DUAL-GENDER PARENTING: A SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE FOR OPTIMAL CHILD REARING
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“In brief,” the Director summed up, “the parents were the father and the mother.”¹ “Try to imagine what ‘living with one’s family’ meant.” They tried; but obviously without the smallest success.²

Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, written in 1932, depicts a futuristic, dystopian civilization where babies are created in fertilization laboratories and are raised in collective facilities by trained personnel. The idea of a family, of being raised by one’s biological parents, of having a father and a mother is both primitive and repulsive. Although most find Huxley’s society appalling and unrealistic, perhaps Mr. Huxley did have a glimpse into 2005. Gametes for sale. Assisted reproduction technology (ART) children. Sperm banks. In vitro fertilization. Surrogacy and other contractual arrangements. High-tech baby making. The transmission of human life has become a commercial activity. The traditional family is seen as outmoded, unimportant, and even oppressive.

This article seeks to resurrect the importance of the traditional family, specifically of dual-gender parenting. It argues against the idea that all family forms are equally as healthful or helpful for children. A mother and father together provide the optimal environment for raising a child. Mothers and fathers parent differently, and both make complementary contributions fundamental to the healthy development of a child. While other family forms do occur in society, the intentional creation of motherless or fatherless families poses significant and increased risks for children, risks that neither children nor society can afford to take.

This article outlines the distinctive parenting styles of mothers and fathers, emphasizing the essential role of fathers in child development. It argues that the future of a good society

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² Id. at 36.
depends on the reversal of the trend toward alternative family forms and on the resurgence of traditional, dual-gender parenting.

**Historically**

Throughout human history, the family has consisted of parents and children who are biologically related. Cultures have recognized, valued, and protected this parent-child bond. Admittedly, the natural family has not been without struggles. Some fathers never returned from war or were killed in work-related accidents; some mothers did not survive childbirth; some children were left to the care of friends or relatives or sometimes to no one at all. Conventionally, however, there has been a place holder for the missing biological parent, hence the use of names such as stepfather, adoptive mother, foster father, or god mother to refer to those who take the place of biological parents. The basic father and mother components of the family have in the past been revered and protected.

**Today**

Today the natural or biological family is losing its prominent position in society. In the controversial article “Deconstructing the Essential Father,” Silverstein and Auerbach conclude that neither a mother nor a father is essential to raising a child. Children merely need one responsible, caretaking adult. The roles of mother and father have been rejected by some as archaic and unnecessary. Our current medical technology has made it possible for individuals and couples to restructure the family, thereby eliminating the roles of mother and father entirely from the family and household structure. In essence, individuals are deciding prior to

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4 *Id.*
5 *Id.*
7 Williams, 6.
conception that the child will grow up with neither a biological or social mother nor a biological or social father in the home.8

**Optimal Family Form**

In the words of the renowned family sociologist David Popenoe, “it is a rare child who does not wish to grow up with both a father and a mother. Why do children have this desire? Despite their sometimes wanting candy for breakfast, children do have, after all, a certain wisdom about life.”9

Indeed, there is no fact that has been established by social science literature more convincingly than the following: children ordinarily develop best and develop most fully when they reared by both a mother and a father and are able to experience regular family interaction with both genders’ parenting techniques during their childhood.10 Popenoe summarized the research nicely: “social science research is almost never conclusive . . . yet in three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable to single-parent families.”11

The research which contends that children do better when they are raised by their biological father and mother does not assert that all children raised in biological families meet with success nor that all children deprived of one or more parent are doomed to failure.12 Some children still struggle in a two-parent family environment, and some children are contentedly raised to adulthood by a wholly-committed single parent. But such exceptions in no way deny

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8 Id. at 1.
11 Popenoe, 176.
the overwhelming findings of robust research which support dual-gender parenting. It is
undisputed that children navigate developmental stages more easily, are more solid in their
gender identity, perform better in academic tasks at school, have fewer emotional disorders and
become better functioning adults when they are raised by dual-gendered parents.

Why a Mother and Father?

