http://www.diva-portal.org

This is the published version of a paper published in Journal of Applied Philosophy.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):
Grill, K. (2020)
How Many Parents Should There Be in a Family?
Journal of Applied Philosophy, 37(3): 467-484
https://doi.org/10.1111/japp. 12401

Access to the published version may require subscription.
N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-165798

# How Many Parents Should There Be in a Family? 

## KALLE GRILL (D)


#### Abstract

In this article, I challenge the widespread presumption that a child should have exactly two parents. I consider the pros and cons of various numbers of parents for the people most directly affected - the children themselves and their parents. The number of parents, as well as the ratio of parents to children, may have an impact on what resources are available, what relationships can develop between parents and children, what level of conflict can be expected in the family, as well as the costs involved in parenting and the experience of parenting a child. Indirectly, there is also an effect on who will have the opportunity to be a parent, as well as on wider social issues that I mention but do not discuss. Having considered all these factors, I conclude that there is some reason to believe that three or more parents is usually better than one or two, especially if children are to have siblings, which is typically beneficial. However, these reasons are not strong enough to support a general presumption in favor of any particular number. We should therefore jettison the two-parent presumption and make different numbers of parents more socially accepted as well as legally possible.


## Introduction

There is a strong presumption in most societies that a child should have two parents, no more, no less. Other adults may be involved in caring for the child, professionally or privately, but the difference between such adults and the child's parents is normally clear and substantial. In this article, I challenge the two-parent presumption and investigate the pros and cons of having a larger or a smaller number of parents in a family.

I believe the answer to the title question is 'not more than five or so'. The vague upper boundary is due to empirical, mainly psychological circumstances that are simply not well known. I believe any other presumptions about the right or best number of parents in a family are unwarranted. This is relevant on an individual level and applies mainly to people who are planning to become parents. It is also relevant on a population level and means that the only norm that state and society should impose when it comes to the number of parents in a family is an upper limit of five (or so).

My investigation is limited to the effects of the number of parents on the members of the family themselves. However, the investigation is warranted also by the wider impact. Most obviously, circumstances that benefit children's development also tends to make them more productive and less disruptive as adults. The number of parents in a family also influences to what extent parenting interferes with productive and other socially beneficial activities. In an even larger perspective, the ratio of parents to children affects demographic issues such as aging populations and global consumption. Some philosophers have argued that families should limit themselves to having
one child, for environmental reasons. ${ }^{1}$ As noted by Anca Gheaus, the same effect can be achieved by increasing the number of parents per family, as long as people are parents in only one family. ${ }^{2}$

Some of the pros and cons I will consider concern the absolute number of parents in a family. Others concern the ratio of parents to children, which of course depends also on the number of children. I will try to make clear throughout which dimension is at stake - absolute number or ratio.

In the next section, I give a brief background and some context to my investigation. I explain my focus on families and develop my understanding of the two central concepts of 'family' and, especially, 'parent'. I then move on to consider how the two-parent presumption relates to our ideas about romance and about biological reproduction, arguing that these are ultimately irrelevant to how many parents there should be in a family. After this, I devote three sections to looking at the pros and cons of having, as a child, different numbers of parents and different ratios of parents to children in one's family. The sections cover effects on material and emotional resources, on parental conflict within the family, and on parent-child relationships. A subsequent section is focused more particularly on the effects on parents. Based on all these considerations, I consider in the conclusion what lessons may be drawn both for individuals who are looking to start a family and for societies and states.

## Background and Context

Family patterns are constantly changing, along with the rest of society. The very idea of parenthood as an involved intimate relationship to be cherished may be relatively new, or newly rediscovered. ${ }^{3}$ A more recent development in many parts of the world is that co-parents break up and move apart, then form new families with new partners, all the while remaining active parents to their first children. This often results in more than two adults playing a parent-like role in children's lives, with 'bonus' fathers and mothers, in addition to the typically two original parents. Another development, though not as large in numbers, is that families are intentionally started by other constellations than the two-person romantic couple, for example by single women and by polyamorous groups of three or more adults outside of traditionally patriarchal polygamous contexts. ${ }^{4}$ Both of these developments pose challenges to the two-parent presumption.

Critics of the traditional, two-parent family have usually focused their attention on the legal institution of marriage. Some have argued that marriage should be open not only to romantic but to caring relationships more generally, ${ }^{5}$ some that it should be replaced by some other institution that supports such broad caring relationships, ${ }^{6}$ some that it should be abolished altogether, either in favor of private contracts or in favor of piecemeal regulation of more particular and concrete relationships not based on legal status, such as cohabitation and co-parenting. ${ }^{7}$ Such reform would to some extent undermine the basis for the two-parent presumption as a social and legal norm. However, as I will argue below, the number of parents in a family need not be determined by how parents structure their romantic or caring relationships, or what institutions help them to do so.

Very few philosophical contributions, as far as I know, discuss more specifically the pros and cons of having more than two parents in a family. One notable exception is Daniela Cutas, who considers whether three parents might be better than two and notes several important dimensions, some of which I will expand on. ${ }^{8}$ Mianna Lotz convincingly argues that it should be legally possible to recognise gamete donors and surrogate mothers as parents, in addition to the recipient or commissioning parents. ${ }^{9}$ Samantha Brennan and Bill Cameron similarly consider whether various existing family constellations with more than two people in a parenting role should be legally recognised. ${ }^{10}$ They continue this discussion in a separate article claiming that families should be centered around children and parenting, rather than romance. ${ }^{11}$ All of these authors mainly defend the viability of currently existing alternative family constellations with more (or fewer) than two parents. Lotz especially bases her arguments on the advantages of legally recognising the relationships people are now engaged in without legal support.

In some contrast to this important perspective, I investigate what number of parents is best for families, in particular for those not already committed to some number, including future children and future parents. I allow myself to discuss this issue in the abstract, somewhat removed from current practice and current laws and norms, in order to consider what practice, laws, and norms would be best in a more long-term perspective. For this reason, I don't consider social stigma an important dimension. Certainly, a child today with five parents, in most places in the world, would be disadvantaged by other people's suspicion, misunderstanding, or even hostility. However, if five parents would be best for this child, absent this disadvantage, that is a reason to fight such unfounded and oppressive norms.

