

Boys to men minus dad

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Single mothers can raise boys just fine -- and maybe even better than families with moms and dads, psychology professor and gender scholar Peggy Drexler says in a new book.

Yes, widespread public opinion says a boy must have a father in the home in order to achieve full manhood, says Mrs. Drexler, an assistant professor of psychology at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University.

But according to her research on 124 parents of boys, most of whom are single mothers or lesbian couples, "I have found there is absolutely no reason to expect that single or gay moms cannot raise sons on their own," Mrs. Drexler writes in "Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men."

"Maverick mothers" throw themselves into parenting their sons and "really nurture" their sons' masculinity, she explains. As a result, mother-raised sons are emotionally strong, empathetic, independent-minded and well-rounded -- even more so than sons raised in traditional mother-father families, says Mrs. Drexler.

What matters is not gender, but the quality of parenting, says Mrs. Drexler, a former gender scholar at Stanford University and the married mother of two. "Parenting is either good or deficient, not male or female."

Robert Knight, who studies families and same-sex parenting at Concerned Women for America, shakes his head at such a theory.

That sounds like "typical feminist ideology masquerading as social science," he said. It "really is the radical feminist dream" to say that boys raised in lesbian homes are the same as boys raised by mothers and fathers -- or that boys raised by lesbians are actually better because they're more like girls, he said.

Fathers are absolutely crucial to boys, Mr. Knight said, citing research contained in child psychologist James Dobson's 2001 book "Bringing Up Boys."

Thousands of studies assert the importance of father involvement, as well as the risks for boys and girls who grow up without their fathers, said Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI).

Children who live in single-parent homes have double the risk of physical, emotional or educational neglect, compared with children living with both parents, he said. Boys born to unmarried mothers are 2? times more likely to become incarcerated, and children who live in homes without their fathers are 32 percent more likely to smoke, drink or use drugs, according to research cited by NFI.

"The deeper, possibly unintentional, message to boys [in Mrs. Drexler's book] is that you can get as many women pregnant as you want -- no need for you to be involved, responsible and committed -- just make sure you're available for someone else's boy to be a 'male role model,'" Mr. Warren said.

Mrs. Drexler's book, released this month, arrives amid mounting evidence that America's families are changing.

Census Bureau data released this month show that nuclear-family homes were the most common kind of U.S. household in 1990, but were outnumbered by single-adult homes by 2000.

The census report also showed that, of the 20 most common kinds of U.S. households in 2000, at least four featured children but no spouse. The data confirm a "growing complexity" in the way Americans live, census researchers wrote.

Census 2000 data also indicate that at least 250,000 children live with homosexual couples, Gary J. Gates wrote in the Gay & Lesbian Atlas, issued in 2004 by the Urban Institute. This number is unrealistically low, he said, because the census doesn't identify children who live with single homosexual parents or who visit, but do not live with, homosexual couples.

Mrs. Drexler's study began in 1996 when she decided to explore single-mothering and sons. She started with 16 lesbian couples and 16 father-mother families with sons ages 5 to 9, all from the San Francisco Bay area. She later added 30 single mothers "by choice" and 30 single mothers "by circumstance."

Mrs. Drexler found that sons raised by mothers were self-assured, appropriately boyish -- "not sissies or mama's boys" -- and into sports. Mother-raised sons also participated in chores; had warm, respectful relationships with their mothers; and had male figures in their lives.

"It's not that they feel men are unimportant or dispensable -- quite the contrary. These mothers bring men into their boys' lives," said Mrs. Drexler, who is continuing to study the boys as they progress through adolescence.

Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of Family Pride Coalition, an advocacy and support group for same-sex parents, welcomes Mrs. Drexler's work. It joins an "ever-increasing volume of research" showing that children raised by two moms or two dads are "on par" with children raised in heterosexual families, said Ms. Chrisler, who is raising twin sons with Cheryl Jacques, the former head of the Human Rights Campaign.

Andrea Engber, co-author of "The Complete Single Mother," also is thrilled with Mrs. Drexler's work, since she "always knew" that single moms can raise boys very well.

Boys raised only by moms often talk about how hard their moms worked to raise them and how connected they are and how much they love them, says Mrs. Engber, who now is married, but still runs a Web site for the group she founded, the National Organization of Single Mothers.

Single moms, she says, "never believed these statistics that we're raising these horrible monsters."

However, syndicated columnist Maggie Gallagher, a former single mother, says Mrs. Drexler's conclusions defy "common sense, the human heart and social science."

Single mothers "can successfully raise a son or daughter outside of marriage," she said, "but those children will be at greater risk, and they will almost certainly experience a powerful longing for their fathers."

To say otherwise, Mrs. Gallagher says, ignores the mountain of social science that says "children do best when their own father and mother are raising them in a decent marriage."