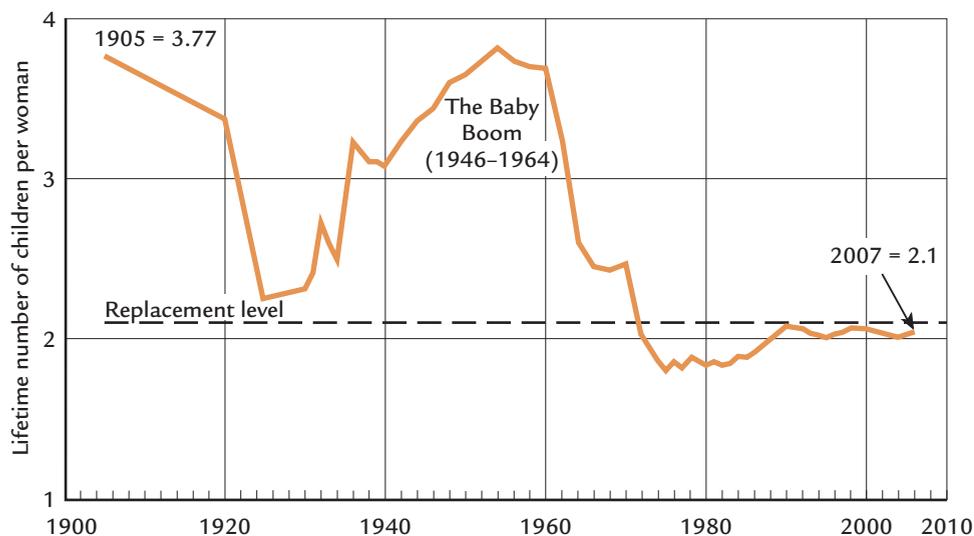
adulthood” (Arnett, 2000). It is critical to emphasize that this emerging life course stage is a response of young people to structural changes in society such as the postindustrial labor market, the demands for more education (and credentials), and the high cost of education and housing.

## Demographic Patterns

Examining a number of demographic factors allows us to describe the changing nature of parenting in the present-day United States. This section considers birth rates over time, differential birth rates by race and socioeconomic status, the facts about those who choose to remain childless, infertility, the trend toward delayed childbearing, and the changing composition of households, including adoption, transracial and transnational adoption, foster care, grandparents raising grandchildren, mixed-race children, children of gay or lesbian parents, the dramatic rise of single-parent households, adult children still living at home, and multigeneration households.

### Fertility

The long-term fertility rate (total childbearing rate) has declined steadily since 1800, when the average woman gave birth to seven children, compared to a current average of two children per woman. This general downward trend obscures four important swings in the birth rate during the past 50 years. The years of the Great Depression (1930–1939) showed a drastic drop, as wives and husbands limited the number of children they had because of the economic hardships and uncertain future during that period. The baby boom that followed World War II (1947–1964) was just that—a boom in the fertility rate (a rate of 3.8 births per adult woman in 1957, compared to 2.1 during the Depression). This was followed by a precipitous decline in the birth rate to an all-time low of 1.7 in 1976. Most recently, however, there has been a slight increase in the fertility rate, to 2.1 in 2007 (see Figure 9.1). This translates to 4,317,119 births in that year. The conditions of the Great Recession beginning in 2007 should reduce the fertility rate, as the Great Depression of the 1930s did.



**Figure 9.1**  
Total Fertility Rate  
(lifetime number  
of children per  
woman)

Sources: Caplow, Theodore, Louis Hicks, and Ben J. Wattenberg. *The First Measured Century: An Illustrated Guide to Trends in America*. Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2000, p. 85; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth: 2008*. Washington, DC: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2008.

The reasons for the relatively low fertility rate today are several. First, marriage tends to occur now at a later age, reducing the number of potential childbearing years for women. Second, the relatively high divorce rate also reduces the number of childbearing years for many women. Third, the majority of women work in the labor force, which adds to family income and the social status of women. The greater the number of children, the more the career development of women is stifled. Fourth, the economic situation of many families demands two incomes to cover mortgages, car payments, and the other elements of a desired lifestyle. Finally, the number of abortions since the Supreme Court legalized the practice in 1973 (*Roe v. Wade*) has reduced fertility. About one-fourth of pregnancies not ending in miscarriages or stillbirths are aborted. Most women getting abortions are under the age of 25, White, and single.

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF LOW FERTILITY

That most family units are relatively small has several important consequences for the family members. The fewer the children, the more family wealth is available to be spent on their health and educational benefits—improving their life chances and the well-being of family members.

Research has shown that small family size is related to positive physical and intellectual endowments for the children. Shirley Hartley (1973:195; see also Blake, 1989) has summarized these findings: (1) In terms of health, height, weight, vital capacity, and strength, all decline as the number of children goes up; and (2) children from small families consistently score higher on intelligence tests than children from large families. Although both large families and lower scores on intelligence tests are related to social class, the explanation for family size and intelligence is not. When family income, or the occupation of the father, is held constant, there is still a substantial decline in IQ with an increasing number of children in the family. This relationship is most likely the result of less parent–child interaction, because, as family size increases, the amount of verbal interactions between parents and their children (such as talking, singing, reading, and playing) is reduced.

Increased marital satisfaction is another benefit of small families. This most likely results from fewer economic problems and because wives and husbands have more time to devote to their relationship. Also, spouses (especially wives) who have few or no children are freer to pursue educational and career opportunities.

At the societal level, sustained rates of low fertility lead to an aging population and a diminished labor force, problems faced by many European countries and Japan.

### DIFFERENTIAL FERTILITY

Fertility rates in the United States vary in a consistent pattern by social factors (**differential fertility**), most notably social class, race/ethnicity, and religion.

**Social Class** The patterned behaviors by social class are that: (1) the higher the income, the lower the fertility; and (2) the greater the level of educational attainment, the lower the fertility. From the perspective of those with more income and education, the costs of children tend to be perceived as exceeding the benefits. The presence of children negatively affects the chances to complete an education, to pursue a career, to engage in certain leisure activities, and to earn a good income.

In short, as the alternatives grow in number and attractiveness, especially for women, the costs of having children go up. With high educational attainment, career and income potential increase markedly for women. These rewards, then, may

outweigh or even replace the rewards of motherhood. This leads to the corollary conclusion that the more prestigious and well-paid the career for a woman, the more deliberately will she restrict family size and maximize time in the labor force.

Another reason for the inverse relationship between social class and fertility is that the more economic resources and educational attainment one has, the later one marries. And there is a strong relationship between the age of the mother at marriage and the pace of subsequent fertility. Lower-class women are more likely to marry soon after high school, whereas middle- and upper-class women are much more likely to complete college first and perhaps even begin a career before marrying. Achieving higher levels of education increases the opportunities to pursue careers, both of which are likely to delay childbearing and, in the long run, to reduce the number of children born to these women.

Generally, the pattern shows that those least able to afford children have more than those who are better able to afford larger families. For example, the 2006 Census revealed that the fertility rates were twice as high among those below poverty (91 births per 1,000) as among those living at 200 percent of poverty (45 births per 1,000) (reported in Kornblum, 2008). Several factors combine to explain this seemingly illogical behavior. First, those with the least amount of education are most likely to hold traditional beliefs, including the acceptance of traditional gender roles and **pronatalism** (the high value given to childbearing). Viewed the other way, the more education a woman has, the more likely she will hold feminist ideals, pursue a career, and limit her childbearing.

In traditional settings, being a mother or father brings social approval from family, friends, and one's religious community. Parenthood facilitates integration into one's kin network and the community. Children may also be considered a benefit to a poor family by supplementing the family income even during their elementary school years. And the poor may desire a large family as a source of retirement security—so that the grown children can support their elderly parents.

**Race/Ethnicity** Whites have the lowest fertility rates, followed in order by Native Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, African Americans, with Latinos considerably higher than the rest (see Table 9.1). Not shown in this table but significant nonetheless are two additional facts concerning differential fertility. First,

**Table 9.1** Fertility Rates by Race and Hispanic Origin (Births per 1,000 Females Aged 15 to 44) for Selected Years

Racial-Ethnic Category	1980	1990	2003
All races	68.4	70.9	66.7
White	65.6	68.3	66.4
Black	84.7	86.8	68.9
Hispanic	95.4	107.7	94.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	73.2	69.6	66.6
American Indian	82.7	76.2	59.9

Sources: "Birth and Fertility Rates," Child Trends Data Bank (2005). Online: [www.childtrends\\_databank.org/pdf/79\\_PDF.pdf](http://www.childtrends_databank.org/pdf/79_PDF.pdf); Child Trends Data Bank (2007) (Winter). Online: [www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/79BirthRates.cfm](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org/indicators/79BirthRates.cfm).

the fertility rate for foreign-born adult women is about 50 percent higher than the rate for native-born adult women. Second, the fertility rate for any racial-ethnic category masks the diversity found therein. For example, the average number of children a woman will have during her lifetime varies among Latinos, with women of Mexican origin having the highest rate (106.8 in 2004) and Latino women of Cuban heritage having the lowest fertility rate (53.2 in 2004).

An interesting pattern seen over time is that fertility rates by race rise or fall in tandem—for example, the fertility rate for each category was the highest in 1955 and lowest in 1976. This demonstrates that fertility rates fluctuate according to economic and other social factors, regardless of race/ethnicity.

Why is there such a strong relationship between race/ethnicity and fertility? Foremost are the socioeconomic factors—income, education, and occupation—that press the disadvantaged toward pronatalist beliefs and practices. People of color are disproportionately poor, uneducated, unemployed, or, if employed, in the low-paying, low-prestige segment of the economy. Thus, they experience the same pressures and rationales as do other disadvantaged persons to have large families. For example, the total lifetime fertility for Latino women and African American women with only a grade school education is more than double the rate for their counterparts with at

least some college. See Box 9.2 for other Latino fertility trends.

A second argument is that people make different sacrifices to get ahead. Because people of color are limited by structural barriers to the normal avenues to success, a common strategy among them has been to have large families. Large families mean more workers. They also make it more likely that the parents, when elderly, will receive help from their children. Also, there is a type of “lottery logic”—that is, as the number of children increases, so does the probability of having a child with unusual abilities (in music or sports, two of the few relatively open areas for people of color) that might lift the entire family out of its marginal economic situation. Thus, large families are a form of adaptation to economic deprivation and a hope to overcome it.

**Religion** Two generalizations hold for the relationship between religion and fertility. First, people who actively practice a religion tend to have higher fertility than nonreligious people (McFalls, 1998). And second, certain religions encourage high fertility. Traditionally, Catholics have had more children than Protestants, but since the 1980s that pattern has all but disappeared, except for Latino Catholics. Mormons have larger families than non-Mormons. Utah, which is 70 percent Mormon, has the highest fertility rate of the states.

BOX  
9.2

## Emergent Family Trends

### A Shift to Smaller Latino Families

Latinos are the largest racial-ethnic group in the United States. Also, they have the highest fertility rate. But that relatively high rate is declining as more and more Latinas are choosing to have smaller families, resisting the Latino tradition of large families. Recent studies show that (Navarro, 2004):

- The fertility rate for Latinas is declining nationally.
- American-born Latinas have a much lower fertility rate than immigrant Latinas.
- The fertility rate for immigrant Latina women, although relatively high, has dropped 30 percent in the last 10 years, reflecting downward fertility rates in their countries of origin in the past few decades.

The reasons for this downward trend in Latina fertility are several. Foremost, ever greater numbers of Latinas are working outside the home, are obtaining higher levels of education, and are postponing marriage, all of which affect when and how often they will have children. In short, they are increasing their options rather than being limited to the traditional Latina pursuit of motherhood. Second, the lower fertility by second- and third-generation immigrants demonstrates that Latinas are adapting to the lifestyles of other American women. Finally, “in their quest for smaller families, Latina women say quality of life is paramount for those who came from big families themselves and felt crowded and neglected” (Navarro, 2004:29).

## Voluntary Childlessness

Despite the strongly held beliefs of most Americans that children are the inevitable and desirable consequences of marriage, some couples choose to remain childless. For most of the twentieth century the proportion of childless marriages ranged from 5 to 10 percent. The percentage of women still childless at ages 40 to 44 (most of whom will remain childless) has increased from 10 percent in 1980 to 20 percent now (Kornblum, 2008). These data include the voluntarily and the involuntarily childless.

