The formula for the 21st century dad - More nurture: less nature

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Being the genetic father of a child should not necessarily entitle men to parenting rights according to a new study by researchers from the University of Birmingham.

The study, which surveyed the opinions of men with a wide range of different experiences of fatherhood, found that most believe that meaningful fatherhood comes through providing care and support to a child, and not from a biological connection except in an “obvious and unimportant” sense.

This goes against the current legal trend of ascribing paternal responsibilities and rights based on genetics.

The study, funded by a grant from the Wellcome Trust, is published in the current edition of Clinical Ethics, a journal of the Royal Society of Medicine.

The 12 focus groups run by the team from the Birmingham University's Centre for Biomedical Ethics included men who are separated from their children, teenagers and men who have experienced unplanned or unwanted pregnancy. The researchers also spoke to men who had been sperm donors, and men who live in a traditional family unit with their children.

The project was set up to find out what men thought fatherhood means, with a particular emphasis on exploring the importance of having a genetic connection in the father/child relationship.

Lead author Jon Ives explains, "Father’s Day is one of the few times of the year when we are encouraged to really think about what it means to be a father. It is very important that we do so, particularly considering the ways in which emerging reproductive technologies, changes in the legislation governing assisted conception and the continuing emergence of new family forms can challenge traditional understandings of fatherhood.

"All the groups of men that we spoke to felt strongly that to be a father in a meaningful sense you have to provide more than the genetic material

"Being a father meant playing a role in caring, providing and protecting a child. The men felt that this should take precedence over genetics in giving men a say in a child’s life

"The only men who seemed to feel differently were men who were separated from their children – who regarded the genetic link as more important because it acted as a lifeline between them and their children, which could not be broken or usurped.

"However, even these separated fathers shared the view that fatherhood itself was more properly defined as ‘being there’ for the child, not simply creating it.

The men did feel that becoming a ‘father’ to a child gave rise to a responsibility to support the child, but rejected the notion that a man can earn the rights to be involved in a child’s life simply by paying child support.

One participant in the focus groups commented: “I think a computer could provide the basic needs for a child really, couldn’t it? It could provide the warmth, the food, the shelter, but if the love and the understanding and the time and the patience and the care isn’t there then it’s just some kind of automaton, just churning out kids.”

The researchers found that absent fathers felt much more strongly than other groups that the biological father should have an inalienable right to be involved in a child’s life.

Dr Ives continues: “The opinions of the men we spoke to are potentially very significant for the family court. Maybe we need to re-consider the current legal position that tends to assign paternity - responsibilities and rights - based on genetics, and still to a large extent views fatherhood as an all or nothing concept.

"For the men we spoke to, fatherhood was a much more complex balance of rights and responsibilities, and that simply causing a child to exist does not make you a father in a meaningful sense, though it may generate certain responsibilities.

"The study provides a rather heartening view of modern fatherhood, emphasising the importance that men place on providing love and attention to their children.”

[ENDS]

'Becoming a father/refusing fatherhood: an empirical' is published in the current issue (June) Vol. 3 number 2 of Clinical Ethics.

Clinical Ethics is published quarterly by the Royal Society of Medicine. Its Editors are Bobbie Farsides and Sue Eckstein.**www.clinicalethics.co.uk (http://www.clinicalethics.co.uk/)**

Dr Jon Ives, a research fellow at the University of Birmingham Medical School, is available for comment.

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