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## Mothers, Fathers, Families and Child Development

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### Introduction

Across the globe, family trajectories have become increasingly diverse, thus driving us away from an understanding of child development within the ‘traditional’ family unit that was once so prevalent, towards an examination of child development within more non-traditional structures (Atter-Schwartz *et al.*, 2009; Kouvo and Silvén, 2010; Magnuson and Berger, 2007). Parallel with this, conceptualising the term ‘family’ has become increasingly difficult (Dunn, 2002), and this has important implications for our understanding of factors that promote positive child development (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001). Newly emergent family structures resulting from social and demographic changes, including single-parent families, stepfamilies, adoptive and foster care families and same-gender parents, have heightened the need to understand how mothers, fathers and families influence child development (Atter-Schwartz *et al.*, 2009; Carlson and Corcoran, 2001).

In this chapter, we review the main tenets of attachment theory, one of the most popular and traditional approaches to conceptualising the relationship between caregivers and child development. Our review highlights the limitations of attachment theory in achieving a holistic understanding of child development in current societal structures. We propose, as an alternative, an ecological approach to understanding how children adjust within different family structures, and consider the advantages of taking this approach to the development of practice and policy. Key messages for policy and practice will be highlighted.

## Attachment Theory Revisited

Most professionals working with children and families in Western cultures will be familiar with attachment theory, most probably in its initial formulations by Bowlby (1951, 1969). John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist, developed a highly influential framework which encapsulates the effects of initial attachment formation on a child's subsequent emotional, social and cognitive development whilst offering a theoretical perspective on development across the life course. Bowlby (1969, p. 94) defined attachment as a 'psychological connectedness between two human beings'. Attachment theory suggests that infants elicit proximity-seeking behaviours from their attachment figures to ensure survival and fulfilment of their needs; this in turn assists the development of the internal working model, which promotes lifelong emotional development (Bolen, 2000). Failure to form stable attachments within a 'critical period' (usually thought to be up to the end of the first year of life) may result in behavioural, social, cognitive and emotional difficulties in later life (Atwool, 2006). Several aspects of attachment theory as they were initially put forward have been challenged by a vast body of research. These are shown in the box below and will be summarised in turn.

### Challenges to attachment theory

1. The role of mothers *vis-à-vis* fathers as primary caregivers.
2. The critical period of early attachment.
3. The continuity of attachment across the lifespan.

#### The role of mothers *vis-à-vis* fathers as primary caregivers

Bowlby (1969) initially proposed that the primary caregiving role is assumed by the mother, consequently neglecting the importance of the father in child development. Until some decades afterwards the importance of fathers as caregivers was not explored (Lamb, 1987, 2010), and recent reviews (Mercer, 2011) offer insightful evidence that challenge and revolutionise the basic tenets and core assumptions of attachment theory. Whilst attachment remains conceptualised as an intimate emotional bond between infant and caregiver, Mercer establishes that bonds can be formed with any person who provides long-lasting connectedness with the child, and that these are not necessarily restricted to a mother-child relationship.

#### The critical period of early attachment

The importance of the critical period of attachment during the first year of life has been challenged. Rutter (2002) argued that, given the right circumstances, new attachments can be formed when children are placed in a positive stable environment, enabling children to benefit from interventions such as adoption. Such conclusions are well supported by adoption research, including research on the adoption of children who have experienced severe neglect and abuse or institutionalisation (Chisholm, 1998;

Garvin *et al.*, 2012; Rutter *et al.*, 2007a, 2010; Smyke *et al.*, 2010). The importance of the environment is accentuated when examining the influences on child development, supporting arguments that children can develop and thrive in non-biological families and shedding new light on debates about the role of same-gender carers and children conceived as a result of assisted reproduction technologies.

