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Can A Man Raise A Child All By Himself?

The Weinstein Group



There are nearly twice as many fathers raising their children alone today as there were 10 years ago

The author with his daughters: Daedre (left), 19, and Heather, 21.

By Paul Levine

I OFTEN WALK INTO MY DAUGHTERS' room when I miss them. I look at their awards, the posters on the walls and the disconnected telephone that had been their lifeline in high school. They are away in college now. And yet when I look at the pictures that lie scattered on the dresser, and when I see the stuffed animals that still remain on their beds, I am reminded of the years I raised them.

They came to live with me in 1978, a year after my divorce. Daedre was 7 and Heather was 9. I had been an alternating-weekend father until then, and their time with me was neatly penciled in on my kitchen calendar. All that changed when they moved into my apartment in Yon-

kers, N.Y., and I decided to seek custody. Originally, my attorney didn't give me any hope. "What can you give them that their mother can't?" he asked. It wasn't until I later retained an attorney who believed in the abilities of fathers to raise children that I was able to win the right to bring up my daughters.

Men have not usually been viewed as able to take on the "mother" role—that of the nurturing parent. While a father could give love, it was thought that he could not provide the physical and emotional care that children need. It was the mother who was supposed to take the child to the pediatrician, be there at the end of the school day and wipe away

the tears. A man's role traditionally has been to get a job, advance in his career and help discipline the children. But my own experience and that of other fathers with whom I've spoken leaves this stereotype open to question.

Increasingly, the courts are forced to confront this question: Can a man raise a child as well as a woman can? Admittedly, women are still seen as the primary caretakers. "Eighty percent to 90 percent of mothers are getting custody or being awarded physical care of the child," says Dick Woods, president of the National Congress for Men in Washington, D.C. But things are changing. In the U.S. there currently are more than 1.2 million single-parent fathers, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By comparison, there were just over 690,000 in 1980 and about 393,000 in 1970.

"Today, courts no longer automatically award a child to the mother just because the youngster is in 'the tender years,'" says Woods.

One of the reasons is the different economic and social reality of the 1980s. "An important factor," says Woods, "is that 78 percent of mothers are working today [compared with 25 percent 20 years ago], and men are more likely to be equally involved with their children."

There also is a new willingness among men to attempt the responsibilities—and rewards—of being a full-time parent, partly the result of a social climate that makes it easier for men to accept in themselves the ability to care and be sensitive. "The father's motivation and capacity to give is important," says Barbara Foltz, executive director of Family Counseling Service of Spokane, Wash., "and we are seeing an increase in the motivation of men."

But even with the strongest motivation, handling children and the demands of a job can cause new problems.

Don Pruett, a divorced father who lives in Plantation, Fla., began raising his son, Joshua, now 7, after winning legal custody more than two years ago. An architectural designer who also operates a construction company, Pruett found the dual responsibilities of career and child to be difficult. "At first it made me feel insecure in my job," he says. "I felt I was neglecting it. If I was sick, it was okay to call in. But if I was staying home because my son was sick, it made me

continued

feel guilty." Pruett had an understanding boss, though, who has helped him through. "Now, I sometimes take work home, go in for half a day or take Joshua to the office," he says.

Eric Gravatt, a prison counselor living in Minneapolis, works the 1:15 p.m. to 9 p.m. shift. "Trying to find the time to spend with the children is a problem," says Gravatt, who has been raising his daughters, ages 5 and 10, since his wife died on New Year's Day of 1989. Gravatt has to depend on child-care help and on relatives to be at home when he's working. "I'm looking for full-time help," he says, "but it's expensive."

Some men find that their attitude toward their jobs has to change. Gerald Kandel, director of development at the Graduate School and University Center of The City University of New York, has been raising his son, Elan, and daughter, Mia, ages 14 and 9, since his wife died five years ago. "If there was no sitter, I had to be there to meet them at the school bus," he says. "My priority is the children. My job is No. 2. I would have done something else if it came to it."

Support from the outside can lighten the burden of raising children alone. "I hated to watch our family disintegrate," says Larry Knapp, a high school history teacher and basketball coach in Santa Barbara, Calif., who began raising his children, Jon and Kristin, after his divorce nine years ago, when they were 12 and 9. Knapp often took care of his children by bringing them along to basketball practice. (His son played basketball in college, and his daughter is now one of the top high school basketball players in the country.) "I also got a lot of emotional and physical support from my church," he says.

