

Professor Susan Golombok
Director



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE

Centre for Family Research

Free School Lane
Cambridge CB2 3RQ
United Kingdom

OFFICE: +44 (0)1223 334510

FAX: +44 (0)1223 330574

E-MAIL: cfr-admin@lists.cam.ac.uk

Ms Helsing-Puts,
Clerk,
Standing Committee on Security and Justice,
House of Representatives of the States General,
The Netherlands.

16th January, 2017.

Dear Ms Helsing-Puts,

Re: Child and parents in the 21st century.

Thank you for inviting me to comment on the Report of the Government Committee on the Reassessment of Parenthood which I found extremely interesting. I thought it would be most appropriate for me to respond to the issues in the report that are most closely related to my areas of expertise and interest: (i) Definition of good parenting (ii) Disclosure of children's genetic and/or gestational origins, and (iii) Multi-parenting.

Good parenting

I did not see the earlier chapter in which I presume a rationale was presented for the seven core elements of "good parenting". However, I felt that greater emphasis could have been placed on the psychological welfare of the child. Point 3, which referred to 'care for bodily welfare', could perhaps be amended to 'care for bodily and psychological welfare' as lack of care for children's psychological wellbeing can be just as damaging to children as lack of care for their physical needs. There is a large body of psychological research showing that parenting involving positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness is associated with positive outcomes for children whereas lack of engagement, conflict and hostility can have a negative effect. In its extreme form, negative parenting involving physical or sexual abuse or neglect can have severe and long-lasting deleterious psychological consequences for children.

In addition, I was a little unsure of what was meant by point 6, 'the creation of a parent-child identity', but this may have been lost in translation. Certainly, an important aspect of good parenting involves facilitating the child's sense of a secure and positive identity.

Finally, a good relationship between the parents themselves has been shown to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of children. The quality of the parental relationship has not been mentioned and could possibly be included (this could include positive post-divorce relationships in which parents work together regarding the best interests of their children).

Disclosure of children's genetic and/or gestational origins

The creation of an Origin Story Register is a bold move that is likely to enhance the wellbeing of children born through third-party reproduction, as children or adults conceived through reproductive donation (gamete donation and/or surrogacy) would be able to obtain information about their origins, including identifying information, should they so wish.

However, repealing the minimum age limit for access to the ROG may produce difficulties for some families. It is known that some young donor-conceived children wish to obtain information about their origins and benefit from doing so. Indeed, many search for this information with the assistance of their parents. However, giving young children the legal right to search for a donor or surrogate against the wishes of their parents, or in families that are experiencing difficulties, takes families into uncharted waters. It is conceivable that, in some cases, this would reduce parents' confidence and effectiveness as parents. Although the child would receive social and psychological support in relation to their request for information, this could result in unwanted third-party involvement in family life and undermine parental authority.

Multi-parenting

The proposals regarding multi-parenting seem the most radical. The emphasis on the intention to parent and the relationship with the child is welcome as it takes account of actual day-to-day parenting rather than simply the presence or absence of a biological connection to the child. This could be advantageous for the child because enabling up to four parents in two households to be legal parents would mean that all of the parents who care for the child would have an equal status regarding the child as well as responsibilities for the child's welfare. This may provide greater security and stability for the child.

However, multi-parent families range from those in which four parents are highly involved in parenting, with the children spending equal amounts of time in each household, to families in which the children live primarily in one household, with only occasional contact with the parent/s from the other household. There is no empirical research on the social and psychological consequences for children of multi-parenting arrangements in which the biological parents are not, and do not intend to be, in an intimate, loving and cohabiting relationship. A loving relationship between parents gives children emotional security and is associated with a good quality of parenting as the parents are not distracted by conflict between themselves. On the other hand, many couples separate or divorce, often resulting in hostility between them and psychological difficulties for children. In multi-parent families, the psychological consequences for children of the absence of a loving relationship between parents is, as yet, unknown. Moreover, if it turns out that there is a high incidence of parenting breakdown in multi-parent families, leading to complicated parental disputes and/or the disruption of relationships between one or more parents and the child, this is

likely to be problematic for the children concerned, just as parental separation or divorce by couples is problematic, but possibly more so with more parents involved.

Overall, this is a hugely impressive and wide-ranging report that genuinely engages with new family structures with the welfare of the child at its heart. Although I am not an expert on the law, the greater emphasis on family relationships than on family structure appears to be a radical and highly innovative departure from existing law, and reflects contemporary understanding of the processes that are most influential in children's psychological wellbeing. I did not comment on the section on surrogacy as I agreed with the proposals for regulation including children's access to the ROG. This report is so ground-breaking that it precedes the availability of empirical data on the outcomes for children of being raised in some of the emerging family arrangements that are the subject of the report. The Committee have acknowledged this and are to be commended for stressing the urgent need for research on these families to establish what actually happens to the parents and children involved.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "S. Golombok". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Professor Susan Golombok BSc, MA Cantab, MSc, PhD

Director