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“But What About THE KIDS?” Seven Reasons Why Non-Exclusive Relationships Are More Child-Friendly Than You Think

Many people are discovering that monogamy just doesn't work for them—yet they have misgivings about raising children in a polyamorous home. Mark Michaels and Patricia Johnson, authors of Designer Relationships, debunk some of the myths and misconceptions that can hold parents back from living their most authentic lives.

New York, NY (August 2015)—The interest in non-monogamous relationships is growing at warp speed. As conventional sexual “rules” crumble, more and more people are rethinking the “one man, one woman, for all eternity” paradigm. The fact is, monogamy just doesn't work for everyone. And while many people find the idea of having more than one partner exciting and liberating, there's a nagging voice whispering in the background: *But what about the children?*

Is that your conscience speaking? Or is it just the tiresome voice of cultural conditioning chiming in (as always) to spoil your fun? Mark Michaels and Patricia Johnson say it may well be the latter.

“There is absolutely *no* evidence that non-exclusive relationships are harmful to kids,” says Johnson, coauthor along with Michaels of [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com). “People used to say the same thing about same-sex marriages, but numerous studies debunked that claim.”

In regard to multi-parent households, there has been very little research as yet, but Michaels and Johnson cite a recent book, *The Polyamorists Next Door* by Dr. Elisabeth Sheff, that addresses the issue. The author concludes that “monogamy and consensual non-monogamy provide similar outcomes for children in these types of families.” She also points out that the benefits and potential problems of non-monogamous relationships also exist for children in monogamous ones.

“The fact is, for many people, consensual non-monogamy is just a happier, more authentic way to live,” says Michaels. “And people who desire unconventional partnerships—whether it’s an open marriage, a polyamorous arrangement, or some other form of designer relationship—are just as likely to want children. We see no reason why parenthood and non-monogamy should be incompatible.”

Here, the authors offer up seven rebuttals to the “Think of the children!” refrain:

First ask yourself: Why are we letting the tail wag the dog? Michaels and Johnson make it clear that they are not fans of the “cult of the child” that exists in 21st-century America. They point out that “putting children at risk” can be (and frequently is) invoked without evidence to condemn anything that’s outside the mainstream. Not only is there no proof that polyamorous arrangements harm children, there is plenty of proof that letting children’s perceived needs drive everything actually *does* harm them.

“Evidence for the power of this cult is everywhere, and yes, it is actually damaging our children,” says Johnson. “Kids do not thrive when parents make them the center of their universe. Studies have shown that so-called ‘helicopter parenting’ cripples kids and leaves them woefully unprepared for life.

“Moreover, a child picks up when caretakers are unhappy, as is the case when adults are forced to live in ways that are unfulfilling for them,” she adds. “No doubt growing up in such an environment is harmful—and it sends kids the message that one should always sublimate one’s own happiness for the sake of others.”

The “nuclear family” is a mostly modern ideal, anyway. The conventional wisdom is that, in the words of Republican presidential hopeful Marco Rubio, “Thousands of years of human history have shown that the ideal setting for children to grow up is with a mother and father.” In reality, thousands of years of human history have shown no such thing, insist the authors.

While two-parent households became the dominant living arrangement in 13th-century England, the idealization of the “nuclear family,” a term that was coined in the 1920s, is largely a modern English and American invention. Even within the U.S., immigrant and minority groups have had any number of very different arrangements. To this day in many parts of the world, the extended family predominates.

“Historically, most children have grown up with multiple caregivers,” points out Johnson. “That must mean something. Maybe it’s now considered ‘ideal’ for kids to live in a home with one mother and one father, but why is today’s ‘ideal’ better than the ‘ideal’ of other times and other cultures? And why, indeed, should we have to conform to someone’s ‘ideal’ anyway?”

The more caring adults in children’s lives, the better. In light of the fact that childrearing was a communal activity for most of human history, there’s some reason to think that polyamorous

arrangements, especially polyamorous living arrangements, might provide children with a more stable and nurturing environment than the nuclear family.

These children become part of an expanded, emotionally intimate social network, and the burdens of childcare may be more widely distributed among people who have a commitment to that child's development and well-being.

Many families are already sharing childcare with other adults, anyway. Most middle-class families make liberal use of daycares and babysitters due to financial necessity. So in reality, despite what traditional moralists like to tout, it's not just one mom and one dad "raising" kids. And even in affluent, two-parent households, people don't think twice about outsourcing their parental responsibilities, hiring nannies or au pairs to take care of the kids.