## Parents and Families

My investigation is limited to families understood as small groups of dedicated adults who together parent one or more children. ${ }^{12}$ This delimitation is partly due to the widespread agreement that the long-term intimate relationship typically formed between a parent and a child when the parent is physically and emotionally close, as well as consistently available, is beneficial to children. ${ }^{13}$ However, my delimitation to families is also warranted by the fact that quite different issues arise in considering non-family systems for caring for children such as professional institutions or large communes (that are not themselves organised into families). Nonetheless, parts of my discussion may be indirectly relevant to whether or not children should be raised in families at all.

What the pros and cons of different numbers of parents are depend, of course, on what we mean by a parent. If, for example, a parent is an absent provider with no other relationship to a child, then the ideal number depends mostly on how much each provides and the material needs of the child. In most societies, absent providers who are also biological procreators are socially and legally recognised as parents. However, my interest here is not with the number of passive providers. It is with the ideal number of emotionally and practically engaged parents. This is an idea of involved parenthood that I believe is commonplace in contemporary liberal societies, at least among the younger adult generations.

For the purposes of this article, I consider someone a parent to a child if and only if the following two conditions are met. First, a parent must have substantial moral rights and responsibilities towards the child, over time and over contexts, such that they are legitimately involved in the child's everyday life and in all important decisions regarding the child. ${ }^{14}$ Second, a parent must be emotionally engaged with the child, such that the two of them have an intimate personal relationship over time. ${ }^{15}$ There is no requirement that the moral rights be legally recognised. Instead, I assume that, on this issue at least, the law should align with morality, such that anyone who actually is a parent should also be legally recognised as such. There are well-known complications around formulating and implementing general laws to cover diverse particular instances that I will not engage with here.

The requirement of engagement over time excludes some adults who are quite engaged with a child and who have some rights and responsibilities. A parent's new romantic partner, who is very engaged with the child and takes part in important decisions, but whose engagement ends after a few months, does not become a parent to the child on my understanding, because the engagement is insufficiently permanent. The 'over contexts' requirement excludes adults who are engaged over time but only in limited areas. An engaged teacher who grows to know a child over many years does not become a parent because the engagement is typically too limited to the particular context of school and education.

My notion of a parent includes some people who are not traditionally considered parents. For example, an exceptionally engaged teacher to a child in need of more parental care could potentially start caring for the child in all or almost all other contexts as well, supporting the existing parent or parents. If this happens, if the teacher and child develops an intimate personal relationship, and if having this role in the life of the child generates moral rights and responsibilities, as I think it might, then the teacher could come to qualify as a parent. Another example is the engaged long-term nanny. ${ }^{16}$ Teachers and nannies are typically not conceived of as parents by most people, although they may be considered to be 'like a parent' to a child.

I believe our everyday notion of a parent is heavily influenced by our legal history. Since my investigation is moral, and not legal or social, I cannot have current legal status or current social norms define my notion of a parent. If exceptionally engaged teachers and long-term nannies should not be socially or legally recognised as parents, this must be for some other reason than that they typically are not recognised as such.

## Romance and Biology

One reason for why it may sound curious to count an engaged teacher or a nanny as a proper parent is that they lack two properties that have traditionally been strongly associated with parenting - being a biological procreator and being, at some point, romantically involved with another parent. There is of course a sense of the word 'parent' according to which it refers to biological procreators. This is obviously not the sense I am interested in, though, as my topic is caring for children, not their creation.

My two conditions for being a parent are indifferent to biological relations, whether genetic, gestational, or otherwise. However, biology may help explain the origins of the two-parent presumption, as well as its endurance. Children are typically, and have
© 2019 The Authors. fournal of Applied Philosophy published by John Wiley \& Sons Ltd on behalf of Society for Applied Philosophy.
been historically, cared for by their procreators. Until recently, the number of biological procreators was always exactly two. Since surrogacy was first achieved, in 1986, three biological procreators are possible, two genetic and one gestational. In the future, more than three people may all be biological procreators in various ways. ${ }^{17}$ It may also become possible for a single person to be a child's only biological procreator. ${ }^{18}$ For the time being, however, two people are biologically necessary, and typically sufficient, for creating a child, and most children have exactly two biological procreators.

While historically important, the link between procreation and parenting is clearly contingent, caused by culture rather than nature. The link has never been particularly firm. Different-sex married couples have typically been presumed to be the only parents of any child born to the woman, even if a third party is sometimes involved as the biological 'father'. Some jurisdictions, such as some US states, apply the same presumption to same-sex couples, where it is almost always the case that only one party is a biological procreator. ${ }^{19}$ Children are also often adopted, in which case there is typically no biological connection between them and either of their parents. If the twoparent presumption was based only on biological circumstances, there would be no reason to expect that it would apply to adoptive parents. Because the relationship between biology and parenthood is so loose, biology cannot fully explain even the social expectation that children should have two parents, much less provide a normative justification for such expectations.

It has been suggested that genetic connectedness to one's parents provides unique opportunities for self-knowledge and identity-formation by enabling the recognition of genetically influenced traits in one's parents and making it possible to be closely acquainted with one's genetic heritage. ${ }^{20}$ This would support including biological procreators among a child's parents. However, many authors doubt that the alleged benefits are real or substantial. ${ }^{21}$ A more modest and arguably more plausible position is that it has value to know the identity of one's genetic procreators and to be able to get to know them, at least as an adult. ${ }^{22}$ This does not, of course, require having them as parents.

There is arguably a stronger reason to be parented by one's gestational parent because of the relationship that is formed between parent and future child during pregnancy. ${ }^{23}$ Since one can only have one gestational parent, however, this does not support any presumption in terms of the number of parents. To some extent, adults can form relationships to fetuses not only by gestation but also by incurring various non-bodily costs, by creating a common history that can be shared with the future child ('we were in Paris when you were in the womb', etc.) and by the forming of intentions around parenting. ${ }^{24}$ This, however, provides no reason to presume more than one parent. First, these relationships are almost entirely one-sided, based on the adult's perceptions and intentions (even though children can recognise voices prebirth, and being met by familiar voices after birth may possibly provide some comfort to the new-born). Second, the possibility of pre-birth relationships provides no positive reason to create such relationships. Rather than granting the role of parent to anyone with a pre-birth relationship to a child, pre-birth proto-parental relationships should be entered into only by people expecting to become parents.

