**Do boys need fathers? This woman says no**

It might suit dads to believe that boys need a man around the house. But academic Peggy Drexler thinks it could all work better without them. And she's got the research to prove it.

* [**Louise France**](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/louisefrance)
* [The Observer](http://observer.guardian.co.uk/), Saturday 8 July 2006

There's a common assumption that the one thing more difficult than being a single mum is being the son of one. Jamie Harrold was 18 months old when his parents' relationship ended. Fourteen years later he sits beside his mother, Fiona, in her members-only club in Covent Garden, and tells me how he plans to join the army or the police force when he leaves school. He is courteous, watchful, self-assured. He listens carefully but at the same time is breezily unimpressed by the idea that a journalist should quiz him on his home life. He is far too polite to say so but I can almost hear him thinking: what's the big deal?

Fiona, meanwhile, says the decision to go it alone was the single most galvanising moment in her life. 'I can honestly say that I have Jamie to thank for me making something of myself.' In those early days she left the Brixton squat where she'd lived with her partner and rented a flat in Hampstead. Without financial help from her ex but with the emotional support of her mother, she juggled childcare with setting up her own business. Mother and son now live in Fulham. Jamie goes to a private boys' school and Fiona runs her own life-coaching business.

Money has never been an issue, says Fiona succinctly. 'I always earned more than Jamie's father.' Neither was discipline. 'Because we had great chunks of time together nothing ever built up. Everything was discussed.' Or conflict. 'I can honestly say our house was a sanctuary. There were no bust-ups or tensions or disagreements.' One by one she ebulliently demolishes the clichés around single mothers and sons. She takes pride in the fact that she never allowed Jamie to become the surrogate husband or 'the man of the house'. At the same time she says she's encouraged him to be independent. She describes a son who is sociable and popular, who goes camping and orienteering; who holidays with uncles and cousins.

'I can remember thinking - this is actually easier on my own. All I have to do is sit down, think what is best for him, and go make it happen.'

Surely single mothers are not supposed to sound like this: bullish, unequivocal, cheerful? Usually they are portrayed as young and despondent, financially dependent on the state. The fact is that the average age of the single mum is 35. There are over 1.8 million one-parent families in Britain. Nine out of 10 of these lone parents are women. It's as inaccurate to lump all these single mothers together as it is to generalise about all married parents, but it's something that happens all the time.

Over the past two years it's divorced fathers who have monopolised the headlines, shifting attention away from the female carer to the plight of the man who is not allowed to see his children. It often seems that there is little that the single mother can do right. She is criticised for being overprotective if she worries about her children, negligent if she doesn't worry; mollycoddling if she engages in her children's lives, selfish if she doesn't; ambitious if she pursues a career, a failure if she stays at home. (Single dads, by contrast, generally receive a positive press.)

Meanwhile the raising of sons has become one of the most contentious social issues of our times. Whole shelves in the parenting section of bookshops are dedicated to the subject of the next generation of boys (in comparison to relatively few titles about bringing up girls). The prevailing wisdom is that a boy must be raised with a man in the house; otherwise he is likely to fail his exams, drop out of school, career off the rails.

Now Peggy Drexler, an assistant professor of psychology at Cornell University and a former gender scholar at Stanford University, has published Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men (Rodale Books). In a unique study she followed more than 60 fatherless families over 10 years. As time went by she practically became another member of the family in these households. She picked up boys from school, dropped them off at sports clubs, spent weekends and holidays talking in depth to both them and their mothers. All the while taking notes and taping conversations. What she discovered stunned her and has divided public opinion. It goes to the heart of the very idea of the apple-pie American family: is it necessary for a son to have a dad?

Since the book was published she has criss-crossed the country, talking about her research in the nation's bookshops, lecture theatres, radio stations and television studios. She's been short-listed for publishing awards and approached by HBO to make a documentary based on the families she met. Her findings contradict many judges, social scientists, religious groups and pundits. But what she discovered was that a boy's morality and masculinity can be cultivated without a live-in father.

Indeed, she goes even further. In her view, traditional families have much to learn from these households: that boys from fatherless homes can fare better than boys raised in nuclear families.

