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Everyday is Father's Day

Number of single-dad households soaring



'A JOY': Raymond Flannagan, of Washington, D.C., says caring for daughters Cerzell and Trina, right, forced him to quit working. Life can be difficult, but at least I can be there for them.

By Walter Calahan



By Steven M. Falk

COVER STORY

Parenting turns men's lives on end

By Marilyn Elias
USA TODAY



FAMILY: Dr. Stephen Mandy, of Aspen, Colo., and daughter Ashley

William Van Wert has three sons under 5 years old when his wife left the family.

He was sure of only one thing: "There was no way I could do a good job with them."

"I thought they couldn't be normal, they wouldn't like women and they'd have to go through therapy to figure out how damaged they were."

By now, however, those doubts have faded and Sunday will be a happy Father's Day.

A single father raising his children was unusual when Van Wert, a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, faced that prospect in 1980.

But between 1985 and 1989 alone, the number of single father-headed homes soared from 1.3 million to 1.8 million, three times the rate of female-headed families, new Census

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Some see custody 'backlash'

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data show. Dads now head 21% of single-parent households. Fueling the trend, say experts:

- Judges' willingness to award custody to men.
- Mothers bowing out after divorce in favor of careers.

"The economics that drive it are very compelling," says Yale University child psychiatrist Kyle Pruett. "As more and more American children sink into poverty, it's hard for judges to turn away fathers who can provide better."

According to the Census data, single mothers have an average \$13,100 annual income vs. \$29,000 for single dads.

But money doesn't shield fathers from the shell shock of being the primary parent. They discover, as single moms know, that being a single parent can wreak havoc on their lives.

Van Wert says the woman upstairs took care of his sons while he taught film and creative writing. Two boys were still in diapers and getting up during the night, so he sleep-walked through the weeks.

"I thought, 'I'll never have a normal social life again. I'm going to die doing this,'" says Van Wert.

Aspen, Colo., dermatologist Stephen Mandy has cared for 8-year-old Ashley since she was 2: "For quite a while, the only time off I had when I wasn't working, I was nursemaid."

Parenthood prompts about 3 out of 4 single fathers to make changes at work, says Geoffrey Greif, who surveyed 2,273 of them for his book, *The Daddy Track and The Single Father* (Lexington Books).

Most common are shortened hours and curtailed travel.

For Raymond Flannagan of Washington, D.C., it even meant losing a job.

Getting daughter Trina off to school often made him late to work, and he was eventually fired from his job as an audio visual equipment service technician. "The major reason was lateness," says Flannagan, whose first wife died.

For a while, he did process-serving, which provided more flexible hours. But when a second marriage ended in divorce and Flannagan got custody of infant Cerzell, too, he says, the care needed by both girls forced him to quit work.

Now the family lives in public housing in an area he considers unsafe. "But at least I can be there for them — they do have that," he says.

A single dad's social life often takes a back seat to parenting.

Mandy says his social life "went to hell in a bucket."

Van Wert remembers falling asleep at the movies on a date. Sick kids sometimes killed romantic evenings.

So it takes the average single dad three years to have his first "meaningful" relationship, Greif found.

But for many, a playboy lifestyle is out of the question.

"I don't want Ashley to wake up and find women in my bedroom. ... I don't even bring anybody home unless they're really special," says Mandy, who is divorced.

Despite the hassles, four years after gaining custody 72% of men surveyed by Greif say the rewards of getting closer to their children often outweigh problems.

"For the most part, it's been a joy," says Flannagan. "You watch them develop and think, 'I helped make them that way.' ... Trina (now 9) is such a caring girl, and she's done very well in school."

The evidence so far suggests that children raised by men fare no worse — and no better — than those raised by women, says psychologist Richard Warshak.

His book, *The Custody Revolution: The Father Factor and the Motherhood Mystique* (Poseidon Press), due in September, summarizes new findings on custody and mental health.

He's found frequent access to their mothers and lack of hostility between parents lead to better adjustment for the kids.

Some studies find that boys do better with dads than do girls. But this doesn't mean men can't raise mentally healthy females, Warshak says. In adolescence, it may be important to provide good female role models — just as single moms are urged to cultivate adult male friends for their sons.

But not everyone agrees that single fatherhood is all good news. "The 'new age' man just isn't that common, and kids need a lot of nurturing," says Philadelphia psychotherapist Jon Benjamin Franklin. "I've heard single fathers say, 'I had no idea what a huge job it was.' We can learn, we're not brain dead. But it does go against the grain of how men are raised."

Feminist psychologist Phyllis Chesler says the new trend is a disaster for women and children.

"Judges are giving kids to sex abusers now. They even give the men breast-feeding infants — and do it in such a vicious