Regarding biology, then, only quite controversial ideas about the benefits of being parented by one's biological procreators would make their number relevant to the
ideal number of parents. If such ideas are correct, they provide some reason to prefer at least two parents in most cases, and in some unusual but important cases, such as surrogacy, more than two. This does not, however, mean that we should prevent or discourage people who are not biological procreators from being parents, nor does it support a restriction on the number of parents to two, or to any particular number that happens to be the most common, or the maximal, number of biological procreators.

Another explanation for the endurance of the two-parent presumption may be the widespread two-lover norm, which says that romantic love should involve exactly two people. This norm has faced much criticism lately, although it also has its defenders. ${ }^{25}$ I will not consider the pros and cons of this norm but rather propose that it gives support to the two-parent presumption only if we assume that all parents should be each other's lovers. This assumption, I propose further, is rather easy to refute. One may just point to existing stepfamilies where two lovers parent a child that is also parented by one of the lovers' earlier lover. It seems absurd to hold that such widespread triparenting is acceptable only if all three adults involved are also lovers. However, a proponent of the two-parent presumption could perhaps argue that such stepfamilies are a sort of second best, a solution to an unfortunate situation, and so not relevant to the issue of how many parents we should aim for when starting families.

It is worth noting, therefore, that the assumption that all parents should be lovers can be refuted more generally and in the abstract. Imagine that only two-people romantic relationships existed and that all children were created by such unions. This would in no way exclude the possibility of including a third adult as a parent in the family. We can easily imagine a custom such that all expecting biological procreator lovers would look around for a third parent. The bonus parent would not be romantically involved with the bio-parents but would have equal rights and responsibilities and would perhaps have customary special responsibilities, for example as tutor/educator. For different-sex couples, there would be a father, a mother, and a tuther. Nothing in this imagined custom is in conflict with the two-lover norm.

Note that the idea that all co-parents should be romantically involved with each other goes well beyond the idea, in itself doubtful, that all children need an example of romantic love within their family (as opposed to just in their wider community). Romantic love couples can exist in a family that also includes a third parent. Indeed, they may be easier to sustain in such a family, thanks to the additional parental support. The basis for the claim that all co-parents should be romantically involved with each other would have to be that there is something inherently problematic about a parent who is not romantically involved with all other parents. I cannot see any basis for such a position, nor do I know of any arguments put forth in support of it.

Contemporary family ethicists tend not to endorse any particular connection between romance and parenthood, nor any particular family form. David Archard, for example, proposes that 'We should value a family not for being of a particular standard form but for what it makes possible'. ${ }^{26}$ Many authors argue explicitly for a separation of romance and parenting. ${ }^{27}$ Such separation can be legal, social, practical, and/ or conceptual - i.e. laws for protecting children as well as parents can be independent of any romantic relationship between parents; social expectations on who should parent can be decoupled from (strong) associations to romance; people can in fact parent with others than their romantic partners; and people can stop thinking of parenting as
(necessarily) associated with romance. However, I do not take a stand on these issues, and my argument is quite consistent with accepting both the two-lover norm and the idea that parenting should have some intimate connection with romance. I only exclude the possibility that romance is a necessary element of any desirable co-parenting relationship. ${ }^{28}$

Whether or not we endorse the two-lover norm, then, we need to consider the question of how many parents there should be in a family (as I will go on to do in the following sections). Since the ideal number of lovers can diverge from the ideal number of parents, practical problems may arise in particular cases. Those who reject the two-lover norm because they accept polyamorous families face the risk that there will be too many potential parents in a family. If, for example, the adults concerned prefer to live in a "moresome" of five or more people, while five turns out to be, in general or in a particular case, too many parents, then there is a potential conflict of values that must somehow be resolved. ${ }^{29}$ Those who endorse the two-lover norm face the risk that two is not the best number of parents, in general or in a particular case. For example, a couple may not have sufficient resources to parent, without much support, and so need a third parent. For another example, only one person in a couple may want to be a parent. Some such issues can be resolved without challenging the two-lover norm. The one person who wants to parent in the second example can, for example, join forces with the couple in the first example for a three-part co-parenting arrangement.

In conclusion, the two-parent presumption is supported neither by biology nor by norms around romantic coupling, whether or not the latter are themselves defensible. Since I have put to one side the wider impact on society, it now remains to consider the impact on the interests of the most directly involved parties - children and parents. In an authoritative overview on children's healthy social development, Michael Lamb states that, apart from important individual variations that are not as easily quantified, this development depends mainly on three factors: (a) the material and social resources available to the family, (b) the quality of the relationship(s) between co-parents, and (c) the quality of the parent-child relationship(s). ${ }^{30}$ These three categories structure my discussion of the effects on children, in the three following sections. Lamb states further that 'dimensions of family structure-including such factors as divorce, single parenthood, and the parents' sexual orientation-and biological relatedness between parents and children are of little or no predictive importance, ${ }^{31}$ Lamb does not consider the extent to which the number of parents in a family, an important aspect of family structure, affects the three main factors.

## Resources

One rather obvious contributing factor to children's wellbeing and development is the amount of resources available within the family, both in terms of money and material resources, and in terms of social and emotional resources, e.g. parents having time to spend with their children. It seems intuitive that, ceteris paribus, a higher ratio of parents to children should mean that more resources are available for and will benefit each child. In this section, I consider three reasons to resist this intuitive correlation, but find them all relatively weak. I also consider some empirical evidence that seems to contradict the correlation, but find it inconclusive.