There is still the problem of loneliness, however. The need for an adult relationship is often a delicate issue. "It was important for me to be with other adults," recalls Gerald Kandel, "but my son was upset when I started dating. He let me know I was taking time from him."

And it is difficult for a single-parent father to date a woman without viewing her as a potential mother for his children. Often, that is how the child will view her too. "Joshua's first comment whenever I date is, 'Are you going to get married?'" says Don Pruett.

Once the children meet the woman, there is always the fear of how breaking up will affect them. Dating a woman with children of her own also can make the man's children feel vulnerable, afraid of losing a special closeness with their father. Still, most of the women Pruett dates have children. "We make it a group," he says. Women without children, he

finds, tend to shy away from single-parent fathers. "There is more to share with women who have children."

The question of marriage is ultimately addressed by all single-parent fathers. "My religion enjoins me to remarry," says Eric Gravatt, "but I'm not in a hurry. Now I want my children to have all my time."

Not having an adult woman in the house can be especially hard on men raising daughters. Gravatt gets his daughters off to school, prepares the evening dinner and lays out their nightgowns. "I

if we had a mother there."

In raising Heather and Daedre, I did the natural things both parents do. I sat through school concerts, went to Meet the Teacher night and made sure there was a box of raisins with their lunch. I had to swallow hard, though, when it came to facing situations that mothers more naturally deal with. To help me discuss menstruation, I ordered a kit that consisted of hygiene samples and a pamphlet. When I mustered the courage to ask if there were any questions, I was relieved when my daughter embarrassedly said

In the final analysis, I believe the qualities needed for raising children successfully are the same for men as for women. And although the task of being a single-parent father is rough, many men prove more than equal to it.

"There is no support in the research that says mothers make better custodial parents," says Richard Warshak, a clinical psychologist practicing in Dallas who specializes in custody situations. More important than whether the single parent is male or female, he adds, "is the ability to communicate and listen to the

child—to set limits, show warmth and be able to nurture."

"The stereotype that fathers can't raise children is as fair as saying a woman's place is in the kitchen," says Jon Pinter, area director overseeing the Single Parent Family Program for the Family Service Association of San Diego County. "The raising of children depends on the person, not the sex."

In my desk drawer, I keep a handmade card given to me many years ago by Heather and Daedre on Mother's Day. On it is a drawing of a man standing at an ironing board. In the background are two girls. The card simply says, "Thanks, Dad, for being such a good mother. I know it's hard for you to be a Mom and Dad, but that's the way it turned out."

We all live with the dream of a two-parent family. But sometimes it doesn't happen that way. "I remember the difficult times," says

What if there's no sitter or a child is sick? For these men, work can't be the priority.



Right: Larry Knapp, a basketball coach, with his children—Jon, 12, and Kristin, 9—in 1982. **Above:** with Kristin today. Knapp often took his children to practice when he was raising them alone, and both became star players.



can handle sewing and ironing, but choosing clothes is very difficult," he says. "The biggest problem is trying to keep them as cute as the other children."

"When Mia was 3," says Gerald Kandel, "I didn't know anything about helping a girl put on tights. I had to learn to make braids and ponytails." He eventually found a volunteer "Big Sister" for his daughter.

"I always wanted a female role model," admits my daughter Daedre, now a sophomore at Barnard College in New York. "Judy, our baby sitter, filled that role. She baked with us and taught us to use eye shadow. We even called her J.M.—for Junior Mommy. It made us feel as

"no." I also remember having to go up to an unsympathetic saleslady and handle the buying of my daughter's first bra while she cowered self-consciously among a rack of clothes.

It is for reasons such as these that children raised by single-parent fathers may feel different from their friends. "In grade school, my friends' mothers were not as comfortable when I had sleepovers, because a mother wasn't in our house," Daedre remembers. "As I got older, children would ask why I didn't live with Mom," adds Heather, now a senior at Buffalo State College. "Back then, they didn't think a father would want to raise a child."

Heather. "Being dropped off very early at school and sitting in a lunchroom and having to wait to be picked up at the after-school center and the trips to court. But I also remember the other times. Our walks by the Hudson River and the candlelit dinners of frozen fried chicken on paper plates while my father told us the stories he made up. And his being there when we needed him."

"I suppose growing up without a mother there wasn't easy," adds Daedre. "But neither is growing up in general. It doesn't really matter how many parents you have or what sex they are. The important thing is that you grow up surrounded by lots of love." □