

FIVE QUESTIONS For Peggy F. Drexler
Having two moms won't make a boy gay -- really

- Carolyn Zinko, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Research psychologist Peggy F. Drexler, who lived in the Bay Area for 20 years before moving to New York City in 2004 with husband Mickey Drexler, former Gap chief executive officer and now chairman of retailer J. Crew, has written a book sure to raise eyebrows in some parts of the country.

In the Bay Area, the book she co-authored with Linden Gross is more likely to reassure nontraditional families -- such as two-mom lesbian households -- with the assertion that it doesn't take a father figure to raise articulate, confident, masculine boys.

"Raising Boys Without Men," (Rodale; 224 pages; \$22.95) describes the ways in which single mothers are defying conventional wisdom and rearing "exceptional men" on their own.

Drexler, a former scholar at Stanford University's Institute for Research on Women and Gender and now an assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University, will be in the Bay Area this week for several appearances. They include a book release party at San Francisco City Hall to be attended by Mayor Gavin Newsom, who was raised by a divorced mom.

She talked recently with The Chronicle via phone from her office in New York.

Q: Your book describes the changing landscape of the American family -- 1 in 2 marriages end in divorce; 40 percent of babies are now born out of wedlock, only 23.5 percent of households in the United States contain a married mom and dad and children; 9 million children in America have a gay parent and so on. Why is it important for average everyday people -- in the Bay Area, Kansas, wherever -- to understand how the changes to the nuclear family affect the development of boys?

A: Americans are worried that a mom left on her own will either make (a boy) a sissy or undercut his masculinity in some way, and they worry that a mom left alone to raise a boy means this kid will most likely turn out to be gay. There's a lot that women with husbands can learn from the parenting techniques of the single moms. These moms -- who I call maverick moms -- and their sons offer opportunities to reshape and rethink our communities of caring. Maverick moms are reshaping our family trees.

Q: You maintain that society throughout the decades has blamed the mother for how kids turn out, even though fathers are seen as essential for raising good sons -- and

even though, as your book states, "It has been reported that the typical American father spends, on average, only 11 minutes each day with his children." Where does the blame come from?

A: Mothers have taken the blame on, and never challenged it. Freud started it with the sense that a boy needed a man in the mother's bedroom to separate from his mother -- otherwise he'd be essentially feminized.

When I looked at two-mom families, I was not particularly interested in sexual orientation but in the impact of gender on parenting, and the notion that if one mom would be trouble, two moms would be sure to be trouble. I compared 32 families: 16 two-parent heterosexual families and 16 two-parent lesbian families. I started in 1996, and looked at boys in those families, ages 5 to 9. What I found was there was no difference in their levels of moral development. And in fact, the boys from the two-mom families scored a little higher on the ways in which they were taught a sense of justice. I used empirical measures based on theories by Harvard's Lawrence Kohlberg, the father of work on moral reasoning.

Q: Who is this book written for? It seems that it would be helpful, sociologically, to single mothers of all orientations. But the book seems to have political implications, given President Bush's emphasis on family values in America today. Are you trying to tell the Republican Party something with your research?

A: I am a social scientist. I saw what I saw: I didn't ignore what I saw and I didn't deny what I saw. I have no political agenda whatsoever.

But because the two-mom lesbian family seemed to be showing something about mothers, I decided to go on and interview 30 mothers from all over the country -- single heterosexual mothers who decided to give birth or adopt --

and then interviewed 30 single mothers who by chance or circumstance were single parents, being divorced, widowed or (having) had a husband who was uninvolved.

The message for all parents is that good parenting is not anchored to gender. It's not the gender that matters but the way a family acts. And the more times the family sits down at a dinner table together is more important than the gender of parents at the dinner table.

All boys -- and girls -- need people of the same sex as guides, as mentors, as people to love in sustained, ongoing relationships. I found that there were all kinds of ways these moms provided this -- not necessarily with a man in the mother's bedroom or a live-in dad. They can be with grandfathers, uncles, family friends, coaches, teachers, religious

people -- rabbis or clergy of other sorts. And the boys found their own. One boy ... found an older teenager to teach him to play basketball.

Q: Popular opinion holds that boys raised by single mothers won't turn out as well as those from a "mom and dad" family. Is this based on the stereotypical poor minority woman raising a son who turns to crime? Former President Bill Clinton and Mayor Newsom were raised by single mothers and are successful.

A: Howard Schultz, chairman of Starbucks, and Mike Krzyzewski, the basketball coach at Duke University, were raised by single moms. There are exceptions. When you look at all the statistics about boys in jail and blame it on the fact that there are no fathers at home, it presents an unremittingly bleak picture about boys raised in single-parent families. We need to look at that through a complex lens because almost all social science data show that socioeconomic status is the strongest predictor of almost any index of child welfare.

The mothers in my study were middle- to upper-middle class, older, economically stable and thought long and hard about having children. With lower-income families in the inner city, that's where most of the statistics are from, so it weights it heavily with the fact that boys in jail, doing drugs, dropping out of school, are more likely to do this without a father in the home. But, as Clinton said, "It's the economy, stupid." It has to do with social, economic, vocational and academic opportunities.

Q: Do boys raised by single mothers develop more "womanly" traits such as expressing themselves better, being more in touch with their emotions? You use the term "head-and-heart boys." What does that mean?

A: The boys I interviewed were learning a new language of emotional literacy often associated with women. As a research psychologist, I've seen how these maverick mothers have been nurturing a new generation of males who possess what I call "boy power," but their moms are also going out of their way to foster their ability to flex their muscles of empathy. Along with that, these moms are honing their sons' skills involving interpersonal savvy, common sense and flexibility. These boys are learning that to get along in the world, brawn and brute force do not work nearly as well as the "soft," traditionally womanly skills of caring, intuitiveness and conflict resolution. This is what I mean when I call these boys "head-and-heart boys."

Drexler will appear at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera; at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday at Stacey's Bookstore, 581 Market St.; at 4:30 p.m. Wednesday at the World Trade Club, 1 Ferry Plaza; and at 7 p. m. Thursday at a Different Light Bookstore, 489 Castro St.

E-mail Carolyn Zinko at czinko@sfchronicle.com.

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