

## **The Revolution in Parenthood**

### The Emerging Global Clash Between Adult Rights and Children's Needs

#### **Executive Summary**

Around the world, the two-person, mother-father model of parenthood is being fundamentally challenged.

In Canada, with virtually no debate, the controversial law that brought about same-sex marriage quietly included the provision to erase the term “natural parent” across the board in federal law, replacing it with the term “legal parent.” With that law, the locus of power in defining who a child’s parents are shifts precipitously from civil society to the state, with the consequences as yet unknown.

In Spain, after the recent legalization of same-sex marriage the legislature changed the birth certificates for all children in that nation to read “Progenitor A” and “Progenitor B” instead of “mother” and “father.” With that change, the words “mother” and “father” were struck from the first document issued to every newborn by the state. Similar proposals have been made in other jurisdictions that have legalized same-sex marriage.

In New Zealand and Australia, influential law commissions have proposed allowing children conceived with use of sperm or egg donors to have three legal parents. Yet neither group addresses the real possibility that a child’s three legal parents could break up and feud over the child’s best interests.

In the United States, courts often must determine who the legal parents are among the many adults who might be involved in planning, conceiving, birthing, and raising a child. In a growing practice, judges in several states have seized upon the idea of “psychological” parenthood to award legal parent status to adults who are not related to children by blood, adoption, or marriage. At times they have done so even over the objection of the child’s biological parent. Also, successes in the same-sex marriage debate have encouraged group marriage advocates who wish to break open the two-person understanding of marriage and parenthood.

Meanwhile, scientists around the world are experimenting with the DNA in eggs and sperm in nearly unimaginable ways, raising the specter of children born with one or three genetic parents, or two same-sex parents. Headlines recently announced research at leading universities in Britain and New Zealand that could enable same-sex couples or single people to procreate. In Britain, scientists were granted permission to create embryos with three genetic parents. Stem cell research has introduced the

very real possibility that a cloned child could be born—and the man who pioneered in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment has already said in public that cloning should be offered to childless couples who have exhausted other options. The list goes on.

Nearly all of these steps, and many more, are being taken in the name of adult rights to form families they choose. But what about the children?

This report examines the emerging global clash between adult rights and children's needs in the new meaning of parenthood. It features some of the surprising voices of the first generation of young adults conceived with use of donor sperm. Their concerns, and the large body of social science evidence showing that children, on average, do best when raised by their own married mother and father, suggest that in the global rush to redefine parenthood we need to call a time-out.

Right now, our societies urgently require reflection, debate, and research about the policies and practices that will serve the best interests of children—those already born and those yet to be born. This report argues that around the world the state is taking an increasingly active role in defining and regulating parenthood far beyond its limited, vital, historic, and child-centered role in finding suitable parents for needy children through adoption. The report documents how the state creates new uncertainties and vulnerabilities when it increasingly seeks to administer parenthood, often giving far greater attention to adult rights than to children's needs. For the most part, this report does not advocate for or against particular policy prescriptions (such as banning donor conception) but rather seeks to draw urgently needed public attention to the current revolutionary changes in parenthood, to point out the risks and contradictions arising from increased state intervention, and to insist that our societies immediately undertake a vigorous, child-centered debate.

Do mothers and fathers matter to children? Is there anything special—anything worth supporting—about the two-person, mother-father model? Are children commodities to be produced by the marketplace? What role should the state have in defining parenthood? When adult rights clash with children's needs, how should the conflict be resolved? These are the questions raised by this report. Our societies will either answer these questions democratically and as a result of intellectually and morally serious reflection and public debate, or we will find, very soon, that these questions have already been answered for us. The choice is ours. At stake are the most elemental features of children's well-being—their social and physical health and their moral and spiritual wholeness.

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