The first reason to be skeptical of the simple correlation between more parents and more resources is that siblings do not only compete for resources - they also provide them, especially social and emotional resources. The empirical literature provides no clear answer as to which of these factors is strongest under what circumstances. It seems, however, that on average children without siblings get more parental resources, but show somewhat weaker social and moral abilities. ${ }^{32}$ Also, the long-term Grant study indicates that warm relationships with siblings predict positive outcomes in later life, such as higher income, in contrast to either poor relationships or no siblings. ${ }^{33}$ It may be an important benefit, therefore, to have at least one sibling. If this is true, it would point to the desirability of somewhat larger families, with at least two children and a number of parents sufficient to provide rich resources for these children. There is very little research on the relative difference between having different positive numbers of siblings. One recent study indicates that unexpected increases in the number of children, in the form of twin births, impact negatively on pre-existing children's development, confirming to some extent the intuitive disadvantage of having more competition for parental resources. ${ }^{34}$

The second reason for why more parents need not mean more resources is that an additional parent may be a poor provider. Since parents spend time with their children and since part of the expenditure of resources is tied to being together (especially for emotional resources but also to some extent for material resources), adding a poorer provider to an existing set of parents may result in relative deprivation. However, as long as such relative deprivation is temporary and does not dominate the child's overall situation, it should not substantially detract from the goods that are most important for a child, neither in terms of relationships goods such as emotional attachment nor in terms of such material and semi-material goods as education, access to health care, and access to supportive social networks. Additional parents can also be an absolute burden on a child if they are so much in need or so self-absorbed that their children end up providing for them (materially or emotionally) rather than the other way around. However, such circumstances are, I presume, relatively rare. Hence, while it is important to recognise that there are exceptions, this does not undermine the general tendency that more means more.

The third reason for resisting the simple correlation is that more parents could detract from some or all parents' sense of responsibility and engagement. Given such a tendency, the contributions from an additional parent may be more than off-set by decreased contributions from the other parents. This risk is probably greatest for emotional resources. The risk is greater the more parents there are, for simple mathematical reasons: going from one to two, the parents' contribution must be reduced by more than $50 \%$ relative to each being a solo parent for there to be a net loss, while going from four to five parents, any reduction of more than $20 \%$ is sufficient to entail a net loss. The tendency may also be stronger at higher numbers of parents for psychological reasons: it is perhaps easier to feel unimportant and so less engaged when one is one among several other parents than when one is one of only two parents.

Whether or not the tendency of less engagement, if real, outweighs the contrary tendency that more parents mean more resources would seem to depend on the particularities. In some cases, additional parents certainly coincide with little engagement from the original parents, such as when a couple of parents buy private childcare - a nanny, who becomes a third parent (on my understanding of this notion) but then
contributes very little emotionally themselves. In other cases, additional parents cause no decrease of engagement from the original parents, such as in the case of some polyamorous families, with many people in active parenting roles. ${ }^{35}$ I speculate that, in general and at the relatively low numbers that we are considering, the risk of a loss of engagement will not completely off-set an increase in total resources. For example, three loving parents, even if they feel slightly less responsible for the child than they would if there were fewer of them, will still provide not only more material resources but more time and affection than would two loving parents.

The limited empirical research there is on one-parent families where a mother is the only parent by choice, rather than because of unplanned pregnancy or separation, indicates that children in those families suffer no measurable psychological disadvantages. Such findings may seem to cast some doubt on the theoretical conclusion that more parents should mean more resources which should mean better outcomes for children. One study compared solo mothers with two-parent families, where both groups conceived by donor insemination and so were similar in terms of having an intentional and well-planned pregnancy. ${ }^{36}$ However, there are very few such studies, samples are small, and some factors, such as age and education of mothers, cannot be controlled for given the small samples. It also seems likely that the few intentional solo mothers that have been researched are particularly dedicated and resourceful. Furthermore, all families in these studies are relatively well-off in terms of resources, and there is clearly decreasing marginal utility of both material and emotional resources for psychological development. Hence, the benefits for well-off families of having more parents are more difficult to identify. I propose, therefore, that this empirical research does not undermine the likelihood that more parents in general means more resources and therefore better outcomes for children.

In conclusion: parents who are poor providers can in some circumstances be a burden on children; many parents can entail a net loss of emotional resources because of less engagement; siblings typically both compete and contribute; solo parents can be excellent parents; but overall and in general, more parents tend to mean greater resources, both material and social and emotional.

## Parental Conflict

Empirical research indicates that conflict between parents can be quite detrimental to children's development. ${ }^{37}$ The number of parents can clearly have an impact in this context. Most obviously, one-parent families are of course entirely free from conflict between co-parents. With increasing numbers of parents, we might suspect that being more than two parents in a family will lead to complex and charged coordination struggles. At least we might suspect this if we are under the influence of the two-parent presumption. However, the relationship between the number of parents and the negative impact of conflict on children is not quite so straightforward.

Solo parents may have other important relationships, such as extended families, cohabitation, or romantic relationships, and conflict in these relationships will also affect a child's everyday environment. We may perhaps assume that conflict caused by the need to coordinate and cooperate around parenting is especially detrimental to children. Solo parenting avoids this particular root of conflict, which is an advantage. On
© 2019 The Authors. fournal of Applied Philosophy published by John Wiley \& Sons Ltd on behalf of Society for Applied Philosophy.
the other hand, less serious conflicts or disagreements between co-parents may contribute more perspectives and lead to better decisions.

With increasing numbers of parents, it seems likely that practical coordination will be more complicated and that it will be more challenging to align parent ideals and preferences around the raising of children. Also, there are certainly more relationships that can go sour. If the risk of (serious and detrimental) conflict increases with the number of relationships between co-parents, it increases exponentially with the number of parents, since three parents make for three relationships, four parents for six relationships, and five parents for 10 relationships.

It is not clear, however, that more complexity and more relationships will entail a greater risk of conflict. Perhaps, as Cutas speculates, decision-making between three rather than two parents will be more deliberative and organised differently. ${ }^{38}$ This may be so simply because each parent has to relate to two others, whom he or she is less likely to be able to dominate. In general, it is arguably not the case that decision-making or joint deliberation becomes exponentially more difficult the more people are involved. A nation state that is twice the size of another is arguably not therefore four times more difficult to coordinate (though it has four times as many one-to-one relationships). On the group and political level, the cost of coordination seems to depend almost entirely on what processes are used and their suitability to the group to be coordinated. On the other hand, it may be more difficult to go along with the social or group preference in such personal matters as the raising of one's children than in most political matters, and so disagreement may be more persistent and more damaging.

