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Lighten Up this Holiday Season

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Whether or not Santa's sleigh is full for your family this year, if you're a mom, it's a cinch that you will once again be lugging some heavy baggage around from now through New Year's Day. And last time I looked, you didn't have flying reindeer helping with all the chores or, more to the point, carrying the weight of expectations and assumptions we load on mothers and their families during the holiday season.

If you're a perfectionist and a mom, you're getting an especially exhausting work-out this month, striving for the perfect decorations, the perfect gifts, the perfect holiday party, the perfect meal, and let's not forget, the perfect family! Even if you give yourself a break on the Martha Stewart aspects of the season, there's no denying the pull so many of us feel to make this the best holiday ever - to succeed this year in sweeping our family conflicts and disappointments under the rug, at least for a day or two - to enjoy the warm glow of a roaring fire and our children's delight - and to be good enough moms that our families will adore us and make us proud. No wonder no reindeer have signed up for the job of helping us pull that sleigh!

Why do we go through this, year after year? It's hard enough for traditional mothers with devoted husbands and competing in-laws to measure up this time of year. When mom is single by choice or circumstance or raising children in a two-mom family (what I call maverick moms), society's veneration of the so-called "traditional family" only adds to the holiday burden.

In fact, the holidays are an opportunity to drop some of the baggage we all carry year round, starting with our burdensome and restrictive assumptions about family. All too often, it is our own narrow ideas of what acceptable families look like and how they behave that weigh us down. The truth is, maverick moms and their children have a lot to teach us about family and community that can lighten the load for all of us in this and every season. The experience of many single and two-mom families shows that there's a whole lot more to both family and community than meets the "traditional" eye. Take Alexis Popescu and her son Declan, whom I interviewed for my book, *Raising Boys Without Men*: "Because Alexis Popescu's family lived in Austria, some 7,000 miles from her Seattle home, this single mother made a conscious effort to build a more geographically desirable collected family for her son, Declan. Not surprisingly, her core group of four or five friends has become more central to 3-year-old Declan's life than his distant grandparents are. Curious after a discussion about families that occurred at her son's day care center, Alexis, a geologist and single mother by choice, asked Declan, "Who is your family?" The boy listed all the people central to their daily lives-Harry, their playful neighbor; Marietta, Alexis's best friend and former college roommate; Eve, a coworker and dear friend of his mother's; and his surrogate family Jan and Marty and their children, Roland and Jeannette, whom he sees most weekends and with whom he vacations. Then he added his grandparents in Austria, but they came at the end of the list."

Children know family when they see it. The idea that "traditional" families are the only source of healthy children and a happy holiday and that Mom bears ultimate responsibility for both is as much a fantasy as Santa Claus. When children are well loved, the number or gender of parents is beside the point. Children know love when they experience it. That is the one and only gift that matters at this or any season, in "traditional" families and alternative ones.

So lighten up. The reality of family life in America today is far richer, less perfect, more loving, more varied than many would have us believe. Love weighs nothing - in fact, it lightens the load. You can lighten yours, if you remember that the holidays are a time to share your love with the world and with those closest to you, whether or not you are related by blood or marriage. After all, love really does make a family.