Because of the pronatalistic proclivities of Americans, those who reject this prescription often face the stigma associated with being deviant. They are considered by some as less-than-whole persons, emotionally immature, selfish, and lonely. Childless women are more likely than childless men to be negatively stereotyped. This is because motherhood

is much more salient to the female role than fatherhood is to the male. Whereas masculinity can be affirmed by occupational success or sexual prowess, femininity has traditionally been closely linked with bearing and caring for children, with other roles remaining relatively peripheral. Although the paternal role is also important, it does not have the same centrality that makes motherhood almost a woman's *raison d'être*. (Veevers, 1980:7)

Given the strong pronatalist ideology and the negative labels that accompany voluntary childlessness, why do some couples choose this “unnatural” option? There appear to be three common paths to this decision. One pattern, found about one-third of the time, is for two persons to make a commitment before marriage that they will not have children. A second pattern occurs with a conscious choice to remain childless after launching a successful career. Childless women 40 to 44 years old, for example, have high levels of education, are employed in managerial and professional occupations, and have relatively high incomes (Hewlett, 2002).

The other and most common route to childless marriages is for a couple to make a series of decisions to postpone childbearing until a time when it no longer is considered a desirable choice. The first two paths explicitly reject childbearing, whereas the latter accepts it in the abstract but never finds it convenient, resulting, finally, in a permanent postponement.

Childlessness affects couples throughout their life course. They, of course, are free from the negatives of childrearing (e.g., the financial costs and restrictions on freedom that are noted later in this chapter), which likely are positive for marital quality. Should divorce occur, childless couples have fewer problems and lower levels of stress, compared to divorcing couples with children. Older couples that remained childless by choice vary in their experiences. Some have regrets; others feel that they made the correct decision. Childless couples replace missing children in their support networks with people other than relatives. Elderly childless individuals rely on siblings and paid supports for daily living (Bulcroft and Teachman, 2004).

## Infertility and New Technologies

One in every eight couples is unable to conceive children by natural means (Centers for Disease Control, reported in Arnst, 2006). About 40 percent of the time this is caused by problems with the male partner (having insufficient number of active, healthy sperm, exposure to toxic chemicals, and blocked passages through which the

sperm must travel). For infertile women the problem is usually with the failure to release healthy eggs or the blockage of the fallopian tubes.

There are several options for infertile single women, couples, or same-sex couples who cannot become pregnant through regular biological means. These procedures, when successful, are modern miracles that fulfill the wishes of the parent(s). Artificial insemination is a common technique. In this procedure, sperm from the partner or from a donor (often anonymous) is injected into the vagina with a syringe (see Box 9.3). A variation of this is for a woman to freeze her eggs (known as oocyte cryopreservation), preserving her fertility until the time is right (Lehmann-Haupt, 2009). In vitro fertilization, first successfully used in the birth of Louise Brown in 1972, is a procedure used when there is a blockage or scarring of the fallopian tubes. Eggs are removed from the ovaries of the mother or a donor and placed in a petri dish where sperm are added. Fertilization occurs and the fertilized eggs or embryos are transferred to the woman's uterus. Surrogate mothering involves sperm used to impregnate a woman other than one's partner (Ali and Kelly, 2008). A common procedure for women with impaired fecundity is to take fertility drugs. One consequence of this procedure is the increased probability of multiple births. The rate for triplets or more was 29.1 per 100,000 births in 1971. Thirty years later the rate was more than five times that number (about one-third of this increase is due to delaying childbearing until the late reproductive years, which also increases the likelihood of multiple births). Multiple births increase the risks to infants of problems such as preterm births, low birth weight, developmental brain damage, and cerebral palsy. Having twins, triplets, or quadruplets, of course, also increases the economic burden on the household as well as overwhelms the parents with double, triple, or quadruple demands on their time and emotions.

Other issues involving the new reproductive technologies include, first, the cost of the procedures (e.g., one cycle of in vitro fertilization costs \$10,000; donor eggs cost \$3,000). This results in a class bias, as poor infertile couples and poor same-sex couples are denied the possibility of having children because of their economic situation.

A second issue involves the sex of the offspring. By creating embryos outside the womb, a preimplantation genetic test can determine the sex of the fetus. This raises some questions: Will choosing one gender over another become a new form of sex discrimination? Will it upset the ratio of males to females as has occurred in China (Kalb, 2004)?

A third issue involves obtaining "designer genes" through the careful selection of egg and sperm donors for all manner of desirable traits (e.g., IQ, beauty, height, eye and hair color, athletic ability). An advertisement seeking egg donors in *The Stanford Daily* made this offer: "Egg donor wanted, \$35,000 (plus all expenses). Ivy League Professional and High-Tech CEO seek one truly exceptional woman who is attractive, athletic, under the age of 29, GPA 3.5+, SAT: 1400+" (reported in Hopkins, 2006:2A).

The next step in creating "designer genes" is the manipulation of the human genome by inserting certain desirable genes into human eggs. While this has the potential to eliminate hereditary diseases, there are potential dangers. Bioethicist Margaret Somerville asks: "[The human genome is] the patrimony of the entire species, held in trust for us by our ancestors and in trust by us for our descendants. It has taken millions of years to evolve; should we really be changing it in a generation or two?" (quoted in Begley, 2001:52). Another bioethicist, Arthur Schafer, worries about affluent parents-to-be having superior babies. He warns of new social divisions: In addition to the haves and the have-nots, we will have the gene-rich and the gene-poor (paraphrased by Begley, 2001:52).

BOX  
9.3

## Technology and the Family

### Hello, I'm Your Sister. Our Father Is Donor 150

Like most anonymous sperm donors, Donor 150 of the California Cryobank will probably never meet any of the offspring he fathered through sperm bank donations. There are at least four, according to the bank's records, and perhaps many more, since the dozens of women who have bought Donor 150's sperm are not required to report when they have a baby.

But two of his genetic daughters, born to different mothers and living in different states, have been e-mailing and talking on the phone regularly since learning of each other's existence last summer. They plan to meet over Thanksgiving.

The girls, Danielle Pagano, 16, and JoEllen Marsh, 15, connected through the Donor Sibling Registry, a website that is helping to open a new chapter in the oldest form of assisted reproductive technology. The three-year-old site allows parents and offspring to enter their contact information and search for others by sperm bank and donor number.

"The first time we were on the phone, it was awkward," Danielle said. "I was like, 'We'll get over it,' and she said, 'Yeah, we're sisters.' It was so weird to hear her say that. It was cool."

For children who often feel severed from half of their biological identity, finding a sibling—or in some cases, a dozen—can feel like coming home. It can also make them even more curious about the anonymous father whose genes they carry. The registry especially welcomes donors who want to shed their anonymity, but the vast majority of the site's 1,001 matches are between half-siblings.

The popularity of the Donor Sibling Registry, many of its registrants say, speaks to the sustained power of biological ties at a time when it is becoming almost routine for women to bear children who do not share a partner's DNA, or even their own.

"I hate when people that use D.I. say that biology doesn't matter (cough, my mom, cough)," Danielle wrote in an e-mail message, using the shorthand for donor insemination. "Because if it really didn't matter to them, then why would they use D.I. at all? They could just adopt or something and help out kids in need."

The half-sibling hunt is driven in part by the growing number of donor-conceived children who know the truth about their origins. As more single women and lesbian couples use sperm donors to conceive, children's questions about their fathers' whereabouts often prompt an explanation at an early age, even if all the information

about the father that is known is his code number used by the bank for identification purposes and the fragments of personal information provided in his donor profile.

Donor-conceived siblings, who sometimes describe themselves as "lopsided" or "half-adopted," can provide clues to make each other feel more whole, even if only in the form of physical details.

Liz Herzog, 12, and Callie Frasier-Walker, 10, for instance, carry the same dimple near their right eye.

"She looks up to me," said Liz, of Chicago, who was an only child before learning of Callie and six other half-siblings but seemed to have had no trouble stepping into her older-sister role. Finding her brothers and sisters, Liz said, "was the best thing in the world," even if Callie does copy her sometimes, like when Liz got her hair dyed red and Callie did the same. "I wanted blue," Callie said. "But they didn't have blue."

The two girls, who send instant messages to each other frequently, will be spending Thanksgiving with their mothers at Callie's house in Chester Springs, Pa. They had a mini-family reunion with some of their siblings last April, although as Liz's mother, Diana Herzog, notes, "It wasn't really a reunion because no one had ever met before."

Many mothers seek out each other on the registry, eager to create a patchwork family for themselves and their children. One group of seven says they, too, feel bonded by the half-blood relations of their children, and perhaps by the vaguely biological urge that led them all to choose Fairfax Cryobank's Donor 401.

Carla Schouten sent a leftover vial of sperm to another mother who wanted to have a second child and found there was no 401 sperm left to buy. (Banks typically pay men \$50 to \$100 per sample, and customers pay about \$150 to \$600 per vial, plus shipping.) In July, Ms. Schouten and her 2-year-old son, Matthys, went camping in Northern California with Louisa Weix, and her Donor 401 twins, Eliza and Julia, who turn 2 next week.

While many donor-conceived children prefer to call their genetic father "donor," to differentiate the biological function of fatherhood from the social one, they often feel no need to distance themselves, linguistically or emotionally, from their siblings.

Several who have met describe a sense of familiarity that seems largely irrational, given the absence of a father, unrelated mothers, and often divergent interests.

"All I can say is, they feel like siblings," said Barry Stevens, 53, a filmmaker who has discovered several

*(continued)*

(Box 9.3 continued)

half-siblings through research and DNA testing since the release of his 2001 documentary “Offspring,” depicting his search for his donor.

If yearning for a sibling is in part a desire to feel less alone, some donor-conceived children may ultimately find themselves yearning for a bit more solitude.

Deb Bash, the mother of a 7-year-old, exchanges e-mail messages often with eight other mothers who have a total of 12 children from the same donor, and she has created a baby book for her son with all their pictures. The siblings, Ms. Bash said, have given her son a way to feel connected to the otherwise abstract concept of a genetic father.

“It’s not a phantom person out there any more,” Ms. Bash said.

The children already have some uncanny resemblances, she said. “That nurture vs. nature,” Ms. Bash added. “Wow, there’s just something to that nature.”

For Danielle, of Seaford, N.Y., contact with her half-sibling JoEllen has helped salve her anger at what she describes as “having been lied to all my life,” until three years ago when her parents told her the truth about her conception. It has also eased her frustration of knowing only the scant information about her biological father contained in the sperm bank profile—he is 6 feet tall, 163 pounds, with blond hair and blue eyes. He was married, at least at the time of his donation, and has two children with his wife. He likes yoga, animals, and acting.

For JoEllen, whose two mothers told her early on about her biological background, it helps just to know that Danielle, too, checks male strangers against the list of Donor 150’s physical traits that she has committed to memory.

“It’ll always run through my mind whether he meets the criteria to be my dad or not,” said JoEllen, of Russell, Pa. “She said the same thing happens with her.”

The girls are considering a trip to Wilmington, Del., which Donor 150 listed as his birthplace.

Even as the Internet makes it easier for donor-conceived children to find one another, some are calling for an end to the system of anonymity under which they were born. Sperm banks, they say, should be required to accept only donors who agree that their children can contact them when they turn 18, as is now mandated in some European countries.

That is partly for reasons of accountability. Sperm bank officials estimate the number of children born to donors at about 30,000 a year, but because the industry is largely unregulated, no one really knows. And as half-siblings find one another, it is becoming clear that the banks do not know how many children are born to each donor, and where they are.

Popular donors may have several dozen children or more, and critics say there is a risk of unwitting incest between half-siblings. Moreover, they argue, no one should be able to decide for children before they are born that they can never learn their father’s identity. Typically, women can learn about a donor’s medical history, ethnic background, education, hobbies, and a wide range of physical characteristics.

More recently, sperm banks have begun to charge more for the sperm from donors who agree to be contacted by their offspring when they turn 18. But they say far fewer men would choose to donate if they were required to release their identity.

Like Wendy Kramer and her donor-conceived son, Ryan, 15, who founded [www.donorsiblingregistry.com](http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com), many of the site’s 5,000 registrants hope that the donor himself will get in touch. But others are happy to settle for contacting their half-siblings, who actually want to be found. As they do, they are building a new definition of family that both rests on biology and transcends it.

“It’s so weird to know that you’re going to meet someone that you’re going to know for the rest of your life,” Justin Senk, 15, told his half-sister Rebecca Baldwin, 17, when they spoke on the phone last summer before meeting for the first time.

Justin, 15, of Denver, was the most recent half-sibling to surface in a group that now numbers five. After his newfound family attended his recent choir concert, Justin’s mother, Susy Senk, overheard him introducing them to his friends with a self-styled sing-song, “‘This is my sister from another mother, and this is my brother from another mother, this is my other sister from another mother,’ and so on.”