The impact of parental conflict may be affected by numbers in another way as well. It seems likely that any one conflict, or any one relationship that is dominated by conflict, will have less impact if it is embedded in a social environment of other, more wellfunctioning relationships. If your only two parents are in conflict, that is likely worse than if two of your three parents are in conflict, while both of them relate well to your third parent. This line of reasoning may indicate that three is a particularly good number of parents, since it keeps the number of relationships, and so potential conflicts, relatively low, mitigating the risk of conflict, while also making it very likely that there will be at least one parent-to-parent relationship that is not dominated by conflict.

Empirical research has undermined the once popular idea that children's development is hampered by a lack of gender role models in the family. ${ }^{39}$ However, it may more likely be beneficial to experience models of healthy relating between adults in close personal relationships. To experience such relating between one's parents is of course only possible if they are at least two, and there are greater opportunities to do so if they are more than two, which may seem an argument for more parents. However, if adults are present around the family in other capacities, this may provide equally good models. Hence, I believe the only conclusion that can be drawn in this regard is that it is desirable that solo-parent families include other adults in their everyday life in some way.

In sum, solo-parent families avoid co-parent conflict, and this is likely an advantage even if they are of course not immune to other adult conflict; it is likely that coordination costs increase and generate more conflict with greater numbers of parents, but not certain, since coordination may happen in other ways; and the impact of parental conflict may be reduced if it co-exists with positive parental relationships. All in all, the conflict dimension may indicate a slight advantage for one-parent families
embedded in supportive larger social networks. Clearly, a dysfunctional many-parent family is much worse than a well-functioning one-parent family. A conclusion that is somewhat tangential to our main investigation is, therefore, that people who are unlikely to get along well with any potential co-parents should probably opt for solo parenting (if they should parent at all).

## Parent-Child Relationship

A third very important factor for children's wellbeing and psychological development is the relationship between parent(s) and children. Children benefit from warmth, care, love, engagement, and consistent and transparent authority. ${ }^{40}$ These goods can be delivered by one or more parents; the main interest of the child is to get them from someone. Therefore, on the one hand, one parent can be sufficient. On the other hand, it seems more likely that a child will have at least one positive relationship to a parent if there are more parents around. In many cases, therefore, the main impact of the number of parents on the quality of the parent-child relationship is probably via the already considered factors of resources and parental conflict. Beyond this, having more than one good parent may provide a diversity of perspectives and experiences that can enrich a child's life and upbringing.

According to attachment theory, it is paramount that a child forms a strong relationship with a principal or primary-attachment figure. ${ }^{41}$ Without such a figure, or if this relationship is dysfunctional in some way, serious psychological problems can ensue. Once a child has a primary-attachment figure, however, additional attachment figures are much less important. There is the potential to form attachments of the same or similar kind as towards the primary figure with several other people from a very early age, i.e. during the first year of life. Moreover, such attachments do not typically detract from the quality of the primary or any previous attachment. How many such attachments are possible will in part depend on how the concept is defined and which people qualify as attachment figures. Proponents of the theory disagree about whether and to what degree, e.g. involved grandparents and professional careers, such as in nurseries, become attachment figures. ${ }^{42}$

There seems to be no particular upper limit for the number of possible attachments, or, more generally, intimate relationships between a child and surrounding adults. There is individual variation, but a child's capacity to form strong intimate relationships tends to increase with age. ${ }^{43}$ In some cultures, children are routinely raised by more than two people, who then all qualify as parents on my understanding of the term, with at least up to four parents being the standard in some cultures. ${ }^{44}$ There seems no particular reason to think that five or six would be psychologically impossible.

Though there is rapidly decreasing marginal value of more good parents as long as all parents are around, more parents help insure against being exposed only to poor parenting. ${ }^{45}$ It also helps to insure against complete loss of parenting. On the other hand, the more parents there are in a family, the more likely a child is to experience the death or disappearance of any one parent. ${ }^{46}$ The premature loss of a parent can have great negative impact on a child. ${ }^{47}$ How common this experience is varies along many dimensions, but the risk is not insignificant. For example, it affected about 3\%
of Swedes born in the 70 s before age 25 and about $5 \%$ of Brits born in 1970 before the age of $16 .{ }^{48}$ It should be noted in this context that having more siblings increases the risk of experiencing the death (or disappearance) of a sibling, which may also be quite detrimental.

In sum, the most important thing for a child is to receive love, care, and consistent and transparent authority from at least one parent. Additional parents can help ensure that these goods are provided, and provide more of them and with greater diversity, though they may also increase the risk of being exposed to suboptimal parenting, and to loss. There is no particular limit to how many people a child can form strong attachments to or enjoy positive parental relationships with. Up to five is certainly possible, and there is certainly some limit beyond which additional people cannot have a very intimate relationship with the child and so cannot be parents on my understanding of the concept.

## Parents' Interests

I have focused so far on effects on children. Effects on parents are more difficult to assess because how adults are affected depends to a larger extent on their pre-existing values and preferences and other idiosyncrasies. In this section, however, I will, tentatively, consider some possible effects on parents from different numbers and ratios.

For starters, I agree with Brighouse and Swift that parenting a child, in the sense of having a continuous intimate relationship as well as being responsible for the child and making decisions for it, is an experience that cannot be had any other way and that is potentially very rewarding. ${ }^{49}$ This does not mean that a life without parenting cannot be an excellent life; there may be many different sorts of experiences that are all very rewarding, in different ways. I also agree with Brighouse and Swift that the rewards of parenting are not conditional on being biologically related to the child one parents. ${ }^{50}$

The rewards of parenting accrue because of the relationship between the adult and one or more children. They are not immediately dependent on what relationships the child or children have with other adults, and in particular not on whether the child has other parents, or how many. However, there must be an upper limit based on the child's ability to form strong attachments and more generally to be in close, loving relationships. The limit might also be based on the access to a child an adult needs in order to develop and maintain the same relationship, though these needs are in part shaped by expectations which are shaped by norms. It does not seem psychologically possible to be a parent in the sense I have assumed if one is caring for a child together with a hundred other adults. However, co-parenting with, for example, three or four other people cannot plausibly detract much from the rewards of parenting. As many parents can testify, particularly fathers, the fact that one's child is closer to and more appreciative of another parent does not detract substantially from the value of the unique relationship (though it can be painful at times). There seems to be no reason for why a third parent should experience parenting as much less rewarding than a second, even though there are two other parents who may in some ways be closer to the child, e.g. by being biological procreators, and who may be closer to each other, e.g. by being lovers. I propose that to the extent that additional parents might feel less like
parents, this is mainly because of preconceptions about the appropriate number of parents, and in particular internalisation of the two-parent presumption.

