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Elective Co-Parenting via Connection Sites

1 **Title:** Elective Co-parenting with Someone Already Known versus Someone Met Online:
2 implications for parent and child psychological functioning

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Abstract

Research Question. What are the psychological outcomes for parents and children in elective co-parenting families and do these differ based on whether or not parents met online?

Design. This cross-sectional study provides novel descriptive quantitative data on the wellbeing of parents and children within 23 elective co-parent families, defined as two or more parents deciding to have and raise children together outside of a romantic partnership or conjugal couple relationship. Standardised questionnaires were administered to assess parent and child psychological adjustment. Bayesian independent t-tests were conducted to compare the parent and child outcomes in 13 families who met online via a connection website with 10 families who were co-parenting with someone known to them.

Results. Elective co-parent scores for depression, anxiety, parenting stress, resilience, perceived social support and couple relationship satisfaction were within the normal range. Children’s average competencies, behavioural and emotional problem scores were low risk when compared with population norms. Bayes factors suggest no support for the alternative hypothesis that there were differences in parent or child wellbeing between the families who met via connection sites versus those already known.

Conclusions. Parents and children in elective co-parent families are functioning well regardless of how they were formed, but individuals may require tailored professional advice or support for this growing new route to parenthood. Future longitudinal work with larger samples is required to replicate these findings, explore children’s perspectives of their families as well as the support needs of co-parents and their children throughout their parenting journey.

52 **Key words:** co-parenting, connection website, parent psychological health, child adjustment, social
53 support, couple relationship, stigma

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74 **Introduction**

75 Striking out against convention, there has been a growth in individuals deciding to
76 conceive and raise children together outside of a romantic couple relationship, hereafter referred
77 to as elective co-parenting (Jadva et al., 2015). Parents may also describe themselves as pursuing
78 platonic parenting, parenting partnerships, collaborative co-parenting or parental constellations.
79 Together these terms capture families consisting of two or more parents who are intentionally
80 committing to raise a child together outside of the traditional nuclear family model. They are,
81 therefore, distinct from parents raising a child together after divorce or separation, where the
82 term co-parenting is typically invoked. Elective co-parenting as a family structure is also
83 conceptually distinct from co-parenting within a family-systems perspective (McHale & Sirotkin,
84 2019), which focuses on the processes between parents collaborating in child-rearing, such as
85 division of labour, agreement, and conflict.

86 Elective co-parenting family arrangements vary in terms of the number, gender identity,
87 sexual orientation, and partner status of parents. Although elective co-parenting has a long
88 history within the LGBTQ+ community (Dempsey, 2010), there has been an expansion in both
89 who and how elective co-parenting is pursued. Specifically, there has been an increase in both
90 the number of heterosexual prospective parents and routes to meet a co-parent outside of
91 existing social networks, for example, online via connection websites (Harper et al., 2017) and
92 through organisations (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005). Despite a lack of recognition within legal
93 documentation, precluding official national figures of this family types, figures from websites
94 suggest a substantial minority of prospective parents are interested in co-parenting (i.e., in 2024
95 11% of Pride Angel’s 100,489 members are registered as co-parents in 2024) .

96 **Elective Co-Parent Families**

97 Research to date has largely explored the motivations and experiences of LGBTQ+ elective
98 co-parents (e.g., Dempsey, 2010). For example, in a qualitative study of nine families (four
99 families who were friends prior to co-parenting and five families who met via specific meetings or
100 online connections websites), elective co-parenting was driven by the desire for biological
101 descent, to experience pregnancy (for women), to know the child’s background, and to provide
102 the child with a mother and a father (Herbrand, 2018a). In the majority of families the child(ren)
103 lived primarily with their biological mothers who were viewed as having an essential parenting
104 role (Herbrand, 2018b), although there were individual differences in how arrangements and
105 parenting roles were experienced. In Israel, the non-governmental institution, The Alternative
106 Parenting Centre, has been facilitating the formation of ‘hetero-gay’ families between gay men
107 and heterosexual women (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005). For the single heterosexual mothers,
108 elective co-parenting was described as having practical advantages over the use of a sperm
109 donor, for example, through the provision of financial assistance and sharing the burdens of
110 parenting (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2012). Interviews with five cisgender heterosexual mothers and
111 five cisgender heterosexual fathers from eight co-parent families highlighted that parents choose
112 and manage co-parenting arrangements by simultaneously reproducing and modernising the
113 traditional family unit (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Elective co-parenting was seen as a plan B and
114 a means through which to achieve or improve the traditional family via nontraditional means. For
115 some this was achieved, with communication facilitating friendship and new parenting
116 arrangements, but for others family life reproduced gender roles.

