



Network Notes

November 2005

Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men



Book Review

by Glen Palm, Ph.D.

As a father advocate and a parent educator who works with fathers my first response to hearing about Peggy Drexler's book *Raising Boys Without Men* was defensiveness followed by combativeness. How could I rebut the idea that boys don't "need" fathers? I have also learned that an effective way of responding

to a challenge like this is to first take time to listen, or in this case, read the book and try to first understand the 'other perspective'.

Raising Boys Without Men focuses on a small number of families where lesbian mothers or single mothers by choice raised boys. The longitudinal study of these families is rich in the details of how this group of mothers successfully nurtured and guided their young sons through middle childhood and towards a positive masculine identity. As a parent

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Our mission, as a statewide network, is to initiate, promote and support effective programs and to educate on public policy to enhance the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of children, families and the community.

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A Voice for Fatherhood

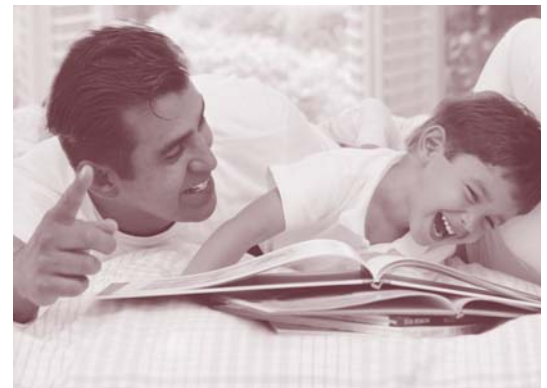
MFFN seeks to provide a voice for Minnesota's fatherhood and family services organizations.

If you have a "best practice" or information you would like to share, please send your idea to MFFN.

Connecting dads and children through early literacy

Did you miss MFFN's seven training sessions about involving fathers in early education and early literacy? Held across Minnesota in September and October, the sessions focused on a broad definition of literacy including reading, writing, speaking and listening. Here are a few of the important messages of the workshops:

- **Dads are important in the literacy development of their children.** When dads and moms both take an active role in reading to/with their children, their children do better in school, are more relaxed and have better interpersonal skills. Fathers need to understand that children are better readers when multiple adults model literacy skills.
- **Reluctant dads may become more involved if literacy-related activities focus on their interests and strengths.** If a father isn't comfortable reading aloud, or if he has low reading skills, perhaps he can start to increase his role in literacy development by focusing on pre-literacy skills such as motor skills (i.e., painting or sanding), spatial skills (reading maps or using instruction manuals to build furniture, bikes or toys), or verbal skills (singing or storytelling). Professionals can help dads understand that there are many ways to support literacy development.
- **Boys read less frequently and at lower levels than girls.** It is important for fathers to take seriously their role as male literacy role-models. Whether reading street signs,



newspapers, or the Internet, dads have an important responsibility to model the enjoyment and benefits of reading to their sons and daughters. Find books for boys at www.guysread.com.

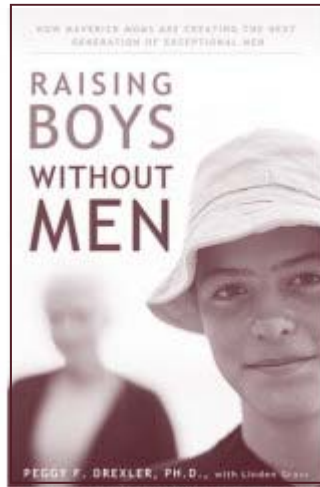
- **Professionals do not need to start from scratch.** Across Minnesota and the U.S., there are many resources for engaging men and fathers in early literacy development. For example, the Minn. Humanities Commission supports organizations that want to develop FRED (Fathers Reading Every Day) Projects and Dads and Kids Book Clubs. The Commission also provides free copies of "Reading with Dad" booklists—a listing of over 50 children's books that have father-focused themes. Learn more at www.minnesotahumanities.org.
- **Limited research has been conducted about fathers and early literacy development.** Learn more about research online: www.mnfathers.org/DadsLiteracyPresentation2005.pdf.

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educator, I appreciated the thoughtful description and analysis of good parenting. This process is carefully summarized at the end of each chapter.

