

Life with father

Research indicates a man is likely to be just as good a single parent as a woman

By **BARBARA McINTOSH**
Post Reporter

Of course, Dustin Hoffman made an appealing single father on the big screen in *Kramer Vs. Kramer*. He coped pretty well considering his movie wife Meryl Streep just up and left him and their 6-year-old son.

Of course, there have been other inspiring role models for daddy bringing up baby. Fred MacMurray was a tweedy, pipe-smoking exemplar of paternal patience and understanding in *My Three Sons*. Eddie's father lovingly cared for his son in the midst of his many courtships. And single parent Ben Cartwright certainly seemed to hit the bonanza with his three law-abiding boys.

But what about in real life, where there is no script and happy endings are harder to find. Can a man really handle the job that's never done? Cinematic notions aside, aren't children always better off with their mothers when a marriage breaks up?

NOT NECESSARILY. Recent research — including two Texas studies — indicates that men are just as likely to raise well-adjusted children as single mothers. There is some evidence that suggests children actually get along better when paired with the parent of the same sex.

Such conclusions flatly contradict the well-established judicial assumption that mothers are, by nature, uniquely suited to care for their offspring, be it son or daughter. In legal circles, this bias of the courts is sometimes called the "tender years doctrine" or the "motherhood mystique."

The topic of child custody has been a hot one in recent decades. Statistics tell why. More than half of all marriages now end in divorce. In 1955 only 347,000 children had divorced parents. By 1977 more than 1 million did. The Census Bureau predicts that almost half of all children born last year will live in single-parent households before they reach age 18.

ONE MIGHT ASSUME that the increase in divorce would have meant a subsequent increase in the numbers of fathers granted child custody simply due

to the wide range of males now divorcing. More and more have been filing for custody in recent years. But the latest statistics indicate there has been little change since 1960 in the proportion of children living with fathers. More than 90 percent of custody decisions still favor the mother.

The effects of divorce on children was a neglected research topic until fairly recently. There is now a national move among social scientists to ground custody decisions in statistical fact, not cultural myth. The ideal goal is to come up with a formula rooted in statistical research for fail-safe child placement that would guide beleaguered judges and emotionally torn parents through the difficult custody decision.

DATA JUST ROLLING IN indicate that there will be no simple answers to this complex problem.

Drs. Richard A. Warshak and John Santrock of the University of Texas at Dallas conducted one of the first in-depth studies in 1978. They are still analyzing data from that research, which concentrated on 64 children, ages 6-11, and their families. The youngsters lived in households that were equally divided among single father, single mother and two parent households.

A Texas A&M professor, Dr. William S. Rholes, just published his findings about the effects of divorce on college-aged males and females. He, too, compared children who were reared in single- and two-parent homes.

Both studies concluded that children weren't necessarily better off with the mother instead of the father. Both indicated children may have an advantage living with the same sex parent. And neither thought male or female single-parent households were an optimal child-rearing environment. In other words, the best situation is probably two parents living peaceably at home.

IN A SERIES OF interviews with the young children and custodial parent, Warshak says "on the average we found that children living with the same sex parents — fathers with sons, mothers with daughters — were less demanding, more socially mature and independent. We found children living with the oppo-

site sex parent tended to show more anxiety, lower self-esteem and less social competence."

Rholes found the college-aged boys in his study had been least affected by living in a single-parent family as a child. They compared favorably with same age males who grew up with both parents; although those who lived with their mothers were judged a bit less socially mature than those raised in intact or single father families.

College-age females, on the other hand, seemed more adversely affected by living in single father homes than males, Rholes says. They tended to be generally more anxious. The only clear benefit females living with their fathers showed through testing was a greater ease in making friends of the opposite sex, he says.

WARSHAK BELIEVES there are several possible reasons why some children do better with the same sex parent. Having a role model of the same gender may make social adjustment easier. A mother might feel more at ease and in control raising a girl instead of a boy; fathers may feel the reverse. And a parent may identify a child of the opposite sex with the ex-spouse.

For example, if a man relied on his wife for comfort and nurturing, he might place the same emotional demands on his daughter. If a woman is still bitter about her ex-husband she might transfer that hostility to her son. In either case, too much pressure is put on the child for proper development.

Yet, despite the differences mentioned, there was a sizable number of children of both sexes who were equally well adjusted in either father and mother custody. For that reason, both Rholes and Warshak warn it is wrong to assume children should always live with the same sex parent. Both say the point they are trying to make is that fathers and mothers should be regarded as potentially equal single parents by the courts.

If judges were less biased toward mothers, they reason that more fathers who want their children might be encouraged to ask for them. If mothers weren't made to feel guilty for not want-

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ing custody of their children, more might admit the father would be the better single parent. Ostensibly, the person who would benefit the most from this more egalitarian approach would be the child.

In reality, future research may show healthy adjustment of a child to divorce has less to do with parental gender than extenuating circumstances, such as the amount of family conflict, access to both parents following a divorce and parenting styles.

Warshak says children whose parents make them pawns in their divorce disputes fare the worst. Long after the marriage is ended, some parents continue to argue and battle for the allegiance of the child. Sometimes a son or daughter is used as a bearer of hostile messages or interrogated after visiting the other parent. Such a tug of war is psychologically damaging to the child, he says.

Both Warshak and Rholes agree the most secure, happy children of divorce have open access to both parents. "Too often this doesn't happen," says Rholes.

It is especially crucial for younger children to be close to both parents,

Warshak says. He says they are then less likely to fear abandonment and blame themselves for the divorce.

The parenting style of the mother or father awarded custody may also be crucial. Warshak says research shows that parents who combine warm, attentive involvement with firm control over their offspring produce more stable, successful children. Conversely, a mother who fears disciplining her son or a father who rides roughshod over his daughter are more likely to rear a troubled child.

"I don't think we're ever going to be able to come up with a mathematical equation which will tell us with whom who children should live," says Rholes.

"But I do think we could come up with some generally applicable rules that should be considered with the attributes of each individual family. Custody is going to have to be awarded on a case by case basis — hopefully with good research as background."

Some of the questions he and Warshak say need to be answered: What are the effects of splitting up siblings? Are children affected adversely when a parent remarries? Should the age of the child matter in awarding custody to either a mother or father?

So far, researchers admit they've just scratched the surface.

Study seeks women who gave up custody

"What type of mother gives up her children?"

Dr. Richard A. Warshak says it may be a woman who has the best interest of her offspring in mind. Yet, one study found that more than 80 percent of mothers who relinquished custody during a divorce reported they were criticized for doing so.

Many women, psychologist Warshak says, "may feel obliged to maintain custody rather than face tremendous social pressure and, perhaps, excessive guilt."

A doctoral candidate studying under Warshak at the University of Texas at Dallas wants to find out more about women who give up their children. She is conducting a study of such mothers and is seeking volunteers for confidential interviews.

Any non-custodial mother interested in the study should write Maria Constantatos at the University of Texas Health Science Center, 5323 Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, Texas, 75235 or call 214.682.9691