

## The family, but not as we knew it



Concepts of the family are at a new frontier Caspar Benson/Getty Images

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**Helen Croydon**

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## As a new show celebrates single, adoptive, gay and blended families, we meet the parents

The Jolie-Pitts call theirs a rainbow family — a happy brood of six children, both biological and adopted. Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart also have an adopted child. Elton John and David Furnish became proud parents in December last year with the help of a surrogate mother, as has Sarah Jessica Parker.

And it's not just celebrities embracing family life in all its many forms. With marriage rates falling, more people living on their own and much talk of “co-parenting” and “blended families”, the traditional nuclear family with 2.4 children is beginning to seem almost an anachronism. What once referred to the average size of a UK family has become an outdated catchphrase. Perhaps a new term is needed to capture the variety of ways in which we live. We are at a frontier in family life — and this month a new event, the Alternative Families Show, aims to celebrate it. But what does it feel like

to be one of these “frontier families”?

Rachel Parker, 30, is a family lawyer. She is seven months pregnant after having IVF with an unknown sperm donor.

“Day in, day out I work with people whose relationship hasn’t worked. I deal with parents arguing over Christmas and birthdays right down to the last hour they can spend with their children. My job has affected my faith in relationships. I do think they can last but those ones are the minority, and many people end up in them for the wrong reasons. I didn’t want to end up in a relationship that wasn’t meaningful just to have a baby, so I decided to go ahead on my own. I haven’t had a serious relationship for five years and I wasn’t willing to sacrifice the chance of having a baby by waiting for the right person. I’ve wanted a child for as long as I can remember.

I used to work as a nursery nurse so I’ve always dealt with children. I thought about doing it on my own for several years but never did anything. Then, two years ago, I had ovarian cysts diagnosed. I had surgery and both my ovaries were saved, but it spurred me into action because it can affect your fertility. After I’d had my first consultation at the fertility clinic I knew it was the right decision.

“Some friends disapproved. Some people think I’m selfish and it’s unfair that my baby won’t have a father, but I’ve seen how children from broken homes can end up stuck in disputes. It is far more damaging being brought up in a hostile environment with warring parents. My family were concerned about me becoming a single parent too, but they have come round to the idea.

“I go on maternity leave at the end of this month. My employers have been more supportive than I could imagine, but for practical support I have no one. Being pregnant on my own is much harder than I thought. I miss having someone to share it with. The first scan will never be as important to friends and family as it would be to someone you choose to have a child with.

“My family live 100 miles away and my friends are in full-time employment, so it’s just me. It’s nerve-racking. In a perfect world I would love my children to have a father role model, but I don’t want a relationship for the sake of it. I don’t think a partner is absolutely necessary.”

Matt Saville, 36, and Anna Schmaehling, 48, became friends while working in recruitment in 1998. They became flatmates in 2000. Matt is gay and in a relationship, and Anna is single. Eventually Anna asked him to father a child. Four years ago they had Charlie, through IVF.

Anna:

“At 35 I still hadn’t found the man of my dreams, so I decided to look at options with fertility clinics. I didn’t see it as defeat. I always thought I would have a child, whether I found a man or not. I had six rounds of IUI [intrauterine insemination] without success. The next step would have been IVF but I thought, this is too hard physically and too expensive. I put the idea on hold and carried on with my life.

“In 2003 I moved from London to Australia. I started to think, if I want a baby, how am I going to have one? Matt and I had lived together for two years and became close. I trusted him 100 per cent. He became the obvious option. On my first visit back to the UK I asked him. I can’t remember how I worded it but it was something direct and simple like, ‘Matt how would you feel about giving me a baby?’ ”

“He thought hard about it for two weeks. It reassured me that he was taking the responsibility seriously. He flew to Australia several weeks later to discuss it properly. I said: ‘You either embrace being a father or you don’t get involved at all and we treat this as a gift to me. But if you ever break that child’s heart you’ll be in trouble.’

“Matt has become Charlie’s daddy. He and his partner for the past ten years, Jeremy, are as much a part of our lives as they can be. He doesn’t contribute financially but he pays to travel here once a year, speaks to Charlie whenever he can and keeps updated on his progress and things he’s learnt.