Gender Differences

Men and women are different. They look differently, they think differently, and they act
differently. Although some argue that these distinctions are merely social constructs, recent
researchers suggest that the human brain, similar to the human body, is sexed, and that gender
differences associated with the human brain help explain the behavioral differences we observe
in the sexes.\(^\text{13}\) Gender differences have been noted with respect to four behavioral/psychological
traits: 1 – aggression and general activity level, 2 – cognitive skills, 3 – sensory perception, 4 –
sexual and reproductive behavior.\(^\text{14}\) For example, females typically have a greater verbal ability
than males, while males tend to possess a greater mathematical ability than females. Women are
generally more sensitive to sensory stimuli than men, while men tend to exhibit greater visual-
spatial ability than women.\(^\text{15}\) These gender differences lead to different ways of seeing the world,
of handling situations, of relating with others, and of parenting. Recent studies clearly establish
that children profit from exposure to persons of both sexes. Current research on brain
functioning concludes that the need for interaction with both men and women on an intimate
basis is not simply a social preference, but rather a biological necessity.\(^\text{16}\)

Gender Complementarity and Parenting

\(^\text{14}\) Popenoe, 10.
\(^\text{15}\) Id. at 11.
\(^\text{16}\) Biller.
Men and women contribute differently to the healthy development of children, and their differing parenting styles complement each other. Research has repeatedly supported the conclusion that most effective parenting is highly expressive and highly demanding.\textsuperscript{17} Highly expressive, instrumental parenting provides children with a kind of communion characterized by inclusiveness and connectedness, as well as the drive for independence and individuality. These essential contributions to the optimum development of children are virtually impossible for a man or woman alone to combine effectively.\textsuperscript{18} For example, in attitude and behavior, mothers are typically more responsive, warm, and sympathetic and fathers firm, directive, and predictable; mothers emphasize emotional security and relationships, and fathers emphasize competition and risk-taking; mothers generally show more concern for the immediate comfort and well-being of their children, while fathers exhibit more concern for the autonomy and independence of their children in the long run.\textsuperscript{19} Not every mother or every father has fully developed all these specific sex-differentiated characteristics. For example, not all fathers are endowed with a firm temperament suited for discipline, and not all mothers are endowed with a sensitive temperament suited for nurturing. However, most fathers and mothers are vulnerable to these sex-specific talents related to parenting, and societies should support parenting roles that take advantage of these gender-related skills and contributions.\textsuperscript{20} The complementarity of male and female parenting styles are of enormous significance to a child’s overall development.

\textbf{Central Importance of Fathers}


\textsuperscript{19} Popenoe, 12.

Few doubt the central importance of mothers. But fathers? The question is increasingly being posed: are fathers really necessary?\textsuperscript{21} Some allege that the difference between having a mother and a father and only having a mother is merely economic. A recent study, however, explored the unique impact of fathers on adolescents’ psychological well-being. The results reveal that mothers and fathers are equally important for their adolescent’s psychological well-being.\textsuperscript{22} These and many similar findings refute theories and studies that disregard the influence of fathers on their children and maintain that beyond monetary support, fathers are superfluous to their children’s well-being.\textsuperscript{23} Wardle affirms, “Not only are fathers’ styles highly complementary to the styles of mothers, but it is now undeniable that, just as a mother’s influence is crucial to the secure, healthy, and full development of a child, [a] paternal presence in the life of child is essential to the child emotionally and physically.”\textsuperscript{24} The presence or absence of a father impacts the development of a child from infancy to adulthood.

