

# Is This Diversity, Or Tragedy? Children as Victims of their Parents' Choices

by Dale O'Leary

## Buying Mother

A little boy was created by surrogate motherhood for two homosexual men who had decided they wanted to have a family. "Daddy" and his partner Don, twenty years younger, had arranged an artificial insemination with a woman who agreed to relinquish her parental rights in exchange for health care and financial compensation.

Researcher Barbara Eisold describes some of the child's trauma in an article entitled "Recreating Mother" (1).

Lacking a mother of his own, the child, Nick, was cared for by a hired nanny. He began attending school when he was only two. When he was two, the nanny was abruptly fired and replaced. The replacement was also fired, and a third nanny hired. Then the men adopted a second child.

At age four, Nick began acting out and was sent to a female child psychologist -- the fifth mother-substitute hired by his fathers. Nick lived in a world where "mommies" were hired and fired, so he fantasized about buying a new mother.

The therapist described his desperate struggle to understand family relationships. She said,

"Nick was often beside himself with anxiety. He wanted desperately to be liked by other children and by [his teacher]. He had trouble waiting, and was not certain about what would make him likable."

## The Evidence: Mother-Hunger May Be Innate

Eisold asks: "How do we explain why this child, the son of a male couple, seemed to need to construct a woman -- "Mother" -- with whom he could play the role of a loving boy/man? How did such an idea enter his mind? What inspired his intensity on the subject?" And she wondered how the boy's psychological construction of the missing, longed-for mother affected his gender-identity development.

Eisold sees some normal, programmed developmental forces at work in a boy who has no mother: if he has none, he will need to make one. This must be part of what it means to be human: children need both mothers and fathers, and this need seems not to be constructed, but biologically mandated.

## Mother-Hunger is Seen by Deconstructionists as "Gender Bias" Created by Society

But her article is critiqued in the same journal by Karen Saakvitne (2), who insists Eisold is applying cultural biases about gender, sexual orientation, attachment, and separation to this child's longing for a mother. Saakvitne sees the child's need for a mother, and his need to make sense of the world in which he has been forced to live, as something imposed on him by a society filled with mere assumptions and biases about gender. She faults Eisold for accepting those biases.

Although the social-constructionist sees gender as something created by society, a great body of evidence reveals that children do best in homes with both mothers and fathers. Such exposure helps the child to fully develop his own sexual identity and to relate to persons of both sexes in the real world. New research on the way in which the brain functions suggests that this need for a close relationship with persons of both sexes is not a mere social preference, but a response to a biological imperative (3).

## Mom and Dad Are Not Interchangeable

Henry Biller has studied parent-child interaction and compared his findings with other work in the field (4). He says:

"Differences between the mother and father can be very stimulating to the infant, even those that might appear quite superficial to the adult. Even if the father and mother behave in generally similar ways, they provide contrasting images for the infant. The father is usually larger than the mother, his voice is deeper, his clothes are not the same, and he moves and reacts differently...The infant also learns that different people can be expected to fulfill different needs. For example, the infant may prefer the mother when hungry or tired, and the father when seeking stimulation of more active play.

"The infant who receives verbal as well as physical stimulation from both mother and father profits from the experience...Mothers and fathers, in addition to having distinctive sounding voices, have different verbal styles when communicating to infants and children as well as to other adults. Such differences provide the infant with an important source of stimulation and learning (p. 12).

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Biller added:

"Because some of my initial findings suggested that father absence during the first few years of life might inhibit certain aspects of the child's development, I began to observe more closely parent-infant relationships in various types of two-parent families. I discovered that when they are involved with infants, fathers tend to be more physically active with them than mothers are, playing more vigorously. This seems to be not only because fathers may be less concerned with their children's fragility, especially if they have sons, but also because they themselves have more of a need for physically stimulating activities (p. 12).

"It was also apparent that infants with involved fathers formed strong paternal attachments--and were usually at a developmental advantage, compared to those who had close relationships only with their mothers...

"Involved fathers are more likely to stimulate the infant to explore and investigate new objects, whereas mothers tend to engage their infants in relatively prestructured and predictable activities (p. 13).

"In the second year of life, the boys began to demonstrate more interest in interaction with their fathers, although the girls did not display any consistent preferences. **In fact, by the end of the second year, all except one of the boys seemed to have a stronger paternal than maternal attachment** [emphasis added]...(p. 14).

"Infants who have two positively involved parents tend to be more curious and eager to explore than those who do not have a close relationship with their fathers... Well-fathered infants are more secure and trusting in branching out in their explorations, and they may be somewhat more advanced in crawling, climbing and manipulating objects" (p. 15).

Advocates of gay marriage and adoption have admitted that it may be better for a child to have two parents than one, but argue that the sex of the two parents is irrelevant—two men or two women, they say, are just as good (or better) than opposite-sexed parents. But Biller discusses research which appears to refute that claim, in which teenage unwed mothers were studied. Biller says:

"Developmental psychology researcher Norma Radin

and her colleagues (Radin, Oyserman, and Benn, 1991) have collected especially provocative evidence concerning the special significance of paternal involvement for infants and toddlers. They studied grandparent/ grandchild relationships in predominantly working-class households in which adolescent unwed mothers were living with one or both of their parents.

"Overall, young children who had positively involved grandfathers displayed more competent behavior than those with relatively uninvolved grandfathers or absent grandfathers. Although other researchers have sometimes noted the contribution of the grandmother to the development of the child living in a single-mother family, Radin reported no clear-cut impact, suggesting a *redundancy between the two forms of maternal influence* [italics added].

"On the other hand, the grandfather's nurturance seemed to contribute in several ways to the young child's adaptability. His observed nurturance was associated with infants being more responsive to maternal

requests, and with the cognitive competence of two-year-olds. Furthermore, relatively high grandfather involvement in child care was related to observations of less fear, anger and distress being displayed by one-year-olds, especially boys (Biller 1993).

"Removed from their fathers, it seems evident that children suffer."

Although some of that suffering will be observed by researchers during the subjects' childhood, we might speculate that more suffering will be seen in an interior sense of loss that will hamper the person's ability to form secure and intimate attachments in adulthood.

#### Endnotes

- (1) Eisold, B., 1998, Recreating mother: The consolidation of 'heterosexual' gender identification in the young son of homosexual men. *American J. of Orthopsychiatry* 68,3:433-442.
- (2) Saakvitne, K., 1998, Recreating mother: A commentary on the case analysis. *American J. of Orthopsychiatry* 68,3:443-446.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Biller, H. (1993) *Fathers and Families: Paternal Factors in Child Development*. Westport, CT: Auburn House.

### Is Mother-Hunger a Social Construction, or a Response to a Biological Imperative?