117 Studies with families co-parenting after divorce have typically found that parents and
118 children experience a reduction in wellbeing (Lansford, 2009). However, elective co-parent
119 families are not the product of romantic relationship breakdown and conflict, the latter of which
120 largely explains links between divorce and poor child wellbeing (van Dijk et al., 2020).
121 Furthermore, multi-informant studies with other diverse family types, such as those headed by
122 LGBTQ+ parents, single parents by choice, or parents who have used assisted reproductive
123 technologies, have found parents and children to be functioning well and sometimes better than
124 those in 'traditional' family units (Imrie & Golombok, 2020). These findings challenge theoretical
125 and widely-held assumptions of the importance of traditional family structures, as well as parent
126 gender, genetic and gestational connections for child development and flourishing (Golombok,
127 2105). That said, parents and children in these modern families sometimes face unique
128 challenges that may have a detrimental impact on their adjustment and experiences, such as
129 stigmatisation and bullying in school (Imrie & Golombok, 2020).

130 **Elective Co-Parenting Through Connection Websites**

131 Connection websites have now opened up alternative paths to parenthood (Harper et al.,
132 2017; Ravelingien et al., 2016). A survey of 102 members seeking to become co-parents via one
133 such website, Pride Angel, highlighted that elective co-parenting was not limited to LGBTQ+
134 individuals and couples, or single heterosexual women, but that heterosexual single men were
135 also actively searching for someone to conceive and raise a child with (Jadva et al., 2015). The
136 desire to have a child who knew both their biological parents was rated the most important
137 driver by members searching for a co-parent. Women were more likely than men to be motivated
138 by their increasing age and being single, whereas men were more likely than women to be

139 motivated by a desire to pass on their genes. Heterosexual men and women were more likely
140 than lesbian, bisexual and gay men to search for heterosexual co-parents. Many prospective co-
141 parents reported they were hoping to develop a friendship with their co-parent. Women were
142 more likely than men to express a desire for daily contact with their child and for the child to live
143 predominantly with them. However, the sample were prospective parents thus the experiences
144 and adjustment of parents and children living within elective co-parenting families could not be
145 evaluated.

146 Some have highlighted potential advantages or risks that may be associated with creating
147 a family through connection websites. On one hand, such sites appear to promote autonomy,
148 enable screening of donor/co-parent health and personal characteristics, and potentially reduce
149 the financial and time burden of clinic involvement (Ravelingien et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2022).
150 However, there are concerns that a lack of, or limited, website regulation, may jeopardise parents
151 medical and legal protection (Harper et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2022), for example, due to
152 insufficient screening or counselling, lack of understanding of medical screening or conflicts
153 arising from unclear or changing expectations of parental involvement. Furthermore, in most
154 countries only two parents can be named on a child's birth certificate. Thus, in families with
155 three or more elective co-parents, non-legal co-parents are not recognised by institutions that
156 are important for children, such as those that provide education and healthcare (Bureau & Rist,
157 2020) which may inhibit the parental role of the non-legal parent(s). Others note that such sites
158 may serve to reinforce heterosexist and genetic norms of valid family building (Ravelingien et al.,
159 2016). In spite of these concerns, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on whether these

160 concerns manifest and present a particular challenge to parent and child wellbeing (Ravelingien
161 et al., 2016) within elective co-parent families.

162 **The Current Study**

163 The current multi-method study provides novel empirical evidence on the nature of
164 elective co-parenting family arrangements, and the psychological wellbeing of parents and
165 children within these families. This exploratory design adopted a broad and inclusive definition of
166 elective co-parenting, including heterosexual and LGBTQ+ parents who did and did not use a
167 connection website, in order to ascertain the range of families' experiences of this path to
168 parenthood. The study was open to elective co-parent families with children aged 12 and under.
169 Parents self-identified as elective co-parents and had started their journey to parenthood either
170 in the context of existing friendships, mutual social networks, or online, and planned to raise the
171 child outside of a romantic relationship. There was no restriction of the configurations of families
172 in terms of parent numbers, sexual orientations, and genders.