\textbf{Infancy and Early Childhood}

Male and female differences emerge in ways in which infants are held and the different ways in which mothers and fathers use touch with their children. Mothers more frequently use touch to calm, soothe, or comfort infants. When a mother lifts her child, she brings the child toward her breasts providing warmth, comfort, security and protection. Fathers more often use touch to stimulate or to excite the child. Fathers tend to hold infants at arms length in front of them, make eye contact, toss the infant in the air, or embrace the child in such a way that the

\textsuperscript{21} Popenoe, 3.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Id. at} 75.
\textsuperscript{24} Wardle, 860.
child is looking over the father’s shoulder. Shapiro notes that each of these “daddy holds” underscores a sense of freedom.²⁵

A study authored by Marissa Diener at the University of Utah demonstrated that babies (12 months old) who have a close relationship with their fathers seemed more stress resistant than those who did not.²⁶ Babies who had secure relationships with their fathers used more coping strategies than those who did not. Her conclusion has fascinating implications: “there may be something unique to fathers that provides children with different opportunities to regulate their emotions.”²⁷ Studies such as those conducted by Pruett concluded that six-month old infants whose fathers actively played with them had higher scores on the Bailey Test of Mental and Motor Development.²⁸ Parke noted that infants whose fathers spent more time with them were more socially responsive and better able to withstand stressful situations than infants relatively deprived of substantial interactions with their fathers.²⁹ Infants who are well-fathered are more confident and trusting in branching out in their explorations, and are generally more advanced in crawling, climbing and manipulating objects.³⁰

**Linguistic development**

Mother and fathers contribute differently to a child’s linguistic development. In addition to having different sounding voices, mothers and fathers use distinctive verbal styles when talking to infants and children. Mothers typically simplify their words and speak on the child’s level. Gleason observed that while fathers occasionally use “child-directed speech,” they often breach this simplification by adding words such as “aggravating,” “dingaling,” and

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³⁰ Biller.
“brontosaurus,” inadvertently expanding their child’s linguistic ability.\textsuperscript{31} Gleason further found that fathers tend to speak with more complete sentences, imperatives, and attention-getting expressions than mothers do, thus contributing in unique ways to linguistic development of their children.\textsuperscript{32} A mother’s way of speaking facilitates immediate communication, while a father’s way of speaking encourages children to expand their vocabulary skills and linguistic ability, an important foundation for future academic success.\textsuperscript{33}

**Play**

Studies by Clarke-Stewart report differences in mothers’ and fathers’ play.\textsuperscript{34} While mothers stimulate the development of fine motor skills, fathers stimulate the development of large motor skills.\textsuperscript{35} Involved fathers help to encourage infants to explore and investigate new objects and surroundings. Mothers, by contrast, tend to play with their infants in more structured and predictable activities.\textsuperscript{36} Mothers typically play more at the child’s level. They provide an opportunity to direct the play, to be in charge, to proceed at the child’s pace. Fathers’ play resembles a teacher-student relationship – an apprenticeship of sorts. Fathers’ play is more rough-and-tumble. Clarke-Stewart notes that the benefits of this rough-and-tumble play have appeared in child development areas extending from the management of emotions to intellectual and academic achievement. Interestingly enough, fathers’ play is related to the development of socially acceptable forms of behaviors and does not positively correlate with violence and aggression, but rather correlates with self-control. Children who “roughhouse” with their fathers

\textsuperscript{32} Id. at 116.
\textsuperscript{35} Stanton, 12.
\textsuperscript{36} Biller.
quickly learn that biting, kicking and others forms of physical violence are not acceptable.

Children learn how to recognize and manage highly charged emotions in the context of playing with their fathers, and such play provides children with opportunities to recognize and respond appropriately to emotions.\(^{37}\)

### Discipline

Gender differences are also apparent in parental approaches to discipline. The disciplinary approaches of fathers tend toward firmness, relying on rules and principles. The approaches of mothers tend toward more responsiveness, involving more bargaining, more adjustment towards the child’s mood and context, and are more often based on an intuitive understanding of the child’s needs and emotions of the moment. Gilligan concluded that the differences between paternal and maternal approaches to discipline are rooted in the fundamental differences between men and women in their moral senses.\(^{38}\) Men stress justice, fairness and duty based on rules, while women stress understanding sympathy, care and helping based on relationships.

**Unique Contributions of Fathers**

The remainder of this article centers on the unique contributions of fathers to child development. Researchers have consistently and overwhelming found that fathers are critical for the intellectual, emotional and social development of children.\(^{39}\) George Herbert once declared, “One father is worth more than a 100 school masters.”