'We have a vocal group who want to keep things the same and to deify the ideal family. But coming from a traditional family is not in and of itself going to make a boy into a moral, law-abiding, decent person or a good husband or a good father.' In short, parenting is either good or deficient, not male or female.

It wasn't long after the final sentence was published - provocatively the final two words are 'family values' - that the backlash began. The anger roused has become part of the story of the book. Commentators have suggested that she's giving husbands a licence to abandon their families. Others have condemned her as anti-men. She's been told that she's 'an abomination', 'a misguided liberal zealot', 'a fucking dunce', a 'femi-nazi'; instructed to 'Do us Americans a favour and move your dyke ass to Europe'. At one point she received so much hate mail she consulted a security company about protection.

Yet she was recently invited to talk to the widows from September 11. For every negative email there is a positive one. Each morning she receives messages of support from lesbian mothers and single mothers. 'You articulate what I have been trying to say for many years,' they tell her. Even the mother of Lance Armstrong, the world-record breaking cyclist, has been in touch. 'When people ask me who was his role model it drives me mad. I was his role model!' Armstrong's mother said.

Drexler says: 'For many women there is a sense that they love their children but they constantly worry, "Am I doing the right thing?" There is guilt and anxiety and a lack of confidence.'

I watch her talk to an audience at Yale University. The room fills up with female students, America's mums-to-be. However, it's easy to spot the mothers in the audience. Two women in their forties sit near the front. When she uses words like 'ingenuity', 'creativity', 'pioneering' and 'brave' they nod and smile to themselves, hanging on to her every word. Unused to good news, they visibly swell with pride, like nesting hens.

Peggy Drexler seems an unlikely champion for fatherless families, not least because she's been married to the same man for 36 years. They live in an apartment on the affluent upper west side of Manhattan and have a 26-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter. But the catalyst for the book was the realisation that the home life she knew was becoming increasingly rare.

Only 24 per cent of families in America are the traditional first-marriage, mother-and-father variety. There are 7.5 million single mother households in the US, an increase of 25 per cent in the last 10 years. These non-nuclear families - once considered atypical - are steadily becoming the norm. 'The premise is that single mothers can't do a good job because every boy needs a father and without him a child is not getting what they need. But how many kids have good relations with their father? There is an assumption that there is the ideal family and that it works. But that family is a figment of our imagination. To set it up as an ideal is to ignore the fact that a lot of these families do not work and that there are a lot of well-established single-mother families out there.'

She focused her research on boys because 'there is much more of a sense that if a woman is left to bring up a boy on his own she is somehow going to damage him'. According to Freud, the first psychologist to examine male and female development, it's the father who makes the boy into a man. A century since he published his theory, the traditional family has changed beyond all recognition, but this premise still underpins many modern child-rearing beliefs. At the same time, prompted again by Freud, there is mistrust of a deep emotional connection between a mother and a son. The perceived risk with a single mother is that she's going to sissify her son, undercut his masculinity, tie him to her apron strings. Or that alternatively he will compensate for the lack of a father figure by becoming overly aggressive.

However, contrary to the idea that single mothers may foster alienation between their sons and adult men, the mothers Drexler spent time with welcomed paternal role models. Aware that their children lacked a father figure, they went out of their way to recruit grandfathers, godfathers, uncles, male friends and teachers. The result is what she calls 'the collected family'. 'Men are very important to boys: boys need relationships with men to understand how to sustain relationships in the world,' she explains. 'But it does not have to be the one man in the mother's bedroom.' In fact, the boys she encountered actually had more male influence in their lives than boys from traditional families where the father was often the only man they knew. On average the American man sees his children for 11 minutes a day.

According to William Pollack in his book Real Boys, research indicates that boys are more empathetic and expressive than girls when they are babies, but these qualities are often socialised out of them by the time they reach the age of six. Drexler argues that the boys she met - 'my boys', as she calls them - showed a mix of healthy aggression and empathy in a way that sons in her mother-and-father families didn't always manage.

In a society that increasingly values 'emotional intelligence' she argues that 'they have the edge'. The boys she studied had a wider range of interests and friendships than those from traditional families and appeared more at ease in situations of conflict. Their sophistication surprised her. Sons of mother-only families, she suggests, can have more self-assurance because they don't have to live up to an idealised masculine model.