173 The first aim of the study was to present novel descriptive evidence on the psychosocial
174 adjustment of the parents and children within these diverse elective co-parenting families. The
175 second aim of the study was to compare the experiences and adjustment of families who started
176 their journey to parenthood via meeting online via a connection website versus those who were
177 previously known to each other. Overall, the study aimed to increase understanding of parents
178 and children in elective co-parenting families, and in doing so provide the first empirical data on
179 the psychological outcomes for parents and children within this new and growing family form

180 **Materials & Methods**

181 **Sample**

182 Participants were recruited through parenting connection websites and mailing lists (e.g.,
183 Pride Angel, Modamily, Pollentree), social media and snowball sampling. Parents were invited to
184 take part in a study exploring co-parenting families to learn more about their experiences of
185 parenthood, parent-child relationships and children's wellbeing. Parents interested in
186 participating were invited to email the research team and they were then provided with detailed
187 information about the project. Parents were eligible to participate if they had a child aged up to
188 12 years old within a co-parenting arrangement and self-identified as raising their child with
189 involvement of the child's other biological parent. The parents could live in different households
190 and participation did not require all co-parents within a family to take part. The sexual orientation
191 of the parent and whether or not they had a partner was also irrelevant to the inclusion criteria.
192 A total of 23 elective co-parenting families were recruited, which included 41 parents (24
193 mothers and 17 fathers; $M_{age} = 40.05$ years old, $SD = 5.22$ years old; range 32 – 55 years old) of
194 27 children (10 boys, 17 girls) with children aged 3 months to 11 years old ($M_{age} = 3.5$ years old,
195 $SD = 2.56$ years old; range 3 months – 11 years old). Families lived in the United Kingdom, North
196 America and Europe. Parents were predominantly well educated with 12.2% completing
197 secondary education, 39% attaining an undergraduate degree and 48.8% a postgraduate degree.
198 Parents' income varied, with 19.5% earning less than £10, 000, 7.3% £10 – 25, 000, 36.6%
199 between £25-50,000, and 24.3% earning over £50,000 (five participants chose not to disclose
200 this). Family arrangements varied in terms of the number, gender identity, sexual orientation, and
201 partner status of parents. Of the 23 families, nine families had two heterosexual parents, four
202 families were made up of one heterosexual and one LGBTQ+ parent, and 10 families had two or
203 more LGBTQ+ parents (e.g., typically lesbian mothers plus gay father). These three different

204 family formations were similarly likely to pursue elective co-parenting with someone they met
205 online or someone known, Cramer's $V = .20$, $p = .638$, and equally distributed across region
206 (United Kingdom, North America and Europe), Cramer's $V = .29$, $p = .444$. From these families, 41
207 parents completed interviews and 36 parents completed standardised questionnaires.

208 Procedure

209 Parents were invited to take part in in-depth semi-structured interviews exploring their
210 paths to, and experiences of, parenthood. Standardised questionnaires administered online
211 collected data on the psychological wellbeing of the parents and the child, as well as parents co-
212 parenting alliance, and, for families where at least one of the biological parents was in a romantic
213 relationship, the quality of the couple relationship. Parents were told they did not have to answer
214 all questions in the interview or the questionnaire if they did not want to. Written informed
215 consent was obtained from the parents. The study received ethical approval from the University
216 of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

217 Measures

218 *Family Formation and Experiences.* Parents were invited to take part in a semi-structured
219 interview which explored their route to elective co-parenting, their experiences of conception,
220 pregnancy and disclosure of this to their family, friends and child(ren).

221 Parental Psychological Wellbeing

222 *Anxiety.* Parents rated their symptoms of anxiety on the 20-item Trait Anxiety Inventory
223 (TAI: Spielberger et al., 1983). The TAI has excellent internal consistency, test re-test reliability,
224 and construct validity. Total scores range from 20 – 80, with high scores reflecting greater levels

225 of trait anxiety, and scores of 44 or greater are commonly used to indicate at-risk levels (Ercan et
226 al., 2015). Reliability of the scale in the current study was good (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

227 **Depression.** Parents rated their symptoms of depression on the 10-item Edinburgh
228 Depression Scale (EPDS: Thorpe, 1993). The EPDS has good sensitivity, specificity and predictive
229 validity. Total scores can range from 0 - 30, with higher scores indicating greater levels of
230 depression, with scores of 13 or more considered the cut off for high risk for depression (Cox et
231 al., 1987). Reliability of the scale in the current study was good (Cronbach's alpha = .83).