### Cognitive Skills and Academic Performance


\(^{39}\) Popenoe, 147.
Fathers have a significant impact on the academic performance of their children. Many researchers believe that a father’s expectations regarding future roles for his child have a powerful effect upon the child’s cognitive ability.\(^{40}\) Father involvement is linked with superior quantitative and verbal skills, enhanced problem solving ability, and improved academic achievement in children.\(^{41}\) The results of several studies have demonstrated that the presence of the father in the home is one of the determinants of mathematical proficiency in girls. Another study observed that the amount of time fathers spent reading was a strong indicator of their daughters’ verbal ability.\(^{42}\) As Popenoe points out, “fathers who are highly committed to child-rearing, have flexible views regarding sex roles for themselves and for their children, and express interest, involvement, and encouragement likely will enrich their daughters’ cognitive functioning.”\(^{43}\) For sons, the effect of fathers on academic performance and cognitive competence is even more outstanding. Several studies have revealed a strong correlation between paternal involvement and quantitative and mathematical abilities of their sons. Other research has uncovered a relationship between fathers’ nurturing and boys’ verbal intelligence.\(^{44}\)

**Self-Esteem and Social Skills**

A positively involved father increases a child’s likelihood of developing a healthy body image, self-esteem, moral strength, and social competence.\(^{45}\) Numerous studies suggest that fathers contribute profoundly to children’s development by influencing central components of children’s self-identities, self-confidence, and self-regulation.\(^{46}\) Children with nurturing, involved, and committed fathers are markedly more successful in their academic, athletic, and

\(^{40}\) Wardle, 858.
\(^{41}\) Popenoe, 148.
\(^{42}\) Id.
\(^{43}\) Lamb, 148.
\(^{44}\) Popenoe, 148.
\(^{45}\) Lamb, 161.
\(^{46}\) Rekers, George A. 2004. *Review of Research on Homosexual Parenting, Adoption, and Foster Parenting*. University of South Carolina School of Medicine, 55.
social activities and have higher self-esteem than do those who suffer from father absence. Radin and Sadi observed that both boys and girls who enjoy a high level of paternal involvement were likely to have an internal center of control and to take responsibility for their actions. Snarey noted that the mentorship of an involved father may give children a later advantage in their capacity to work hard, to view themselves as industrious, and to feel productive.

Having a father present in the home considerably decreases the probability of a student requiring psychological counseling at school. Videon examined the influence of father-adolescent relationships on depression in more than 6,500 boys and girls. Her results found that higher levels of satisfaction with the father-adolescent relationship correlated with fewer depressive symptoms among both boys and girls.

In a recent study, Cummings and Wiggins retrospectively examined the medical records of 168,113 adolescents who had been treated for over four years in a national behavioral health provider. Prior to commencing treatment, sixty-one percent of the males and twenty-three percent of the females were taking psychotrophic medication for ADD/ADHD prescribed by a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, or a primary care physician. The majority of the adolescents came from single-parent homes. Most lacked an effective father figure and/or were exposed to negative and often abusive male role models. Behavioral intervention involved a sympathetic but firm male therapist and the introduction of positive male role models (e.g. fathers, Big Brothers, coaches, Sunday school teachers, etc.) into the adolescent’s life. Despite very strict requirements for discontinuing the medication, the results were dramatic. After an average of six

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47 Id. at 144.
48 Lamb, 154.
49 Id.
51 Videon, 69.
treatments with the children, the percentage of boys on medication decreased from sixty-one percent to eleven percent, and the percentage of girls on medication was reduced from twenty three-percent to two percent.\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Gender Identity}