Source: Harmon, Amy (2005). “Hello, I’m Your Sister: Our Father Is Donor 150.” *New York Times* (November 20). Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/20/national/20siblings.html?li=50>.

Human cloning takes “designer genes” to the next level. “Cloning involves replacing the female genetic material of an unfertilized egg with a nucleus from a different cell. Thus, the genetic material in the nucleus will be identical to that of the donor, essentially creating a twin born at another time” (Bartels, 2004:494). This would make it possible, for example, for grieving parents to take the DNA of their

recently deceased child to clone an exact replica. Cloning could also be used for the creation of spare body parts for research and medical uses. The downside to this technology is voiced by conservative William Kristol and progressive Jeremy Rifkin:

Humans have always thought of the birth of their children as a gift bestowed by God or a beneficent nature. In its place, the new cloned progeny would become the ultimate shopping experience, designed in advance, produced to specification and purchased in the biological marketplace. A child would no longer be a unique creation but rather an engineered reproduction. (Kristol and Rifkin, 2002:2)

An especially thorny problem involves the legal issues “in establishing parenthood when there may be as many as five people involved: a sperm donor, an egg donor, a gestational mother, and the contracting mother and father” (Stephen, 1999:2). Consider, for example a lesbian strategy where

an ovum from one woman is fertilized with donor sperm and then extracted and implanted in her lover’s uterus. The practical and legal consequences of this still “nascent” practice have not yet been tested, but the irony of deploying technology to assert a biological, and thereby a legal, social, and emotional claim to maternal and family status throws the contemporary instability of all relevant categories—biology, technology, nature, culture, maternity, family—into bold relief. (Stacey, 1998:121)

What if, in such an instance, the relationship is broken and both parties seek custody of the child in the courts? Who is the biological parent? Is it the woman whose egg is fertilized, or is it the woman whose uterus was used to bring the fetus to birth? What about the sperm donor, who could actually be a relative (a common occurrence, with often the brother of one of the lesbian partners donating his sperm): Does he have a claim? Similar questions occur with heterosexual couples who have used reproductive technology to produce a child. There can be later claims by surrogate mothers (whose uterus brought the fetus to term) and by egg and sperm donors. Or there can be claims for the inheritance rights of children conceived posthumously, with frozen sperm, years after the father’s death. For example, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in 2001 that posthumously conceived children are entitled to their share of the donor’s inheritance. Other questions: “Who has the right to frozen embryos, frozen eggs, frozen sperm? Whose name should appear on the birth certificate the genetic mother, who provided the egg, or the carrier, in whose womb the baby grew?” (Lewin, 2002:1). Clearly, these issues and questions point to a legal and ethical quagmire.

## Delayed Childbearing

The age of first-time mothers has risen steadily since 1970, from an average of 21.4 years then to 25.0 in 2006. At least two factors lead to delayed childbearing: the increased age of first marriage and the ever greater likelihood of highly educated women launching their careers before having children. The relationship between age and the delay of a woman’s first birth is especially keen for college graduates. Andrew Hacker points out that

[in 1970] almost three quarters of college women had given birth while they were still in their twenties, and for most of them that meant leaving what might have been promising careers. By 2000, only 36.6 percent were starting babies that early, and many of them had arranged to return to their job. (Hacker, 2003:70)

This trend is producing more newborns at risk for health and learning problems. Research finds that women who postpone motherhood until their mid thirties or later increase the health risk for their babies (e.g., low birth weight, increased chance of premature birth, and learning disabilities) (Elias, 2002).

This shift toward more mature parenthood has several interesting consequences for the parents and children. First, the age gap between parents and their children is significantly greater than it was a generation ago. This may affect the quality of the parent–child relationship. This may be a positive development, as older parents have certain advantages over younger parents, such as more money and more maturity for dealing with the children. On the other hand, older parents, compared to younger parents, may have less patience and a diminished awareness of the needs of the young, especially when children reach adolescence. Second, while older parents will likely be more financially secure, having children later in life places the financial burden of a college education nearer the time of parental retirement, when it may deplete retirement savings. Third, children may push egalitarian couples back toward a more traditional division of labor—husband as provider and wife as homemaker. Aside from the traditional cultural prescriptions, which insist that the father work and the mother stay at home, there are the structural constraints that inhibit a role reversal. In most cases it makes more sense for the father to work because he, typically, makes more money than the mother. Many mothers, however, will continue their careers. Even those who might prefer to stay at home continue to work because their lifestyle depends on two incomes. The result is that more than half of all children under the age of 18 live in homes with fathers and mothers in the workforce. The majority of children, then, spend time away from their parents in child-care centers, in preschools, and with peers—all of which lessen the parental influence on their socialization.

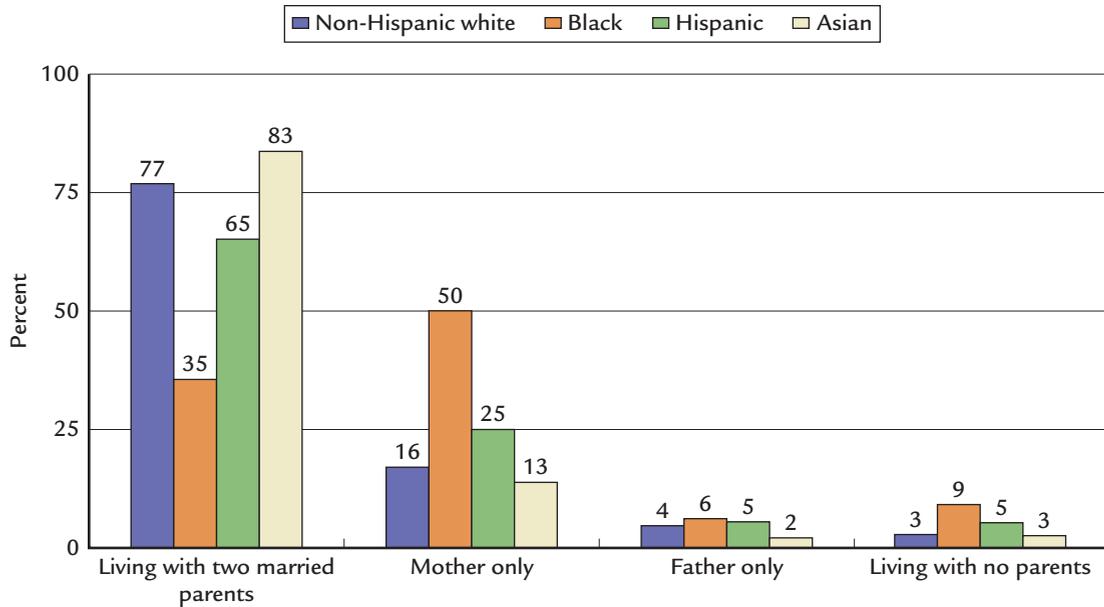
## Family Composition

### SIZE

Voluntary childlessness and delayed childbearing combine to reduce the size of families. The proportion of couples with no children has risen in the past 20 years, as has the number of one-child families. The result is a gradual shrinking of family size—from an average of 3.14 in 1970 to 2.57 in 2006.

### FORM

The demographic trends noted in this chapter and elsewhere in this book have combined to alter the traditional family pattern. The typical family just a generation ago was composed of a working father, a homemaker mother, and their children. Now only a small minority of families—7 percent—meets that description. But for the nation's children younger than 18, about 68 percent of children lived with two parents in 2008 (ChildStats.gov, 2008). As shown in Figure 9.2, slightly more than three-fourths of White children and more than four-fifths of Asian children live with two parents, almost two-thirds of Latino children live with two parents, but slightly more than one-third of African American children do. In each instance the proportion of children living with two parents has declined significantly since 1970. The data in Figure 9.2, while informing about the rise of single-parent households, mask various other family forms—the children raised in stepfamilies, the children with same-sex parents, the children living in grandparent-maintained households, and the percentage of children living with several generations in the same dwelling. An unwelcome trend is the rising share of children, particularly African American children in cities, who are living in no-parent households—living rather with relatives, friends, or foster families without either their mother or their father (Bernstein, 2002).

**Figure 9.2****Living Arrangements of Children, by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2004**

Note: Estimates for 2002 and 2003 by race have been revised to reflect the new OUB race definitions, and include only those who are identified with a single race. Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: Child Trends calculations of U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2004 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2004. Table C-2. Available at <http://www.census.gov/population/www.docdemo/hhfam/cps2004.html>

**Unmarried Parenting** In 2007 the births to unwed mothers reached an all-time high of about 40 percent of all births (in 1960 it was 5 percent). In the recent past, teens accounted for about half of unwed births, but now they account for less than a quarter. These statistical facts indicate two trends: (1) Fewer unwed births now are due to youthful indiscretions, and more are due to conscious decisions by older women; and (2) many of these infants are born to cohabiting couples, not “single” women. This later trend is significant, because it means that while many children are being raised outside of marriage, they are actually in a two-parent family. The probability of this arrangement varies by race/ethnicity with Latino women and African American women more likely to conceive a child in cohabitation than White women.

Annually, over 400,000 babies are born to teenagers. The nation's highest teen birth rate was in 1957. From 1971 to 2005 there was an overall 34 percent drop in teenage births. Since then there has been a slight rise in teenage births. The overall decline occurred in all racial and ethnic groups. Despite the significant decline in the teenage birth rate, the United States still has the highest adolescent pregnancy rate among developed countries (four times higher than Sweden or France).

Around 40 percent of cohabiting couples have children under age 18 living at home. Usually, these children were born to one or both partners prior to the cohabiting arrangement. About 15 percent of cohabiting couples have at least one child together (Secombe, 2008:231). How these children fare depends on the situation. Are the children better off living with a single mother, living with a mother and her unmarried partner, living with a father and his unmarried partner,

or living with two cohabiting biological parents? Sociologist Andrew Cherlin sums it up this way:

Simply put, some children seem to have difficulty adjusting to a series of parents and parents' partners moving in and out of their home.... Stable households, whether headed by one or two parents, do not require that children adjust repeatedly to the loss of parents and parent figures or to the introduction of cohabiting partners and stepparents and the new children these partnerships sometimes bring. (Cherlin, 2009:5–6)

The key variable for children's outcome is stability and, lest we forget, cohabiting partnerships can be stable or unstable.

**Adoption** Adoption creates a family form that differs from the traditional biologically related nuclear family. It "creates a family that is connected to another family, the birth family, and often to different cultures and to different racial, ethnic, and national groups as well" (Bartholet, 1993:186). Because the blood bond serves as the basis for kinship systems, adoptive family ties have been viewed traditionally as "second best" and adoptive children as "second choice" (March and Miall, 2000; Wegar, 2000). Research has revealed that both adoptive parents and adult adoptees have felt stigmatized by others who question the strength of their adoptive ties.

Adoption is relatively rare, with about 4 percent of Americans being adopted. In an average year in the United States some 120,000 children are adopted. More than one-fourth of these adoptions involve children with "special needs," such as older children or children with mental, physical, or emotional handicaps. Although many adopted children have typical childhoods, on average they are more likely to have problems than nonadopted children. As noted expert David Brodzinsky has suggested, "The experience of adoption exposes parents and children to a unique set of psychosocial tasks that interact with and complicate the more universal developmental tasks of family life" (quoted in Fishman, 1992:46).

Despite this obstacle, most adoptions do work. As Katha Pollitt has observed, "Of course adoption can be a wonderful thing; of course the ties between adoptive parents and children are as profound as those between biological ones" (Pollitt, 1996:9).

**Transracial or Transcultural Adoption** This means placing a child who is of one race or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another race or ethnic group. About 15 percent of all adoptions are classified as either of these two types (Shehan, 2003:295). Adoptions, international adoptions, and children being raised in foster homes each increase the likelihood of parents or surrogate parents being of a different race/ethnicity than their children.

About one in six adopted children is of a different race than the head of his or her household. More than 1 in 10 of the nation's adoptees are foreign-born (more than one-fifth from South Korea, followed by China, Russia, Guatemala, Ukraine, Mexico, and India). There are pitfalls with transnational adoption as the process is unregulated domestically or internationally.

**Foster Care** Some children are placed in foster care when a court determines that their families cannot provide a minimally safe environment because of physical or sexual abuse, severe neglect, or, in some cases, severe emotional problems. In 2005 there were over 500,000 children in foster care. Foster children are vulnerable because

of past and often present circumstances. As a consequence, they are disproportionately vulnerable for dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and criminal behavior (O'Hare, 2004:13).

