

# The family, but not as we knew it

As a new show  
celebrates single,  
adoptive, gay and  
blended families,  
**Helen Croydon**  
meets the parents

**T**he 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 What once referred to the average size of a UK family has become an outdated catchphrase.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

Alex is not our first child, so this isn't the first time that I've watched a baby of mine develop. What's different is the subtle, but distinct, gap in my understanding of what Alex might be thinking.

It is folly for parents to imagine that they can really understand how a baby feels, but part of the fascination of the whole parental experience is the sense that you can intuit some of

certain distance, or copy you if you stick out your tongue, or smile.

None of that applies to Alex. I can't delude myself that I have any insight into what it feels like to be him. I don't have Down's syndrome, so I can't empathise with that, and even if I could there's no way of knowing where he lies on the spectrum of severity. He is unquestionably — and increasingly — alert. He has a

diagnosed. I had surgery and ovaries were saved, but it spurred into action because it can affect fertility. After I'd had my first consultation at the fertility clinic I knew it was the right decision.

"Some friends disapproved because people think I'm selfish and that my baby won't have a father. I've seen how children from broken homes can end up stuck in difficult situations. It is far more damaging being brought up in a hostile environment with absent parents. My family were concerned about me becoming a single mother but they have come round to my way of thinking."

"I go on maternity leave at the end of this month. My employers have been more supportive than I could have hoped for but for practical support I have my mother. Being pregnant on my own is harder than I thought. I miss having someone to share it with. The relationship will never be as important to me as it would be to someone who chooses to have a child with a partner."

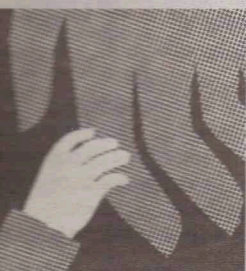
"My family live 100 miles away and my friends are in full-time employment, so it's just a bit of a nerve-racking. In a perfect world I would love my children to have a father role model, but I don't want to compromise my relationship for the sake of it. I think a partner is absolutely not

**Matt Seville, 36, and Anna Schmaehling, 48, became friends while working in recruitment. They became flatmates in 2001, and in a relationship. Anna is a single. Eventually Anna had a father's child. Four years ago she had Charlie, through IVF.**

**Anna:** "At 35 I still hadn't found the man of my dreams, so I decided to look at fertility clinics. I didn't see any point in defeat. I always thought I would find a man, whether I found one 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 about having a baby, how am I going to have one? I had lived together for two years and became close. I trusted him. He became the obvious choice. On my first visit back to the UK I met him. I can't remember how I felt but it was something direct and simple, like, 'Matt how would you feel about giving me a baby?'"

"He thought hard about it for several weeks. It reassured me that he was taking the responsibility seriously."



**About a boy**

disconcerting not to be able to see it in one's imagination, to guess it feels like to look out of.

A family friend came up with an interesting theory. I told him about the low muscle tone that child with Down's syndrome are born with and how it delays their ability to sit, crawl, walk, so on, and he extrapolated that the same low tone might affect the

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

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."

att:  
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 got to think about what a family unit should be. I don't 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 job — and ask you

whether you're happy to have your house inspected by the social worker with three busy 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

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