While the rewards of parenting do not decrease (much) with additional parents, at least for relatively low numbers, the costs decrease substantially with a higher par-ent-to-child ratio. Material costs for such things as housing, nourishment, activities, and education can simply be shared between all parents with means. It is not as straightforward to consider the costs in terms of time, attention, and emotional engagement as it is the spending of these resources that create the rewarding parenting relationship. However, parents to small children are often rather desperate to ease the burdens of parenting by inviting help from relatives or others, and they typically do not report less satisfaction with their relationship to the child when they get such help. It could perhaps still be argued, as discussed above, that the presence of other parents, who are, in contrast to temporary helpers, equally responsible for the child, might lead to less engagement from each parent, and so a less rewarding relationship. On the other hand, it may be argued that less stressful parenting can leave more room for and so facilitate meaningful relationship-building. ${ }^{51}$ In addition, of course, spending less emotional resources on one's children leaves more energy for other things.

Though not as outstanding as those of parenting, I propose that there are also unique rewards to be found in the relationship of being co-parents. Because parenting is such an intimate and everyday experience, to share this role with other people grounds a quite special relationship, in particular during the early years of childhood when the child's interactions are very local. Co-parents are also co-responsible and corights holders in relation to the child, which in itself is a unique relationship. In benign cases, co-parents can together indulge in all the details of parenting, which others who are not as involved are typically not able to appreciate. Co-parents also communicate, deliberate, and make shared decisions about a child for whom, hopefully, they both or all care very much. Hence, an advantage of being at least two parents is that this makes possible a co-parenting relationship. Should one co-parent be difficult to relate to, or should she die or disappear, having more than one other parent may be a particular blessing.

The discussion to this point has assumed the perspective of someone who will be a parent, one way or other. However, one advantage of giving up the two-parent presumption is that, most likely, more people will have the opportunity to parent, an opportunity they may otherwise not have had. ${ }^{52}$ Though four-parent families can be created by two couples who would have parented anyway, additional parents can also include those that would not otherwise parent, because of infertility, lack of a co-parent, and/or lack of resources. This advantage, it should be noted, will mitigate the positive environmental impact of a higher parent-to-child ratio.

In sum, the potentially great rewards of parenting can be enjoyed by several parents in relation to one and the same child; a higher ratio of adults to children saves material and emotional resources for parents; more parents means more opportunities for rewarding co-parenting relationships; and giving up the two-parent presumption will likely mean opportunities to parent for people who otherwise would not. All of these factors indicate that parents, as a group, are better off being more than one per family, and probably better off the more they are, up to the psychological limit at which the child cannot form the appropriate intimate relationship to all intended parents.

## Conclusion

I have considered a series of factors that either are traditionally associated with the number of parents in a family or that are in fact affected by it, or by the ratio of parents to children. The table below provides a brief summary of these factors and my assessment of their bearing on the title question: how many parents should there be in a family?

| Factor | Assessment |
| :--- | :--- |
| Biological relatedness | Very weak support for at least as many parents as there are <br> biological procreators |
| Romantic couplehood | No relevance |
| Material resources | Strong support for as many parents as possible, though <br> decreasing with numbers due to decreasing marginal utility <br> Some support for more parents than one, though possibly |
| Emotional resources | decreasing for higher numbers due to loss of engagement |
| Parental conflict | Strong support for solo parenting; some support for lower <br> numbers of parents; some support for three parents to make <br> likely some healthy co-parent relationship while limiting conflict |
| Parent's interests | Some support for as many parents as possible up to <br> psychological limit <br> Strong support for more parents than one, though decreasing <br> with higher numbers; particular support for giving up <br> presumptions that prevent some from parenting |

All factors that are relevant are so only in general, and each of them may have no or only marginal relevance in particular cases. Individuals with plenty of resources and/or lacking suitable co-parents may be better off parenting alone, especially if they have other adults with whom to share their parenting experience.

The various factors are not easy to balance. Most of them point to greater advantages with a greater number of parents, up to the limit at which a child cannot form the intimate relationship that partly constitutes parenting. Also, the fact that it is probably beneficial to have at least one sibling strengthens the case for a higher absolute number of parents. On the other hand, the benefits of more parents decrease with increasing numbers. There may also be reason to avoid many parents due to increased likelihood of some parental conflict and some parental loss.

My overall assessment is that no particular number stands out as generally preferable. There is some indication that two may be better than one and also that three or four may be better than two, but these indications are too weak to support a general social presumption in favor of any particular number or numbers below the psychological limit. It seems most likely, therefore, that we should jettison the two-parent presumption and take active steps to neutralise it, without replacing it with another similar presumption. Consideration of the wider societal and global effects of the par-ent-to-child ratio probably provides additional support for having a higher such ratio and so more parents per family. My investigation is premised on my understanding of a parent as both practically and emotionally involved with their child. On other understandings of the idea of a parent, other conclusions might have followed.

I have excluded from consideration the impact of current social norms, as well as current values and preferences of existing or soon-to-be parents. For people exposed to an oppressive two-parent norm, it may be best not to challenge this norm, even if another number would have been better under more benign circumstances. For people who are already committed to parent with one other person, perhaps one particular person who shares this commitment, it may be wisest to stay so committed. I see no reason, however, for society to support such commitment by a general two-parent presumption. My conclusions are in the first instance relevant for people who have not yet internalised the two-parent presumption and who have not already established their family life in particular ways, giving rise to reasonable expectations of exclusivity. To some extent, however, even committed people and existing families may consider welcoming additional parents. As several other authors have emphasised, many families already in fact include more than two parents; they would benefit from recognising this and from getting social and legal recognition and support for their existing arrangements.