232 **Parenting Stress.** Parents completed the 36-item Parenting Stress Index short-form
233 (Abidin, 1995) to assess their stress associated with parenting. The PSI has clinical utility,
234 excellent internal consistency, and content and construct validity (Holly et al., 2019). Scores can
235 range from 36 to 180, with high scores reflect greater parenting stress. Based on norms, scores of
236 90 or higher are indicative of clinically significant levels of stress. Reliability of the scale in the
237 current study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .93).

238 **Resilience.** Parents completed the 6-item Brief Resilience Scale (BRS: Smith et al., 2008) to
239 assess their ability to bounce back or recover from stress. Psychometric properties tested across
240 four samples show the BRS is reliable and produces a unitary construct associated positively with
241 coping and health, and negatively with poor mental health, controlling for optimism and social
242 support. Scores can range from 6 to 30, with higher scores indicating greater ability to bounce
243 back. Reliability of the scale was good (Cronbach's alpha = .86).

244 **Parental Relational Wellbeing**

245 **Social support.** Parents were invited to complete the 12-item Multidimensional Scale of
246 Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988). Parents are asked to use a 7-point scale to rate how

247 far they agree with statements about their support from family, friends and a significant other.
248 Mean scale scores of 1-2.9, 3-5, and 5.1-7 are classified as low, moderate, and high support,
249 respectively. Reliability of the scale in the current study was excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .96).

250 ***Couple relationship quality.*** Those in romantic relationships were invited to complete the
251 28-item Golombok-Rust Inventory of Marital State (Rust et al., 1986). Scores can range from 0 to
252 84, with scores of 34 or more indicative of marital dissatisfaction. Reliability of the scale in the
253 current study was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

254 ***Stigma***

255 ***Exclusion.*** Parents completed an adapted version of the Perceived Sexual Orientation-
256 Related Stigma and Exclusion questionnaire (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Parents were asked to
257 indicate using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true*, to 5 = *very true*) the extent to which each of
258 eight statements relating to exclusion and mistreatment by teachers, school staff and other
259 parents was true for them. Wording of five of the eight items was adapted for co-parenting, for
260 example, "I have felt that my parenting skills were questioned because I am a parent through a
261 co-parenting arrangement". Higher scores indicate greater experiences of stigma. Reliability of
262 the scale in the current study was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .71) and in line with the alpha
263 from the development of the measure.

264 ***Acceptance and criticism.*** During the semi-structured interview parents reflected on any
265 experiences of criticism, prejudice or lack of acceptance from others they had experienced due
266 to their family at a local community level or at a national level. These answers were rated on a 3-
267 point scale (0 = *None*, 1 = *Yes – occasional*, 2 = *Yes – frequent*).

268 ***Co-parenting***

269 **Alliance.** Parents completed the 20-item Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI: Abidin &
270 Brunner, 1995) which assessed co-parenting processes, such as cooperation, communication and
271 mutual respect, using a 5-point scale. Scores ranged from 20 – 100, with higher scores indicating
272 a stronger and more positive parenting alliance. In the validation study, the PAI had good internal
273 consistency, convergent validity and discriminated between married, separated, and divorced
274 parents; mean scores for parents in married families were higher (women $M = 84$, $SD = 13.1$;
275 men $M = 86$, $SD = 9$) than those in divorced and separated families (women $M = 67.9$, $SD = 17.6$;
276 $M = 70.1$, $SD = 15$) (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Reliability of the scale in the current study was
277 excellent (Cronbach's alpha = .97).

278 **Experiences of co-parenting.** During the semi-structured interview parents reflected on
279 their experiences of co-parenting, including the distribution of childcare, the frequency of
280 contact with co-parents, the financial organisation of the family, the quality of the relationship
281 with their co-parent, the level of disagreement with their co-parent and the extent to which their
282 parenting (e.g., rules, discipline) is coordinated.

283 **Child adjustment.**

284 Parents of infants and toddlers (0 – 2 two years old) completed the Brief Infant-Toddler
285 Social and Emotional Assessment (BITSEA: Briggs-Gowan et al., 2004) to provide an assessment
286 of their child's, competencies (Cronbach's alpha = .79) and problems (Cronbach's alpha = .73). In
287 a representative birth cohort, the BITSEA had excellent test-rest reliability, and criterion,
288 discriminative and predictive validity. Reliability of the scale in the current study was acceptable
289 (competencies Cronbach's alpha = .79; problems Cronbach's alpha = .73).

