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Deconstructing Mother Guilt

Single Mothers Can Effectively Raise an Emotionally Healthy and Well Developed Male Child

Single mothers raising children on their own can be the result of a family breakdown, separation, divorce, or the result of a decision to have a baby without a partner. This family structure occurs in lower, middle, and upper class socioeconomic backgrounds and the number of children raised by single mothers has increased dramatically in recent years (Whitehead, 1993).

Guilt, shame, and inadequacy—feelings of a single mother raising a son

Feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy may be present particularly when a single mother is raising a son on her own. Some of their apprehension, fears and guilt are fuelled by society's view of single mothers and the problems this family constellation causes for the child and society. One societal myth is that sons of single mothers will have difficulties developing masculine tendencies and normal emotional development with the absence of a significant male. Who will teach them to rough house, play sports, and develop female relationships, if not their father? The common view is of a single mother raising her son and struggling to survive financially with few resources remaining for other important factors, such as fostering healthy self-esteem, social skills, and academic skills.

In addition, recent articles have blamed the increase in school violence partly on broken homes, as single parents may fail to provide the necessary controls for their children. They may be exhausted after work and lack the strength to set strict guidelines for their children. Separated parents who continue to argue and criticize each other in front of the children prolong and increase the damage caused by a breakdown in the family. Children will model their parent's behaviour in the schoolyard with peers and in future relationships.

Healthy children need two healthy parents?

Whether left unspoken in a room with a single parent, fostered by the media, preached from a pulpit, reflected in government policy, hidden in corporate practices, overtly minimized in public education, steeped in family histories, or held in the questioning stares of society, there exists a myth. The myth recognizes as an unassailable fact that a single parent is a poor and ineffectual substitute to a two-parent household (Pollack, 1998; Eyer, 1996; Ahrons, 1994; Goodrich *et al*, 1988). It is worse still if the single parent is a female: a mother to whom so many stigmas are directly and indirectly attached.

Is this myth real, does it have proven substance, reliable research and studies to support its claim, is it steeped in countless quantifiable observations? Single parenting, specifically single mothers have received an inordinate amount of focus and scientific scrutiny. The studies range from the breakdown of the family, academic performance, family values, poverty, sexual orientation, youth crimes, attachment in relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, to teenage pregnancy. Diane Eyer, in her book *Motherguilt*, succinctly summed this negative myth as follows:

Being a single mom is basically immoral and selfish, the reasoning goes, since it deprives children of an important paternal role model and source of income. Single mothers are seen as engenders of the underclass—the juvenile delinquents, drug addicts, and violent criminals who plague the country. (1996: 29)

The single parent myth has risen steadily since the 1950's with the decline of the white picket fence surrounding the suburban home with its dutiful working father and nurturing stay at home mother—the North American dream. It is without doubt that the last two generations have seen a sharp rise in divorce rates in which one in two American marriages end in divorce, while in Canada this statistic hovers around 35-40 percent; as well as an ever increasing number of women in the work force. Constance Ahrons (1994: 7-14) noted that we continue to glorify the “intact family” while stigmatizing “broken homes,” without recognizing that divorce is now normal. Even the language of divorce and separation conveys inadequacy and guilt to the parting parents. Words such “broken, dysfunctional, abnormal, split, and parted” replace words like “whole, functional, normal, together, and complete.” The negative judgmental nature of these terms are unfairly applied largely to women who are, according to the myth, the real gatekeepers of relationships.

Excluding economic and relational shifts and developing trends in our culture and society does a child need two healthy parents to become healthy and functional? This question, although well studied, does not contain a simple answer. The question latently allies itself with the myth, guilt and negative language of the two-parent family. A less loaded query might ask: can a single parent raise a healthy and functional child? Altering this question is not an

argument in semantics or a lesson in political correctness; rather it succinctly captures the essence of the question without value or morality. Similarly, the following questions are burdened with judgmental weight: will a child raised in a more affluent family be more healthy and functional; or does a child, whose parents can provide better diet and medical attention perform better in school; or a child raised by parents in an economically advantaged society develop better than one raised in a “Third-world” shanty town? Although often contradictory in results, methodology, and theoretical approach, studies have revealed that there are some advantages to raising a child in a two-parent household. However, these narrow advantages are dependent on a multitude of variables notably including no emotional, physical, or sexual abuse and a relatively stable, open and amicable parental executive.

No study or research has ever stated that a single parent cannot raise a healthy and functional child. Some research indicates that single mothers may have the propensity to have less resources and support, which in turn can have some adverse affects. However, some recent studies have openly questioned the myth that two-parent families are essential in raising a healthy and well developed son. Adolescents living with single mothers in these studies received more parental support than those in two parent families and the males were no more likely to be involved with drugs or alcohol; or be delinquent or a school dropout than those living in other family constellations. Yes, there may be some advantages to a two-parent family, but there can also be some disadvantages. Furthermore, there can be advantages for a mother or father to raise a child without a partner. Shaw (1991) suggested that single parenting often develops the parent’s independence and ability to handle a variety of situations. In addition, children may benefit from increased levels of responsibility in homes of single parents.