In the beginning of the book, Drexler notes that maverick moms “recognize that how much time they spend—and how they interact with their kids matters much more than whether they are single, married, straight or gay.” I agree with Drexler’s basic premise that, “It is the quality of parenting, not the gender (or sexual orientation) of the parent that counts.” Drexler skillfully uses qualitative data to articulate the “essence” of good parenting based on her observations and interviews. This detailed description is an important contribution to our field.

She also explores the merging gender identity of the boys. Her sub-title, “How Maverick Moms are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men” tells us this is an important theme and conclusion of her research. She writes, “They developed their boyishness (i.e., masculinity) at a normal rate but their sense of justice and fairness and their ability to express their feelings were off the charts.” I value all of these qualities in men and am hopeful that more boys are adopting this model of masculinity. I also believe that “good fathering” can instill these same characteristics using some of the same “essential” parenting behaviors that Drexler describes throughout her book.



I am disappointed by her need to defend motherhood and to “take a stand against the recent tide of opinion and the rash of books asserting that boys must have a father in the home in order to grow into full manhood.” She has discovered and described a positive parenting style that could be practiced by male and female parents in different family structures or contexts. She acknowledges the social and psychological capital that the mothers she studied brought to their parenting. They were educated, financially secure and they had developed a strong set of parenting skills. These characteristics probably explain more about the effectiveness of their child rearing than their gender or sexual orientation. In her rush to defend mother only families, she often portrayed the men (frequently the biological fathers) in a negative light. Many fathers possess neither the social capital nor the psychological capital described in the families that were studied and have also not developed parenting styles that are “loving and growth encouraging”. I see this as an important challenge in our society to be able to support men in developing positive parenting styles. Pitting men and women against each other in a competition for who has the

best parenting style and whose presence is most important is not a productive way to encourage and support good parenting in diverse family structures.

The two positive messages from this book that can inform and guide our future efforts to support parents are:

- (1) Social and psychological capital that provide parents with resources and support and reduce stress will strongly influence parents’ ability to display optimal parenting behaviors.
- (2) Parent-child relationships are nurtured by the set of parenting attitudes and behaviors described in the book, that while gender neutral are never void of gender influence.

Drexler’s book reminds us that parenting is often mired in guilt feelings. Guilt is unavoidable in the complex task of making a multitude of parenting decisions that together have a profound influence on our children. Both mothers and fathers are important and both need and deserve information and support to make the best decisions for themselves and their children.

While *Raising Boys Without Men* is meant to affirm and support mothers it does a disservice to fathers by discounting their importance. I hope that we can find ways to appreciate and support the unique, positive contributions of gender and sexual orientation to parenting and inspire the style of positive parenting that Drexler describes in her book.

Details: Drexler, Peggy F. with Linden Gross. *Raising Boys Without Men: How Maverick Moms Are Creating the Next Generation of Exceptional Men*. Rodale. Aug. 2005.



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Fathers' involvement in their children's education

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One aspect of changing families in recent years is greater involvement by fathers in their children's lives. Many initiatives to promote involved fatherhood have emerged. There have also been renewed emphases in education on building strong school-home partnerships and on family learning. There is strong research evidence showing that parents' involvement in their children's learning has a substantial impact on children's educational attainment. In light of a gender achievement gap in schools, many experts propose the importance of positive male role models for boys' learning and reading. Much of the research published on the relationship between parents and their children's learning uses the term 'parent' but focuses almost entirely on mothers. Fathers are also absent in many family learning programs and their evaluations.

The report, "Fathers' involvement in their children's education" (April 2005), takes a comprehensive look at fathers' involvement in their school-aged children's learning and education, and in schools and family learning programs. The research was carried out in 2003 and 2004 in partnership with the Department for Education and Skills (London) Fathers Advisory Group of local policymakers, voluntary organizations and practitioners.

How involved are fathers in their children's learning and education - some findings:

Extent of fathers' involvement:

- Resident fathers are less likely than resident mothers to be involved in many aspects of their children's out-of-school learning and in their children's school.
- Fathers contribute substantially to specific areas of their children's out-of-school learning: building and repairing, hobbies, IT, math, physical play etc. There is a focus on play, leisure, practical activities and fun. Their involvement in these areas of learning is at higher rates or more frequent than mothers' participation.



with their children, they often use non-fiction, environmental print and recreational materials.