### The continuity of attachment across the lifespan

The assumption that internal working models are fixed throughout the life course (Bowlby, 1969) has had important implications for child development research, particularly as family structures have changed and continue to transition to include non-traditional arrangements. Recent research (reviewed by Mercer, 2011) challenges this notion, asserting that the child's internal working models are flexible and have the ability to adapt to new environments. These conclusions have been reinforced by studies of Romanian institutionalised children, who, despite their previous lack of early stable attachment relationships, were able to form attachments after placement within adoptive families, even though some of these attachments displayed features of 'indiscriminate friendliness' (Chisholm, 1998; Chisholm *et al.*, 1995). Research studies that followed up these children into their teens (Rutter *et al.*, 2007a) show that features of disinhibited attachment (such as indiscriminate friendliness) were reduced in frequency at age 11 (Rutter *et al.*, 2007b), and a quarter of the children who displayed 'quasi-autistic' features lost these as they were growing into their teenage years (Rutter *et al.*, 2007c). Overall longitudinal research attests to the remarkable resilience in these children's development. Recent reports on children at age 15 indicate that although some features of the effects of institutional deprivation persist, positive, major changes took place, such as the fading of the autistic features and problematic social disinhibition (Rutter *et al.*, 2010), reinforcing the fact that the effects of institutional deprivation are by no means fixed and irreversible. The evidence, then, suggests that poor early attachment experiences may not irreversibly hamper social and emotional adjustment as was once believed.

Public policy and practice in the UK and worldwide have embraced the original principles of attachment theory, and these have influenced child welfare systems and childcare policies, including custody decisions and adoption and fostering policies, for over 50 years. However, the challenges presented by increasingly diverse family structures (Walker, 2008), coupled with advances in current attachment theory, prompt a rethink of how decisions 'in the best interest of the child' are made. The current drive for evidence-based practice and a more highly skilled child workforce will hopefully provide the framework for a more positive integration of theory and practice.

## **Towards an Ecological Perspective in Understanding Child Development**

This chapter proposes an alternative perspective for exploring the impact of family structure on child development. The bio-ecological model, also known as ecological systems theory, provides an evolving theoretical approach for human development, advocating that the objective and subjective elements of an individual and their environment

dynamically drive their development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Comprehensive in its nature, the bio-ecological model consists of several hierarchical systems, the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chronosystems that interrelate to influence human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), as indicated in the box below.

### Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development

The ecological model of development was put forward by Urie Bronfenbrenner, a distinguished American developmental psychologist, also well-known as a co-founder of the Head Start programme in the USA for disadvantaged pre-school children. His ecological systems model identifies five levels of environment that interact with an individual's development:

1. *Microsystem*. Comprises factors that impact directly on the child's development (e.g. family, school, peers, etc.).
2. *Mesosystem*. Refers to relations between microsystems (e.g. the relationship between parents and school).
3. *Exosystem*. Involves factors from the larger social system that impact on the child's development by interacting with a structure in the microsystem (e.g. community resources).
4. *Macrosystem*. Refers to the cultural contexts in which individuals live, including cultural values, customs, and laws (e.g. socioeconomic status, poverty, ethnicity, etc.).
5. *Chronosystem*. Encompasses the time dimension and transitions over the life course, as well as socio-historical circumstances.

An individual's own biology may be considered to be part of the microsystem, thus creating the 'bio-ecological model'. The bio-ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been applied to investigations of an array of developmental processes and to examinations of the ways in which multi-dimensional environments and a variety of family patterns shape child development, adjustment and wellbeing (Evans and Wachs, 2011). For example, Pedrosa *et al.* (2011) explored the ecology of adolescent adjustment and development, concluding that developmental processes are primarily associated with familial influences and relational variables. Similarly, friendship duration has been examined through the application of the ecological model to provide a framework for development.

Troutman and Fletcher (2010) advocated that individual development is influenced by direct interactions with family (process), the characteristics of the individual (person), the context in which development occurs (context), and changes over time (time), supporting the notion that peer relationships are dynamic and influenced by time and context. This understanding has important implications for developmental research: since peer relationships are context-specific and shaped by change over time, this may also hold true for child development within different types of families.

