

My Turn: No Such Thing as An 'Average' Family

Growing up without a father, I felt as if there was something missing. My job taught me otherwise.

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Meghan Petersen for Newsweek

Redefining Normal: I'm now part of the family I once longed for--married with two kids. But we're far from standard issue.

May 14, 2007 issue - We were an average suburban Philadelphia family—with one big difference. My father died when I was 3 1/2. There were always reminders of his absence: the class assignment to make Father's Day cards, the father-daughter dances. One time a deer ran in front of my mother's car and broke the windshield, making her late picking me up from school. I thought, things like this don't happen when dads are driving. Another time, a friend's father leaned in a bit too close to my single and very attractive mother at a dinner party, and his wife got angry. I could hear them in the kitchen—voices tense and hushed. I knew that didn't happen to families that were whole.

This sense that we were a lesser form of family helped shape my life of education and research. If my town, my school and my own insecurities were telling me that being raised by a mother and two sisters isn't normal, then what is?

Over time, I found people who showed me the answer. I got to know them through my doctoral research in psychology and later as a gender scholar: more than 11 years of study and hundreds of hours of interviews with dozens of families outside the standard of Mom, Dad and the kids. My special fascination, no surprise, was single mothers. I also wanted to know about two-mother couples. I was particularly interested in their sons.

My research started in San Francisco, where I learned that single mothers and two-mother families were simply parents like any others. As one lesbian parent said, "Kids are kids. Society might throw a few issues at you, but all parents are dealing with the same things."

The project ended, but the little boys I met in those families stayed with me. My work felt incomplete. One day my daughter came home from school and casually said, "Max said I was unlucky because I'm adopted." As I was about to throw my body on her tender psyche, she shrugged and added: "But how does he know? He's not adopted." Exactly! How does anybody know? I suddenly had to know: how did not having a father in the house affect these boys I studied?

When I reconnected with some of the boys two years after my initial study, I found young men who were healthy, strong and happy. If they were different at all, it was because they were more in touch with themselves, more concerned with the feelings of others than you might expect from teenage boys. I saw in the eyes of these laughing, solid young men that families are what you make them.

When I published all I had learned about these mothers and their sons in a book, I thought I was simply expanding the definitions of good parenting—something that might help people like me. So I was startled when I was called an "abomination," a "misguided liberal zealot," a "dunce," a "femi-Nazi" and invited to "do us Americans a favor and move to Europe."

But the world has a way of moving on. More than 20 years ago, when my son was in the first grade, divorce was something new. Fourteen years later, my daughter found the fact that some classmates had no fathers and some had two mommies to be no more remarkable than the color of their backpacks.

I'm now part of the family I once longed for—married to the same man for more than 30 years with two great kids and two unruly dogs. But we're far from standard issue. I'm an older mother with a 28-year-old son and a 14-year-old adopted daughter. I've worked hard to make sure my daughter sees her adoption for what it is: just another way for two people who love each other to find each other.

My daughter recently had a class assignment to bring in a picture that said something important about her life. She picked one when she was an infant—with me, my husband and her brother all managing to support some part of her tiny body. We were standing in front of the adoption agency on the day we brought her home.

I think often about the families I got to know in my research. I think about how they are simply getting on with their lives, wanting nothing more than what all families want—health, affection, success and some fun on the weekends.

The utter normalcy of those lives changed how I see mine. I realize now that my mother was dealt a terrible hand being widowed in her early 30s with three kids. And I allowed slights and empty spaces—the reminders that we were an exception to some kind of rule—to equate "different" with "damaged." We weren't. I know that now.

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