**Grandparents Raising Grandchildren** In 2006 about 5.7 million children (8 percent) lived in a household that included a grandparent. In slightly less than half of these homes, there was no parent present (Child Trends Data Bank, n.d.). Put another way, four million grandparents are rearing their grandchildren, usually grandmother-headed households. This trend toward "skipped generation" households is the result of death, teen pregnancy, divorce, drug use by parents, economic marginality, eviction from housing, the incarceration of parents, child abuse and neglect, mental and physical illness, and changes in welfare that are adding to the pressures on single parents. This family arrangement of grandparent-maintained households is most common in African American households (in the rate, not actual numbers), reflecting the greater likelihood of poverty and single motherhood among them. When both grandparents are raising grandchildren without parents, the families are overwhelmingly White, but when the children move in with a single grandmother, the families are predominantly African American. The children living with only their grandmother are disproportionately poor and tend to be without any health insurance. An Urban Institute study found that among grandparents raising grandchildren, 37 percent had incomes below the poverty threshold, and 66 percent were low-income (less than twice the poverty level) (reported in the *Economist*, 2007b).

Grandparents assuming the parental role are usually stretching meager resources, have reduced freedom, and experience added responsibility. At a time when they should be slowing down, they have the added burdens of providing emotional and economic support, transportation, guidance, and discipline for their grandchildren. The result, typically, is a high level of stress. Although the negatives are real, there are some positives: (1) providing a sense of usefulness and productivity for the grandparents; (2) making the grandparents feel good that they are able to help both their children and grandchildren; and (3) providing a more stable situation for the grandchildren (Giarrusso et al., 2000).

**Multigenerational Families** More than four million households in the United States (about 4 percent of the nation's households) have three or more generations within them. These households are most common in areas with high immigration, where recent immigrant family members live together for financial reasons and also because of language and other cultural factors.

In another type of multigenerational household, adults are taking care of their aging parents and their children simultaneously (known as the **sandwich generation**). Only a relatively few are caught in this bind because it generally means the combination of two factors exists: having children late in life and having parents who suffer from premature disability (Koss-Feder, 2003).

**Older Children Still Living at Home** A type of multigeneration family that is on the rise, especially under the conditions of the Great Recession, is one in which adult children, single and married who had lived on their own, move back home to live with their parents. According to the 2008 Census, 30 percent of people ages 18 to 34 live at home with their parents (reported in Trejos, 2009). Some of this so-called **boomerang generation** fit the stereotype of being unfocused, lazy, and immature. The majority, however, have been forced to turn to their parents because of the high cost of education, unmarried parenthood, the loss of jobs and homes (because of the

high cost of housing and because they are recently divorced or separated), or because they work at low-wage entry-level jobs.

**Mixed-Race Marriages and Children** Over 93 percent of Whites and African Americans marry within their own racial groups, compared with about 70 percent of Asians and Latinos (Kennedy, 2002). Put another way, about 2.5 percent of the married couples in the United States are matches between people of different races (a rise of well over 300 percent since 1970). The result, of course, is biracial children. President Barack Obama is a prime example of a person with mixed race parentage (a Black father from Kenya and a White mother from Kansas). The number of biracial children has increased more than 400 percent in the past 30 years, while the number of all births has increased by just over 18 percent. This difference in growth rate will increase with the continued influx of immigration from Asia and Latin America, the rising trend toward numerical parity between Whites and non-Whites by 2042, and the increasing acceptance of racial intermarriage.

**Same-Sex Parents** Estimates of children of gay or lesbian parents vary widely, with various reports putting the number at between 6 million and 12 million (Biskupic, 2003). The existence of same-sex cohabitation, combined with the wish by many committed lesbian and gay couples for children, has resulted in a variety of family forms despite an array of social, legal, and practical challenges. The legality of gay/lesbian parenthood varies from state to state, and the interpretation of the law often varies from judge to judge. In general, the laws and the courts are hostile to same-sex couples gaining and retaining the custody of biological children and adopting children. In 2008, three states (Florida, Mississippi, and Utah) had laws that effectively banned gay couples from adopting. Twelve others allowed same-sex couples to adopt and 35 states were not clear on this issue (Ruggeri, 2008). Countering this trend, a 2006 study by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute found that a growing number of adoption agencies (60 percent) accept applications from gays and lesbians and that 40 percent of all agencies have already placed children with gay and lesbian parents (Donaldson, 2006).

There are relatively few documented cases of adoption by openly homosexual couples because many adoptions take place in which a single person seeks the adoption while concealing her or his sexual orientation.

Another situation is custody of children by a homosexual parent following a heterosexual marriage. In such a situation judges are likely to give custody routinely to the heterosexual parent, assuming that this is better for the child. For example, Alabama's supreme court ruled 9 to 0 that children are better off with a violent father than a reliable lesbian mother. The chief justice, Roy Moore, wrote in his opinion:

The common law designates homosexuality as an inherent evil, and if a person openly engages in such a practice, that fact alone would render him or her an unfit parent. Homosexual conduct is, and has been, considered abhorrent, immoral, detestable, a crime against nature, and a violation of the laws of nature and of nature's God. (quoted in Graff, 2002:52)

Many lesbian mothers had children before "coming out" and were awarded custody as women, not as lesbians. The point is that lesbian mothers can, and do, lose custody of their children because of their sexual orientation.

A third method to achieving parenthood is the practice by lesbians of artificial insemination. The partner of the mother in this arrangement often has difficulty in

adopting the child. Presently, only 12 states permit second-parent adoptions—that is, gay men and women adopting a child whose parent is the other gay partner. The majority of same-sex parents are women because the courts are more likely to award custody to mothers and because of the lesbian baby boom through artificial insemination.

A final issue: Do children raised by gay or lesbian parents differ from those raised by heterosexual parents? A growing body of research indicates that the children of gay and lesbian parents develop normally, including their sexual identity. Charlotte Patterson, a psychologist, reviewed 30 studies of gay and lesbian parents and concluded that

despite longstanding legal presumptions against gay and lesbian parents in many states, despite dire predictions about their children based on well-known theories of psychosocial development, and despite the accumulation of a substantial body of research investigating these issues, *not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents*. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by gay and lesbian parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth (emphasis added). (Patterson, 1992:1036; see also Allen and Burrell, 1996; Cherlin, 2009; Patterson, 2001:119; Patterson and Redding, 1996)

These conclusions are supported but altered somewhat by sociologists Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz (2001). They reevaluated 21 psychological studies conducted between 1981 and 1998, which found that children raised by same-sex parents were no different from those reared by heterosexual parents. Their analysis of those studies revealed that (1) the emotional health of youngsters with heterosexual or gay parents is essentially the same; (2) the offspring of lesbians and gays, however, are more likely to depart from traditional gender roles than the children of heterosexual couples; and (3) children with same-sex parents seem to grow up to be more open to homoerotic relations. Stacey and Biblarz conclude that nothing in their work justifies discrimination against gay families or alters their conviction that gays and lesbians can be excellent parents raising well-adjusted children. The key for the healthy emotional growth of children is their empathetic attachment to an adult caretaker, female or male, heterosexual or homosexual. To buttress this conclusion, the American Academy of Pediatrics formally supports gay adoption. So, too, do the American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

There is one special difficulty that children in gay and lesbian families experience, one that is derived from legal discrimination and social prejudice.

Children of gay parents are vicarious victims of homophobia and institutionalized heterosexism. They suffer all of the considerable economic, legal, and social disadvantages imposed on their parents, sometimes even more harshly. They risk losing a beloved parent or coparent at the whim of a judge. They can be denied access to friends by the parents of playmates. Living in families that are culturally invisible or despised, the children suffer ostracism by proxy, forced continually to negotiate conflicts between loyalty to home, mainstream authorities, and peers. (Stacey, 2003:160)

Earlier in this chapter we considered parenting as a socially constructed phenomenon. The existence of lesbian and gay parents demonstrate this.

Lesbian and gay parents challenge the primacy enjoyed by “traditional” heterosexual marriage and parenthood. They reveal, by their innovation in creating and maintaining families that thrive even in a hostile social environment, that parenting is not an essentialistic or inherently natural experience. Lesbian and gay parents exemplify that families are constructed by a variety of biological, adoptive, and chosen kin ties. (Allen, 1997:198)

Or put another way:

Under postmodern conditions, processes of sexuality, conception, gestation, marriage, and parenthood, which once appeared to follow a natural, inevitable progression of gendered behaviors and relationships, have come unhinged, hurtling the basic definitions of our most taken-for-granted familial categories—like mother, father, parent, offspring, sibling, and, of course, “family” itself—into cultural confusion and contention. (Stacey, 2003:147)



## The Impact of Children on Marriage

Probably no single event has more impact on a marriage and on the marriage partners than the addition of a child. This momentous event impacts the career patterns of the parents, the division of housework, the distribution of power, marital satisfaction, and the economic well-being of the unit. Significantly, when spouses become parents, they shift to responding to each other in terms of role obligations rather than as intimates. Interaction patterns shift, as do the patterns of domestic work, communication, and the distribution of power; and the shift is usually toward more traditional gender roles. In effect, then, the addition of a child changes the social organization of the family. To discuss these consequences, this section is divided into four parts—the transition to parenthood, the benefits of parenthood, the costs of parenthood, and gendered parenting.

### The Transition to Parenthood

The birth of the first child to a couple brings enormous changes to the parents and their relationship. The structure of their daily lives is altered. The workload of the parents grows with the time devoted to child care. Their living space is more constricted. The freedom the couple had previously is now curtailed severely. The attention that was once lavished on each other is now interrupted by the new arrival. Their lovemaking may become less frequent and more inhibited. There are heightened financial problems. The new mother and new father

find themselves riding the same roller coaster of elation, despair, and bafflement. . . . [They approached] parenthood full of high hopes and soaring dreams, . . . [yet] six months or a year after the child’s birth they . . . find themselves wondering “What’s happening to us?” (Belsky and Kelly, 1994:4)

Jay Belsky and John Kelly’s research on new parents found, among other things, that parenthood presents a fundamental source of tension between the parents. Most couples approach parenthood assuming that the new baby will bring them closer together. In time this often happens, but initially a child has the opposite effect. Couples, even those who consider themselves

as like-minded often find their priorities and needs diverging dramatically when they become parents. Differences in family background and personality also contribute to transition-time marital gaps. No matter how much they love each other, no two

people share the same values or feelings or have the same perspective on life, and few things highlight these personal differences as pointedly as the birth of a child. (Belsky and Kelly, 1994:12)

Differences emerge over new concerns, such as whether to minister to every demand of the infant, or feelings intensify over old disagreements about the division of labor, which, with the arrival of a baby, is so relentless.

There is considerable evidence that children have a negative effect on marital happiness. Representative of these findings is the research from a national survey of families (Heaton et al., 1996). The researchers found that the child's influence on marital relationships varies with the age of the child. When parents have very young children, the parents tend to perceive positive parent-child relationships, but these couples spend less time together and have more marital disagreements. Marital stability, however, is greatest in the first five years following the birth of a child. During the early adolescent years, on the other hand, there is a declining closeness in the parent-child relationship and high marital disagreement about children. The researchers also found that the greater the behavior problems of the child, the greater the marital disagreement, the less time together, and the lower marital happiness. They conclude that couples tend to be happiest before the arrival of the first child. This happiness declines with the arrival of a child and reaches a low point as children reach adolescence. Marital happiness increases after the children leave home.

These and other concerns alter marriages. The research of Belsky and Kelly found that the entry of a child into a marriage relationship changes marriage in one of four ways (Belsky and Kelly, 1994:14-15):

1. About 13 percent of new parents are what Belsky and Kelly term "severe decliners." These new parents become so split by their differences that they lose faith in each other and in their marriage. Their communication diminishes, as does their love.
2. Another 38 percent are "moderate decliners." These couples avoid a dramatic falling out, but their love and communication is less than before the birth of their child.
3. About 30 percent of the couples experience "no change." Their marriage neither declines nor is enhanced by their child.
4. Nineteen percent of the couples in Belsky and Kelly's study are "improvers." These couples find that their new child has brought them closer together, increased communication, and enhanced their mutual love.

The tendency for marital satisfaction to decline with the arrival of a baby is mitigated by two factors (research by Philip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan, reported in Council on Contemporary Families, 2009). First, couples who plan the conception jointly are much less likely to experience a serious marital decline. In other words, couples who slid into having a baby without planning or who disagreed about having a baby but went ahead and conceived without resolving their difference will very likely find their marriage rocky after the baby.

