

Dads are important in single parenting  
by Lloyd Robertson

Men's roles have been changing. At a recent seminar for independent (home study) practitioners we learned that birth fathers are often fighting adoptions, demanding their right to raise their genetic offspring. This did not happen a few decades ago.

It used to be that single parent fathers were the butt of sit-com humour. Usually widowers, they were pictured as hopelessly inept with diapers and blushing awkwardly when talking to their older children about sex.

Prior to the 1960s men were to love their children but weren't supposed to show emotion. It was supposed that women were the nurturers while men were the providers. Given these roles women were at home for their children while men were out in the "world of work" somewhere, earning the money the family needed to survive. This resulted in many men lacking the skills to physically care for or even relate to their children.

The courts have largely accepted this stereotypical bias. I once had a judge tell me, bluntly, that children belong with their mothers. Typically the mother, after divorce, is awarded custody and the father is awarded the responsibility for child support. Only ten percent of single parents in Canada are men.

A recent (1996) U.S. study by psychologists Alison Clarke-Stewart and Craig Hayward has lent support to men fighting for custody of their children. Previous studies focused on single parent mothers and had found that boys, in these families, fare worse than girls on scales measuring self-respect, academic achievement, anxiety, depression and problem behaviors. The suggestion had been made that children develop better if raised by a parent of the same sex.

This had been the hypothesis of Clarke-Stewart and Hayward but they proved themselves wrong. Children, regardless of gender, did better with their dads. When controlled for income (single parent fathers are, on average, richer than single parent moms); for support (dads reported receiving more emotional support from friends and family than did moms); and for mental health (moms reported higher levels of depression and anxiety than dads) the difference was still significant. With all these factors equalized, the kids still did better with dad. Boys, on average, did slightly better than girls.

These results run counter to popular wisdom. Aren't women supposed to be the nurturers? Are men better parents?

Children need to feel close to both of their parents. It turns out that men are less likely, on average, to share with their children the perceived shortcomings of the absent parent. Children of single parent fathers reported still feeling close to their mothers. Children of single parent mothers often reported that they did not feel close to their dads. These tended to be children with emotional problems.

Second, there is the problem of self-selection. Remember that we still have a societal and judicial bias against single parent fathers. Twenty three percent of the single parent mother subsample said that there was no real decision, it was "just assumed" that they would receive custody. This assumption was not present in the male subsample. Men had to make a conscious decision that they wanted custody and then had to fight, often against considerable odds, to gain custody. The minority of men who are single parenting represent those men most determined to parent.

Finally, other research has shown that single parent women tend to feel trapped, bored or stressed by their situation. Custodial fathers, however, have been found to feel more satisfied and less stressed than custodial mothers. In fact, fathers frequently report that single parenting has enhanced their social status and given meaning to their lives. Women often report the opposite.

People, generally, feel more positive when they take control of their lives. If women feel that the role has been thrust upon them and that as single parents they have somehow been "victimized" then of course they will not function as well.

Dads are important and can make a difference even when mom has custody. Children need their fathers in their lives. Myself, I am single parenting my daughter and I would not trade the experience for anything. I am thankful for all of the support I have received in the community and, if I am able, will return that support to both genders.