"The mindset is, *As long as you are paying for it, it's okay to have another adult living in the home, but heaven forbid there should be a household in which intimacy is shared among more than two people when all the adults are invested in caring for the children,*" says Michaels. "How weird is that?"

Non-monogamous people aren't wild animals. In fact, they can be great parents. People make assumptions about parental fitness based on fantasies, stereotypes, and moral judgments. They may think that non-monogamy equals inappropriate behavior and that people in open relationships are likely to flaunt their sexuality in front of their children, possibly even going so far as to expose them to orgies. In reality, consensually non-monogamous parents have sex the same way monogamous people do, taking precautions to protect their privacy.

"If you work with, socialize with, or just casually encounter non-monogamous people in your life, there's a good chance you wouldn't know anything about their sex life," says Johnson. "The non-monogamous look and behave just like everyone else in their roles as employees and friends. Well, the same is true in their roles as parents—they are no more likely to behave inappropriately in front of children than anyone else."

Unhappy marriages in which people stay together "for the sake of the children" are deeply harmful for the children. When people's sexual and emotional needs are not being met, they often resort to secretive sexual behavior outside the marriage. The impact of an affair, whether or not it leads to divorce, can be devastating for a child, not because of the sex itself, but because of the emotional fallout and insecurity about the stability of the marriage that it engenders. (Click [here](#) for an article on this subject.)

"People will often ask, 'Well, if you're in an open marriage or a polyamorous one, you're having sex with other adults anyway, so isn't that the same as an affair?'" says Michaels. "The answer is, of course not. If you're in a designer relationship, sex with someone besides the mom or dad of the child is not cheating—because the arrangement is freely chosen by both partners.

"Even in the absence of an affair, kids can be remarkably sensitive to parental unhappiness, whether it involves fighting or emotional distance," he adds. "This by itself can be immensely stressful and is potentially damaging."

Conversely, relationship satisfaction is good for kids. There can be no doubt that parents' emotional and relationship satisfaction has an impact on child development and well-being. Studies suggest that people in consensually non-monogamous relationships have higher levels of relationship satisfaction than people in monogamous ones. Thus, children from non-monogamous households may actually have an advantage in terms of feeling emotionally secure and loved.

“Of course, if you're in a consciously chosen *monogamous* marriage, rather than one that you've simply settled for by cultural default, your kids will feel secure and loved, too,” says Johnson. “Many people are very happy in monogamous relationships. *Conscious choice* is the key, and that's where many couples go wrong.”

This last thought is the point the authors hammer home again and again throughout their book.

“We must all be free to choose the style of relating that is best for us,” says Michaels. “It's that simple. Everyone has different sexual and emotional needs, different temperaments, different levels of comfort with risk, different belief systems. Because we are all different, it's impossible to be happy and fulfilled if we're forced into the same predetermined mold as everyone else.

“Isn't that what parents want most for their children—to show them, by example, how to live a happy, fulfilling life?” he adds.

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About the Authors:

Mark A. Michaels and Patricia Johnson are the authors of the new book [*Designer Relationships: A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships*](#) (Cleis Press, September 2015). A devoted married couple, they have been creative collaborators—teaching and writing about relationships, sexuality, and Tantra—since 1999. In addition to *Designer Relationships*, they have written *Partners in Passion* (Cleis Press), *Great Sex Made Simple*, *Tantra for Erotic Empowerment*, and *The Essence of Tantric Sexuality* (Llewellyn). They are also the creators of the COVR Award-winning meditation CD set *Ananda Nidra: Blissful Sleep*.

Internationally known as experts in sexuality, Michaels and Johnson have taught throughout the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe, and Australia. They have been featured on television and radio and widely quoted in numerous publications. They are cofounders of the Pleasure Salon, a monthly gathering in New York City that brings together sex-positive people and pleasure activists from a variety of communities.

Michaels is a graduate of New York University School of Law and holds master's degrees in American Studies from NYU and Yale. Formerly a playwright and translator, he has translated, adapted, and cowritten various works for the stage. Johnson is a retired professional operatic soprano who toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and South America. She currently works in turtle conservation; she is certified in reptile monitoring by the Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation and is a New York state-licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

About the Book:

[Designer Relationships](http://www.michaelsandjohnson.com): A Guide to Happy Monogamy, Positive Polyamory, and Optimistic Open Relationships (Cleis Press, September 2015, ISBN: 978-1-627-78147-3, \$15.95, www.michaelsandjohnson.com) will be available in September 2015 at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.