

CHANGING ATTITUDES ABOUT FAMILIES

Is fear of same-sex marriage fear of nontraditional parenting?

- Peggy Drexler

Tuesday, September 20, 2005

It's no surprise that Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is the latest political headliner to find himself in the hot seat over same-sex marriage. Last year, he told Jay Leno that he thinks such marriages are fine, but let the people decide. Now, their elected leaders have done so -- yet the governor promises to veto the bill. At the same time, deep fears and widely held beliefs remain persistent when it comes to people of the same sex forming families.

A politician trying to have it both ways is nothing new. What's new (and surprising to many people) is what we're learning about the actual families that lesbian and gay couples are creating: They work remarkably well for children. To the extent that public reluctance to fully embrace same-sex marriage is based on a concern for the children of such relationships, a growing body of research should help allay those fears. In fact, two-mom and two-dad families are showing that they can raise children as well as heterosexual couples can. Marginalizing them does not serve their children.

What same-sex couples and their children need most are the civil and legal rights that families with married parents have. By now it should be clear that the "Father Knows Best" myth is, and always has been, just that: a myth. For one thing, traditional families of mom, dad and kids are in a distinct minority. U.S. Census Bureau figures show that in 1970, 40 percent of all American households were married couples with children age 18 or under. Today, these "mom and dad" families represent just 23 percent of all households, and that number is shrinking every year.

At the same time, the proportion of families headed by women has grown by 50 percent since 1980. What's more, lesbian couples are having children at nearly the rate of their married heterosexual counterparts. The 2000 Census reported that 34 percent of families headed by women with women partners have children under age 18. That compares with the rate of married couples, of whom 46 percent have children under 18.

Many Americans bemoan these and other changes in the family and worry about the apparent erosion of traditional families. Without evidence, we

just assume that female-only parenting is deficient or flawed. But in fact, socioeconomic status is a stronger predictor of child welfare than almost any other index. Not marriage status. Not the number of parents in the household, or their gender, for that matter. Still, we persist in seeing single-mom families as wanting, two-mom families as unnatural, and both as threatening to a boy's masculinity.

In my own research on the sons of these "maverick moms," I have found that nontraditional families are defying expectations and assumptions about what it takes to raise strong, healthy children. These boys and their mothers have surprised me with strong evidence that boys will be boys. Boys raised by women show an innate and astonishing ability to establish a strong and resilient sense of their own masculinity. Good mothers can and do foster this awareness. Their boys exhibit what I call boy power: the pairing of healthy aggression with empathy in a way that sons in mom-and-dad families don't often manage.

Masculine role models are everywhere. Boys from two-mom families turn successfully to other family members, coaches, teachers and caretakers for experiences that impart the business of being a man. Many actually have more male figures in their lives than boys from traditional families, and benefit from choosing male role models. Two of my studies have shown that when they are secure in their attachments to those who raise them, these boys are at no more risk for "father hunger" than their peers.

Good parenting is not anchored to gender. A good female parent will change diapers and coach soccer. Parenting is about the human heart, which has no gender. More than anything, children need loving parents who connect with them and are home for dinner. Closeness and communication pay off. Maverick moms have close, communicative relationships with their sons, who exhibit a high degree of emotional savvy. As evidenced in my research, these head-and-heart boys relate to females with great respect and openness, which augurs well for their heterosexual romantic relations as adults.

We mythologize traditional families and demonize nontraditional families. As long as the myths and demons persist, so will our fears. Increasingly, research shows that we need not fear for the children of same-sex couples. In fact, they and their parents can teach us a great deal.

Peggy Drexler, Ph.D., is assistant professor of psychology in psychiatry at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University and a former gender

scholar at Stanford University. Much of the research she cites in this op-ed is taken from her book, "Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men" (Rodale, 2005).

Page B - 7

URL: [http://sfgate.com/cgi-](http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/09/20/EDGLUEPCEB1.DTL)

[bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/09/20/EDGLUEPCEB1.DTL](http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/09/20/EDGLUEPCEB1.DTL)

[©2005 San Francisco Chronicle](#)