Children have the best chance of developing healthy sexual identities when they are raised by both a same-sex and an opposite-sex parent.\textsuperscript{54} Boys and girls form their notions of their sex roles from their associations with both genders.\textsuperscript{55} As Knight and Garcia note, “Boys need fathers so they can develop their own sexual identity; they need mothers so they can learn how to interact with the opposite sex. Girls need mothers so they can learn what it is to be a woman; they need fathers so they know how to interact with the opposite sex.”\textsuperscript{56} Researchers have found that fathers have a greater impact on gender role adjustment of both boys and girls than do mothers because fathers typically emphasize preparing children for their various roles in society.\textsuperscript{57}

Through identification and imitation, boys learn from their fathers what they cannot learn from their mothers - how to be a man. The transition from boyhood to manhood is a difficult process, especially since as boys grow up, they must necessarily leave the comforting female protection provided by their mothers.\textsuperscript{58} Boys learn through interactions with their fathers about male responsibility, about how to be assertive and self-sufficient, and about how to interact acceptably with members of the opposite sex.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{53} Id.
\textsuperscript{54} Knight, R.H. and Daniel S.G. Homosexual Adoption: Bad for Children, Bad for Society. Family Research Council, 1.
\textsuperscript{55} Wardle, 861.
\textsuperscript{56} Knight and Garcia, 5.
\textsuperscript{57} Rekers, 54.
\textsuperscript{58} Popenoe, 142.
\textsuperscript{59} Popenoe, 142.
Girls learn from their fathers how to relate to men. They learn about heterosexual trust and intimacy, about assertiveness, achievement and independence.\textsuperscript{60} Blankenhorn observed that a positively-involved father provides girls with a steady relationship of love and respect from a non-exploitative adult male, thereby equipping them with a security and trust that helps them avoid precocious sexual involvement and exploitative relations with other males.\textsuperscript{61} Girls raised in single mother homes are more apt to become sexually active and are exceptionally vulnerable to males who treat them poorly.\textsuperscript{62} On the whole, when there is a father present in the home, there are lower instances of adolescent sexual involvement.

**Delinquency**

Boys with fathers seldom commit crimes; fatherless boys commonly commit crimes.\textsuperscript{63} The single most important factor (more significant than family income) explaining the increase in delinquent behavior is the presence of the father in the home. In fact, the delinquency rate is twice as high in cases where the father is absent than it is when the father is present.\textsuperscript{64} The discipline and authority that men provide in raising children is very hard for a woman to achieve by herself.\textsuperscript{65} Studies repeatedly reveal that children without a father in the home are more likely than other children to be suspended or expelled from school, to exhibit emotional and behavioral problems, to have difficulty interacting with their peers, and to have run-ins with the police.\textsuperscript{66} The majority of criminals were raised in single parent homes or homes without either parent.\textsuperscript{67}

**Long term effects**

\textsuperscript{60} Popenoe, 143.
\textsuperscript{61} Rekers, 55.
\textsuperscript{62} Adolescence, 28, 1993.
\textsuperscript{63} Wardle, 859.
\textsuperscript{64} Hart, Craig. Combatting the Myth that Parents Don’t Matter, 3.
\textsuperscript{65} Popenoe, 142.
\textsuperscript{66} Wardle, 859.
\textsuperscript{67} Statistics, March 1993, NCJ-136949, pp. 3,9,32.
Fathers play an essential role in encouraging their children to confront challenges and opportunities that face them outside the home. Fathers push their children from a young age to engage in novel activities, to associate with strangers, and to do things on their own. Fathers are more likely than mothers to encourage their children to attempt difficult tasks, to seek out new experiences, and to bear pain and hardship without acquiescing. Fathers are exceptional at teaching their children the qualities of fortitude, temperance, and prudence as they prepare for life away from their family. Fathers who are present to provide essential experience and role models for children can help them attain greater competence and maturity. The absence or presence of fathers in children’s lives, both when they are young and when they are adolescents, has a significant influence on those children’s later lives and into adulthood. There is considerable evidence that paternal involvement is associated with higher rates of educational and occupational attainment for both boys and girls. Individuals who enjoyed warm and loving relationships with their fathers when they were young are more likely as adults to have long-term marriages, successful parenthood, and close friendships.