I haven’t had a serious relationship in 15 years. I’m open to one but it’s hard to think how that would happen at my age. I talked about that possibility with Matt, but of course he’d always be Charlie’s father and have access to him, no matter who I meet.

“My mother moved back to Australia before me and I live with her. I have lots of support and I’ve never encountered hostility because of my decision. I’ve never had to hide my situation. It is important that your child is accepted by your friends and family. I think that in future people will become more confident about having a child alone. Charlie gets more love, attention and guidance than any child I’ve ever met. That’s because he was so wanted.”

Matt:

“Growing up as a gay person, children weren’t on my agenda. I thought it was something I would never have access to. When Anna asked me I was secretly delighted but there was also an ‘oh my god’ moment. I have principled ideas on what a family unit should be. I firmly believe that there should be active involvement from father and mother. I cast my mind back to my childhood and what I had — a stable home and family unit. How could I create that same environment if we were living in different countries? What about school assemblies, parents’ evenings and cake-bakes — those little things that are so important to a child?

“There were so many questions: what if Anna and I fell out? What if she needed financial support? Would I be wedded to the Child Support Agency for 18 years, being chased for maintenance payments? I had been in a relationship with Jeremy for ten years, so I was concerned about how it would affect us.

“I flew to Australia to discuss things properly. I concluded that I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. The idea evolved and suddenly my questions turned to positive ones: Would it be a girl or a boy? Would I be ‘Uncle Matt’ or would that be confusing as Charlie gets older? I wanted to be involved from the start. Anna and I were both keen for him to know who his grandparents and aunts and uncles are.

“Four years on, it works really well. Charlie comes to the UK every year and Jeremy and I average four weeks in Australia. We have a large house in South London, so Charlie and Anna stay with us when they visit. We speak on Skype every week.

“The best thing has been the chance to experience unconditional love and to watch Charlie grow up. When I see him pull a face, I think, ‘Is that my genes, Anna’s genes or my mother’s genes?’ Charlie is headstrong but engaging and a bright, capable little guy. To think I’ve played a part in making him who he is, that’s truly an amazing thing.”

Nicola Marshall, 41, and husband Ashley adopted three siblings aged 4, 5 and 7 with the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) “We tried for a child for five years but couldn’t conceive. We considered IVF but had conflicting feelings. We had seen friends go through it. It seemed difficult both financially and emotionally, and we were already feeling the pressure in our relationship from months of trying to conceive. I wanted a family but I didn’t feel desperately broody.

Also, there seemed to be so many children who needed homes that it didn’t seem right to create a baby in a way that wasn’t entirely natural. We decided on adoption. It took three years from the application to them moving in. Although it is a major process, it didn’t feel nearly as intrusive as what we had already gone through: month after month of not getting pregnant.

“We went on a preparation course where you learn about the types of children you’ll be dealing with and the difficult lives they may have had. Then you are assigned a social worker who conducts a “home assessment”. They look at every aspect of your life — your finances, your family, your job — and ask you about everything from your own background to how you will discipline the child. Then we were interviewed by a panel of 25 people.

“We always wanted more than one child. We didn’t want to separate siblings, and because we didn’t want to go through the whole process again we had the three together. It was strange meeting them: we opened the door to a social worker with three lively children calling us mum and dad. But we didn’t know them and they didn’t know us.

We have had them for three years and there’s still a lot I have to find out about them and their background before I can really understand why they do the things they do. I didn’t feel an instant deep bond but there was always the feeling that these are my children no matter what.

“They are not a replacement for children of our own. When I see a friend who is pregnant I do get that gut-wrenching feeling of loss — that I missed out. But it isn’t a case of one being better than the other; it’s just different. I have been able to tap into parts of me I didn’t know about. I never thought I was a compassionate person but now, whenever I think of my children and what their lives were like, it breaks my heart.

“I am so grateful for having the family we have. They are very much like us now and

have adopted our mannerisms. I would encourage anyone considering IVF to open their mind to adoption.

“I’m so glad things turned out like this. It changed our life in so many ways, and I can’t be anything but grateful.”

The Alternative Families Show is at the Grand Connaught Rooms, Covent Garden, London, on September 17, 10am-5pm; [alternativefamiliesshow.com](http://alternativefamiliesshow.com)

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