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Dispelling the myths around raising boys without fathers

We've all heard the dire predictions for boys raised without their fathers - they'll turn out to be sissies or delinquents - but a new book by an American psychologist suggests that it doesn't have to be this way.

'Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating The Next Generation of Exceptional Men' by Dr. Peggy Drexler was released in August 2005 by Rodale Books. It comes out in paperback shortly.

"The principle message in my book is that it is not about the number or the gender of parents in the home or even their sexual orientation," said Dr. Drexler. "What is important is the quality of the parenting. It is about how many times you sit down at the dinner table with your son.

It is really about how you act. Good parenting is not anchored to gender."

Dr. Drexler became interested in the topic of raising boys without men in the house, because she herself was raised without a father.

"I grew up in the 1950s, in a typical 'Father Knows Best' kind of community," she said. "My father died when I was three-and-a-half. It felt like I was the only one in the community being raised without a dad. I have always had a gnawing curiosity about what it was like for other children raised without a dad."

Many of the parents featured in the book are lesbian couples, so Dr. Drexler's book has received a lot of attention, positive and negative. On the positive side, Raising Boys Without Men has been selected as a finalist for Lambda Literary Awards in the category of nonfiction, and was also a finalist for the Books for a Better Life Award in the category of parenting and childcare.

"The reaction has been very exciting in that it has caused people to think," she said. "I have gotten love mail and hate mail. I have had wonderful reviews and reviews that are more polemics than reviews. The book has really been very wid

She said one of the reasons there is so much interest in her book is that there are over 10 million single mothers in the United States. In the 2000 census, less than 25 percent of American households were headed up by a mother and a father.

"Yet, there is a perception that most American children grow up in a home with a married mom and dad," she said. "There is a big increase in the number of families who are headed by unmarried or divorced moms. In light of that fact, and in light of the notion that boys are commonly thought to be sissified or feminised if they are raised without men, I wanted to find out how boys were fairing without a father."

In the first phase of her research she looked at boys aged five to nine raised in lesbian families compared to boys of the same age raised in traditional 'mom and dad' families.

"I used clinical and quantitative research," she said. "You can look on my website to see the research that was done. I compared the boys from two mom families to two mom and dad families to how they viewed right and wrong, and also how the moms and dads taught about social issues."

The research was carried out over a five year period in the San Francisco Bay area. She checked back with the boys in her study on a regular basis to see how they were doing as they got older. She hopes to continue the research following some of the boys into their college years.

"I interviewed 30 single mothers by choice and 30 single mothers by circumstance from all across the board," she said. "What was interesting was I found a lot of the same positive parenting strategies were being used."

In the book, Dr. Drexler coins the term 'maverick mothers' for mothers who are raising particularly successful, happy or well-adjusted youngsters.

"I found that good parenting is not anchored to gender," she said. "Good parenting of a son goes beyond gender."

She said that the biggest indicator of a boy's future success in life was actually the socio-economic status of the family.

"Obviously, if there is no money to pay bills, to buy food, to get adequate health care, to have community support and resources you are going to find a different outcome for boys," she said. "Then it doesn't have to do with the parents gender but their socio-economics and what opportunities are available to the parents."

She said unfortunately, single mothers often take the heat for deviant or troubled males in the community.

"About three or four years ago in Cleveland there was a big story about a group of boys who killed a neighbourhood homeless man," she said. "The main headline was that these boys had no fathers.

"They didn't say these boys were all out of school. There were no resources for their mothers to access to help them or themselves. They were from a very poor community.

There was no afterschool care available to their mothers. Their mothers were out of jobs and had no health care. They really had very little opportunity. The fact that the father was not in the home was the least of what the issues were."

She said the boys featured in the book have reacted very well to the publication of 'Raising Boys Without Men'. Author Linden Gross, helped Dr. Drexler with the writing of the book, because Dr. Drexler did not want it to be an academic book and needed the help of an experienced writer.

"I really wanted it to be a book that was accessible, and to create a book that would be user friendly," said Dr. Drexler.

At the end of each chapter, 'Raising Boys' includes Maverick Mom tips and ideas such as: 'Maverick Moms balance their sons' physicality with sensitivity that these moms make a point of promoting. The end result of this balance is the sons' remarkable ability to reach out to others.'

Dr. Drexler is an assistant professor of psychology in psychiatry at Weill Medical

College of Cornell University in New York. Her primary interest is gender issues. "There is a lot of concern in our society right now about what masculinity is and how it manifests itself and how it develops," she said.

"The two main things we worry about are that the boy raised with out a man in the house will be feminised or he will be homosexual.

"We know that boys are hardwired to be boys. More and more research is showing that homosexuality is hardwired as well."

'Raising Boys Without Men' is available at the Bermuda National Library. For more information about Dr. Drexler go to www.peggydrexler.com .