The two-parent presumption is reinforced by society in a number of ways. Most obviously, there is an almost universal cap on the number of legal parents to two. This in turn means that institutions that are either run or regulated by the government accommodate only two parents. Important such institutions include hospitals and clinics, schools and nurseries. There is often little room for a third or fourth parent to interact with these institutions, in that role. The two-parent presumption is also supported by social norms and by private enterprises that presume it in advertising and offers and in the products and services they supply (e.g. 'family' discounts that presuppose that a family contains two parents). All these instances of the two-parent presumption should be eliminated. This means legal reform to allow up to five parents and as a consequence changes in various rules, regulations, and methods employed by government and government agencies. It may also mean anti-discrimination laws, e.g. against commercial offers restricted to two-parent families.

My investigation has focused exclusively on the interests of parents and children when the children are minors. Parents can be very important allies in adulthood, of course, and then more seems again to be better. On the other hand, when parents grow old, roles may often be reversed, with children caring for their parents. At that point, a high parent-to-child ratio could be a burden on the adult children. In addition, having a smaller absolute number of children will increase the risk that one has no surviving children when old, or no surviving children with the interest and opportunity to uphold an active relationship. On the other hand, a higher absolute number of parents in a family might mean that these parents, as they grow old, have stronger support from each other, with whom they have shared an intimate life experience and probably a home. The material impact on elderly parents with no or few children will depend a lot on the social welfare available. Because of its complexity, this matter deserves independent treatment. I am not convinced that it will, overall, indicate that a low parent-to-child ratio is desirable. If it does, however, this may be an additional consideration in favor of larger families, with at least two children and two or more parents.

I have focused on parenthood and not discussed the pros and cons of other relationships between children and adults. In particular, I have not considered weaker forms of parent-like relationships such as traditional extended family relations or more novel
© 2019 The Authors. Fournal of Applied Philosophy published by John Wiley \& Sons Ltd on behalf of Society for Applied Philosophy.
constructions such as the 'support parents' Laurie Shrage proposes are superior to additional parents because they involve less additional coordination while still providing some of the resource benefits. ${ }^{53}$ Non-parent and parent-like-but-not-quite-parenting relationships between adults and children are certainly worth our attention. However, I do not see how their presence or potential makes the two-parent presumption any more plausible, although they may mitigate some of its harmful effects.

More generally, there may be reason to encourage any type of caring bonds between people, including shared engagement with and responsibility for children, in whatever way people find suits them. Such encouragement may make one- and two-parent families more attractive. However, it may also stimulate additional parenting relationships. When that happens, it should be accepted and recognised by law and society.

Kalle Grill, Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, 901 87,Umeå, Sweden . kalle.grill@umu.se

## Acknowledgements

Material that later found its way into this article was presented at the conference Beyond the Nuclear Family: The Philosophy of Close Personal Relationship at Umeå University in 2015, at a guest lecture at the Centre for Ethics at Ludwig- Maximilians-University of Munich in 2017, and at the panel on The Good Family and the State at Mancept Workshops in Political Theory, also in 2017. Something closer to the current article was presented at the higher seminar in philosophy as well as at an informal workshop on family research at Umeå University in 2018. Thanks to all who contributed questions and comments on these occasions. Thanks especially to Anna Smajdor for being an active member of several of these audiences and for our discussions in connection. Thanks finally to Daniela Cutas and Bouke de Vries for helpful written comments on a late draft, as well as two reviewers for this journal for useful comments.

## NOTES

[^0]6 Tamara Metz, Untying the Knot: Marriage, the State, and the Case for Their Divorce (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
7 For the piecemeal regulation approach, see Clare Chambers, Against Marriage: An Egalitarian Defence of the Marriage-Free State (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2017), especially chapter 5. On the contract approach, see Chambers (Chapter 4) for a critical overview. One recent endorsement is Ronald Den Otter, In Defense of Plural Marriage (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
8 D. Cutas, 'On triparenting. Is having three committed parents better than having only Two?', fournal of Medical Ethics 37, 12 (2011): 735-38.
9 Mianna Lotz, 'The two-parent limitation in ART parentage law: Old-fashioned law for new-fashioned families', in Cutas and Chan, op. cit., pp. 34-48; see also Melanie B. Jacobs, 'Why just two - disaggregating traditional parental rights and responsibilities to recognize multiple parents', fournal of Law $\mathcal{E}$ Family Studies 9 (2007): 309-39.
10 Samantha Brennan and Bill Cameron, 'How many parents can a child have? Philosophical reflections on the 'three parent case,' Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie 54, 1 (2015): 45-61.

11 Samantha Brennan and Bill Cameron, 'Is marriage bad for children? Rethinking the connection between romantic love, having a child, and marriage', in Elizabeth Brake (ed.) After Marriage: Rethinking Marital Relationships, (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 84-99.
12 The notion of a family as constituted by caring relationships in small groups and over generations is endorsed by e.g. Margaret Mead, "Contrasts and Comparisons from Primitive Society," The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 160, 1 (1932): 23-28, p. 23; Véronique Munoz-Dardé, 'Is the Family to Be Abolished Then?', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 99 (1999): 37-56, p. 44; David Archard, The Family: A Liberal Defence (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 10.
13 This is one central finding of attachment theory, the basic tenants of which are generally accepted within developmental psychology. Though not impossible, it is difficult to see how healthy attachment would be reliably achieved in the absence of such relationships. Vivien Prior and Danya Glaser, Understanding Attachment and Attachment Disorders: Theory, Evidence and Practice (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

14 A qualification to the 'over time' condition is that a person who otherwise qualifies as a parent can be a parent to a newborn child from the start. However, if a person cares for a child only during a few months, I would be tempted to say that they were never a parent.
15 Here too qualifications for very young children may be needed, depending on to what extent they can have intimate personal relationships.
16 Anca Gheaus has repeatedly pointed out as problematic the lack of legal rights of engaged non-parents, see e.g. 'Arguments for Nonparental Care for Children', Social Theory and Practice 37, 3 (2011): 483-509; Gheaus 2019, op. cit.
17 César Palacios-González, John Harris, and Giuseppe Testa, 'Multiplex parenting: IVG and the generations to come', fournal of Medical Ethics 40, 11 (2014): 752-58.
18 Daniela Cutas and Anna Smajdor, 'I am your mother and your father!' In vitro derived gametes and the ethics of solo reproduction', Health Care Analysis 25, 4 (2017): 354-69.
19 James W. Walther, 'Attorney General News Release: Supreme Court Affirms Parental Obligations Under Marriage Equality', October 4, 2018, https://governor.hawaii.gov/newsroom/latest-news/attorney-general-news-release-supreme-court-affirms-parental-obligations-under-marriage-equality/ (accessed 2019-04-01).
20 J. David Velleman, 'Family history', Philosophical Papers 34, 3 (2005): 357-78.
21 Sally Haslanger, 'Family, ancestry and self: What is the moral significance of biological ties?', Adoption $\mathcal{E}$ Culture 2 (2009): 91-122.
22 Daniel Groll, 'Well-being, gamete donation, \& genetic knowledge: The significant interest view', fournal of Medicine and Philosophy, forthcoming.
23 Anca Gheaus, 'The right to parent one's biological baby', fournal of Political Philosophy 20, 4 (2012): 43255.