Second, marital satisfaction will decrease in couples who do not share in domestic duties after the birth of their child. Typically, after the birth of a child most couples become much more traditional in dividing the chores of housework and child care. This means the women will carry the burden, leading to feelings of tension, depression, and

sometimes anger in both partners. Stated positively, couples who plan conception jointly and who establish a collaborative parenting relationship will tend to have happy marriages. In short, babies are not necessarily bad for marriage.

## The Benefits of Parenthood

Throughout U.S. history the role of parenthood has been exalted, especially for wives. The assumption has been that a woman's destiny and her ultimate fulfillment is wrapped up in motherhood. This pronatalist belief was fostered by the encouragement of young girls to play at motherhood (e.g., playing with dolls, "playing house"), by children's literature that presented women mainly in nurturing roles, by the Madonna theme in art, and by kinship expectations to marry and have children. The consequence of this usually unquestioned sanctity of childbearing is that today 85 percent of marriages produce children. Although most marriages include children, becoming parents is not a trivial event. The partners in a marriage now add the roles of mother and father to their already complex relationship, and this has profound implications.

The benefits of parenthood are several. First, children can positively affect the marriage bond. The partners share in the miracle of birth, their creation of a common product, their new and enhanced status in two kinship networks, and pride in their offspring's accomplishments. They can experience mutual satisfaction in nurturing the emotional and physical growth of children. The presence of children may also encourage communication between spouses as they share experiences and work through problems.

A second benefit of having children is that it symbolizes a kind of immortality—a link with the past and the future. Related to this is that parents often find it exhilarating to see themselves in their children, as the personality traits of parents, their mannerisms, and their values are passed on and acted out by their children. Third, having children may give the lives of parents a sense of meaning and purpose. This may be especially true for those with low social status. The pride they do not find in their work they might find in their children.

A fourth benefit, and related to the third, is the enhanced status one has as a parent. Parenthood is tangible evidence of one's adulthood to almost everyone—kin, colleagues, friends, neighbors, employers, and community agencies. Fifth, with children there is the ultimate giving and receiving of unconditional love. Sixth, parents can benefit by symbolically recapturing their youth through their children's activities and accomplishments as well as by vicariously having experiences they were denied as children themselves.

A final benefit is that parents are more likely to be integrated into their communities than childless adults (Ambert, 1992). As parents meeting their children's needs, they interact with physicians, teachers, coaches, sitters, day-care providers, and other parents. They become connected to organizations such as schools, churches, sports leagues, children's clinics, and day-care and preschool centers. Children may act as social facilitators as they introduce their parents to the parents of their friends and classmates. Similarly, the children of immigrants who do not know the language of the host country may be the catalysts in connecting their parents with the larger community.

## The Costs of Parenthood

While children bring joy to parents, the realistic examination of parenthood requires that we consider the negatives as well as the positives. Almost all of the benefits just listed have a negative side: Children can adversely affect marital happiness, children can have negative personality traits, they may get into trouble, and they may not return

their parents' love. Added to these are other emotional costs to parents. They worry about children's safety, physical and emotional development, progress in school, potential negative influences of peers, and the like. When children fail in school or at work, become social misfits, get arrested for driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or become criminals, parents tend to blame themselves. Adolescence, in particular, is an emotionally difficult time for parents and children as there is the inevitable clash of wills.

Financially, children are a significant burden. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average middle-income household could expect to spend a total of \$191,000 on the child through age 17 to feed, clothe, house, and educate a child born in 2005 (reported in Ordonez, 2007). Note that this expense is calculated before the costs of a college education and the lost wages for a stay-at-home mom or dad. If these costs are included, raising a child to adulthood costs \$1.6 million.

## Gendered Parenting

There has been a shift in men's involvement in pregnancy. Just a generation ago, most fathers-to-be were not involved in preparation for the impending birth. Most were not witnesses to the birth. Now, many prospective fathers join their pregnant wives in prenatal classes. These husbands are present at the birth, helping their wives with breathing and other relaxation techniques. They may hold the newborn and present it to the new mother in a significant symbolic gesture. They may even take time off from work to help care for and bond with the infant.

This relatively new involvement of men with pregnancy and birth, however, has not resulted in equal responsibility for child care: "The mother still does most of the work not because she is more nurturing or competent but because the culture ideologically and practically structures women's and men's parenting behavior and the time spent in paid work" (Lorber, 1994:162).

Michael Lamb (1987) divides child care into three components: accessibility, or being on call near the child but not directly engaged in care; direct interaction or one-on-one care, such as feeding, bathing, playing, reading, helping with homework; and responsibility, thinking about the child's emotional, social, and physical development, and making arrangements for such activities as babysitting, doctor visits, and school visits.

Lamb found that in two-parent families in the United States in which mothers did not work outside the home, fathers spent about 20 to 25 percent of the time that mothers spent in direct interaction with children, and about a third of the time in being accessible. They assumed no responsibility for children's care or rearing. In two-parent families where

Research indicates that the key for the healthy emotional growth of children is their empathetic attachment to an adult caretaker. . . . Same sex couple with twins.



both mothers and fathers were employed thirty or more hours a week, fathers interacted with children 33 percent of the time that mothers did and were accessible 65 percent of the time mothers were, but they assumed no more responsibility for children's welfare than when mothers were full-time homemakers. In fact, the higher proportional level of their day-to-day child care was due to employed mothers' spending less time with the children; it did not reflect more actual time spent with children by the father. (Lamb, 1987; summarized by Lorber, 1994:163; emphasis added)

The parenting pattern, then, is clear—mothers are the primary caregivers, while fathers are passive; mothers spend more time actually doing things to and for their children as well as doing the emotional work of caring and worrying about them. Just as with housework, women are the givers and men the takers.

There are exceptions to this overriding tendency. First, "the overall pattern for all regions, ethnic groups, and religions in the United States was that fathers spend more time with sons than with daughters and were more likely to play with them than do things for them" (Lorber, 1994:163). Related to this bias of fathers for sons, research by two economists found that with the birth of their first child, men work harder—118 hours a year more if their first child was a boy but only 54 hours more if their firstborn was a girl (cited in Morin, 2002).

A second exception occurs when fathers become the primary parent because of widowhood or divorce. In these instances, single fathers develop relationships with their children that are intimate and nurturing.

A final deviation from the typical male parenting pattern is when couples deliberately share parenting. Here children have two primary caretakers. Parents divide chores and spend time with the children equitably, as noted in the title of a book on shared parenting, *Halving It All* (Deutsch, 1999). This sharing, however, is not as easy as it may appear on the surface. Research has shown, for example, that couples find it easy to divide the work (e.g., changing diapers, giving baths, taking children to lessons) but that mothers tend to do more of the emotion work: "Women feel on call for their children all the time; men do not. Men can more easily distance themselves from their children, letting them cry, not paying attention to their every move, and not thinking about them at work" (Lorber, 1994:166). Thus, parenting often remains gendered even among those who work at overcoming the inequitable arrangements within more traditional couples.

There is a major debate over the consequences of gender egalitarianism of the parents for their children. Conservative scholars claim that contemporary egalitarian lifestyles are undermining families and placing children at risk (Glenn, 1997; Popenoe, 1993). Progressive scholars, in contrast, argue that families are changing but not declining. They see egalitarian marriages as an improvement over traditional families because they provide increased opportunities for adult self-fulfillment, especially equitable arrangements for women (Coontz, 1997; Stacey, 1996).

Family sociologists Alan Booth and Paul Amato (1994), using a 12-year longitudinal study, examined whether nontraditional gender roles among parents are associated with later life outcomes of children. They defined nontraditional families as those in which mothers are employed, fathers contribute to household and child care, and parents hold egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles. Booth and Amato found very little evidence that being raised in nontraditional families had adverse or positive effects on offspring well-being. Adult children from nontraditional families are less likely to live with their parents, they have slightly poorer relationships with their fathers, and they are more likely to have nontraditional gender attitudes. Many aspects of the parent-child relationship are unaffected. The children of nontraditional families are

just as likely as those from traditional families to get married and have children, to be happily married, to have positive self-esteem, to experience psychological distress, and to achieve similar levels of education. The authors conclude that

our evidence does not support the notion that nontraditional families are creating serious problems for their offspring. This is not surprising in that, through history and across cultures, there have been a variety of ways of organizing the family division of labor. Long-term offspring outcomes probably have more to do with economic well-being, parental warmth and competence, social support, and other resources than with family organization. In contrast to the claims of those on the religious and political right, our research suggests that the current trend toward a less traditional, more egalitarian division of labor in the family poses relatively few problems for the youth of today. (Booth and Amato, 1994:874)

Houseknecht and Sastry (1996) compared the well-being of children in four societies, from the least traditional (Sweden), followed in order by the United States, the former West Germany, and the most traditional, Italy. They found that the decline of the traditional family is not associated with the kind of deleterious consequences for child well-being asserted by conservatives.



## The Impact of Parents on Children and of Children on Parents

---

Parents, more than anyone else, interact with their children on a continuing basis and, therefore, have a crucial impact on their children's physical, social, and emotional development. Ideally, parents provide children with communication skills, the interpretation of events and behaviors, identity, a haven in time of distress, a source of emotional attachment, a sense of right and wrong, and skills for competence in the social world.

When [the child] enters the human group, he is quite at the mercy of parents and siblings. They determine both what and when he shall eat and wear, when he shall sleep and wake, what he shall think and feel, how he shall express his thoughts and feelings (what language he shall speak and how he shall do it), what his political and religious commitments shall be, what sort of vocation he shall aspire to. Not that parents are ogres. They give what they have to give: their own limited knowledge, their prejudices and passions. There is no alternative to this giving of themselves; nor for the receiver is there any option. Neither can withhold the messages conveyed to the other. (Wilson, 1966:92)

Although parents are clearly important socializing agents, this observation must be balanced by the reality that the child is not an empty vessel that the parents fill, but, to the contrary, the child is an active social being who often shapes the parents.

Historically, theories of childhood have focused on children's internalization of and adaptation to their parents' and societal constraints. In this deterministic view, children were believed to be shaped and molded by adults who reinforced proper behavior and punished inappropriate behavior. More recently, less deterministic, more constructionist theories of childhood have been advanced. "In this perspective, children are seen as negotiators and co-creators of their own worlds" (Shehan, 1999:6).



The family's resources and educational achievements affect how children perceive themselves.

In other words, the children are not assumed to be passive receptors of parental influences; rather, influence flows both from parents to children and from the children to parents. The joke that “insanity is hereditary—parents get it from their children” illustrates this point. Parents respond to the smiles, sighs, irritability, and crying of infants. Infants with colic act in ways that exert control over the parents. The gender of infants affects parents as they, typically, treat boys differently than girls, have different expectations according to gender, and structure the play and room environments of children according to gender stereotypes. Other attributes of children—their size, right- or left-handedness, abilities, disabilities, temperament, and personality—are all factors potentially relevant to how parents react to them, as are the unique interests and achievements of children (Alwin, 2004:152). Children may resist the demands of parents, such as toilet training. Younger and older children can manipulate their parents through their behaviors (e.g., showing affection or being difficult). Clearly, the power and authority of parents to form their children is not total: Children are not blank slates to be filled in by parental instruction but rather are active agents in their own construction of knowledge about the world (Kuczynski et al., 1999). This construction will not necessarily be the same as that held by the parents. Thus, children may have insights, children may teach, and children may even lead. For example,

older children may pressure their parents to quit smoking, to eat a healthier diet, to use seat belts, and to act more positively toward the environment. In short, children, while being shaped by parents, are also active in shaping their parents. This is known as the bilateral model of parent–child relations (Kuczynski et al., 1999).

## The Structure of the Family Embedded in a Larger Network of Influences



Several family structure variables profoundly affect the social and emotional development of children regardless of overt attempts by parents to socialize their young in particular ways. This section examines first the variables related to family structure and then some extrafamilial factors.

### Family Structure

#### ONE-CHILD FAMILIES

Single-child families are the fastest-growing family unit. In 2004, 17.4 percent of women ages 40 to 44 reported having one child, compared with 9.6 percent of women that age in 1976. Families with only one child now outnumber two-child families (Census Bureau, reported in Stevens, 2008).

Only children are commonly believed to be worse off than children with siblings. They are stereotyped as self-centered, lonely, spoiled, and anxious. These are faulty beliefs, however. Research finds that only children are superior to children with siblings on virtually all positive dimensions including intelligence, achievement, maturity, leadership, health, and satisfaction with friends and family (Blake, 1991).

#### FAMILY SIZE

With the addition of each child, the resources that a family has for each is diminished. Douglas B. Downey (1995) analyzed data from a national sample of 25,000 eighth graders and found that parental interpersonal resources such as interaction with children and knowing their friends were negatively affected by additional children. Similarly, parental economic resources for their children, such as a personal computer, a place to study, money saved for college, and music or art lessons, were all negatively related to additional children (summarized in Eshleman and Bulcroft, 2006:417–419). Of course, the economic resource problem is minimized when the family is relatively affluent.

