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The Buyers' Market for Role Models

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With every family photo op, Barack Obama cements his place as role model-in-chief, telling young boys everywhere that you can be the leader of the free world and a father.

But there is huge gulf between "can-be", and "will be."

While Obama is an object lesson in possibility, real role models are centered in reality - right there, right now, showing boys what it means to be a man. Unfortunately, they have a lot of competition from the role models, packaged for consumption by sports and media, whose object lessons have nothing to do with traits like responsibility, achievement and caring.

An involved and loving father in the home can easily win that competition. But what about when the father is not involved, not loving or not in the home at all? What then for the boys?

The question has recently taken on some demographic urgency with the news of an all-time high in the number of single women giving birth -- just under 40 percent of all births in 2007. The increase cuts across racial lines, and it is mainly women in their 20s and 30s, not teens.

We can torture the numbers and factor in the variables. But they work out to the inescapable fact that the lives of more boys will not include a father - a male role model - on site.

The right will point to the surge in single-mother births as another slick spot on the downward slope of our communal road to hell. Boys - they argue without nuance, qualification or appreciation for the elastic definition of "family" - need a man in the house. Period.

Nobody will argue the importance of a good father. But neither can one argue that marriage makes a father good. The continuum fatherhood is a decidedly untidy line.

If a role model for boys isn't sleeping just down the hall, then where is he?

Teachers and role models

One obvious answer is male teachers.

But like most obvious answers, things get a little less so when you start digging. There is no definitive research that says male teachers improve the academic achievement of boys, or that they enhance a young man's masculine social development.

Even if a statistically compelling case could be made for the power of male teachers as role models, the base-line numbers do not work in favor of the argument.

The latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that just a quarter of the nation's public school teachers are men. In the primary grades - where lessons in masculinity resonate in life-shaping ways - 2004 Federal data puts the number at just 16 percent.

Blame low salaries, constant fear that a simple hug could be misconstrued in career-killing ways, and the stereotypes that teaching - particularly in the primary grades - is "women's work."

Boys find a way

Even with the continuing growth numbers of boys without in-home role models and the dearth of education-centered alternatives to fill that gap, we may be leaving one important element out of our calculation. That is the boys themselves.

In researching my last book, *Raising Boys Without Men; How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men*, I had the chance to get close to many sons of single mothers. I saw first hand that they find their own role male models. They might be coaches, ministers, youth leaders, relatives, neighbors or friends. And when those connections are made, they are likely to be made of stronger stuff than simply ending up in the same classroom.

Every family and every boy is different. But in my observation, boys who were exposed to the widest array of male influences are the most likely to find the influences that had personal meaning in their lives - influences that, just like fathers, help them see what kind of men they want to be.

The demand for role models might exceed the supply. But they are there. The job for all single mothers is to put their sons in a position to find them.