Response to Conflicting Studies

In spite of the overwhelming evidence citing the importance of mothers and fathers to the healthy development of children, attempts have been made in professional literature to blur the lines between genders, and to claim that neither mothers nor fathers are necessary for positive child outcomes. Such research reports have become increasingly bold with their activist agendas such as the aforementioned article “Deconstructing the Essential Father,” in which the authors argue that “neither mothers nor fathers are essential to child development and that responsible

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68 Lamb, 142.
69 Stanton, 17.
70 Lamb, 155.
fathering can occur within a variety of family structures.” Silverstein and Auerbach utilized the offspring-raising habits of soft-furred, tree-dwelling South American monkeys to support their view that other parenting forms lead to positive child outcomes. “Marmosets illustrate how, within a particular bioecological context, optimal child outcomes can be achieved with fathers as primary caregivers and limited involvement by mothers.” No animal models approximate the human family. Raising a child is significantly more complicated than raising a marmoset.

Moreover, the interpretation of such research and its use in advocacy is overwhelmingly influenced by bias. Much of the existing studies that find no negative effects of alternative family forms on children have evident limitations, such as small sample sizes, nonrepresentative and self-selected samples, and reliance on self-reporting subject to social desirability prejudices. The advocates of these studies, however, often downplay these limitations and frequently fail to contemplate the potential importance of having both male and female nurturers and role models in the home.

Societal Trends

In only three decades, from 1960 to 1990, the percentage of children growing up without their fathers present has more than doubled, from 17 percent to 36 percent. In Popenoe’s view “our growing national fatherlessness is a disaster in the making.” Compelling evidence shows that the erosion of fatherhood is a driving force behind many of our current societal problems. Father absence is a major, if not the predominant, factor contributing to the social ills that saturate the news and are sweeping our society: “crime and delinquency; premature sexuality and

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71 Silverstein & Auerbach, 397.
72 Id. at 400.
73 Wright and Cummings, 308.
74 Popenoe, 3.
75 Id. at 2.
76 Id. at 1.
out-of-wedlock teen births; deteriorating educational achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among teenagers; and the growing number of women and children in poverty.”
Blankenhorn has concluded that father-hunger is the primary cause of the declining well-being of children in our society.78

Conclusion

Raising a child in an environment where one parent is unavoidably absent is much different from planning a family structure which purposefully eliminates the roles of mother and/or father.79 Supplanting the traditional family structure and replacing it with a family structured according to individual desires wherein the role of one or more of the biological parents in the child’s life is intentionally reduced or eliminated portends negative consequences in the development of the child and his or her likelihood of living a satisfying life.80 On the whole, children need a mother and father to develop optimally and completely. Fathers and mothers make necessary and complementary contributions to the development of children. Although the importance of mothers has long been recognized, recent research underscores the impact of fathers on several areas of child development.

Using the numbers of fathers who fail their families as reason to deny the importance of fathers is to ignore the large numbers of fathers who are outstanding or even ordinary parents and to disregard the subjective judgment of the countless of children who desire their fathers in their lives. For those whose fathers were positively involved in their lives when they were children, and who even now provide support and encouragement to them as adults, it would indeed have been a tragedy not to have had that father in their lives, even though we were fortunate to have

77 Popenoe, 3.
79 Williams, 5.
80 Williams, 2.
loving and caring mothers. It is not outmoded to hope that every child has a mother and father who love each other and who love the child. In fact, it is all we have. Unfortunately, we too often fall short of this ideal, but our failure does not justify the complete repudiation of the mother’s or the father’s role in a child’s life.81

The contributions of gender complementarity to the healthy development of children is deeply rooted in the innate differences between men and women. Regarding gender complementarity and child-rearing, social science research supports the conclusion that mothers and fathers provide optimal development for children. The placement of children in settings where there is not a mother and father begins a slippery slope, one filled with risks that neither the children nor society can afford to take.


Motherless or fatherless children: “[I]nstability [is] practically assured.”83

81 Williams, 19.
82 Huxley, 56.
83 Id. at 54.