#### BIRTH ORDER

A significant family structure variable affecting the child is ordinal position. As Jerome Kagan has pointed out,

[d]espite the importance of parental behavior, the mere existence of a younger or older sibling in the family is a salient force in the psychological development of the child. The mechanisms that account for these differences do not rest only with the practices and communications of the parents, and, therefore, they are not solely a function of what is normally meant by “direct family experience.” Rather, the catalyst of change is simply the introduction of “another,” like the introduction of a crystal into



a cloud to precipitate rain. The “other” is the catalyst that creates uncertainty in the child. In response to that uncertainty, the child alters his beliefs, behaviors, and roles. (Kagan, 1977:53)

Older children have an inherent advantage over their siblings—they have exclusive parental attention at least for a while. This probably explains why, when compared with later-born children, firstborns have a strong tendency to adopt the values of their parents and to be less influenced by peers. They tend to be more achievement oriented, to excel in school, to have higher verbal scores on aptitude and IQ tests (Carey, 2007), and to have high levels of self-esteem. They are even taller and weigh more than later-borns (Kluger, 2007). Female first-borns tend to be more religious, more sexually conservative, and more accepting of traditional feminine roles. These traits accrue from the time they had the exclusive atten-

tion of parents and because they want to differentiate themselves from their younger brothers or sisters. Thus, “the first-born is propelled to adulthood by the presence of the younger sibling” (Kagan, 1977:51). Later-born children never have the exclusive attention of their parents. They have the disadvantage of always appearing less competent than the first-born. The result is for later-born children, when compared to first-borns, to be less cautious, more impulsive, and more involved in physically dangerous activities. They are more peer-conscious, more social, and more willing to challenge authority.

### SIBLINGS

Related to birth order, and perhaps a more powerful influence on behavior, is the presence of siblings. By the time children are 11, they spend about one-third of their free time with their siblings—more time than they spend with peers, parents, teachers, or by themselves.

From the time they are born, our brothers and sisters are our collaborators and co-conspirators, our role models and cautionary tales. They are our scolds, protectors, goads, tormentors, playmates, counselors, sources of envy, objects of pride. (Kluger, 2006:47)

As a result, brothers and sisters are especially important for teaching how to resolve conflicts or how not to, for educating about the mysteries of the opposite sex, for teaching how to negotiate with parents, and even for steering one another into risky behavior. Regarding the latter, research finds that the existence of an older sibling increases the chances that a younger sibling will drink, smoke, use marijuana, or have sex (reported in Jayson, 2006a). For example, a girl with an

older, pregnant teenage sister is four to six times as likely to become a teen mother herself (Kluger, 2006:52).

### PRIMARY PARENTS

The question of who does the primary parenting, while seemingly straightforward, is quite complex because there are so many possible variations. These possibilities depend on the number of parents in the household (or even if there are no parents in the “parental” role, such as in households headed by grandparents or foster parents); if there is only one parent, the gender of that parent; the presence or absence of an extended family; parents’ marital status; and the sexual orientation of the parents—and each of these may have different effects on children depending on their age (Demo and Cox, 2001). For example, a study of African American children in the Woodlawn community in Chicago distinguished 86 different combinations of adults living in households with first graders (Hunter and Ensminger, 1992). Of crucial importance is the timing and sequencing of changes in children’s living arrangements.

The following are some research-based generalizations concerning some of these variations:

- The absence of a same-sex parent for daughters of solo fathers and sons of solo mothers tends to have a negative impact.
- The presence of two adults, even if the second adult is not a legal parent, has been found to diminish adolescent behavior problems.
- Growing up in nontraditional gender role families does not have adverse effects on children (see Box 9.4).
- Children of lesbian and gay parents have normal relationships with peers, and their relationships with adults of both sexes is satisfactory.
- Children do better in stable living arrangements than in transitory ones, even if the stability involves living with a single parent. For example, children experiencing multiple transitions (e.g., from two parents to single parent to parent and step-parent) and experiencing them later in childhood fare poorly compared to those living their entire childhood in stable single-parent families (Demo and Cox, 2001:105).

BOX  
9.4

### Researching Families

#### Parental Gender Role Nontraditionalism and Offspring Outcomes

As we have noted throughout this book, the emerging family of the 1980s and 1990s differs significantly from the traditional nuclear family of the 1950s. Now the majority of mothers are in the labor force. Many contemporary mothers and fathers share child-care and household tasks (albeit still unequally for the most part). And the attitudes of spouses concerning gender roles have changed in many families. What, if any, are the outcomes for children raised in families with nontraditional gender roles?

Sociologists Alan Booth and Paul Amato (1994) investigated this question using data from a longitudinal study of a representative sample of 471 parents and their adult offspring. This procedure allowed the researchers to interview children at least 19 years of age in 1992 whose parents had been interviewed in 1980, 1983, 1988, and 1992. Thus, they were able to determine the behaviors and attitudes of parents as their children were being raised as well as how the children were affected as adults. They were interested in the effects of maternal employment, paternal involvement in home activities, and parental attitudes regarding gender roles. In their analysis they controlled for the possible confounding effects of parents’ gender and race, mother’s education and age, and offspring’s age and gender. In other words, they compared respondents similar on a variable to assess whether another variable was making a difference.

When comparing the children of traditional parents with those of nontraditional parents, Booth and Amato found that the latter (1) were more likely to leave home prior to marriage; (2) were less likely to be close to their fathers (possibly because the fathers were not living at home); (3) were similar to the former in ties to close relatives and friends; (4) were just as likely as those from traditional homes to get married and to parent; (5) were the same as the children from traditional families on measures of psychological well-being; and (6) were comparable to their traditional counterparts in educational attainment.

- Children in stepfamilies, compared with those in first-married families, are more likely to experience a broad range of adjustment problems.

## Extrafamilial Factors

As parents interact with their children, they are not free from outside influences. A number of work-related factors, for example, affect parents and their interactions with children. Some of these are the level of job satisfaction, promotions or demotions, transfer to a new community, level of pay, work schedules, job-related stress, layoffs or threatened layoffs, sexual harassment at work, job discrimination, and the presence of both parents in the workforce.

The influence of parents on their children is diminished by a number of other outside forces as well. When both parents work, preschool children will be cared for by someone other than the parents. Once children are of school age, the school (i.e., its teachers, policies, and curriculum) becomes an important socialization agent, sometimes in opposition to the wishes of the parents, causing some to move their children to other school environments or to home schooling.

As children grow, they spend less time under the direct supervision of their parents. They are increasingly supervised by others such as teachers, coaches, and youth leaders. Most important, though, is the influence of peers on young people, especially adolescents. Especially disconcerting to parents is that their adolescent children are learning to deal with potentially risky behaviors at the very time peer influence increases (Furstenberg, 2001).

The neighborhoods in which families reside can be mixed in terms of social class and race/ethnicity, but more likely they will be relatively homogeneous—composed of neighbors of the same social class and race/ethnicity. Thus, living in an area of concentrated poverty (such as an urban ghetto) or in affluence (such as a gated suburban community) provides peers with the same backgrounds and privilege, or the lack thereof, in terms of opportunities, well-financed schools, and community services.

The economic resources of families are a crucial factor affecting the outcomes of children. The amount of family income available to children depends on the type of family in which he or she lives (Bianchi and Casper, 2000:27). Most basically, social class position provides for the child's life chances. The greater the family's economic resources, the better the chance to live beyond infancy, to be in good health, to receive a good education, to have a satisfying job, to avoid being labeled a criminal, to avoid death in war, and to live the "good life." On the negative side, this means that millions of U.S. children are denied these advantages because they were born to parents who were unemployed, underemployed, stuck in the lower tier of the segmented labor market, handicapped, victims of institutional racism or sexism, divorced or separated, or otherwise disadvantaged.

Significantly, the family's resources and educational achievements affect the way in which children perceive themselves. These ascribed characteristics (along with race/ethnicity and gender) position children in the perceptions of others, in turn giving children an understanding of their worth. If the family has favored characteristics, children are very likely to gain nourishment from the social power and esteem that come from high social position. But children of the poor and minorities find they are devalued by persons outside the immediate family and kin network; this perception can have a profound effect on their psyches and behavior regardless of the efforts of their parents (Kagan, 1977:35, 47).



## Parental Time with Children

---

Contrary to popular belief, mothers today spend more hours tending to their children than did mothers 40 years ago (the following is from Bianchi et al., 2006; Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; St. George, 2007). Sociologists Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson, and Melissa Milkie, using four decades of time-diary surveys in which representative samples describe a typical day conclude, “that parents are spending as much—and perhaps more—time interacting with their children today than parents in 1965, the heyday of the stay-at-home mother” (2006:1). This is accomplished through several strategies, including mothers spending less time on housework (use of labor saving devices such as microwave ovens and husbands doing a bit more housework) and parents including children more in their own leisure activities.

There are three types of time with children: (1) primary time, where children are the focus of parents’ attention in activities such as reading or playing games; (2) secondary time, which involves helping with homework, working together at preparing a meal, or doing another household chore; and (3) passive time, just being with children. Single mothers spend as much time engaged in primary care as married mothers but they spend less total time with their children than married mothers (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008). Comparing 1975 with 2000, married mothers increased their time with their children while single mothers’ total time with their children decreased. This distinction is blurred, however, as more and more single mothers live with the father of their children in a cohabiting arrangement.

Several additional variables affect the time parents spend with their children (Kendig and Bianchi, 2008). First, the greater the economic resources a family has, the better its ability to purchase goods and services that free up time for childrearing. Second, the greater the education mothers attain, the more time they spend with their children and the more often they engage in activities that promote children’s cognitive development. Third, employed mothers spend less time with their children than mothers not in the labor force. Fourth, preschool-age children in households increase mothers’ child-care time. These factors help to explain why single mothers tend to spend less time with their children than do married mothers. Never-married mothers tend to have younger children than married or divorced mothers. They have less household income. They are likely to have less education and more likely to be employed outside the home than married mothers. Despite the structural locations of single mothers, they, nevertheless, still spend almost 90 percent as much time with their children as married mothers.



## Parents and Children in Dual-Earner Families

---

Since 1960, the rise of women’s participation in the labor force has been dramatic. For example, the percentage of mothers in the workforce with children under six years of age increased from around 19 percent in 1960 to over 60 percent in 2009; for mothers with school-age children, the percentage of mothers in the labor force increased from less than 40 percent in 1960 to 78 percent. The year 1987 was a tipping point: That year was the first time that more than one-half of all mothers with babies one year old or younger were working or looking for work.

This phenomenal rise is a consequence of several factors. Feminism has encouraged many women to seek fulfillment in a career outside the home. Wives in many

husband–wife households work outside the home to supplement family income, since one-wage families have lost purchasing power since 1973 and since the costs of housing, cars, and college, to name a few expenses, have risen sharply. By 2008 the share of dual-earner family income contributed by women was 44 percent, and 26 percent of women earned 20 percent or more than their husbands (Families and Work Institute, 2008). The rapid rise in the numbers of working women is also a consequence of the growth in the divorce rate and in female-headed households, where their participation in the labor force is an economic necessity.

Working mothers in both categories—single and married—share similar problems, such as low pay (78 cents for each dollar earned by men in 2008); the need to juggle the demands of a job, housework, and parenting; and the need for good child care. One critical difference, however, is that single mothers tend to raise their children with inadequate financial resources, whereas married mothers in the workforce, for the most part, tend to have an adequate financial base.

## Maternal Employment and Time with Children

Research contradicts the commonsense notion that mothers in the labor force will spend less time with their children (the following is from Kendig and Bianchi, 2008; St. George, 2007). Despite the rapid rise in mothers' labor force participation, mothers' time with children has remained stable over time. Actually, in two-parent families it has increased. In dual-earner families, mothers spend more time with their children than fathers, but the gap is narrowing. Typically, employed fathers of all ages spend 3.0 hours per workday with children under 13 today, compared with 2.0 hours in 1977. For employed mothers of all ages, the time spent with children has remained at 3.8 hours per workday (Families and Work Institute, 2008).

## Social Supports for Working Parents

Dual-earner families and single-parent families (the subjects of the next section) share a common problem—the lack of adequate social supports in the community and workplace to ease the strains of their dual roles of workers and parents. In general, U.S. society is unresponsive to the needs of working parents. Single women especially need supplementary help, such as subsidies for food, housing, health care, and child care, but the government in recent times has restricted and even denied rather than enlarged such supplementary aid to the poor and the near poor. The Great Recession has further reduced government subsidies to needy families.