The reconceptualised tenets of Bowlby's attachment theory suggest that internal working models are flexible and susceptible to change in various environments (Mercer, 2011). Evans and Wachs (2011) reinforced this notion and emphasised the importance

of the environment, suggesting that chaos and dysfunctional relationships can occur within any given environment. Therefore it may be conceivable that the emphasis on ‘family’ may be overstated, while the role of the ‘environment’ might be more salient.

In order to understand fully the ecology of child development and the implications of various family patterns on developmental processes, it is important to unravel the micro- and mesosystems in more detail, and we examine these in turn below. The remaining hierarchical environments in the ecological model of development—although not considered here in detail—filter down through to the individual and are influential regarding the processes involved in the first two hierarchical stages. The exosystem considers the social context in which children develop, for instance the social settings children engage with. The macrosystem envisages the cultural context (socio-economic status, poverty, ethnicity, public policy) that shapes the development of the child.

### The Microsystem

At the micro level, the immediate environmental processes that influence child development include the relationship between the child and his or her parents as a unified structure. However, the microsystem further explores the role of the mother–child relationship independent of the father, and vice versa, to clarify the unique contribution each parent makes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Moreover, the role of siblings, extended family and day care/schooling arrangements may be considered in light of the effects on child development. Quality of relationship with the immediate family profoundly impacts on how children continue to develop during periods of stability or change (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

#### The traditional family unit

There has been a long-held belief that the traditional family, consisting of two parents and their biological children, is the best environment for raising children (Lansford *et al.*, 2001). It is important, therefore, to consider further the microsystem of the traditional family unit and its impact on child development, and to ask the question ‘How important is the traditional two-parent household on children’s wellbeing?’ It is well-established that children growing up in a traditional two-parent household exhibit more enhanced development, particularly within the social, cognitive and emotional aspects of child development, than children living in diverse family structures (Amato, 2005). Likewise, the quality of attachment towards two parents enhances children’s wellbeing across the life course (Liu, 2006) and further assists the stabilisation of romantic relationships and peer friendships in adolescence (Dykas *et al.*, 2006). Alternatively, evidence from meta-analysis posits that both parents may influence the development of mental health disturbances, in the presence of maternal and/or paternal psychopathology, which suggests that the mother and father are equally influential on child development (Connell and Goodman, 2002).

Exposure to a positive, stable environment offers the child a greater opportunity to develop security and a secure attachment to both parents, which consequently enhances academic competence (Diener *et al.*, 2007) and emotional wellbeing (Baxter *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, Magnuson and Berger (2007) advocate that a stable two-parent

household is likely to earn significantly more income, achieve a better socio-economic status and live in a higher-quality environment, all of which are assets to child development. Moreover, a unified mother–father relationship facilitates child development by offering two role models, enhanced supervision and stability (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999), which act as protective factors against substance misuse, violence and risky behaviour (Barratt and Turner, 2006). Involvement with two parents optimises development and psychological wellbeing, especially in quality relationships (Bulando and Majumdar, 2008). Similarly, stable long-term autonomous parenting enhances adjustment to social situations and also influences gender behaviour (Kouvo and Silvén, 2010). These themes are illustrated in the box below.

### **The potential advantages of living in a two-parent family**

Three themes emerge from the research on children living in a two-parent family:

1. Children living in a two-parent household have better outcomes than their peers who do not (Lansford *et al.*, 2001).
2. Children have the opportunity to benefit from two role models (Barratt and Turner, 2006).
3. Living in a stable two-parent family environment enhances the development of secure attachments, which the mesosystem reinforces (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Analysis at the micro level offers only a partial view of the role of the mothers and fathers in child development, however. As much research on divorce has shown (see e.g. Chapter 16, this volume), the relationship between parents is crucial in determining the influence that parents have on their children. This will be explored further at the mesosystem level.

