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~~Mom, Dad~~ and the Kids

**FATHERS GOING IT ALONE
ARE FINDING THAT THEY, LIKE WOMEN, CAN
REAR CHILDREN SUCCESSFULLY.**

BY DENNIS MEREDITH

He is an uneasy leader in a social revolution, an average guy thrust into a role for which he was not prepared. He must learn to do housework, alter his well-laid career plans and become a nurturing parent.

He is a single father, rearing his children on his own or as a "coparent" for substantial amounts of time. According to the Bureau of the Census, there are some 893,000 fathers heading single-parent families today, rearing more than one million children. These single fathers are discovering what single mothers have long known: that rearing children alone while trying to make a living is incredibly hard work. They are also learning from their experiences in court the spirit-sapping frustrations of sex discrimination. But most importantly, they are

discovering that they can manage a household successfully, nurture their children and derive immense satisfaction from watching them develop into successful adults.

In the past few years social scientists have begun to study in earnest the experience of the single father, and their work is beginning to yield valuable insights. Even the early findings have debunked a number of myths about single fathers—myths that when adopted by judges, lawyers and society at large can seriously damage a father-child relationship.

The most fundamental of these myths is that the feelings fathers have for their children are not disrupted by divorce or separation. According to John W. Jacobs of the Montefiore Medical Center in New York, this

*Jim Smith with Laura and Gordon:
Making single fatherhood look easy.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY KAY CHERNUSH



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ing to assume primary responsibility," says Ohio State University psychologist John Moreland, who conducts parenting courses for new single fathers.

One of the most serious problems these men have is poor communication with their children, and Moreland tries to teach them to be better communicators. To do this, Moreland and his colleagues use a variety of training techniques, including practice in class. "We'll have men bring one or more of their children into the workshop and practice talking with their kids. We'll give them feedback on how well they're communicating." Moreland also gives the fathers homework assignments and has them keep a daily log in which they review the interactions with their children that were most satisfying and those that were the biggest problems.

Once men do learn to parent, however, most evidence shows that they approach the job in much the same way as mothers do. This can be seen in a study by Sara Bonkowski, associate professor of social work at George Williams College in Illinois. She interviewed 26 divorced custodial fathers and 26 divorced custodial mothers about their perceptions of the physical, emotional and social tasks of parents. Her finding: There was no significant difference between the two groups. Custodial fathers and mothers provided about the same amount of hugs, well-balanced meals and piano lessons. In many cases, however, the fathers had more money and greater job flexibility, which allowed them to respond more quickly to their children's daily needs.

Another problem for most single fathers is the difficulty of adjusting to being single again while raising chil-

dren. In Greif's study, single fathers often had difficulty in trying to develop a social life and fewer than half agreed with the statement, "I feel comfortable being single again." The pain of divorce, diminished income and the shock of the new morality contribute to this unease, but there are also the purely logistical problems. As Greif puts it: "It is difficult to have a romantic dinner in one room while the children are making popcorn and watching *Dallas* in the other."

After a single father does establish a relationship, the hurdles may be even higher. According to Jacobs, "Most people in the field say that 80 percent of the people who get a divorce will remarry, and 50 percent of those remarriages will fail. And the number one reason they fail is because of the problems of dealing with the children from the first marriage. The father may be caught in the middle between his children and the new spouse or lover, whom the children may not respect. Many of these fathers will be forced to side with their children, and the relationships then fail."

Of course, the bottom line for any assessment of single fathers is their impact on their children. While researchers have found no evidence that fathers are less well adapted than mothers for rearing children, there are differences in how the two affect their children. In one study, for example, Dallas psychologists Richard Ades Warshak and John Santrock examined the effects of custody on 64 boys and girls between 6 and 11 years old. About one-third each lived with their fathers, mothers or with both in intact homes. Warshak and Santrock interviewed parents and children, videotaped their interactions in the laboratory, asked the children to make up stories about pictures of parents and children and asked teachers to report their perceptions of the children.

They found that when girls are in the custody of their mothers or boys with their fathers, they do better on average on the various measures of personality and social development. "Children living with opposite-sex parents tend to be more immature and dependent, and to show higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-esteem," Warshak says. What's more, Warshak and Santrock found indications that the children preferred to be with the parent of the same sex.

THE EVIDENCE CONTINUES TO MOUNT: IT'S IMPORTANT FOR A CHILD TO MAINTAIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH PARENTS.

When they asked the children to tell a story about a child in a picture, no child living with the same-sex parent said the imaginary child wanted to live with the other parent. On the other hand, 57 percent of the children living with a parent of the opposite sex said that the child in the story wanted to be with the other parent. The researchers also found that daughters living with their fathers and sons with their mothers were more likely to want more visits with the other parent.

Although their findings are clear, Warshak cautions that his findings do not necessarily argue against mother-son or father-daughter custody arrangements. "I don't want to substitute a new myth for the old mystique of motherhood," he says. "Our research has to do with averages. While I think boys do need their fathers and girls their mothers, I also think boys need their mothers and girls their fathers. I do think that evidence continues to mount, both from our work and from that of others, indicating that it's important for a child to maintain a relationship with both parents."

In *Single Fathers*, Greif also reports some differences, albeit minor, in life with father. Older children living with their fathers were asked to do more housework than were those in single-mother households, and daughters were burdened with more housework than were sons. The children in these homes also seemed to feel a sense of protectiveness toward the absent mother, a feeling that they may not have had toward an absent father. However, Greif adds, this doesn't mean that the mother should be raising the children. "It might very well be that even though the children expressed great interest in the mother,

they would have fared a lot worse if they were living with her."

Given that men in our society are taught to value rugged individualism more than women are, we might also expect the children raised by fathers to be more independent than those raised by mothers. Indeed, some studies do hint at this difference. The late Michael E. D'Josey, who was at the University of Southern Mississippi, for instance, reported such differences after comparing 30 father-reared and 30 mother-reared children. Besides interviewing the children themselves, D'Josey asked parents and teachers to rate the children on a range of personality traits. Children living with their fathers were rated by teachers as less well adjusted in school. Sons in particular were more apt to break rules than were children living with their mothers. Otherwise, the children of the two groups were comparable on all measures of adjustment.

These results as well as those from a growing number of studies suggest that overall the middle-class single father is a man who is meeting a challenge and meeting it well. He is managing to reconcile his parenting role with all the demands of traditional masculinity, and in this respect he is a pioneer.

All indications are that he will be joined by more and more like him. The number of single fathers has grown by 127 percent since 1970, and there is every reason to believe that it will continue to grow. As it does, and as the courts gradually give these fathers a greater say in the lives of their children, more men may discover that they can rear children as well as women can. And more separated and divorced women may begin to feel comfortable entrusting children to their fathers. Although fathers and mothers have different strengths and weaknesses, the result can still be happy, competent children. And many married fathers may benefit as well. Seeing the effectiveness of pioneering single fathers, those in intact families might realize that they are missing out by not being more involved in their children's lives. □

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