290 Parents of children aged three years and over completed the widely-used Strengths and
291 Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ: Goodman, 1997) to assess children's psychological adjustment.
292 The 25-item SDQ has five subscales each with 5 items: conduct problems, hyperactivity/
293 inattention, emotional problems, peer problems and prosocial behaviour. The four difficulties
294 subscales are summed to create a total difficulties score (possible range of 0 to 40) whereby
295 higher scores reflect greater problems (Cronbach's alpha = .79). Reliability of the total difficulties
296 and prosocial scores in the current study were acceptable and good respectively (Cronbach's
297 alpha = .79; alpha = .86).

298 **Analysis plan**

299 Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were first
300 calculated to provide information on family formation, experiences, and parenting and child
301 functioning. Information on family formation and experience is presented at the parent and
302 family-level where appropriate. Descriptive statistics for the parent self-report questionnaires are
303 provided for all parents who completed the questionnaires (N = 36) and compared against
304 questionnaire norms. The score from the parent who spent the most time with the child (or
305 random selection from parents when they reported equal time with the child) was used to report
306 child adjustment. Mean scores on the questionnaire measures were compared to norms to
307 assess the proportion of parents and children scoring within the average range for the different
308 variables assessed.

309 Bayesian independent t-tests were conducted in JASP (JASP, 2024) to explore whether
310 there were differences between parents in psychological and relational wellbeing, co-parenting
311 and exclusion, or children's behavioural and emotional difficulties, between families who met via

312 connection websites or not. Default priors (i.e., how plausible the alternative hypothesis is
313 compared to the null before any data collected) were used given the lack of prior evidence on
314 this phenomenon (van Doorn et al., 2021). The group comparisons were conducted using one
315 parent (the same parent for whom the child adjustment rating was taken) from each family ($n =$
316 12 connection website; $n = 10$ existing relationship). Bayes factors provide a quantifiable measure
317 of the evidence in favour of the alternative (BF_{10}) or null hypothesis (BF_{01}) (Wetzels &
318 Wagenmakers, 2012). Interpretation of these scores is judged on the strength of the evidence
319 required to suggest the alternative hypothesis is true, such that the evidence is considered as
320 weak or ‘anecdotal’ (1 – 3), moderate (3 – 10), strong (10 – 30) or very strong (30 – 100)
321 (Jeffreys, 1961; van Doorn et al., 2021). Bayes factors are particularly useful in the absence of
322 prior evidence around a phenomenon and are also suitable for small sample sizes (Schönbrodt &
323 Wagenmakers, 2018), with low false positive rates with $n = 10$ per group in over 99% of cases
324 (Stefan et al., 2019).

325 Results

326 Elective Co-Parent Family Formation and Experiences

327 As can be seen in Table 1, co-parents had met between 0 – 10 (mode = 2) coparents
328 prior to pursuing co-parenting with their current co-parent. Just under half ($n = 11$, 47.8%) had
329 known their coparent for over a year before trying to conceive, with just under a third ($n = 7$,
330 30.4%) knowing them for less than 6 months. The majority of co-parents had undergone medical
331 screening ($n = 21$, 91.3%) and had drawn up a legal co-parenting agreement ($n = 17$, 73.9%).
332 Table 1 also presents proportions and frequencies relating to the child’s conception within the
333 elective co-parent families (majority not in a clinic setting; $n = 17$, 73.9%), and parents’ reports of

334 whether they have, or plan to, disclose the nature of their co-parenting relationship with others,
335 including their child. The majority of co-parents had discussed disclosure with each other and
336 with family and friends, and planned to tell the child how they met and how they were conceived
337 ($n = 19, 82.6\%$).

338 **Parent Psychological and Relational Wellbeing**

339 Table 2 displays the average scores for parent self-reported symptoms of anxiety,
340 depression, parenting stress and resilience. The mean scores for anxiety, depression, parenting
341 stress and resilience were within the normal range of scores. As shown in Table 2, parents'
342 perceived social support was higher than average. Of the 26 parents with a romantic partner, the
343 average relationship satisfaction score indicated high relationship satisfaction.