Male children need a stable significant male parental figure in their lives in order to become healthy and well adjusted

Family therapists for years have openly asked, encouraged, and at times expected that a single mother should find a male figure to help effectively rear her male child. Pollack stated, “single mothers say they are almost universally counseled to find the boy a male role model, as if a mother cannot possibly raise her son alone, as if she will be unable to convey some vital secret about masculinity” (92). The stigma of raising a healthy child by a single mother seems to resonate significantly if that child is a boy.

Until recently there was a notable absence of research and scientific questioning regarding the ability or inability of a single mother to raise a boy to be a healthy and well-adapted man. In the last ten years, this area is beginning to receive some attention in the literature (Pollack, 1998; Russell and Saebel, 1997; Zinner, 1997; Eyer, 1996; Snider, Smith and Mitchell, 1995; Silverstein and Rashbaum, 1994; Brocke-Utne, 1991). What remains absent is any discriminating evidence that reveals that a single mother is less able or equipped

to raise a male. According to Russell and Saebel (1997) little clear evidence has been found to mark any discernable difference between differing parent-child gender relationships.

In spite of this lack of supporting scientific evidence there apparently continues to exist a socialized belief that a developing boy requires a stable male role model beyond his single mother. An unfortunate ramification of this reified belief is the internalization by females of mother blaming, specifically mother-guilt. In literature and in our clinical practices, it has been repeatedly revealed that single females often feel greater inadequacy and guilt when raising a son. One highly educated single mother recalled crying for days after leaving the hospital upon having a male child; lamenting at not having had a daughter and filled with the thought, “how can I raise a boy, I don’t even know how to play baseball.” This internalized mother guilt by single mothers may further exacerbate this erroneous belief, as studies have revealed that the mother’s mood influences maternal interactions with their child. In the study by Jouriles *et al*, it has been noted with male children (Jouriles, Murphy, and O’Leary, 1989).

Challenging the accepted perceptions of single mothers

A myth about the deficiencies and difficulties regarding a sons’ experience when a single mother raises him has fuelled much unnecessary guilt and shame in this group. Single mothers need to confront the myths that suggest that they provide inadequate care for their children. If they accept the commonly held societal beliefs, then feelings of guilt, shame, depression and inadequacy may develop. Single mothers can proactively challenge, confront and replace societal misconcepts through a variety of methods, both internally unto themselves and externally unto the world. Internally, single mothers can continue to develop insight into their personal belief structure and their internal feelings in order to sort out the truth and cope with their own potentially intense emotions.

It is important to be self aware of the need to seek out emotional support, guidance, and nurturing when it is necessary and not feel that independence and self sufficiency hold greater value than interpersonal connections and support. Also, mothers can internally identify their own unique resources and strengths that they possess as a mother and an individual. The internal measuring stick with which an individual judges or rates the self is not merely externally imposed but co-created from within. As Michael White aptly noted, “that which we copy we make new” (White and Epston, 1990). According to Winnicott, a child does not need a perfect or society driven ideal archetype mother but a “Good Enough Mother” (Winnicott, 1988). Similarly, foremost family therapist Virginia Satir echoed this point in recognizing that a parent is the best parent they can be at any given moment (Satir *et al*, 1991). Recognizing her strengths and ability to parent is essential for a single mother. Single mothers are “walking the walk” and may need to ignore the “talk.”

Externally, many options exist for single mothers to deconstruct the

outdated myths and replace them with the more appropriate one: that single mothers are effective, nurturing and able to raise a child, son or daughter. One external avenue is support groups for single mothers; or group therapy may be beneficial in instilling hope, normalization and in helping them realize that they are not alone and unique in their problems and thoughts. Another path is to openly challenge noted misconceptions when they are faced with them in society, social institutions, conversation or even humour. Advocacy for single parents often can facilitate those without a voice to be heard. Also, modifications to the current welfare system and legislation to provide additional financial support to single mothers is encouraged. Single mothers can break the cycle by challenging the myths with their own children. One technique is to instill self-esteem and respect into the children by helping the child to understand—a lesson single mothers sometimes forget—that it is who you are not what you have or lack. The child's humour, intelligence, understanding, playfulness and resourcefulness are much more important than external items the family may possess, such as cars, video games, and televisions.

Conclusions

There are several publicly held misconceptions accepted as norms concerning single mothers raising sons which have perpetuated unnecessary and harmful shame and guilt on single mothers. Research has not supported the many myths that continue to be accepted by our society. It is time for single mothers to be proactive in challenging and dispelling these misconceptions. To effectively change these stereotypes it is essential for both single mothers and others to recognize and become more aware of the internal and external components that propitiates these myths. Frequently, this starts by recognizing that generally single mothers are positive and nurturing parents who need not accept the values or guilt of others.

It is important to note that this article was not meant to suggest that single fathers do not also experience problems nor was it intended to undermine the fact that two-parent families are very capable of raising psychologically healthy children. Rather, its purpose is to challenge the myths faced by single mothers and to acknowledge that single mothers can raise healthy, well-adapted children.

It is recommended that issues regarding parenting alone and single mothers receive further attention in both research and study and that future work in this area continues to deconstruct accepted traditional norms and myths about single parenting.

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