24 Gheaus 2012 op. cit.
25 Critics include Cheshire Calhoun, 'Who's afraid of polygamous marriage - lessons for same-sex marriage advocacy from the history of polygamy', San Diego Law Review 42 (2005): 1023; Elizabeth Brake 2012 op. cit.; Natasha McKeever, Romantic Love and Monogamy: A Philosophical Exploration (University of Sheffield, 2014); Den Otter op. cit. Defenders include John Finnis, 'The good of marriage and the morality of sexual relations: Some philosophical and historical observations', American fournal of furisprudence 42
(1997): 97-134; Roger Scruton, Sexual Desire: A Philosophical Investigation (London: Continuum, 2006, first published 1986); Ralph Wedgwood, 'Is civil marriage illiberal?'," in After Marriage: Rethinking Marital Relationships, ed. Elizabeth Brake (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 29-50.
26 Archard, op. cit., p. viii; see also Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, Family Values: The Ethics of ParentChild Relationships (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 48-56.
27 Metz, op. cit.; Brake, op. cit.; Christian Munthe and Thomas Hartvigsson, 'The best interest of children and the basis of family policy: The issue of reproductive caring units', in Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan (eds.) Families - Beyond the Nuclear Ideal (Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 49-63; Samantha Brennan and Bill Cameron, 'Is marriage bad for children?' op. cit.; Chambers op. cit.; Laurie Shrage, 'Decoupling marriage and parenting', Fournal of Applied Philosophy 35, 3 (2018): 496-512.
28 Traditionally, many authors have claimed a positive relationship between marriage and the wellbeing of children. To the extent that there is such a relationship, however, it does not depend on marriage as such, but on other factors that tend to co-vary with marriage in some cultures (for a critical overview, see Chambers, op. cit., pp. 102-109).
29 For a real example of such conflict, see Sheff, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
30 Michael E. Lamb, 'Mothers, fathers, families, and circumstances: factors affecting children's adjustment', Applied Developmental Science 16, 2 (2012): 98-111, p. 98.
31 Lamb op. cit, italics added.
32 For a fresh overview over relevant literature, see Jason M. Fletcher and Jinho Kim, 'The effect of sibship size on non-cognitive skills: evidence from natural experiments', Labour Economics 56 (2019): 36-43, pp. 36-37.
33 George E. Vaillant, Triumphs of Experience (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 42-43.
34 Fletcher and Kim, op. cit.
35 Mark Goldfeder and Elisabeth Sheff, 'Children of polyamorous families: A first empirical look', fournal of Law and Social Deviance 5 (2013): 150-243.
36 Susan Golombok et al., 'Single mothers by choice: Mother-child relationships and children's psychological adjustment', fournal of Family Psychology 30, 4 (2016): 409-18.
37 Lamb op. cit. , p. 121.
38 Cutas, op. cit., pp. 736-737.
39 Lamb op. cit., pp. 104-105.
40 Lamb op. cit., pp. 100-101.
41 Prior and Glaser, op. cit.
42 Prior and Glaser, op. cit., chapter 5.
43 Prior and Glaser, op. cit., chapter 5.
44 Judi Mesman, Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, and Abraham Sagi-Schwartz, 'Cross-cultural patterns of attachment', in Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications (New York: Guilford, 2016), pp. 852-77.

45 Gheaus, 2011 op. cit.; Brennan and Cameron, 'How many parents can a child have?' op. cit.
46 Both of these factors are noted by Cutas, op. cit., p. 736.
47 For a brief overview and a study that indicates more frequent school failure after parental death, see Lisa Berg et al., 'Parental death during childhood and subsequent school performance', Pediatrics 133, 4 (2014): 682-89.

48 Berg, op. cit.; Samantha Parsons, 'Long-term impact of childhood bereavement', Preliminary Analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) (London: Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre, 2011).
49 Brighouse and Swift op. cit., pp. 87-93.
50 Brighouse and Swift op. cit., pp. 104-110.
51 As noted by Brennan and Cameron, 'How Many Parents Can a Child Have?', op. cit., p. 59.
52 Lotz argues that recognising donors as third (and forth) parents will enable some would-be parents who otherwise may not have an opportunity to parent, op. cit., p. 43.
53 Shrage, op. cit. pp. 8-10.


[^0]:    1 Philip Cafaro, 'Climate ethics and population policy’, Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change 3, 1 (2012), 45-61; Sarah Conly, One Child: Do We Have a Right to More? (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); cf. Thomas Young, 'Overconsumption and procreation: Are they morally equivalent?', Fournal of Applied Philosophy 18, 2 (2001): 183-92.
    2 Anca Gheaus, 'More co-parents, fewer children: Multiparenting and sustainable population', Essays in Philosophy 20, 1 (2019).
    3 For an overview over ideas about childhood now and in previous centuries, see David Archard, Children: Rights and Childhood (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), part I.
    4 For various examples of new ways of forming families, see the contributions in Daniela Cutas and Sarah Chan (eds.), Families - Beyond the Nuclear Ideal (Bloomsbury, 2014); For polyamory in particular, see Elisabeth Sheff, The Polyamorists next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families (Rowman \& Littlefield, 2014).
    5 Elizabeth Brake, Minimizing Marriage: Marriage, Morality, and the Law (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); see also Brake, 'Equality and non-hierarchy in marriage: What do feminists really want', in Elizabeth Brake (ed.) After Marriage: Rethinking Marital Relationships (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 100-124.

