
THE  TIMES

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Often it is not worth all of the heartache

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279 words

11 August 2005

The Times

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English

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PATERNITY tests are often the culmination of years of gnawing doubt. But they can have unforeseen consequences for family relationships.

DNA testing has made the physical process of paternity testing straightforward.

This simplicity, however, can conceal the emotional fallout. Non-paternity results could have far-reaching social, emotional and legal consequences. Family relationships, care and residence arrangements and inheritance can be turned upside down.

Once this information is known, it cannot be unlearned. Some fathers may be happier to live with the hope of paternity than the certainty that they are not the father.

They also need to consider how they will react to bad news in their relationship with the child, or family life. If the situation is volatile, it may be better to delay testing.

The prospect of knowing for sure is attractive to those who dislike living in confusion. While some agree that ignorance is bliss, others say that it is better to have all the information we can.

The child or children's point of view is important. If a child is old enough, the test should be discussed.

Children may be asked how they would feel if "Dad" was not their father.

The significance of blood ties over social bonds is also relevant. While genetic inheritance is important for health, social bonds are also important to family life. The courts have already ruled that it is in a child's interest to know the biological father.

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Document T000000020050811e18b0001m