344 **Stigma**

345 Table 2 shows the average exclusion score was higher than the overall mean scores
346 reported by lesbian parents ($M = 1.66, SD = .48$) and gay parents ($M = 1.75, SD = .81$) in the study
347 for which the measure was developed (Goldberg & Smith, 2014), although the mean score still
348 suggests low levels of mistreatment and exclusion based on being in an elective co-parenting
349 family. During the interviews, most parents felt elective co-parenting was perceived as acceptable
350 within their local community ($n = 25$ parents, 61.1%) and partially accepted in wider society ($n =$
351 24 parents, 58.5%). Around half of parents reported experiencing some level of prejudice ($n = 20,$
352 50%) and criticism ($n = 16, 40\%$) towards them in their local community because of their family.

353 **Co-Parenting**

354 The average co-parenting alliance score (Table 2) was in line with average scores for
355 married parents and better than the scores for divorced parents. As illustrated in Table 2, in most

356 families, child care and financial organisation and responsibilities were more likely to be
357 undertaken by biological mothers ($n = 17$ families, 73.9%). There was variability in the frequency
358 fathers saw their child(ren), with the majority having weekly contact ($n = 14$ families, 60.1%).
359 Most parents described relationships with their co-parent that could be classified as harmonious
360 or close ($n = 28$ parents, 68.3%), reported never having had disagreements ($n = 22$ parents,
361 53.7%), and described a range of coordination over parenting (e.g., discipline).

362 **Child Adjustment**

363 Table 2 also includes average scores for the 11 parents who completed the BITSEA
364 regarding their infant/toddler. Only the under 24-month average competence score was just
365 above the cut-off for risk. Eleven parents (i.e., one parent report per family) completed the SDQ
366 for their child. The overall mean total difficulties score was comparable to average population
367 levels. No children received a raised, high or very high score indicative of risk. The average
368 prosocial score was suggestive of slightly lowered scores.

369 **Comparisons between Families Created via Connection website versus Existing Relationships**

370 As illustrated in Table 3, the Bayes factors (BF_{10}) for the Bayesian independent samples t-
371 tests suggest there is weak evidence of a difference in the questionnaire measures between
372 parents or children from elective co-parenting families who met via connection websites versus
373 those who pursued parenting with someone already in their social network (i.e., friend,
374 acquaintance). That is, meeting a co-parent online was not associated with poorer wellbeing,
375 social support, couple relationship quality, or co-parenting alliance, or greater stigma, child
376 difficulties or reduced competences. The Bayes factor robustness checks suggest the lack of

377 evidence for any differences between the two groups was stable across a wide range of prior
378 distributions suggesting the analysis is robust.

379 **Discussion**

380
381 This study presents novel data on family formation, parent psychological and relational
382 wellbeing, co-parenting, and child behavioural and emotional adjustment in 23 elective co-
383 parenting families who met initially online or with someone known. Three key findings emerged
384 from this study. First, elective co-parent families are diverse in their structure and formation.
385 Second, compared to families within the general population, on average, elective co-parents
386 report good psychological wellbeing, high social support, low levels of exclusion in their child's
387 childcare/school, and high quality co-parenting alliances, and those in romantic relationships
388 describe high levels of couple satisfaction. Children's competencies, behavioural and emotional
389 problem scores appear in line with population norms and suggest low clinical risk. Where parents
390 are at risk, they appear to be more anxious than depressed, and many describe experiencing
391 discrimination and criticism within their communities. Finally, there were no group differences in
392 parent and child wellbeing or co-parenting alliance between those who pursued elective co-
393 parenting with someone known to them versus someone they met via a connection website.
394 Below we discuss each of these findings further and reflect on study limitations and future
395 directions.

396 **Diverse family structure and formation**

397
398 Elective co-parenting is not a new phenomenon (Dempsey, 2010), however in recent
399 years there has been a perceived rise in the numbers of heterosexual adults pursuing this family
400 arrangement, and technological shifts have broadened the routes to co-parenthood via

401 connection websites. In this sample, both prospective LGBTQ+ and heterosexual elective co-
402 parents made use of connection websites to find a co-parent suggesting the pathway to
403 parenthood has diversified and it is not the exclusive route of one particular group of parents.

