

CHAPTER ONE

THE BAD RAP AGAINST MOTHERS

“I hope you have a father for that baby!”

—Male bus driver to a well-dressed, single-by-choice, professional mother in San Francisco struggling with moderate success to get her wailing 4-year-old son, his rather large truck, and her briefcase onto the bus after picking him up from a playdate

“HI, MY NAME IS PEGGY, and I’m a mother.” I’m also a worrier. I always thought that was a Jewish thing, but then Catholic friends, Episcopalian friends, and Muslim friends, Black, White, Asian, gay, straight—you name it—friends all swore it was their thing. Now I believe that with mothering, worry is an equal-opportunity opportunity. It comes with the job and is fanned by expert advice on child rearing that implies that a boy’s healthy development is thoroughly dependent on his mother’s parenting.

Like most new mothers, when my son was born, I relied on numerous child-rearing books, including one by T. Berry Brazelton, M.D., that identified three different types of babies and their time lines. My son did not fit neatly into any of Dr. Brazelton’s categories, and that drove me nuts. I obviously wasn’t measuring up as

a mother. So I kept reading more books by child experts, trying to follow their unending advice. And still my son never seemed to fit the mold. When he did meet the mark, I didn't bother to underline those more positive passages. Like most of us, I didn't dwell on the things that were going well. Whatever wasn't quite right stood out like a headline. And the biggest headline of them all read: YOUR SON STILL DOESN'T SPEAK.

That 13-month-old Alex wasn't walking yet also concerned me, even though 14 months (which is when he did start to walk) is average. But the fact that he still hadn't said his first word nearly drove me to distraction. I would listen and try to figure out if he was saying something, because he did make a lot of incoherent noises. Every time he opened his mouth, I'd think, "Is it this word? Is it that word?"

We lived in the pressure-cooker environment of Manhattan, where all the mothers I knew were highly educated, high-powered women like me, and just as concerned, eager, competitive, frightened, and anxious. That held true for the two other women in my mommy-baby group, both of whom had girls. Since girls tend to be developmentally quicker than boys, I had to contend with that as well.

"I have some concerns about Alex because he's not talking. And, like your daughter, he is not walking yet," I confided to one of them on our way to a Tumbling Tots class shortly before Alex started motoring around our apartment as if he'd been walking his whole life.

"Well, at least my daughter is talking," she shot back. "If my daughter wasn't talking, I'd be really upset."

I was crushed. I had already reviewed every week of my pregnancy to try to figure out what it was that I had done or not done to myself that could have caused this problem. Remembering how my baby had banged his head on the sink as

I bathed him one day, I felt sure that my clumsiness and inexperience were responsible for his seeming inability to speak. It didn't matter what the pediatrician told me. I was to blame.

Just before he turned 2, I enrolled Alex, who was still not saying an intelligible word, in a music class for kids. Its location was inconvenient, but everyone said it was "the best," and God forbid my son did not learn how to bang on a tambourine with other toddlers. After class one snowy afternoon, we headed out to catch the Third Avenue bus uptown. We reached the bus stop in minutes. Then we waited, and waited some more. Eventually we started getting cold. Since there was still not a bus in sight, I decided to hail a cab. Suddenly I couldn't find one of those, either. As the snowstorm intensified, I began to panic. We were a fair distance away from home. What if I couldn't find a cab and the bus never came? I could probably walk home on my own, but what about my 2-year-old, who was bundled in a big snowsuit? I had chronic back problems, and there was no way I could carry him.

"How the hell am I going to get us back to the apartment?" I asked myself, feeling increasingly frantic. All of a sudden, Alex put up his hand and yelled: "Taxi! Taxi!"

After all the angst, his first word!

What a relief. I was convinced that whatever went wrong with Alex, it was my fault. I was an educated New York woman who had been raised on books and movies featuring pushy, troublesome Jewish mothers, thanks to Philip Roth, among many others. I had learned the lesson of blaming mothers long before Alex's birth, and I remembered that in the early days when the pioneers in Israel were formulating the design for living in the kibbutz, they consciously tried to break the mold of the overly close family, diffusing mother-child closeness by having children sleep away from the parents and having everyone eat communally to avoid the intense family meals they remembered from the old country.

It was in the air. Mothers who were too close to their sons made them homosexual; mothers who were too distant made them autistic. Mothers were even blamed for schizophrenia. The term of blame was the “schizophrenogenic mother.” (Try saying *that* five times fast.)

