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Grandfathers: Stepping into the Lives of Boys

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My grandfather was a successful clothing designer, accomplished horseman and an amateur boxer who once lasted six rounds with Jack Johnson.

He was a man at the center of family lore. One often-told story: when he first laid eyes on my grandmother at a party, he said to a friend: "I'll bet you a high silk hat that I marry that woman." He did marry her. And he wore that high silk hat to the wedding.

He was a man who burst through our front door with energy, good cheer and gifts. When my own father died, he moved to a very important place in my life and my sense of how I fit in to the world. Then, he also died.

I think about him often. And lately, when I do, I find myself wondering about boys. An odd connection, I know. Let me explain.

Record numbers of women are choosing to have children out of wedlock -- 40 percent in 2007 according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Two-mother families are becoming, if not commonplace, at least unremarkable. The Census tells us that more than one in four families with children under 18 are headed by a single parent; and three out of four of those are headed by a female.

Among all the things those numbers tell us about change in America, is the fact that more boys are growing up without fathers in the home. I know the feeling of not having a father. I know the feeling of longing for something that everyone else seems to take for granted. What I don't know -- and can't know -- is what it's like to be a boy without a male to respect and emulate.

But I do know -- and virtually all studies confirm -- that those role models are critical.

My gender research which I present in my book *Raising Boys Without Men* and the work of many others shows clearly that a lack of a man under the roof is not a deal-breaker in raising confident, healthy and masculine boys. It is also clear that no father can be better for boys than a bad father.

The religious right attacks conclusions like that the way the body attacks an infection. They eagerly confuse the idea that homes can be happy and productive without a father with the idea that fathers are irrelevant. The first idea is true. The second is not.

One more time: boys do benefit from having a caring and involved father on site -- from grades to social and emotional development. But more often than ever before, by chance or choice, a father may simply not be there. That's not a statement of value. It's just a fact.

That is where grandfathers come in.

As more women raise boys alone, the fathers of those women are moving to a different place in boy's lives. They can fill the missing pieces in ways that no one outside the family can.

In my earlier study of single mother and two-mother families, I saw that boys do find their own role models -- coaches, teachers, friends others in the family. But -- and I say this from logic and experience rather than hard evidence -- the tie to a grandfather can be more direct.

Grandfathers have the wisdom of life experience; they have the family gravitas to teach and -- when necessary -- enforce values. They are a link between generations; the point where extended family members gather. Recent studies show involved grandparents can counter the threats in households at risk from poverty, drugs.

In researching my new book about fathers and a new generation of daughters tentatively titled "Deciphering Dads," I am talking to a number of single mothers. One, I'll call her Emily, told me: "I very much wanted to have a child. I did not feel I needed a man in my life to make that happen. When I found out my child was going to be a boy, I did start to think about role models and masculine influences. I can teach a boy to be a good person. I can't teach him everything he needs to know to be a good man. But I had my dad. I knew he would fill that gap. And that is a great confidence-builder for me."

Grandfathers have always had a special place in the workings of families. Increasingly, they are having an important role in the lives of boys. These are men who have already raised one family. They may well be dealing with the economic collapse of once-comfortable retirements. We need to help them and celebrate them. Many are going to shape the next generation of men.