What intrigued her most was her observation that boys are hardwired to be boys. Masculinity seemed to be innate. 'The roots of gender difference are rooted in our genes. What I call "boy power" - a generous, confident sense of a masculine entitlement and of natural male possibility - is not merely the patented practice of dads. Boyishness is a quality that can be nurtured by mothers too.'

Traditionally it's thought that fathers are the ones to bring an element of physicality into children's lives. But here were mothers who went out of their way to play basketball and baseball. Neither could she find any evidence to suggest that boys in female-run homes are more likely to grow up to be gay. 'No one family structure has been shown to produce gay men.'

It's possible that one of the reasons the book has so drastically divided opinions - apart from the provocative title - is that unlike other academic studies, it's written in the style of a self-help manual. It's not a dry text, destined to go unread. A mix of cheerful anecdotal descriptions of the boys and their families and a fondness for Faith Popcorn-style pithy catchphrases like 'maverick moms', 'collected families' and 'boy power' sit happily beside academic analysis. Each chapter ends in jaunty bullet-point advice for fatherless families. Her overall message: 'It is not the gender or the number of parents that counts, but the quality of parenting.'

Drexler is quick to acknowledge that the majority of the families she interviewed were not struggling financially. These were mothers who had professional jobs and were able to afford childcare. However, she argues that it's money and not the lack of a father which causes problems. Poor single mothers may not be suffering as much from the lack of a partner, as from the lack of emotional and practical skills needed to parent well. The principle remains the same - provide support for single parents and they have the potential to do as good a job as any two-parent family. They might even do better.

But could these boys be doing well in spite of having one parent, not because of it? 'It's easier with two,' she acknowledges. 'But only if you are getting along and there is a synergy between you. In fact women who are single say there are benefits to not having to worry about another person's point of view. Two-parent families are great when they're working but that's not a lot of people's experience, judging by the divorce rate.' Meanwhile a growing body of research suggests that it's the conflict before a divorce which adversely affects children, not life after a break up.

The majority of women in Drexler's study who were single mothers by choice - women who had used donor sperm from a clinic or a friend - were older and extremely eager to have a child. They are among the growing number of mothers who know exactly what they are doing from the outset. 'They had thought long and hard about having a baby; for many of them it was a complicated and expensive process. They didn't come from a victim stance. The children were not mistakes. These were kids who were very much wanted and cared for and thought about.' These are children who have not experienced the loss involved in a break up. They have never known any different.

'There are so many ways to have children, so many avenues. Women no longer think, "I have to have children and I have to have a man to do it,"' says Drexler. 'The facts of life need to be rewritten.' As Anne Lamott argues in Mothers Who Think: 'We have finally stopped falling for the lie that the normal mother exists ... Somewhere along the line we figured out that "normal" is the setting on the dryer.'

Drexler plans to continue following the boys she met through later adolescence and adulthood. Does she think more problems will emerge? 'I don't know but at the moment I don't see any more problems than for any other teenage boys. They are smarter than average, they have emotional sophistication and savvy. I think that will put them in good stead.'

But can a woman really understand what it's like to be a boy? Drexler believes she can, if she listens and asks enough questions. 'My own feeling is that we are not so far apart that we live in totally different worlds. We see women show bravery, discipline, determination, strength. These boys see their mothers stand up for themselves, argue, face authority. All those qualities that we have traditionally linked with men but women have them too. They discover that feminine qualities are human qualities.'

'I'm very hopeful. We need to see how single-mother families are doing. This is who we are - let's embrace it. By redefining manhood, these mothers have the chance to redefine not only the American family but also the face of society. These kinds of boys can be exceptional. I can see that this is an opportunity to create different men. Men who show strength and sensitivity, who understand that emotions are OK, and valuable.'

It's easy to find celebrities who say they're considering becoming single mothers - Jennifer Aniston and Kristin Davis to name just two - but finding women who are not in the public eye is another matter. We hear about single mothers who have succeeded against the odds (Google 'single mother' and JK Rowling's name invariably pops up). We hear about the single mothers whose children catastrophically fail. But rarely the single mothers in between.

Rosalind Edwards has a five-year-old son, Matthew. Unlike many of the women in Peggy Drexler's study, in the early days after her divorce there was a struggle financially. Her husband walked out when Matthew was seven months old. She had to sell her home and live with her mother. Five years on she has a job in the financial industry and a new place to live. Although Matthew sees his father once a month, she is the main parent.