This is not meant to blame the experts for all the angst of being a mother. I think we naturally carry a sense of deep responsibility for the health and happiness of our offspring. Why shouldn't we? But something happened in psychology during the 1930s that made a tremendous difference to my sense of guilt—and yours.

It all started out innocently enough. A large number of infants and small children who were orphaned were not thriving in the orphanages, and too many of these babies were not surviving. These were good orphanages. The babies were fed and changed and kept clean, but many became quiet and weak, and then died. According to the wisdom of the day, infants and small children were not to be picked up and held. That was considered to be bad for their young characters. Researchers were sent out to see if they could understand what was happening to these babies in their cribs. First they looked for physical causes for this unusually high mortality rate, but they could find no specific diseases. Then they sent in a pioneering child psychologist named Lauretta Bender, M.D. She observed the babies and came back with a clear answer: They were starving for love and human attention. Infants must have contact with people. Hug them, play with them, hold them, and they will thrive and grow. Leave them alone, without attention, and they will suffer. The very distinguished psychologist John Bowlby, M.D., was one of the researchers who worked with children in hospitals in London, and he began to understand the importance of attachment in the lives of children (and, of course, in the lives of us all). But instead of calling his study “Human Contact Deprivation” or “Parental Deprivation,” he called it

“Maternal Care and Mental Health.” By focusing on maternal deprivation, he spawned many of the concerns that weighed so heavily on me and my generation of mothers.

Dr. Bowlby also published studies about mothers who worked in factories all day, and he found their children were perfectly normal. This research has not been widely disseminated because it is neither sexy nor sensational. And it has not influenced cultural notions about the impact of working mothers in the raising of their children. What a shame!

PUT THE BLAME ON MOM

The news of Dr. Bowlby’s preliminary research and other studies like it hit the American culture after World War II, when women were no longer needed in the workplace (the fathers were returning from the war and ready to provide for their families). These women went to their new homes in the suburbs, there to become the Cleaver moms, trying to make everything perfect for their husbands and children.

The tendency to blame mothers for how their children developed persisted. Then, to make matters worse, mothers who stayed home in the 1950s were accused of *momism*—being so overprotective that they created selfish and spoiled children.

Over time, scientists have begun to discover the biological causes of schizophrenia, autism, and homosexuality. But we continued to look around for the guilty party when children weren’t doing well, and we found The Mom.

That attitude has lasted down through the decades. The mother is supposed to be responsible for everything her son is and will become. It’s as if she holds all the cards. If she’s a good mother, her son will turn out okay. If she’s a bad mother, she winds up with a bad son. And, curiously enough, the father plays a minor role in

taking the blame for the problems the children may have. It's a double bind for moms because fathers seem to carry much less responsibility for the problems their sons may have, but in the political and popular culture of today, they are considered absolutely essential to raising good sons.

There's really no research to back up this notion of maternal omnipotence, but it sticks to us like glue, creating unending anxiety in mothers, who often judge themselves by how their sons do and blame themselves for their sons' deficits.

As a specialist in the study of gender, I am extremely sensitive to the bad rap against mothers. These days, deprivation is the name of the blame game. That's what is making boys more aggressive, critics say, and the mothers have to be home or else. Mothers are blamed, even though studies of children raised in the same Israeli kibbutzim that separated the kids from their parents most of the time—and where they spent many hours away from their mothers, often sleeping elsewhere—revealed sons who were quite the opposite of aggressive: They were cooperative, friendly, and well-adjusted.

And then we have custody fights. More and more when the father wants custody, he uses the successful mother's career as a strategy to get the children. Pamela McGee, who plays for the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks, lost custody of her 4-year-old daughter while the court investigated whether McGee's work prevented her from being a good mother. In his motion for temporary sole custody, McGee's ex-husband, the Reverend Kevin E. Stafford, asserted that a career and motherhood are mutually exclusive. McGee's "level of achievement," he argued, impaired her ability to parent their child. McGee was on the road 4 weeks a year. And the father said it took away too much from the daughter. But the court did not investigate whether the father's travel schedule, which took him on the road 7 to 8 weeks a year, made him an unfit father.

“We live in a culture where we want mothers to do everything, and whenever something goes wrong, it’s the mother’s fault,” Mary Becker, who teaches family and domestic violence law at DePaul University in Chicago, told the *New York Times*.