- Additionally, considerable proportions of resident fathers attend parents evenings and general school meetings, and drop off and pick their children up at school, but at lower rates or less frequently than mothers.
- Much less data was found on the involvement of non-resident fathers and single-parent fathers than on the involvement of resident fathers in two-parent families.

Fathers' involvement in their children's learning is associated with better educational, social, and emotional outcomes.

- Non-resident fathers are especially unlikely to be involved in their children's school. Involvement with their children's out-of-school learning often takes place on weekends and has a recreational focus. Schools and family learning programs have the potential to be a neutral place where non-resident fathers and their children can have positive time together.



- Single-parent fathers tend to get more involved in their children's schools than do resident fathers in two-parent families.
- Overall, fathers are more likely to be involved if their children's mother is involved in the child's learning and education, they had good relations with their child's mother, they or their child's mother have relatively high educational qualifications, they got involved in their child's life early on, their child is in primary school rather than secondary school, among other factors. However, the strongest association is with the level of mother's involvement.

Impact of fathers' involvement on children's learning:

- There is consistent evidence that the quality and content of fathers' involvement matter more for children's outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children.
- Many research studies assessing the impact of fathers' involvement in their children's learning and education on children's educational outcomes are localized and small-scale and this report focused on five high-quality studies with large-scale, nationally representative samples

[across the United Kingdom] of fathers and children, which indicate that:

- Fathers' interest in and involvement in their children's learning and in schools is statistically associated with better educational outcomes. There are also associations with better social and emotional outcomes.
- The statistical associations with fathers' involvement are independent of mothers' involvement.
- Mothers' involvement is no substitute for fathers' involvement, although there are mixed findings on any differences in the strength of impact of fathers' involvement and mothers' involvement.

In addition, this report synthesizes the evidence about the benefits of fathers' involvement for fathers and mothers, the barriers to fathers' involvement and outlines effective practice in engaging fathers in schools and family learning programs. This report concludes with several policy implications.

Details: This article is a review of the report by Rebecca Goldman, April, 2005, "Fathers' involvement in their children's education" (London: National Family and Parenting Institute). Ordering information: www.nfpi.org/data/publications/index.htm.

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Fatherhood research roundup: Recent documents examine fatherhood from a variety of perspectives

"Southeast Asian Fathers' Experiences with Adolescents: Challenges and Change"

This paper examines fathering experiences of Southeast Asian immigrant men who are parenting adolescent children in the U.S. Focus groups were conducted with Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese immigrant fathers. The study found that most fathers wanted to become more involved in their children's lives. Read online: <http://hmongstudies.org/XiongandDetznerHSJ6.pdf> (Hmong Studies Journal Vol. 6, June 2005).

The Child Support Program: An Investment That Works

Revised to include 2004 data, this article through the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) reviews how child support enforcement programs can help families achieve self-sufficiency. The article states that child support helps to connect children to their fathers and to reduce reliance on welfare, among other findings. www.clasp.org/publications/cs_funding_072605.pdf (July 2005).

Returning Home: Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry

Finding employment is one of the most important reintegration challenges faced by ex-offenders. The Urban Institute highlights challenges and characteristics of successful job seekers. For example, offenders' positive perceptions of home neighborhoods correlated with higher work rates after release. Also, participation in a work-release program predicted more weeks worked after release. Online: www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311215_employment.pdf (Aug. 2005).

Fathering Magazine focuses on incarcerated men

Fathering's current issue (Vol. 3 #3) focuses on the family and community context in which men return home following incarceration. Typically men's prison experience and return to family life are viewed either from the institutional or psychological perspective. Understanding the nature and texture of familial relationships as the former prisoner returns home is critical for understanding how he succeeds (i.e., future parole violations, arrest, and/or re-imprisonment). Online: www.mensstudies.com (Click "journals"; then click "Fathering Magazine").

ChildTrends releases new studies on family trends: Nonmarital birthrates and family dining patterns

Two new studies have been released on ChildTrends' Family Page. "Are families eating together? New research finds age, ethnicity, nativity, and poverty related to family dining." "New trends in U.S. births and fertility rates: Teen birth rates are the lowest ever reported, but nonmarital birth rates are up significantly for women 20 and older." Online: www.childtrendsdatabank.org/thefamily.cfm

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