

'Alloparenting' Is Not a Replacement for the Traditional Family

Is it good for parents to have lots of help raising their children? Often it is, and sometimes it's even necessary. Of course, it depends on who's helping, how they help, and why the help given is needed.

But does it follow that the value of good help casts doubt on the benefits of being raised within a two-parent family? Not really. But that's what some fairly influential people would have you believe.

It's a prominent theme in Hillary Clinton's 1996 book *It Takes a Village*, and reappears in an article published last week at Second Nexus entitled "[Wrong All Along? New Study Casts Doubt On Benefits Of Traditional Family Model.](#)" The article suggests that "alloparenting" has been shown to be so beneficial to children as to render the traditional nuclear family almost superfluous.

[Alloparenting](#) consists in both extended family and non-related people, mostly female, being primary or regular caregivers for young children, especially infants. Most of us would be inclined to agree that having extended family help raise one's children is a net plus. Of course the article's author, Alison Wilkinson, admits that alloparenting by people *not* closely related to the parents has not been studied much by social scientists. But she cites and links to new, preliminary research suggesting that among primates and primitive *homo sapiens*, babies who are exposed to a variety of good (or at least passable) caregivers thrive. And there's some evidence that alloparenting among extended kin, and even among the larger tribe, was the norm in prehistoric, hunter-gatherer

societies.

Now Wilkinson also acknowledges the considerable body of research suggesting that *modern* children raised in single-parent households are [much more likely](#) to develop a variety of problems than children raised in intact, two-parent families. Do the interesting data cited about alloparenting cast doubt on that?

No, but that's the inferential leap Wilkinson makes. It occurs after the following passage:

"Whether studied or not, most families by necessity rely on a network of care—either formal or informal—to rear their children. More than half of all U.S. households with young children have [two employed parents](#), creating a need for family, friends or paid caregivers to watch them.

Despite the need for a network of care, guilt and financial pressure often surround it. [Karen Hansen](#), a Brandeis University sociologist, found that all economic classes of parents rely on these networks. But the professional middle-class parents were more vulnerable to job pressures, which lead to a higher level of anxiety about often cobbled-together childcare arrangements. 'We should support and promote these kinds of relationships, which are found among all classes and races.'"

So far, so good: Many parents need a wider "network of care," and children often benefit from getting it. But here's the kicker:

"Despite the need to support these relationships, government spending persists in promoting the nuclear family, [with little success](#)..."

While it's probably true that government efforts to "promote

the nuclear family” haven’t worked, it hardly follows from the preceding two passages that *no such effort by anybody* should be made. The established body of relevant research, of which Wilkinson is well aware, suggests that, *all other things being equal*, being raised by two parents is generally better than not being so raised. In fact, having two parents present and actively involved in one’s life as a child actually increases the opportunities for beneficial alloparenting, should the parents desire it. It often supplies two sets of extended family rather than one, and often increases the income needed to pay for alloparenting from non-related people.

Wilkinson’s conclusion conveniently serves the now-fashionable agenda to widen the definition of family so much that the traditional nuclear family neither can nor should be seen as a desirable norm. But it’s unwarranted. Assuming that the data she cites are correct, her conclusion is a typically political example of using truth as propaganda.

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Image: Tim Macy