This perception is reinforced daily by everything from the people around us to the news. In 2002, the *New York Times* published a story about a mother named Tabitha Pollock, who was convicted of first-degree murder “by accountability” (meaning that if you have certain knowledge that a crime will be committed and you do nothing to stop it, you are as guilty as if you had committed the crime yourself) and sentenced to 36 years for having failed to anticipate the murder of her sleeping 3-year-old daughter by her then boyfriend. The Illinois Supreme Court finally overturned the conviction, finding that while Tabitha Pollock may have been guilty of poor judgment in her choice of men, there was no basis in law to judge her for someone else’s crime. That decision came after she had served 7 years in prison.

Noting that there are hundreds of cases across the nation like this one, the article went on to question whether mothers are held to an unreasonably high standard of behavior and whether the resulting punishment of the mother and her surviving family was unduly harsh. According to legal experts, mothers in situations similar to Tabitha Pollock’s have been repeatedly found guilty by accountability, but fathers have gotten off without penalty.

Blame intensifies when mothers defy convention. More often than not, the treatment of moms without husbands in the professional literature focuses on a mother’s aloneness (translate: not with a man) or sexual preference (again, not with a man), rather than her parenting skills. Despite the relative prominence of many varieties of mothering families raising sons, both social scientists and popular opinion continue to make erroneous assumptions about the single-mothering experience and its impact on children.

Single- or two-mother families are portrayed as deficient, inadequate, broken, or flawed. And judgment is cast as a result.

When the experts look at the impact on kids' lives of having a single mom or two mothers, they see the numbers, not the people. Remember the mantra of the first Clinton campaign—it's the economy, stupid? That's what we're really talking about here. Social science data show that socioeconomic status is a stronger predictor than almost any other index of child welfare. Not marriage status. Not the number of parents in the household, or their gender, for that matter. Still, we persist in seeing single-mom families as wanting, two-mom families as unnatural, and both as threatening to a boy's masculinity. Instead of looking at those unconventional families that are succeeding, we focus on the stereotypes of the man-hating lesbian and the overburdened, stressed-out, isolated single mother who's incompetent and neglectful.

For as long as any of us can remember, parenting theory and popular culture have promoted the notion that Mommy and Daddy—the traditional family unit—produce the best sons. That message has become louder in recent years. In 1992, President George H. Bush announced that children “should have the benefit of being born into families with a mother and father,” citing the number and the gender of parents and their biological bond as central to optimal family life. And his son has supported a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage and thus protect the hallowed nuclear family. Whether conservative politicians and religious leaders like it or not, the family structure has changed—dramatically—and the Bush definition of family seems, well, less than definitive.

Across the country, a lightning bolt has split the trunk of the family tree, and it is growing in new and challenging directions.

Some have labeled this a family crisis, though as Laura Benkov, Ph.D., points out in her book *Reinventing the Family*, “A

careful look at other places and other times reveals [the nuclear family] to be but one of many possible human arrangements.” Further, according to historian Stephanie Coontz, “Families have always been in flux and often in crisis; they have never lived up to the nostalgic notions about ‘the way things used to be.’” We cannot roll back history, nor—once we tear away prevailing misconceptions about the American family—would we want to. So get ready for a little myth-bashing reality check.

Myth #1: Families of the past didn’t have problems like families do today. The reality is that desertion, child abuse, spousal battering, and alcohol or drug addiction have always troubled a significant number of families. Many of those perky housewives from 50 years ago depended on mother’s little helper (tranquilizers, mood enhancers, and alcohol) to see them through their mind-numbing days. In other words, the good old days weren’t what they are cracked up to be.

Myth #2: The 1950s male-breadwinner family is and always has been the only traditional family structure in America. Families have regularly been torn apart and reassembled throughout human history. Not until the 1920s did the majority of children in this country live in a home where the husband was the breadwinner, the wife was a full-time homemaker, and the kids could go to school instead of working for their wages.

Myth #3: The sexual revolution of the 1960s caused the rise in unwed motherhood. The reality is that the sharpest increase in unwed motherhood occurred when it tripled between 1940 and 1958. During the Great Depression, abandonment rates rose, with husbands leaving their wives

(and children if they had them). Out-of-wedlock sex shot up during World War II. And below the surface, the underpinnings of traditional marital stability continued to erode. After this shift, nontraditional families (including divorced families, stepfamilies, single parents, gay and lesbian families, lone householders, and unmarried cohabiting couples) would never again be such a minor part of the family terrain that we could count on marriage alone as our main institution for caring for dependents.

