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Raising Boys Without Men

Research psychologist Peggy Drexler on how a father figures

BY VICKY WALTZ



Peggy Drexler will discuss her book "Raising Boys Without Men"

this Thursday.

Beaver Cleaver would have trouble recognizing the typical American family today. Households where both a mother and a father are present make up only 23.5 percent of American homes, and more than eight million women are single parents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And while few would say the job is easy, mothers of boys have an additional burden: they are often especially stigmatized, says Peggy Drexler, a research psychologist and an assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University's Weill Medical College. After all, she asks, doesn't prevailing wisdom claim that boys who grow up without fathers turn out to be helpless sissies, violent adults, or gay?

In her new book, *Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men* (Rodale Books), Drexler demonstrates through nearly a decade

of research that boys who are raised in single-mother homes are just as likely to develop into happy, healthy adults as boys raised in households with both a mother and a father.

Drexler is coming to BU to speak about the book on Thursday, January 18, from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m., in Room 106 of the Kenmore Classroom Building. For more information, call Maryam Shahahebi, program coordinator for the Arts and Sciences Women's Studies Program, at 617-358-2370.

BU Today spoke with Drexler about her research findings and about what all parents can learn from single mothers.

BU Today: What inspired you to write *Raising Boys Without Men*?

Drexler: Really, I wrote it for all mothers who are raising sons and all of the parents — moms and dads — who are raising children in so-called nontraditional families. There is a perception in the United States that most American children grow up in a home with a married mom and dad, but really, less than 23 percent of American households fall into that category. There are an estimated eight million women parenting alone, and at the very least another 100,000 families with two gay moms. Based on my research, I wanted to set the record straight and dispel long-held myths about mothers and sons. And I suspected that children and their families would be reassured and helped by the book's contents.

Can parents in nonnuclear families, those without both a mother and a father in the household, successfully raise children?

The reality is that it is how a family acts, not the way it's made up, that determines whether children succeed or fail. The number of times parents eat dinner with their children is a better guide to how those children will turn out than the number or gender of parents at the dinner table. Good, loving, growth-encouraging parenting is what sons need. A good female parent will help to develop her son's full potential as long as she values his manliness and encourages his growth, independence, and sense of adventure. Masculine and feminine qualities are in fact human qualities.

What, if any, differences have you observed between boys raised by single mothers and boys raised by a mother and a father?

The boys in my study were very boyish boys in the traditional sense of the word. All were avid sports fans and sports players. However, they also enjoyed cooking and gardening, and they were also more attuned to the good and bad aspects of themselves and others and were very empathic toward peers and adults.

If a boy is being raised by a single mother, is it important for him to have male role models?

I think men are very important for boys, and it is very important for boys *and* girls to be surrounded by both sexes. A beloved son, with his mother's encouragement, will venture out with confidence and find the additional male support he requires. What he does not find in the home, he will discover in the society around him. No family can provide it all; children need many models and many attachment figures.

You write, "The deep emotional connection between a mother and her son has been demonized for generations." Why do you think this is?

Because traditionally mothers have been delegated the lion's share of parenting, they become an easy target. The mother is supposed to be responsible for everything her son is and will become. If she's a "good mother," her son will turn out okay. If she's a "bad mother," she winds up with a bad son. Many are still afraid that a mother parenting alone will feminize a boy — that he'll become a mama's boy, a wimp, or — worst of all — gay. What's so bad about raising boys who turn out to be homosexual is another question. But now we know boys are hardwired with an innate sense of maleness. Many believe homosexuality in males is innate as well, so to blame mothers for either of the above goes against current scientific knowledge.

In what ways does Freudian theory play into contemporary culture and society's views of a "normal" family?

We have been told by Freud that sons need both moms and dads in order to become decent men — to "learn how" to be a boy and to develop a sense of right and wrong. According to this theory, boys are unable learn how to be boys without a very present father. Mothers are needed as caretakers, but in the process, boys become physically and emotionally dependent on their moms. Assuming there is a present father in the home, eventually the mother must withdraw from her son if the son is to become independent of her and begin to be more like his dad. The idea that boys acquire masculinity only with an in-house male in the mother's bedroom has

prevailed to the detriment of both mothers and sons.

What have been your observations regarding boys raised by lesbian couples?

Among my findings, I discovered that the sons I studied from two-mom families are growing up emotionally strong and empathetic, independent-minded, and well rounded. These boys are in touch with their feelings and remain boyish and masculine in all the ways defined by our culture.

What can society learn from women who are raising sons without a father figure?

Parenting is not anchored to gender. Parenting is either good or deficient, not male or female. Boys have an innate ability to become men, a capacity that good parenting by males or females can nurture. A good male or female parent will be able to change diapers and coach soccer, fry the bacon, and bring it home.

What do boys need most from their families, and what advice do you have for women who are raising boys without men?

Boys will be boys. Boys have an innate and astonishing ability to establish a strong and resilient sense of their own masculinity, but mothers should foster this awareness. Important, satisfying, and meaningful paternal experiences need not necessarily be with an in-house dad.

Grandfathers, godfathers, uncles, family friends, teachers, and coaches can all become important figures in a son's life.

Vicky Waltz can be reached at vwaltz@bu.edu.