## **The Mesosystem**

Beyond the microsystem, a study at the mesosystem level shows how different family structures may impact on children's development and adjustment in the light of newly emerging family structures (Palacios, 2009). Dramatic shifts in family arrangements have increased single parenthood and reduced the number of multi-generational households in industrialised societies (Ginsburg, 2007). By considering the mesosystem it is possible to examine child development relating to children living in a range of family structures. Thus, we can consider children whose parents are cohabiting, divorced, remarried or gay or lesbian, as well as children who are adopted. The microsystem and the mesosystem are salient for the understanding of child adjustment in diverse family structures because they take account of the immediate environment and the interrelation of contexts in relation to the child (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Palacios, 2009).

### Cohabiting and conflictual couples

There are no significant differences between the contributions to child development made by cohabiting and married parents (Liu, 2006). The development of children growing up with cohabiting parents has been shown to be considerably better than that of children who have minimal contact with one parent and, perhaps more importantly, children of cohabiting parents do not fare worse than children of married parents (Heiland and Liu, 2006).

Exposure to high conflict in any kind of family increases the psychological distress experienced by children, which in turn impacts on the child's sense of security (Harold *et al.*, 2004). Exposure to observed and covert conflict impacts on the parental relationship and, consequently, hinders child adjustment (Finger *et al.*, 2009). This has important implications for child adjustment. Irrespective of marital status, the evidence suggests that parental conflict is far more damaging to the child's wellbeing in increasing the risk of behavioural disturbances, psycho-social problems and poor adjustment (Pedro-Carroll, 2001). Consequently, a stable environment enhances positive child development and adjustment (Amato, 2005).

### Single parenthood: mothers and fathers

Research exploring the impact on children of living in single-parent households is less consistent (see Chapter 12, this volume). Single parenthood, whether through choice, death, or separation and divorce, is shown to have adverse consequences on child development and adjustment (Belsky and Pasco-Fearon, 2011). However, while there is greater risk of ambivalent behaviour and conflict than in two-parent households, research shows that children simultaneously experience greater intimacy with their parent (Walker and Hennig, 1997). Growing up in a single-parent household further emphasises the independent roles played by mothers and fathers.

Parental separation is a significant contributing factor to single parenthood (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001; Ginsburg, 2007). Amato (2005) ascertained that children in single-parent families experience weaker relationships with their primary parent, and exhibit less secure attachments than their peers whose families remain intact (Hamilton, 2000). These impacts are closely associated with conflict. Risk factors associated with divorce heighten the prevalence of behavioural problems among children and adolescents (Pasco Fearon and Belsky, 2011). When the parental relationship is hostile post-separation, this environment has negative consequences for the child's emotional wellbeing (Baxter *et al.*, 2011). The risks of children of divorced parents engaging in delinquent behaviour and leaving education early are three times those of children of non-divorced parents doing so (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999), indicating that there are significant disadvantages relating to lone parenting, parental conflict and economic hardship (Carlson and Corcoran, 2001). Moreover, children with divorced parents are at risk of unresolved attachment representations in adolescence and adulthood, subsequently affecting their own romantic relationships and peer friendships (Aikins *et al.*, 2009).

Sharing close relationships with siblings and other kin, by contrast, aids adjustment to parental separation and negative life events (Ainsworth, 1989). Child development is significantly associated with the time and attention that the child receives from its parents or caregiver. Magnuson and Berger (2007) argue that single parents are

significantly disadvantaged with regard to parenting in terms of the time they can give to their children. As a result of parental separation, time for lone parents to engage in play with their child is reduced, which has a major impact on the child's social, emotional and cognitive development (Ginsburg, 2007).

### Single mothers

The assumption that the mother assumes the role of the primary caregiver (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969) has heavily influenced public policy and custodial arrangements when parents separate, with the result that the majority of children live with their mothers and spend less time with their fathers (Stevenson and Black, 1988). A positive maternal attitude has been shown to alleviate the negative effects of parental divorce (Ricciuti, 2004), indicating that the stability of the new environment is influential on child adjustment and wellbeing. The role of the mother has been shown to be highly important in peer relationships, particularly influencing friendship quality in childhood and assisting social and emotional development across the life course (McElwain and Volling, 2004; Steele, 2002).