404 The transition to parenthood involved preparing co-parenting agreements for the
405 majority of families in this study. These documents may be fruitful starting points to facilitate
406 conversations around both every-day parenting decisions as well as other arrangements, and
407 provide parents with peace of mind, although they do not hold weight in court (Cammu, 2021).
408 Furthermore, some multi-parent families in the study were unaware that only two parents were
409 allowed to be legally recognised on their child's birth certificate. Given that the majority of
410 parents in this study conceived their child outside a clinical setting, and only a small number
411 underwent pre-conception counselling, it is possible that some parents are entering these co-
412 parenting arrangements without the relevant legal knowledge regarding their parental rights and
413 responsibilities (e.g., Bureau & Rist, 2020; Harper et al., 2017). The majority of parents in this
414 study did undergo medical screening prior to conception suggesting they did engage with health
415 services at some point in their journey to parenthood. This period might be a potential window
416 to provide information and support to prospective parents pursuing co-parenting arrangements.
417 Future research is required to explore how parents manage changes in arrangements over time
418 as well as breakdowns within elective co-parent family relationships.

419 **Positive Parent, Child and Family Functioning**

420
421 Parents in this study had, on average, good psychological and relational wellbeing. Parents
422 reported resilience in the face of adversity and low levels of anxiety, depression, and parenting
423 stress. Elective parents also report feeling well supported by significant others in their lives which

424 may partly explain the good psychological health in this study (Hughes et al., 2020). However,
425 almost a third of parents appeared at risk of clinical levels of anxiety. Future research exploring
426 the drivers of elective co-parents anxiety and potential barriers to support will help clinicians
427 understand if existing interventions and pathways to support need to be tailored.

428 Interestingly, co-parents who were in a relationship with a romantic partner had average
429 to above-average couple satisfaction scores. Although the co-parenting and marital/romantic
430 relationship is typically made up of the same individuals within a traditional family, this study
431 provides new evidence that elective co-parenting may not negatively impact parents' other
432 relationships, and is consistent with family systems perspectives that these relational units can
433 operate independently (Cox & Paley, 1997). Previous research exploring the motivations of a
434 subsample of 10 heterosexual elective co-parents from this study highlights that for some this
435 route to parenthood was seen as a plan B and a means through which to achieve the traditional
436 family via nontraditional means (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). Given this desire, further research is
437 required to explore if, and how, additional adults joining ~~within~~ the family impacts parental roles,
438 responsibilities and relationships within the family, as well as how new partners navigate step or
439 blended family relationships. As it stands, however, it seems that the co-parenting processes
440 within elective co-parent families were more similar to cohabiting/married parent families than
441 divorced families. Specifically, in this study co-parenting is, on average, higher in cooperation,
442 communication and mutual respect compared with behaviours exhibited in divorced families
443 (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Thus, it appears that a romantic relationship between co-parents is not
444 essential for effective co-parenting. Some of the heterosexual elective co-parents in the study
445 reflected that their positive co-parenting experiences are instead due to modernising the

446 traditional family via developing and maintaining friendships and clear communication patterns
447 (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

448 Children in this study appeared to be doing well thereby highlighting that raising children
449 outside of a cohabiting and conjugal family unit is not necessarily associated with negative child
450 outcomes (c.f., divorce: Lansford, 2009). These findings provide further evidence that families
451 who challenge the traditional nuclear family model, either in formation or structure, should not
452 be assumed to have a negative impact on child psychological adjustment (Golombok, 2015).
453 These findings also underscore that it is the processes within separated parent families that may
454 serve to compromise parent and child wellbeing rather than the structure itself. Further research
455 is required to explore the factors that are associated with children's psychological adjustment
456 within elective co-parent families. Identifying whether predictors of child developmental
457 outcomes are distinct from, or similar to, those in other family forms will extend theoretical
458 accounts regarding the universality or specificity of family influences on child development and
459 enable the provision of practical support for elective co-parent families. For example, in the
460 present study all parents reported that they plan to tell their child how they met their co-parent
461 and how they were conceived. However, given that the average age of the children in this study
462 was 3 years old, many had not yet done so. Longitudinal research is required to explore whether
463 parents do disclose and whether how and when this occurs impacts children's psychological
464 health (Golombok et al., 2023). Further work is also required to listen to children's perspectives
465 to understand their experiences of their families.

