

Family unbound: How Western society is redefining and assembling families through digital platforms

March 12 2024, by Lydia Ottlewski, John Schouten and Joonas Rokka



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Modern Western life offers a wide range of possibilities of what "family" can be: single parents, rainbow families, patchwork constellations, co-parenting, adoption, surrogacy and [partnerships without children](#). Family forms are diversifying and extending beyond the [traditional](#).

In many ways, the landscape of this fundamental institution is changing faster than laws and other institutions that can accommodate. As a result, certain [online platforms](#) are now seeking to bridge the gap, connecting individuals who are interested in forming non-traditional families and seeking guidance on how to do so.

A Zeitgeist shift

A website operating in Switzerland, Germany and Austria, [Familyship.org](#), is looking to [bridge this institutional and cultural gap](#). Two women, Miriam Förster and Christine Wagner, set it up in order to form their ideal family. Together they found a co-father to take an active parental role and to provide ongoing support for the infant. While the women later ended their relationship, Christine and the co-father, who is gay, have continued to raise the child together.

The site was designed to help people weave new family ties according to a range of desired constellations. Regardless of relationship status, [sexual orientation](#) or gender, it's designed to help anyone with a non-traditional understanding of family to conceive and raise a child. Over the past decade, more than 12,000 people have used the platform.

Users can seek various types of co-parents: hands-on, those with more passive "aunt or uncle" functions, or sperm donors who are less involved in the upbringing of the child. It is also possible to "mix and match"

these parental roles as desired. The community is diverse with regard to gender, sexual orientation, [relationship status](#), the desired form of family, and geographic location. Most users are based in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, and they're generally politically liberal and well educated.

The overall goal of the platform was to help those wishing to be parents develop a child-centric family structure. Users are looking for ideal co-parenting partners to bear and rear offspring, not for romance or life partners. The platform affords privacy and protection for its users by offering strict privacy regulations and community access upon registration for a user fee.

Liberation through innovative family models

In our research, published in [Marketing Theory](#), we analyzed discourses in [media coverage](#), interviewed the site's founders, and accompanied 23 families or to-be families over a period of a year and a half. All names have been changed for privacy reasons.

Our analysis showed that there is a demand for platforms that enable and support individuals who question the societally dominant meanings of family. For example, Carlotta, a 38-year-old architect who is bisexual, describes herself as someone who struggles to maintain long-term relationships. After a year of reflecting on her wish to having a child, she came across the platform:

"At some point I [searched the Internet] and found a concept called co-parenting—it made total sense to me. I couldn't believe that after all this worrying and thinking, my solution was right there. From one moment to the next, the burdening feeling was gone, and I felt so relieved to see a realistic option for having a child."

She is now raising a child with a homosexual man in a co-parenting arrangement.

Separating parenthood from romantic partnerships

The platform's co-founder, Christine Wagner, takes issue with the role of romantic entanglement in family formation and childrearing:

"Eventually, it became obvious to me that this separation between the desire for children and partnership had to happen. This traditional coupling was also deeply rooted in my mind."

The disentanglement between romance and family formation is also a key reason for the popularity of the platform among heterosexual men and women. The platform was initially founded by a lesbian couple and used predominantly by the LGBTQIA+ community in the earlier years of the platform. Many users are drawn to the platform because they desire to reduce the perceived risk inherent in romantic relationships.

Emilia, a 37-year-old heterosexual woman, is one of them. An expatriate with a degree in literature and history, she co-parents with a homosexual man she found after moving to Berlin, which she dubs the "singles' capital" of the world. Their second child is already in the planning. She reflects upon her journey:

"I always knew I wanted to have a family and become a mother... But at the same time, I increasingly worried. My parents got divorced, as with so many other families. I see the marriages of my friends and the unstable relationships children are born into. And if you look at the official statistics, the divorce rates speak for themselves. To be honest, I don't believe in this family model anymore. It is too risky to base a family on romantic emotions between two people. I want to find a stronger basis for my child's future."

Claudia, a 35-year-old who graduated in design and business, is also co-parenting a child with a homosexual man. Her thoughts echo Emilia's:

"I actively thought about questions like: How important is it for me to have children? I came relatively quickly to the conclusion that it is very important for me to have children. But I really do have big doubts about the concept of a traditional family, and it doesn't really suit me either."

Family creation afforded by platforms

Social scientists have started to question the changing role of relationships and [love in the contemporary era](#), in which popular social media and dating apps greatly influence our interactions and how we meet others. In this respect, [our study](#) helps advance understandings of "platformisation" of consumer culture. In practice, this means that corporations are once again closely involved in shaping our intimate relationships.

As a digital platform, Familyship.org contrasts with such trends. It can be better understood as a "[social enterprise](#)", given it was created by ordinary people as a nonprofit. In doing so, it became a successful initiative in shaping and re-imagining one of the most intimate spheres of our lives—the way people think about, create, and enact family.

For policy-making purposes, we consider the model of Familyship.org to be an interesting one to learn from. Its collaborative model helps individuals to share [life experiences](#) and find solutions to complex social and legal constraints in ways that leverage a network of expertise. The site protects privacy, enabling participants to talk freely and creatively about their desired family constellations in a closed community space.

As a [2006 paper](#) published in the MIT journal *Innovations* notes, "people are competent interpreters of their own lives and competent solvers of

their own problems". Similarly, policymakers should follow suit and foster the creation of similar kinds of protected platform spaces for social innovation and experimentation.

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