Nevertheless, transitioning to a single-mother household increases the risk of a child having behavioural problems during childhood, which can escalate to affect emotional adjustment (Magnuson and Berger, 2007). Furthermore, single mothers are susceptible to poverty, which increases the risk of alcohol misuse, and both of these factors have major implications for children's adjustment and development (O'Connor *et al.*, 2002). In turn, poverty and scarcity of economic resources significantly affect the child's cognitive and emotional wellbeing and adjustment (Ram and Hou, 2003).

### The role of the father in child development

After decades of an exclusive focus on mother-child relationships, researchers have come to recognise the important roles that fathers play in socialising their children (see Lamb, 2010, for a review). Most fathers and father figures have a significant impact on children's development, both directly and indirectly. Fathers in heterosexual couples, and increasingly those in gay relationships, are taking a more active role in child rearing.

Evidence from research that has explored the importance of the father-child relationship has increased significantly in recent decades. While there is evidence that the absence of a father does not necessarily hinder child development (MacCallum and Golombok, 2004), critics argue that lack of a father figure hinders emotional wellbeing and promotes exposure to hostile environments (Magnuson and Berger, 2007). The risk of aggressive behaviour is more prevalent among sons whose father is absent than among sons who have stable or frequent contact with their father (Lewis and Lamb, 2003). This supports more recent findings that children who receive greater paternal support exhibit fewer aggressive tendencies (Harper *et al.*, 2006). Although some research has minimised the importance of the father-child relationship, Allgood *et al.* (2012) have highlighted the profound positive effect fathers have on their child's self-esteem, independence and psychological wellbeing. Lone fathers bringing up children can claim to promote significant benefits for children's romantic relationships and their social and emotional development (Hall, 2009). Single fathers offer

protection for their children and enable positive adjustment, particularly among sons who are able to relate to their father (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Moreover, the father's role is crucial for learning about the outer social world and developing peer relationships in adolescence (Steele, 2002), and for assisting the child's development (Lewis and Lamb, 2003) and wellbeing (Wilson and Prior, 2010). Fathers have a critical role to play in providing care for their child. As fathers frequently report feeling emotionally detached from their child in the presence of the mother (Miall and March, 2005), providing the child with a secure paternal relationship benefits the child's socio-emotional development and adjustment (Lewis and Lamb, 2003).

Conversely, the lack of a maternal influence significantly hampers child development, particularly for young girls. For example, adolescent girls have reported difficulties in approaching their lone father about personal issues which they would typically discuss with their mother (Kalman, 2003). The research indicates that both parents are equally important contributors to child development and that the absence of either parent can have detrimental effects on a child's wellbeing.

Various single-parent arrangements reinforce the importance of the environment and the significance of stability on child development (Baxter *et al.*, 2011). More important than the family structure *per se* is the quality of the environment that parents provide, whether stable or hostile, which predicts child development and adjustment (Evans and Wachs, 2011; Gunnar *et al.*, 2000; Lansford *et al.*, 2001; Rutter, 2002).

The evidence suggests that mothers and fathers are equally important in shaping child development. However, in the absence of one parent, adverse effects can be overcome if the transitioning environment is stable and positive (Baxter *et al.*, 2011). When children move into a harmonious environment having experienced a conflictual parental divorce, they are likely to exhibit fewer behavioural problems (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Such transitions may include moving into a stepfamily owing to the remarriage or repartnering of one or both birth parents or more harmonious shared care arrangements between the parents. How these transitions are managed is critically important for child development.

In respect of parenting post-divorce or post-separation, finding the solution which is 'in the best interests of the child' presents many challenges. While parent-child contact after parental separation receives paramount consideration in judicial decisions, recent research evidence from Australia indicates that shared childcare (defined as childcare taking place five nights or more per fortnight) post-divorce or post-separation is developmentally challenging for infants and pre-school children (McIntosh *et al.*, 2010). This new evidence is important, as it identifies the developmental stage of the child as an important factor in children's outcomes in shared post-separation arrangements:

... regardless of socio-economic background, parenting or inter-parental cooperation, shared overnight care of children under four years of age had an independent and deleterious impact on several emotional and behavioral regulation outcomes ... By kindergarten or school entry at around age 4–5 years of age, these effects were no longer evident. (McIntosh *et al.*, 2010, p. 9)

These findings have important implications for policy and practice, unequivocally placing the developmental needs of the child at the centre of decisions on childcare arrangements post-divorce or separation.