466 Another potential challenge that elective co-parents and their children may face is
467 prejudice from their community. In this study, parents reported experiencing low levels of

468 critique and exclusion. This may be because many families, particularly those with two parents,
469 are 'invisible', passing as heteronormative families during daily life (Segal-Engelchin et al., 2005).
470 However, a substantial minority of parents did not feel that elective co-parenting was accepted
471 within their local or national communities, and over half reported experiencing prejudice. Some
472 parents anticipated their child would in the future experience difficulties at school and did not
473 foresee telling school staff about their co-parenting arrangements. Regularly updating successful
474 school campaigns and materials which highlight diverse family forms may be one avenue to help
475 children and families feel more accepted.

476 **Similarities Between Online versus Known Elective Co-Parent Families**

477 Becoming a parent outside of a romantic relationship with a co-parent met via a
478 connection website generally appears to elicit surprise or alarm (Ravelingien et al., 2016) and has
479 attracted media interest (e.g., 2021 UK television show Strangers Making Babies). However, the
480 current study found that, on average, compared to elective co-parents raising their child with
481 someone known to them, families who met via websites had parents and children who were
482 functioning well. This study provides no evidence for reduced wellbeing, support, co-parenting or
483 child adjustment for co-parenting via a website. The decision to enter into co-parenting
484 arrangements were not taken lightly for these parents. Aside from their initial meeting, there was
485 no difference in the pathways to parenthood between these two groups, for example, they had
486 comparable lengths of time between meeting their prospective co-parent for the first time and
487 trying to conceive, and equal numbers drew up co-parenting agreements and underwent medical
488 screening and counselling, suggesting that parents following either route to parenthood take
489 similar amounts of time to discuss their options, plan and consider the practicalities of daily life.

490 Unlike families who have experienced divorce or relationship breakdown, elective co-parents are
491 intentionally committing to raise a child together outside of the traditional nuclear family model
492 and the current study provides novel empirical evidence that these individuals are functioning
493 well regardless of how they began. The findings also underscore that it is factors such as conflict
494 or poor co-operation within separated parent families that may serve to compromise parent and
495 child wellbeing (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

496 **Limitations and Conclusions**

497
498 The current findings should be viewed in light of the small and voluntary nature of the
499 sample. Given the lack of visibility of this family form, it may be that only well-functioning families
500 were willing to participate. Parents from a range of countries took part in the study and so it may
501 be that different contextual factors impacted parent and child wellbeing that could not be
502 explored in the present study. Furthermore, there is no sampling frame to draw upon to recruit
503 within and compare to. Thus, the extent to which this sample represents the larger population of
504 elective co-parents within and between each country remains unknown. This cross-sectional
505 study only provides a snapshot into the lives and experiences of a small sample of families at one
506 time point. Bayes factors provided a means through which to statistically compare different
507 groups of elective co-parent families. However, the current study lacked a comparison group to
508 control for asymmetric childcare arrangements or the experience of fertility treatment, for
509 example families co-parenting after divorce or those who had a child through assisted
510 reproduction (e.g., IVF using parents own gametes or sperm donation). Future work with larger
511 samples, comparison groups and longitudinal designs will provide necessary replication tests and
512 test new findings regarding the impact of family structure and processes on trajectories of parent

513 and child wellbeing and the quality of the co-parenting relationship. Larger samples will also
514 enable tests to explore links between the different familial processes, for example the potential
515 negative impact of experiencing discrimination given previous work with gay fathers
516 demonstrating greater stigmatisation was associated with more child externalising problems
517 (Golombok et al., 2018).

518 Overall, it appears that parents and children in this 'new' family form are functioning well.
519 In light of the rise of connection websites facilitating elective co-parenting, this exploratory study
520 does not suggest there are differences between elective coparenting families based on how they
521 are formed. It remains to be seen whether online connection sites as a means of creating family
522 will become normalised as a means of establishing romantic relationships. Understanding how
523 children think and feel about being born and raised in this way, as well as the support needs of
524 elective co-parents and their children throughout their parenting journey, is now vital to
525 understand.

526

527 **Authorship**

528 SF: data collection, data analysis and data interpretation; drafting original article

529 VJ: funding acquisition; project conceptualisation; data collection, data interpretation; revising

530 original article.

531 SG: funding acquisition; project conceptualisation; revising original article

532

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537 **Conflicts of Interest:** None to declare.

538

539 **Data availability:** Data cannot be shared for ethical/privacy reasons.

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