She meets me in between leaving work and picking up Matthew from her mother's. 'At first I was horrified. What do I do with a boy? I still think that now sometimes when he might be running about at a party and I see all these girls in clean pink dresses. But I've got used to it.' She describes a little boy who is gregarious, boisterous, popular at school, at ease with adults. Shopping trips where she takes a football in her handbag. Knockabouts in the street when she gets home from work. 'I don't even like football but we play together because he just loves it.'

Early on it was difficult not to be over-protective, to allow him to take risks. 'Now I've realised how much he can do on his own. I try to let him have as much freedom as I can, so long as he knows the boundaries. Despite not seeing his dad very often he is naturally boyish. By the time he was two-and-a-half he seemed to be thinking: right, I want to be a boy. It's just built in there.'

He understands that not all parents live in the same house. 'I'd never criticise his father in front of him and I've never talked to him about why we split up. But, because he was young and wasn't exposed to the animosity he seems happy with the situation.'

There is a strong sense that she feels vindicated by how well they have both coped. 'I am amazed when I look back. I had a baby who needed a home, I needed some money, he needed friends. He needed a strong role model and that is what I have always been. When I tell people, I say: you can't just give up. You have to keep going.'

Many single mothers are delighted to have a chance to talk about their experiences but are wary of being exposed. Some, understandably, are worried that their sons would not appreciate the attention. Others were mindful of their ex-partners and worried about jeopardising these relationships with a rash remark.

Many were initially apprehensive about bringing up boys alone. 'I definitely wanted a girl,' says one mother who split up from her partner a year after she gave birth. 'A child I could dress up and take to River Island. But now I could never imagine it any other way. It's been a joy. I actually like that point of difference that another gender implies. You have to have respect for the opposite sex. With a girl I'd be presuming I knew all the answers. This way I have to ask.' Her son is now on the brink of becoming a teenager. 'It is a scary time' she says. 'On the other hand the relationship develops slowly. It's not a sudden thing. The key is to plan ahead and not get hysterical.'

It's clear that despite a good deal of soul searching these single mothers are proud of their sons and hopeful for their futures. Family structure, in itself, seems to have made little difference to children's lives. What really matters is the quality of family life.

One woman who got pregnant with the help of a gay friend says: 'I did feel guilty for a long time - that I was depriving my son of a man in the house. But as time has gone on, the guilt has worn off. He is turning out well and I feel less worried. While he's not into the rough and tumble that boys like, he isn't bullied. I think he's able to talk his way out of any situation.' What surprises her most is the fact that he's naturally boyish. 'Suddenly I have a bloke in the house! It's just that he likes boy things. And, amazingly, he hates shopping.'

I wonder if she worries that he is the odd one out. 'Recently we moved out of London and I wondered what would happen. But one of the kids gets picked up every afternoon by a transsexual. To tell you the truth, I don't think being a single mother is a problem any more.'

How was it said? How did the author make specific choices to create a desired effect in the reader’s mind?

How did he/she “paint the picture”?

List one adjective that best describes the tone of this piece. Justify your response:

Two examples of specific authorship tricks, approaches or devices that the author used to express the message

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| **Approach, Strategy, Literary Device** | **Words from the text that show it** | **Effect on the text and reader** |
| Metaphor | “Heaven’s eye shined brightly” | Puts an accurate picture of the sun’s power in the reader’s mind. |
| Quote from a scientist | “90% of the animals were harmed” | Adds authenticity to the text’s argument |
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| **Learning Target** | 4.0 | 3.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| Analyze the **author’s craft of narratives, informational and persuasive texts.**  | **I can insightfully** **explain** **all examples** of author’s craft **accurately beyond** **teacher’s expectations.** | **I can plainly explain** **several examples** ofauthor’s craft **relatively** **accurately and consistently.** | **I can mention some** **examples** of author’s craft **somewhat** **accurately and somewhat consistently.** | **I can partially identify** **a few examples** ofauthor’s craft with **some inaccuracies & teacher assistance.** |

**Compelling question about this class, this topic, about Mr. Foster, or about Mr. Foster with respect to this topic?**