

KATIE ROIPHE

## In Defense of Single Motherhood

How do we define the ideal family? And should we even try? In an era where families come in all shapes and sizes, it may be time, writes Katie Roiphe, to set aside our long-standing, and largely fruitless, search for the ideal. Katie Roiphe is a journalist and the author of several books, including *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (1993) and *Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century's End* (1997). This essay appeared in the *New York Times* in 2012.

**I**N A SEASON OF ARDENT PARTISAN CLASHING, AMERICANS SEEM united in at least one shared idea: Single mothers are bad. A Pew Research Center poll on family structures reports that nearly 7 in 10 Americans think single mothers are a “bad thing for society.”

Conservatives obsess over moral decline, and liberals worry extravagantly—and one could argue condescendingly—about children, but all exhibit a fundamental lack of imagination about what family can be—and perhaps more pressingly—what family is: we now live in a country in which 53 percent of the babies born to women under 30 are born to unmarried mothers.

I happen to have two children with two different fathers, neither of whom I live with, and both of whom we are close to. I am lucky enough to be living in financially stable, relatively privileged circumstances, and to have had the education that allows me to do so. I am not the “typical” single mother, but then there is no typical single mother any more than there is a typical mother. It is, in fact, our fantasies and crude stereotypes of this “typical single mother” that get in the way of a more rational, open-minded understanding of the variety and richness of different kinds of families.

The structure of my household is messy, bohemian, warm. If there is anything that currently oppresses the children, it is the idea of the way families are “supposed to be,” an idea pushed—in picture books and classrooms and in adults’ casual conversation—on American children at a very early age and with surprising aggressiveness.

At 2, my son, Leo, started to call his sister’s father, Harry, “my Harry.” When he glimpsed Harry’s chocolate-brown 1980s car coming down our block he would say,

“My Harry’s car!” To me this unorthodox use of “my” gets at the spirit of what we’re doing: inventing a family from scratch. There are no words for what Harry is to him, but he is definitely his Harry.

The other day Leo brushed his mop of blond hair in front of the mirror and announced, “Now I look like Harry.” People are quick to tell me that this is not the real thing. But is it necessarily worse than “the real thing”? Is the physical presence of a man in the home truly as transfiguring, magical, and unadulteratedly essential as people seem to think? One could argue that a well-loved child is a well-loved child.

To support the basic notion that single mothers are irresponsible and dangerous to the general order of things, people often refer vaguely to “studies.” I am not a huge believer in studies because they tend to collapse the complexities and nuance of actual lived experience and because people lie to themselves and others. (One of these studies, for instance, in order to measure emotional distress asks teenagers to record how many times in a week “you felt lonely.” Is there a teenager on earth who is a reliable narrator of her inner life? Can anyone of any age quantify how many times in a week they have felt lonely?) But since these studies provide fodder for those who want to blast single mothers, it’s worth addressing what they actually say.

Studies like those done by the Princeton sociologist Sara S. McLanahan, who is one of the foremost authorities on single motherhood and its impact on children, show that conditions like poverty and instability, which frequently accompany single-mother households, increase the chances that the children involved will experience alcoholism, mental illness, academic failure, and other troubles. But there is no conclusive evidence that, absent those conditions, the pure, pared-down state of single motherhood is itself dangerous to children.

Professor McLanahan’s studies over the years, and many others like them, show that the primary risks associated with single motherhood arise from financial insecurity. They also offer evidence that, to a lesser extent, particular romantic patterns of the mother—namely introducing lots of boyfriends into children’s lives—contribute to the risk. What the studies don’t show is that longing for a married father at the breakfast table injures children.

And Professor McLanahan’s findings suggest that a two-parent, financially stable home with stress and conflict would be more destructive to children than a one-parent, financially stable home without stress and conflict.

There is no doubt, however, that single motherhood can be more difficult than other kinds of motherhood. In France, the response to the added difficulty is to give single mothers preferential access to excellent day care. Here the response is moralism disguised as concern and, at other times, simply moralism.

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The idea of "single mothers" may itself be the convenient fiction of a fundamentally conservative society. In fact women move in and out of singleness, married parents break apart, men and women live together without marrying, spouses or partners die, romantic attachments form and dissolve. Those who brandish research like Professor McLanahan's ongoing Fragile Families study and Paul R. Amato's 2005 paper on changing family structures to critique "single mothers" conveniently ignore the fact that such investigations rely on shifting, differing, and extremely complex definitions of the households involved.