Places of work have been slow to respond to the needs of their employees who are or who soon will be parents. The traditional organization of work—an inflexible eight-hour workday—makes it difficult for parents to cope with family problems or the conflicting schedules of family members. Many European countries have some form of “flextime” arrangement that allows workers to meet their family and work obligations, but in the United States only about one in six employees has such an opportunity. About 80 percent of industrialized countries offer *paid* maternity leave to women workers (Canada, for example offers 17 weeks). The United States, in contrast, passed the Family and Medical Leave Act in 1993, which permits up to 12 weeks of *unpaid* leave in companies with more than 50 employees (Heintz and Folbre, 2000:63)

More than two-thirds of all children under the age of five are in a child-care arrangement on a regular basis by someone other than a parent. Many of these children

are young, since 75 percent of women go back to work by a child's ninth month. The children may attend day-care centers or nursery schools, go to the home of a provider, or be cared for by a relative, neighbor, or babysitter (Zaslow and Tout, 2002). The crucial question is, What are the effects of child care by someone other than parents on children? The common assumption is that a preschool child deprived of maximum interaction with his or her parents, especially the mother, will be harmed. Because this belief is widely accepted, many working parents feel guilty for their assumed neglect.

The relationship between child care and child development is complex, involving sources within the child (e.g., temperament, impairment), factors in the child's immediate environment (such as the quality of relationships with parents), and factors in the child's larger social environment (e.g., neighborhood). Although this complexity prevents us from gaining a full understanding of the relationship between child care and child development, the cumulative evidence from empirical studies does permit some conclusions (the following is from a thorough review of the research by a panel on child care of the National Research Council, as reported by Hayes et al., 1990:47–144 and Belsky, 1991; for findings from other research, see Burchinal, 1999).

1. Young children need to develop enduring relationships with a limited number of specific individuals, relationships characterized by affection, reciprocal interaction, and responsiveness to the individualized cues of young children.
2. There is a normal tendency for children to form multiple, simultaneous attachments to caregivers.
3. Children can benefit from "multiple mothering" if it provides affection, warmth, responsiveness, and stimulation in the context of enduring relationships with a reasonably small number of caregivers (usually assumed to be five or fewer).
4. For children beginning child care after their first year of life, there is little indication of differences in the mother-child relationship. Children beginning full-time child care within the first year, however, increase the risk of insecurity in their attachments to their mothers, compared to children at home full-time with their mothers.
5. Children reared in child care orient more strongly toward peers and somewhat less strongly toward adults than their home-reared counterparts.
6. Child care does not negatively affect the cognitive development of middle-class children, and it has positive consequences for the intellectual development of low-income children (if the child-care programs emphasize cognitive enrichment, as Head Start does).
7. The overall quality of child care (group size, caregiver/child ratio, caregiver training, and educational material available) is associated with children's cognitive as well as social development.
8. The children who experience quality care in their families and child-care environments have the strongest development. Children from low-income families are the most likely to be found in lower-quality care settings; thus, they experience double jeopardy from encountering stress at home and stress in their care environments.

The most comprehensive research on the effects of day care on children was sponsored by the federal government's National Institute of Child Health and Development. Researchers from 14 universities tracked children from birth to age

three, comparing those cared for full-time by their mothers with those spending time in day-care centers for varying amounts of time. Among the findings were that children in day care develop as normally and as quickly as children who stay home with their mothers; and children cared for by adults other than their parents have normal cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development (Perry-Jenkins and Turner, 2004; Scarr, 1997).

Thus, we conclude that day care under the right conditions can be a positive experience for children. Over three-fourths of preschoolers are cared for on a regular basis by someone other than the parent. Unfortunately, many of these children are in day-care situations that do not meet the standards that lead to positive experiences for children. A key problem is the hiring and retaining of high-quality, well-trained day-care workers. The problem with most day-care centers is that they are underfunded. The average U.S. child-care worker makes one-third the salary of an elementary school teacher. With pay so low and benefits so meager, the annual day-care worker turnover is relatively high and the training expected of workers prior to being hired is minimal. While hairdressers must attend 1,500 hours of training at an accredited school in order to get a license, only 11 states require child-care providers to have any early childhood training prior to serving children in their homes (Children's Defense Fund, 2002). The result, often, is inadequate care.

What should be done to improve day care for the children of working parents? There are two fundamental policy issues involving child care—should the government intervene with subsidies and standards; and if the solution is governmental, then at what level? Conservatives oppose government intervention for several reasons. Some conservatives oppose the government's subsidization of child care because it encourages mothers to leave their homes and children for the workplace.\* The Christian Coalition supports this view and is thus opposed to the funding of child care. Others oppose it because of higher taxes. Still others fear government intervention in what they consider issues best left to individual families and the marketplace. Progressives argue that the United States provides the least assistance to working parents and their children of any industrialized nation (Helburn, 1999). As a result, many of our children are neglected. And, as usual, the neglect is correlated with social class, as the affluent can afford the best care for their children and the poor cannot.

The second issue—whether the federal or state governments should help to fund child care—also divides conservatives and progressives. Conservatives seek governmental help at the local and state levels because they fear federal bureaucracy and the universal standards that may not apply to local conditions. Progressives, on the other hand, argue for federal programs because they will ensure that every child, regardless of location, will receive approximately the same benefits. If left to the states, some legislatures and governors will be generous while others will do little, if anything, to provide benefits to the children of working parents. For example, in 2007 New York, Georgia, and Oklahoma had programs that were available to all four-year-olds in participating school districts, irrespective of family income (Eitzen and Sage, 2009:78). But other states provide only minimum help, and some states

---

\*There is a major contradiction among conservatives on this point. On the one hand, they strongly favor incentives to encourage middle-class women to forgo employment while their children are young, so that they can care for them at home. At the same time, conservatives approve of government policies such as eliminating welfare to poor mothers (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and forcing them into the labor force in spite of inadequate provision of early child care (Helburn, 1999:9).

do not provide any assistance for preschool education. Thus, if left to the individual states, the benefits to children will be very uneven at best.



## Single Parents and Their Children

About one-fourth of all U.S. children live with just one parent, up from 12 percent in 1970. The disproportionate number of single-parent families headed by a woman is a consequence, first, of the relatively high divorce rate and the very strong tendency for divorced and separated women to have custody of the children. Second, there is the relatively high rate of never-married mothers (in 1960, 5 percent of U.S. babies were born to unmarried mothers; in 2007, 40 percent were). To counter the common myths, the facts indicate that more than three-fourths of out-of-wedlock births are to women 20 and older. Moreover, while the *unwed birth rate* for African Americans and Latinos is higher than for Whites, there are *more unwed births* among Whites than among African Americans and Latinos.

The important question to answer concerning this trend is, What are the effects on children living in mother-only families? Research has shown consistently that children from single-parent homes are more likely than children from intact families to have behavioral problems. McLanahan and Booth's (1991) review of the research on children from mother-only families, compared to children from two-parent families, shows the following:

- They have lower academic achievement. This relationship is more negative for boys than for girls.
- They are more likely to have higher absentee rates at school.
- They are more likely to drop out of school.
- They are more likely to have lower earnings in young adulthood and are more likely to be poor.
- They are more likely to marry early and to have children early, both in and out of marriage.
- If they marry, they are more likely to divorce.
- They are more likely to commit delinquent acts and to engage in drug and alcohol use.

Although these findings are relevant, showing that children of single-parent families are more at risk than children from families with both parents present, most adjust normally. A review of the research concludes the following:

Most children who experience living in a single-parent family do not get pregnant, drop out of school, or require treatment from a mental health professional. . . . Such evidence is an important reminder that most children are resilient in coping. Thus, it seems clear that the majority of children from single-parent families proceed along a relatively healthy child development trajectory as measured by key indicators of their academic, social, and psychological adjustment. (Martin et al., 2004:285)

Because 85 percent of one-parent families are headed by a woman, the common explanation for the disproportionate pathologies found among the children of single parents has been that the absence of a male adult is detrimental to their development.

The presence of both mothers and fathers contributes to the healthy development of children (Marsiglio et al., 2001). Also, the absence of a spouse makes coping with parenting more difficult. Coping is difficult for any single parent—female or male—because of three common sources of strain: (1) responsibility overload, in which single parents make all the decisions and provide for all of their family's needs; (2) task overload, in which the demands of work, housekeeping, and parenting can be overwhelming for one person; and (3) emotional overload, in which single parents must always be on call to provide the necessary emotional support (see Box 9.5). Clearly, when two persons share these parental strains, it is more likely that the needs of the children will be met.

The children of a single parent, whether living with their mother or father, can have emotional difficulties because they have experienced the stress, often traumatic, that accompanied their separation from or even the death of one of their parents.

Another reason for the disproportionate behavioral problems seen among children living in one-parent families is that their families, for economic reasons, move more often than two-parent families. Moving is a source of emotional strain as old friends are left behind and children experience social isolation in the new setting.

The stress that mothers face also can have negative effects on their children. Changes in residence require that they, too, leave their social networks and sources of support. These moves are sometimes to disadvantaged neighborhoods, with high rates of crime, poverty, and unemployment, and poor educational facilities. Often mothers in this situation must enter the labor force for the first time or increase their working hours. Such changes add stress to their lives as well as to the lives of their children.

Although the factors just described help to explain the behavioral differences between children from one-parent and two-parent homes, they sidestep a major reason—a fundamental difference in economic resources. As Andrew Cherlin has argued, “it seems likely that the most detrimental aspect of the absence of fathers from one-parent families headed by women is not the lack of a male presence *but the lack of a male income*” (Cherlin, 1981:81; emphasis added). There is a strong likelihood that women raising children alone will be financially troubled (there are exceptions, of course—especially for college educated women who, although not married, have chosen to have children). In 2007, for example, 28 percent of children living in single-parent families headed by a woman were poor, compared with 5 percent of children in two-parent families (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2008).

The reasons for a disproportionate number of poor mother-headed families are obvious. First, many single mothers are young and never married. They may have little education, so if they work, they have poorly paid jobs. Second, many divorced or separated women have not been employed for years and find it difficult to reenter the job market. Third, and more crucial, jobs for women, centered as they are in the bottom tier of the segmented job market, are poorly paid (women, we must again underscore, presently earn about 78 cents for every dollar earned by men). Fourth, half of the men who owe child support do not pay all that they owe, and a quarter of them do not pay anything; those women who do receive child support find that the amount covers less than half the actual cost of raising a child.

The economic plight of single-parent families is much worse for families of color. Women of color who head households have the same economic problems as White women who are in the same situation, plus the added burdens of institutional racism. In addition, they are less likely to be getting child support (their exhusbands, unlike White exhusbands, are much more likely to be poor and unemployed), and they are more likely to have been high school dropouts, further reducing their potential for earning a decent income.

BOX  
9.5

## Inside the Worlds of Diverse Families

### A Single Mother with Children Struggles to Make Ends Meet

Regina Johnson's children are her alarm clock, and they start ringing too early most mornings.

"Mom, I'm hungry!"

"Mom, look what Mark did!"

Such cries punctuate her mornings starting around 8 a.m.

The single mother of three young children would like to stay in bed a while longer, after working until midnight and getting to sleep about 2 a.m.

Instead, Johnson asks what the children want for breakfast and heads to the kitchen. Then it's time to bathe and dress everyone before cleaning their modest central Denver apartment.

The inevitable rough moments of the day crop up: red Kool-Aid spills on the worn carpet. The kids fight over a toy and cry.

All the while, Johnson worries about making ends meet on her \$5-an-hour salary as a printer's assistant for Communications Packaging, Inc.

"It's not easy and sometimes I feel like I want to fall apart," said Johnson, 24. "But the kids are here and I know I have to keep them going and keep a roof over their heads."

Michael, 3, nestles his head in his mother's lap in the mid-summer heat.

"He's still kind of sick, and when he's sick, he lays around all day," she says.

Johnson worries about how Michael, Mark, 2, and Paula, 1, will turn out. She acknowledges it's hard to find the energy to play with them as much as she would like.

She feels they will drift toward drugs or crime. Or that they'll grow into the type of kids "who just don't care."

She wonders if they'll be more financially secure than she has been. Johnson would like to buy a savings bond for each child. But money is too tight.

Last month, she mailed the rent about a week late. She can't afford a phone. She's bought herself only one new outfit since the kids were born.

"I don't have a checking account," Johnson said, "I live from paycheck to paycheck. I keep enough to get us by through the week."