While women's out-of-wedlock sex and the breakdown of the nuclear family are issues for politicians who see it as the root to society's ills, women—whether in lesbian relationships, widowed, divorced, or as single mothers by choice—are transforming the way we think about unwed mothers. In my neighborhood and neighborhoods all across this country, single mothers and mothers in pairs are at the forefront of what it means to re-create the new American family. They are a galvanizing force in American society as our nation struggles to accommodate a broader and more useful—yet no less loving—definition of family.

Myth #4: Children of divorced or unwed mothers are sure to fail. The reality is that it's how a family acts, not the way it's made up, that determines whether the children succeed or fail. The number of times you eat dinner with your kids is a better guide to how well they'll turn out than the number or gender of the parents at the dinner table. Marriage is no longer the gold standard when it comes to being a good parent. Though residual condemnation still hits here and there, Dr. Benkov points out that raising children without being married has “emerged as a potentially positive decision, not an unwanted circumstance.”

We all can understand the appeal of a perfect mom-and-dad family. But we have to wonder, how many children and parents in this country actually live there?

Diversity is taking over America. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2000 only 23.5 percent of households in the United States contained families with a married mom and dad and their children. The percentage of all households that were unmarried in 1950 was 22 percent; in 2000 that number had reached 48 percent. Figures released from the 2000 census show that mothers raising sons (and daughters) alone or in pairs in this new world are just as prevalent as the 1950s Donna Reed mom-and-dad version. The number of families headed by single mothers increased 25 percent between 1990 and 2000, to more than 7.5 million households.

This new breed of mothers without fathers is likely to be financially secure, straight or gay, and of any age and any race. The median age for unmarried mothers is late twenties, and the fastest-growing category is White women. Whether these women are divorced or never married, mothering singly and in pairs has not only entered the popular culture and become acceptable; it also is now considered chic. High-profile moms like Angelina Jolie, Isabella Rossellini, Wendy Wasserstein, Camryn Manheim, and Diane Keaton are parenting sons and daughters without husbands, and lesbian moms such as comedian Rosie O'Donnell and singer Melissa Etheridge are coming out with their partners and are mothering together. Few of these women have men as full-time parenting partners. Yet despite their deviation from what's been deemed a "normal" family pattern, the media routinely refer to their motherhood in a positive light.

“We’ve finally stopped falling for the great palace lie that such a person [the normal mother] exists,” writes Anne Lamott in the foreword to *Mothers Who Think*. “Somewhere along the way, we figured out that normal is a setting on the dryer.”

THE TARNISHED GOLD STANDARD

Conservative critics tell us that family life is on the verge of being atomized, that our children are corrupted, that our moral codes are crushed. As we all know, there’s a serious movement to define legal marriage as the union of one man and one woman, the conservative ideal for marriage—and for family making. Many in the so-called marriage movement (and, I would argue, in the clinical research field as well) take a pessimistic view of children raised by parents who are not a traditionally married couple. The mom-and-dad family may have its problems, conservative advocates of family values agree, but they pronounce the presence of a strong male family figure to be vital to a child’s development.

Marriage proponents, however, ignore the dark side of matrimony. While overall both adults and children get a host of benefits from good marriages, the situation for kids in bad marriages is quite the opposite. Married couples in conflict don’t always provide what’s best for their children. Further, according to Philip Cowan, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, the way husbands and wives treat each other has as much impact on their children’s academic confidence, social adjustment, and behavior problems in school as the way the parents treat the children. A high-conflict marriage or a marriage that isn’t working can negatively affect children in a way that might never happen in a single-mom family.

In addition, social scientists have confused family structure with economic factors that can influence behavior and performance. Researchers who analyze the data of boys having problems, for example, see that a large percentage of these kids come from single-mother homes and assume that mothers' single status has caused their boys to fail. Think back to the days when mothers were blamed for their children's having illnesses they didn't cause. I believe the same thing is happening with single moms and two-mom households: They're blaming the mom instead of the economic situation of the family. A study by researchers at Cornell University found that single mothering did not automatically spell trouble in school for elementary-age sons. How much schooling the mother received and her abilities had the biggest influence on her children's school performance—not the fact that the boys were without fathers.