## Stepfamilies

The effect of stepfamily life on children's development is unclear, as research has so far failed to draw a clear conclusion. Family transitions become problematic for child wellbeing and adjustment when there is heightened stress, a change in family roles and ongoing familial conflict (Magnuson and Berger, 2007). The complexities of stepfamily arrangements are more apparent when the step-parent also has children from a previous relationship. This complexity is more likely to be associated with adjustment problems and poor psychological wellbeing for children living in complex stepfamilies than for those living in non-complex stepfamilies (Dunn, 2002).

Wagmiller *et al.* (2010) have challenged previous negative findings relating to stepfamilies, suggesting that mothers from advantaged single-parent households who remarry facilitate their child's academic achievement since their children re-enter a unified household that provides a more stable environment. Conversely, adjustment problems as a result of acquiring a stepfamily tend to change the parent-child relationship and maintain residual conflict (Dunn, 2002). Consequently, Saint-Jacques and colleagues (2006) have reported that stepfamilies increase children's vulnerability to behavioural problems, although these are usually short-lived, and in the long term are reduced.

The negative effects of family transitions can be overcome when step-parents offer support to their stepchildren (Kinniburgh-White *et al.*, 2010), but if step-parents portray dominance this can increase adjustment difficulties, conflict and the risk of emotional and behavioural problems (Cartwright *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, an increasingly negative relationship with stepfamilies reduces attachment security (Planitz *et al.*, 2009). Research suggests that the effects of transitioning to a new family structure affects children differently, and some may develop resilience to the impact of changes which accompany family reorganisation, thereby negating adverse childhood experiences (Magnuson and Berger, 2007).

## Adoption and child development

A fundamental question in applied child development research is whether children can develop normally in terms of their psychological, emotional and social wellbeing after experiencing abuse and neglect and, consequently, having been removed from their birth families and placed in state care or with foster parents, or having been adopted. Researchers are essentially interested in how adopted children engage with their microsystem (school and family life) and how their past experience impacts on their later development, including how their internal working models coexist with the internal working models of their adoptive parents (Palacios, 2009).

The evidence indicates that a positive caregiving environment has the ability to reverse the effects of neglect and deprivation and assist normal child development (Smyke *et al.*, 2010). This suggests that past experiences need not hamper a child's future development and adjustment. Moreover, parenting quality can mediate the potentially detrimental effects of early institutionalisation (Garvin *et al.*, 2012), especially if the child is adopted before reaching the age of 2, as they are still able to form a secure attachment within this early critical period (Smyke *et al.*, 2010).

On the basis of Bowlby's original (1969) assumptions, adoption policy and practice maintain that failure to initiate a bond with or separation from the primary caregiver within the first two years of life has detrimental consequences for the child's social and emotional development (Chisholm, 1995). However, as the tenets of attachment theory have evolved, new light has been shed on the understanding of adoption and attachment. While research into the effects of institutionalisation among Romanian children has highlighted the importance of attachment formation (Audet and Mare, 2010), evidence pertaining to the assumption of attachment continuity is not uniform.

Child institutionalisation reportedly hinders the ability to form an attachment (Stein, 2006), so that later exposure to a positive environment cannot always negate impaired development because the increased risk of developmental disorders prevails (Audet and Mare, 2010). Likewise, long-term absence of a primary caregiver increases antisocial behaviour and the risk of irreversible developmental consequences (Muris and Maas, 2004). It is well established that attachment insecurity remains higher among adopted than among non-adopted children (Feeney *et al.*, 2007). Yet, despite many children continuing to exhibit socio-emotional difficulties, problem behaviour and cognitive delays, these effects can be eradicated by post-adoption care when the child is exposed to a positive and stable environment (Gunnar *et al.*, 2000). Palacios *et al.* (2011) proposed that adoption offers a remarkable opportunity to facilitate positive child development and overcome past negative experiences.