What gets lost in the moralizing conversation is that there is a huge, immeasurable variety in households, and there are great ones and terrible ones, arduous ones and inventive ones, drab ones and exuberant ones, among families of all structures and economic strata.

It's useful and humbling to remember that no family structure guarantees happiness or ensures misery: real life is wilier and more fraught with accident and luck than that. If you think that being married ensures a good life for your children you need only enter a bookstore and open any novel, or go to the theater and watch practically any play, or have dinner with nearly anyone you know. Suffering is everywhere, and married parents, even happily married parents, raise screwed-up or alcoholic or lost children, just as single parents raise strong, healthy ones. What matters most, it should go without saying, is the kind of parent you are, not whom you sleep with, and even that matters only up to a point.

With the steep rise of children born to unmarried parents, America's prevailing fantasies of family life no longer match the facts on the ground. But as the children born to unmarried women under 30 come of age in the majority, these faded archetypes will have to evolve. Our narrow, constricting, airless sense of the isolated nuclear family has not always, if we are honest, served us well, and it may now be replaced by something more vivid and dynamic, and closer to the way we are actually living.

All of the liberal concern about single motherhood might more usefully be channeled into protecting single mothers, rather than the elaborate clucking and exquisite condescension that get us nowhere. Attention should be paid to the serious underlying economic inequities, without the colorful surface distraction of concerned or judgmental prurience. Let's abandon the fundamentally frothy question of who is wearing a ring. Young men need jobs so they can pay child support and contribute more meaningfully to the households they are living in. The real menace to America's children is not single mothers, or unmarried or gay parents, but an economy that stokes an unconscionable divide between the rich and the not rich.

#### DISCUSSION

1. Take a moment to consider the phrase "single mother." What image does it evoke for you? What type of person, what set of social circumstances, what issues or problems do we typically associate with "single motherhood"? In your view, are the ways this term gets scripted accurate? Fair? Why or why not?
2. "The idea of 'single mothers,'" Roiphe posits, "may itself be the convenient fiction of a fundamentally conservative society" (p. 60). What do you make of this hypothesis? Is single motherhood a "convenient fiction"? Convenient for whom? Fictional how? Do you agree that our ideas about single motherhood reflect an underlying social conservatism? Why or why not?
3. For Roiphe, the most important questions raised by the phenomenon of single parenting are economic: "The real menace to America's children is not single mothers, or unmarried or gay parents, but an economy that stokes an unconscionable divide between the rich and the not rich" (p. 60). To what extent does the "divide between the rich and the not rich" affect the roles and relationships that define the family?

#### WRITING

4. As she acknowledges, Roiphe's conception of the ideal family is quite different from the standards scripted by the dominant culture. "The structure of my household," she declares, "is messy, bohemian, warm" (p. 58). Use Roiphe's characterization of her family as the starting point for creating your own definition of the ideal family. What does this family look like? What roles best define it? What social scripts does it reflect? What underlying norms does it represent? Then indicate the specific ways your model challenges or revises the roles, scripts, and norms that define the "typical" American family.
5. "It is, in fact," writes Roiphe, "our fantasies and crude stereotypes of this 'typical single mother' that get in the way of a more rational, open-minded understanding of the variety and richness of different kinds of families" (p. 58). In a longer essay of your own, address the claim Roiphe makes here. First, assess the way she characterizes the situation: Do you agree that our culture supplies us with "fantasies" and "crude stereotypes" about single mothers? How do such characterizations function as social scripts, teaching us to pass judgment on those in this category? Then respond to the central assertion Roiphe makes: Do you agree that cultural stereotypes "get in the way" of a more "open-minded understanding" of what family can be? How specifically? And what do you think should be done to remedy this situation?
6. From very different vantage points, Roiphe and Michael Eric Dyson (p. 52) each focus on the ways cultural stereotypes (whether about gender or race) shape broader public attitudes. Take a closer look at the argument each writer advances. What assumptions or ideas do they share? What are the key differences? On what specific points do their arguments about cultural stereotypes diverge?