Similarly, it had been assumed that boys from divorced families had more problems than children of two-parent, mom-and-dad families, until a 2000 study reported by the New York University Child Study Center discovered that the same boys had been demonstrating behavioral problems even prior to the divorce. When the researchers controlled for earlier behavior problems, the differences between boys from intact families and from divorced families were significantly reduced. The researchers concluded that to blame the boys' difficulties after the divorce on the actual divorce or separation limited the scope of understanding. The likely turmoil that preceded the split had to be considered a contributing factor to any problems observed in the boys after the divorce.

So now we have seen a series of bad raps against mothers. I would say that ever since Eve, women have been blamed for the evils of the world (and she gave Adam the apple even before the children were born!). The mother is labeled overprotective when she worries about her children, negligent if she doesn't worry;

smothering or bossy if she engages in her children's lives, selfish or icy if she doesn't; overly self-involved if she pursues a career or holds down a job, overly involved with her kids if she doesn't. She can't seem to get it right, and if anything goes wrong with the children, it's her fault.

SNAP JUDGMENTS

If you think that's a problem, consider how much more severe the judgment is on single or lesbian mothers. Because the economics have not been factored into the difficulties single mothers face, many people assume that single mothers are bound to have trouble raising their sons. And the prejudice against lesbians carries over into the expectation that they can't raise healthy sons. These are the biggest myths of all.

In my research, which I describe in the next chapter, I have found there is absolutely no reason to expect that single or gay moms cannot raise sons on their own. These maverick moms and their families are living their lives with an everyday consciousness of the problems they and their sons face. They are not ideologues working out a theory about different ways to parent in our culture. They are real mothers raising real boys, boys who should not be marginalized in the least. These boys may not live with biological fathers, but they are in no way illegitimate. The families their moms have created are as real and as legitimate as any other, and have much to teach everybody who cares about children.

We simply need to be ready to learn. Nicole Sands mothered her partner Michelle's sons Connor, then 15, and Adam, 18, ever since they became a family 13 years before. She remembered a time when Connor, then in first grade, came home in tears but wasn't able to tell Nicole what the problem was. Later in the evening, when Connor had apparently forgotten his distress, Nicole received

a phone call from another parent in the class who explained the mystery.

“Connor had been asked to draw a picture,” Nicole recalled. “They were making number books, with a drawing on each page representing a number. For page three, the teacher asked them to draw their family, their two parents and themselves. Three. So Connor drew me, his mom Michelle, and himself. When he showed it to his teacher, she said, ‘That’s not what I mean. Everybody has one mother and one father. Give me that picture. Do it again.’ The other children in the class protested that the picture really did represent Connor’s family, but the teacher wouldn’t listen. So Connor cried.”

The children understood what so many do not, that Connor’s family was every bit as valid as a mother-father family. “We had a judge in family court tell us that the boys have a right to spend time with a real family, meaning their biological father and his wife, even though they had moved out of the country and lived abroad,” Nicole told me. But *their* real family—Nicole, her partner, and their two sons—was already firmly established. “We’re the ones who are there. I think the time you spend with the boys is hugely important in being a good parent. Just being around. Those drives to and from school are great opportunities for talking about stuff.”

That these two women are doing a fine job raising their sons to be thoughtful, responsible adults is not in doubt. “We were on the streetcar, going downtown to look at something at the Museum of Modern Art,” Nicole recalled. “It was a little crowded. Michelle and I were in one of those front rows right by the little booth where the driver sits. The glass in front of us was reflective enough so we could see our teenage sons a couple of seats behind us. She and I were talking. We came to a stop, the door opened, and two older women got on. I saw the boys in the glass, and without saying a

word to each other or looking to us for guidance or anything, they just both got up and immediately gave their seats to these two older women. I looked at Michelle, and we could tell that we were both thinking how proud we were of those two boys.”

WHEN RAISING BOYS, MAVERICK MOMS:

- ⊗ Reject social judgments about their family structure, and in the process model strength, character, and conviction to their sons.
- ⊗ Recognize that how much time they spend—and how they interact—with their kids matters much more than whether they’re single, married, straight, or gay.
- ⊗ Realize that their sons’ family priorities include eating dinner together, spending more time together, and having their parents watch them play sports.
- ⊗ Know that their personal achievements—from schooling to the workplace—will help rather than hinder their sons.
- ⊗ Take an active, considered stance when it comes to mothering their sons. Mothers who have thought ahead about being a mother, and who line up one or several other mothers as a support system, are way ahead of the game.