### Gay and lesbian parenthood

The impact of same-gender parenthood is the focus of Chapter 13 in this volume. Here we summarise the main messages from a child development perspective. Many of the negative stereotypes about gay or lesbian parenting have been challenged by research conducted over the past three decades (Anderssen *et al.*, 2002; Tasker, 2005). A strong body of empirical evidence, emerging in particular from studies of lesbian-headed families, indicates that children with same-gender parents are indistinguishable from children with heterosexual parents with respect to their psychological adjustment, quality of peer relationships and psychosexual development. Moreover, children raised by lesbian women do not develop more poorly than children in general and, indeed, they experience family lives which are very similar to those experienced by children in heterosexual families (Tasker, 2005). As is the case in heterosexual families, the quality of the couple relationship is a strong predictor of the quality of children's adjustment (see e.g. Bos, 2004; Brewaeys *et al.*, 1997; Chan *et al.*, 1998; Patterson *et al.* 2004). Research on outcomes for children raised in same-gender families has progressed our understanding of children's social development by highlighting the importance of factors such as family harmony, and by raising questions about the presumed importance of same-sex and heterosexual role models in shaping gender development and the development of sexual preferences (Golombok and Tasker, 1996). Research on the impact of same-gender families in respect of child development does not detract from the importance of mothers or fathers in child development, but highlights ways in which different gender roles are provided through extended family, kin and social networks.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

For many years, attachment theory influenced social policy and the child welfare system (Walker, 2008) and new assumptions, research findings and reformulations have not always filtered into practice. In the light of new evidence, we can see that the quality of the home environment and the quality of the relationship with the caregiver both facilitate positive child development more than the type of family structure in which children live (Baxter *et al.*, 2011): a positive and stable environment has the ability to negate the harmful effects of family transitions and divorce, and any damaging experiences before adoption (Diener *et al.*, 2007; Liu, 2006). Despite the need to reconceptualise attachment theory's basic assumptions and understand that attachment styles are not inflexible across the life course, so that the sooner a deprived child is moved into a harmonious environment the sooner they can readjust, in reality the primacy of birth parents is frequently maintained to the detriment of children's well-being. Research recognises the important role that both mothers and fathers play in child development (Amato, 2005), but, as the traditional family structure is changing, it is important to adequately support alternative family structures, including those involving single parents, stepfamilies and same-gender parents.

The evidence reviewed in this chapter has important implications for child welfare policy and practice. An ecological perspective that is child-centred contributes to a holistic understanding of how families, in all their variety of forms, influence child development. Such a perspective will support child-centred practice and policy. With an adequate environment and appropriate and stable care, children will thrive. The quality of the family environment, including the relationship between the parents, whether living in the same household or sharing parenting after separation, is a key factor for the healthy adjustment, development and wellbeing of children. However, it is equally imperative that judicial decisions, and in particular post-separation parenting arrangements, take into account the ages and developmental stages of children.

The existing evidence supports the idea that both mothers and fathers are equally important in child development and that this should be acknowledged. This has implications for decisions about the provision of childcare and family support, or about family support, which all too often tend to be mother-centred in practice. Equally, the evidence should not be interpreted too narrowly in practice—as evidence from research on same-gender families shows, same-sex parents can provide an environment in which children may thrive. At a time when many governments are seeking to support parents and families so that they can ensure healthy outcomes for children, four key messages from the research need to be taken into account:

1. An ecological perspective that is child-centred contributes to a holistic understanding of how families, in all their variety of forms, influence child development.
2. Such a perspective will support child-centred policy and practice.
3. The quality of the family environment, including the relationship between the parents, whether living in the same household or sharing parenting after separation, is a key factor for the healthy adjustment, development and wellbeing of children.
4. Taking into consideration the developmental age/stage of the child is paramount when making decisions in the best interests of the child.

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