She was receiving child-support payments from the children's father. But when he quit his job recently, the \$114-a-month checks stopped.

Still, Johnson said he helps out when he can and takes the children sometimes on weekends.

Johnson left home and school in eighth grade because she said her father threatened her. She lived for a while with an uncle, and then with the children's father, whom she never married. When they split, she landed on welfare for brief stints.

"It made me feel like a prisoner," she said. "It wasn't for me. I can't sit around all day. I have to go to work and make my own money."

Besides, Johnson didn't want her children teased as "welfare kids."

She went back to school, earned her General Educational Development degree, and found her first job paying more than minimum wage.

"I was so excited. I felt like things were turning around. It was neat."

But her next thought was where she would find an affordable babysitter. Relatives agreed to watch the children for \$5 each per day.

Paula, just up from a nap, comes to sit on her mother's lap.

"I want her to grow up and be a model, lead a glamorous life, wear nice clothes, and see different parts of the world," says Johnson, stroking her daughter's hair. "I don't want her to have kids until she's 25."

And she wants all her kids to finish high school.

"If something happened to one of my kids, I'd go crazy. I don't think I could handle it. I guess I'm real protective."

When she grows depressed over financial matters or the condition of her house, Johnson says the children are her best tonic.

"I got in a better mood after I started playing with them," she says of one recent bout of depression. "They were making me laugh."

Source: Cantwell, Rebecca (1989). "It's Not Easy." *Rocky Mountain News* (August 28): 43.

The financial difficulties of women heads of households are sometimes alleviated in part by support from a kinship network. Relatives may provide child care, material goods, money, and emotional support. The kin network is an especially important source of emergency help for African Americans, but for many women, kin may not be near or helpful.

In summary, the behavioral social costs attributed to the children of single mothers, noted earlier, are, in large part, the result of living in poverty. Lack of income has negative effects on intellectual development and physical health (Guo and Harris, 2000). Living in poverty translates into huge negatives for single mothers and their children—differences in health care (including prenatal and postnatal care), diet, housing, neighborhood safety, and quality of schools, as well as economic disadvantages, leading to a greater probability of experiencing low self-esteem, hopelessness, and despair.



## Reprise: The Duality of Parenting

How desirable are children? In the not-too-distant past children were an asset to their families as they worked in the fields, for merchants, or in the shops of their parents. Not too long ago adult children provided a form of retirement insurance by taking care of their elderly parents. However, as we have shifted from an agrarian society to an industrial society and then to a highly technological information/service economy, children are no longer the economic assets they once were. Now they are an economic liability. Moreover, children now often hinder the career aspirations of their mothers, and they can reduce marital happiness. The information in this chapter has focused on the reality of modern parenting, with its risks and liabilities. We should not forget, however, that most adults want children; most adults cherish and celebrate their children. They are fulfilled through parenting. Sylvia Hewlett, upon the birth of her daughter, Emma, penned the following poem, which enunciates what her child means to her and the value of children even in a contemporary world where they no longer are economic assets:

I glory in her gummy grin which lights up the whole world,  
and her infectious giggle.

When she lets loose that bubbling crescendo of pure joy,

I stop whatever I am doing and allow it to wash over me.

Such unstinting, unedited delight cleanses the soul.

...

I am deeply grateful for this bonus child,

for Emma brings with her special joys and special responsibilities.

In midlife I am much more in touch with that which is miraculous  
and glorious in a new life.

But I am also more in touch with the awesome risks—hers  
and mine.

Some are straightforward enough;

Emma can choke on a pea or drown in three inches of bathwater.

Others are more complicated.

I now have another hostage to fortune,

one more life that is more precious than my own. And I now know what  
that means.

It means a loss of freedom. It means dealing with an undertow of care  
and anxiety that permeates every hour of every day.

For I know full well that if I fail to keep my children safe, I will not find life  
worth living.

One thing is clear, the loss of freedom is a small price to pay for this, most  
sublime of earthly connections.

Being a parent, cherishing a child, brings out the better angels of human nature, drawing upon our most selfless instincts. For myself it has brought a measure of wisdom, and a great deal of happiness. (excerpted from Hewlett and West, 1998:xvi–xvii)



## Chapter Review

1. Parenting roles by gender—aside from conception, childbirth, and nursing—are not based on biological imperatives. Styles of parenting, expectations of parenting, and behaviors associated with parenting are social constructions, resulting from historical, economic, and social forces.
2. The various aspects of childhood vary by time, place, and social location. Hence, it is a social construction.
3. The long-term fertility rate has declined steadily since 1800. The reasons for the low rate now are (a) marrying late, (b) a high divorce rate, (c) a majority of women in the labor force, (d) two incomes required for many couples to maintain a desired lifestyle, (e) delayed child-bearing, and (f) legal abortions.
4. Fertility rates vary consistently by social class and race/ethnicity. The higher the social class, the lower the fertility. In terms of race/ethnicity, Whites have the lowest fertility, followed in order by Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinos.
5. Those women who chose to remain childless are typically well educated and in professional careers.
6. The availability of reproductive techniques has fundamentally changed the ways families are created. Infertile and same-sex couples have several options for becoming parents other than adoption—artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, surrogate mothering, and fertilizing drugs.
7. Two factors account for couples delaying child-bearing: the increased age of first marriage and the likelihood of highly educated women launching careers before having children.
8. Lesbian and gay parents create and maintain families that thrive even in hostile environments, thus illustrating human agency and that families are socially constructed.
9. The addition of a child affects a marriage dramatically. This event affects the career patterns of parents, the patterns of housework, the distribution of power, marital satisfaction, and the economic well-being of the family.
10. Parenting is gendered, with mothers the primary physical and emotional caregivers. Power tends to become more patriarchal with parenthood.
11. The prevailing view is that parents of young children are all-powerful, shaping their children irreversibly. Although parents are powerful socializing agents, they are not omnipotent for these reasons: (a) The child is an active social being who often shapes the parents; (b) the structure of the family (i.e., two parents, a solo parent [if so, whether that parent is the same sex as the child], ordinal position, and the presence of siblings) affects children and parents in predictable ways; (c) extrafamilial caregivers influence children; (d) peers become increasingly important socializers, especially in adolescence; and (e) social class position determines the child's life chances as well as the child's experiences.
12. Most children live in dual-earner families. The effects of extrafamilial child care are complex and depend on a number of variables: attentiveness and affection of caregivers, the ratio of caregivers to children, the small number of caregivers available, group size, and the availability of stimulating materials. Children from low-income families are the most likely to be found in lower-quality care settings.
13. More than one-fourth of all families with children under age 18 are headed by single parents, and these families are almost always headed by women. Children living in mother-only families (especially boys) are negatively affected in school performance, delinquent behaviors, early marriage, and divorce. These negative probabilities are the likely result of (a) single parents being strained by parental responsibilities, tasks, and emotional overload; (b) children being separated from one of their parents; (c) emotional strains resulting from moving away from friends and neighbors; (d) strains the mothers feel in the labor force; and, most important, (e) economic deprivation.
14. The majority of single mothers have inadequate economic resources. Thus, the social costs attributed to single mothers and their children are largely the costs of poverty.

## Key Terms

---

**boomerang generation** 311

**differential fertility** 300

**pronatalism** 301

**sandwich generation** 311

## Related Websites

---

**<http://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsresch.htm>**

National Longitudinal Surveys. Managed by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, this site provides links to numerous government reports regarding youth and employment.

**<http://www.childrensdefense.org>**

Children's Defense Fund. CDF began in 1973 and is a private, nonprofit organization supported by foundation and corporate grants and individual donations. CDF advocates for all children, with a special focus on the most vulnerable. It works with elected officials, government agencies, faith groups, and individual activists in an effort to build a nation of families where all children have the support they need to thrive.

**<http://www.childrennow.org>**

Children Now. Since 1988, Children Now has championed the needs of children with a successful combination of research and advocacy. Children Now is unique in its bipartisan, strategic advocacy on behalf of the whole child. Children Now is often sought after by policy-makers, the media, business leaders, academics, and parents for its high-quality research and sharp analysis of the full spectrum of matters affecting children. The organization pioneered an annual Report Card on the status of California's children—a publication that has been duplicated in every state, in addition to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. And its Fall Colors reports are the most comprehensive research studies on prime time television diversity.

**<http://www.childstats.gov>**

ChildStats.gov. This website provides government statistics and reports on children and their families, especially from the Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics.

**<http://www.childtrends.org>**

Child Trends. Founded in 1979, Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children and their families. In advancing its mission, Child

Trends collects and analyzes data; conducts, synthesizes, and disseminates research; designs and evaluates programs; and develops and tests promising approaches to research in the field.

**<http://www.futureofchildren.org>**

The Future of Children. The Future of Children is a publication of The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and The Brookings Institution. The organization seeks to promote effective policies and programs for children by providing policy-makers, service providers, and the media with timely, objective information based on the best available research.

**<http://www.pactadopt.org>**

Pact: An Adoption Alliance. Pact is a nonprofit organization founded in 1991. Pact's goal is to create and maintain the Internet's most comprehensive site addressing issues for adopted children of color, offering informative articles on related topics as well as profiles of triad members and their families, links to other Internet resources, and a book reference guide with a searchable database. The site provides reprints of past Pact Press issues, as well as opportunities to interact with other triad members and to ask questions of birth parents, adopted people, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals.

**<http://www.adoption.com>**

adoption.com. This commercial website offers visitors a comprehensive array of information, discussion rooms, and links to relevant sites on every aspect of adoption.

**<http://www.cfw.tufts.edu>**

Child and Family WebGuide. This website is provided by Tufts University and is a nonprofit resource. This directory describes trustworthy websites on topics of interest to parents and professionals. All the sites listed on the WebGuide have been systematically evaluated by graduate students and faculty in child development. These sites have been selected from thousands that are available on the Web, based primarily on the quality of the information they provide. The goal of the WebGuide is to give the public easy access to the best child development information on the Web.

**<http://surrogacy.com>**

The American Surrogacy Center, Inc. TASC promotes the exchange of information on medical and pharmaceutical treatments, surrogacy alternatives, current legal status, counseling, medical and legal practitioners, agencies and similar societies, as well as providing a forum for those requesting and providing information.

**<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>**

Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc. (PPFA), is the nation's largest and most trusted voluntary reproductive health care organization. This website is coordinated through PPFA and 48 affiliated Planned Parenthood organizations for the purpose of providing streamlined access to the complete array of sexual and reproductive health information, services, and advocacy and volunteer opportunities available from Planned Parenthood entities nationwide.

**<http://www.aclu.org/lbgt/parenting>**

American Civil Liberties Union: Lesbian and Gay Rights: Parenting. Managed by the ACLU, this site provides up-to-date reports and publications regarding lesbian and gay parenting issues and rights across the nation.

**<http://www.fathers.com>**

fathers.com. Fathers.com is the premier online resource for everyday dads. Created by the National Center for Fathering (NCF), fathers.com provides research-based training, practical tips and resources to inspire and equip men to be the involved fathers, grandfathers, and father figures that children need.

**<http://www.fatherhood.org>**

National Fatherhood Initiative. NFI encourages and supports family and father-friendly policies, develops national public education campaigns to highlight the importance of fathers in the lives of their children, provides motivation for national and local coalition-building, and provides resources to men to help them be better dads.

**<http://www.fathersnetwork.org>**

Fathers Network. The Fathers Network provides current information and resources to assist all families and

care providers involved in the lives of children with special needs. The Fathers Network is a program of the Kinderling Center and is sponsored by Children with Special Health Care Needs Program/Washington State Department of Health, the Paul G. Allen Charitable Foundation, and private donations.

**<http://www.familyeducation.com>**

Family Education Network. Launched in 1996 as the first parenting site on the Web, FamilyEducation has become the Internet's most-visited site for parents who are involved, committed, and responsive to their families' needs. Parents find practical guidance, grade-specific information about their children's school experience, strategies to get involved with their children's learning, free e-mail newsletters, and fun and entertaining family activities. FamilyEducation brings together leading organizations from both the public and private sectors to help parents, teachers, schools, and community organizations use online tools and other media resources to positively affect children's education and overall development.

**<http://www.aecf.org>**

Annie E. Casey Foundation. Since 1948, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) has worked to build better futures for disadvantaged children and their families in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families.

**<http://www.fci.org>**

Family Communications. Family Communications, Inc., is a nonprofit organization founded in 1971 by Fred Rogers, as the production company for Mister Roger's Neighborhood. It creates programs and projects for children, their families, and those who support them. Respect for healthy emotional, social, and intellectual development is its core mission. It develops projects in all media, provides education and training for people who work with young children, and consults on issues that affect families.