A new book has a message for women raising sons without a man around: It'll be OK.

By Alexis Jetter

Raising super men

Raising children alone can be difficult and scary for any woman, but there's a special worry reserved for mothers of boys. After all, don't boys need a man around the house to show them how to be strong, capable males?

Increasingly, though, women are plunging ahead anyway and raising sons on their own. An estimated 8 million women are parenting alone, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The same source says that at least another 100,000 families have two gay moms. In fact, according to census figures, married couples with kids now total less than 25 percent of the nation's households.

Peggy Drexler, PhD, a research psychologist and married mother of two, decided to find out how these mothers and their sons are faring. Since 1996, she's been studying 32 boys in San Francisco, ages 5 through 13, comparing the sons of married mothers and fathers to boys raised by single mothers or by lesbian couples.

This wasn't a random sampling of families: Many of the moms are well-educated, older, and have devoted a lot of thought to how to parent. Still, given the stats, Drexler's findings are reassuring: Boys raised without fathers can do just fine, she says.

Contributing Editor Alexis Jetter talked with Drexler, an assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University's Weill Medical College, about her new book, Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men.

Health: Why did you write this book?
Drexler: Really, for all mothers raising sons. There's a notion in our culture
that a mother will feminize a boy if left on her own, that he’ll become a mama’s boy or gay. What’s so bad about having boys that are homosexual is another question. But the fact is, most boys are raised by their mothers. No one had asked boys from moms-only homes how they felt about it, and I wanted to know how they’re doing.

**And how are they doing?**

(Laughing) They’re fine. They’re the kind of boys that most women would want to marry—or wish that their fathers were like.

They seem to have the whole range of masculine and feminine qualities. They’re extremely boyish boys; they all play sports, and many are captains of their teams. But for them it’s also OK to cook, garden, coach younger kids on a team, help a friend, and express dismay over someone’s discomfort. These boys are comfortable with emotions, and they’re independent.

**What stands out about these families?**

The mothers accept their sons for who they are, but they expect them to pull their weight (cooking, cleaning) and be part of a team. These boys know how to take care of themselves. And they don’t think that any task is “not boyish” enough for them to do.

The other thing these mothers do is talk and talk and talk with their sons—in the car or while unloading the dishwasher, on the basketball court or while listening to music together. They don’t sit them down at the table and pepper them with questions, and they weren’t put off by one-word answers. They understand that boys shy away from “we-need-to-talk” type discussions so they’re creative about how they initiate conversations.

**Does this mean men are dispensable?**

This is by no means a father-bashing or man-hating book. I hope this book will be useful for dads as well. But even without live-in dads, boys are boys. They’re hardwired with an innate capacity to become a man, and good parenting by mothers or fathers can nurture that. If a son is supported, encouraged, and loved, he’s going to go out there with confidence and find the additional support he requires. No family can provide it all.

You wrote that these boys have found positive male role models.

Many of these boys have more men in their lives than boys from conventional families do. They’re remarkably resourceful in seeking out male teachers, coaches, neighbors, and friends of the family. They have more than one model for being a man.

**What can these maverick moms teach us?**

They can teach all mothers that the notion that you have to pull back from your sons as they grow older in order for them to be independent is not true. They don’t buy into cultural fears about being too close to their boys, no matter what age they are.

They connect with their sons any way they can, encouraging physical and emotional affection even when their sons try to push them away. But they also let their sons lead a double life emotionally. They understand boys’ need to be standoffish in public—and that they still crave mothering in the privacy of their homes.

**Any advice for women who are or will be raising sons without an adult male around the house?**

The number of times you eat dinner with your kids is a better guide to how they will turn out than the number or gender of parents at the dinner table. The fact that women can and do raise healthy sons should be reassuring and affirming. The human heart doesn’t have a gender.