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Psychologist: Boys from single mother, lesbian families turn out fine

According to research psychologist Peggy Drexler, boys will be boys, whether dad's around or not.

by dan pine

staff writer

In her book "Raising Boys Without Men," Drexler details the results of her years-long study of single mothers and lesbian couples. Her most striking conclusion: It's possible, even likely, that boys from those families will grow up emotionally stronger and more well-rounded than boys from traditional mom-and-dad households.

Drexler will be making several appearances at local bookstores and at a reception sponsored by the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation.

"What surprised me," says the former San Francisco resident, "was that these mothers were establishing a creative new way of parenting. Good parenting was not anchored to gender."

She also discovered that the boys in her study formed multiple healthy attachments with male role models other than their fathers, were deeply involved with sports, were diligent about completing household chores and related to women with respect and openness.

"That was the other thing that surprised me," she says. "The boys were very savvy, with a lot of empathy and sensitivity to themselves and others."

Drexler studied two populations, single mothers (by choice or circumstance) and lesbian co-moms. Her subjects for the latter group all lived in the Bay Area, and a large number of them were affiliated Jews.

Jewish herself (she formerly belonged to S.F.'s Congregation Sherith Israel), Drexler observed that Jewish families in her study "very much felt that the Jewish spiritual values would provide a strong sense of respect for community."

The fact that so many of her subjects lived in the tolerant Bay Area may have played a role as well.

"A lot of the women chose to be here because of the presumptively accepting communities," she says. "But even for these families, once the kids get out in the world, there's a lot of anxiety about whether they are accepted."

As a scholar with a focus on gender, Drexler says her main interest in the study was "this notion that a mom will undercut her son's masculinity if there's no father in the mother's bedroom." That, she learned, was not true.

"My own feeling is that so-called male and female qualities are human qualities and we all need them," says Drexler. "I do think boys need male role models as mentors, but

most children do OK if they have the love and support of at least one parent while growing up.”

That was certainly true for Drexler herself, who grew up in Elkins Park, a heavily Jewish suburb of Philadelphia. Her father died when she was young, a wound compounded by the fact that, as she recalls, “we seemed to be the only family in the neighborhood without a father.”

Her family belonged to a local synagogue, but she remembers feeling unconnected to Judaism until she moved to the Bay Area with her husband. Once they affiliated here, she says she felt “a sense of community and shared values.” The couple, now married over 30 years, have a son, 27, and an adopted daughter who will become a bat mitzvah soon.

“I feel quite identified as a Jew,” she says. “When I moved to San Francisco, I really began to change in terms of identification of religion. The culture of the Bay Area motivated my growth as an individual.”

Drexler has served as a clinician and lecturer at New York Hospital/Cornell Medical School, and locally was a member of the advisory board at the San Francisco Day School, as well as a member of the advisory committee on psychology education at S.F.’s McAuley Institute at St. Mary’s Hospital and Medical Center. She now lives in New York City.

As for her new book, Drexler hopes parents and prospective parents will read it, especially those who might fit into what are called “alternative” family structures, such as single-parent or gay/lesbian households. Of course, these days, it’s hard to tell what’s alternative and what’s mainstream.

“Fewer than 25 percent of families are of the mom-and-dad variety,” she notes. “Forty percent of children are born out of wedlock. The census says there are 100,000 families with two gay moms, and 10 million single moms. That’s what the familial landscape is made up of.”

While she hopes someday to tackle a mirror-image book about single fathers raising daughters, she’s already convinced that society needs to reexamine its value judgments about the family.

“We have to reshape our family trees,” she says. “The families I studied are legitimate, viable and raising fine boys. It’s not the number or gender of parents in the house. It’s how often you eat dinner with your kids that matters more.”

Peggy Drexler will appear 7 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 30, at Book Passage, 51 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera. Also 12:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 31, at Stacey’s Books, 581 Market St., S.F., and at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 1, at A Different Light Bookstore, 489 Castro St., S.F. She will also appear at a reception and book signing at 4:30 p.m.

Wednesday, Aug. 31, at the World Trade Club, One Ferry Plaza, S.F., sponsored by the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation. RSVP required. Write to litap@sfjcf.org.

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