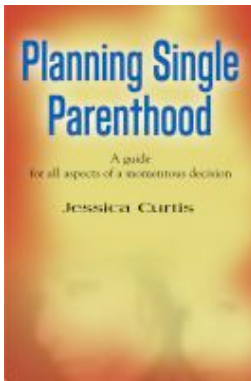


Planning Single Parenthood

A guide
for all aspects of a momentous decision

Jessica Curtis



Making the decision to bear - or adopt - and raise children alone is a step that increasing numbers of women, especially career women over thirty, are deciding is right for them. This trailblazing guide provides women the information they need to take a responsible choice and, if the decision is affirmative, to prepare for a happy and secure future for themselves and their children.

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Jessica Curtis

Planning Single Parenthood

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First Edition

Preface

This book was written close to 30 years ago when I was participating in a support group for single women who were contemplating or had chosen to bear a child without a husband. We called ourselves "single mothers by choice," and eventually the group incorporated with the name Single Mothers by Choice Incorporated. In this book I often refer to the group by the acronym "SMC" and to the women as "SMCs."

A compulsive note taker, I had a fair amount of material after a few years of attending meetings. What to do with it? Together with Jane Mattes, the group's founder, and several other early members, I produced this book as a reflection of what we learned and a resource for others contemplating single parenthood. However, nothing in this book can be taken as speaking for the non-profit Single Mothers by Choice Inc.

At the time we were writing, single motherhood (as opposed to single parenthood or fatherhood) appeared to be the issue because women were just realizing that a child born "out of wedlock" was unlikely to suffer much social stigma because of the lack of a father (an increasingly common experience, if not commonly a planned one), and that a single mother could support and raise a child by herself. Nowadays the emphasis on "motherhood" seems less appropriate, so a book originally called "Single Mother by Choice" I have renamed "Planning Single Parenthood." The reader must translate from "motherhood" to "parenthood" as appropriate for him/herself.

A single parent by choice is a woman (or man) who decided to have a child knowing that, at least at the outset, s/he would be the child's sole parent.

Another book, "Single Mothers by Choice" by Jane Mattes, L.C.S.W., SMC's founder (Three Rivers Press, 1994, 1997) reflects somewhat more recent discussions in the support group and a more complete history of SMC together with Jane's comments based on her experience and background as a psychotherapist.

This is the original book and the stories herein are a product of realizations new to many of us at the time. All names have been changed and no story is identifiable. In addition, the events described happened

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many years ago and the children brought into the world or adopted by members of the original group have grown to adulthood and moved on by now.

Participating in the original group were many different kinds of people from many different walks of life. Typically, we were career women in our thirties or forties. The ticking of our biological clocks had made us face the fact that we could no longer wait for the right man to appear if we wanted to have our own children. We decided to start building our families.

Some of us experienced an accidental pregnancy, only to discover we were thrilled. Some of us intentionally conceived with a man. Others went to a doctor for artificial insemination or found a child we could adopt.

Most of us would rather bring a child into a good marriage. However, one has a lifetime to make a marriage, but nature is not so generous in allotting childbearing years. Single parenthood is for the person who thinks a child would be an important addition to her/his life, and who has adequate emotional and financial resources to support her/himself and the child.

The New York chapter of Single Mothers by Choice (SMC) began in 1981. An article appeared in the New York Daily News describing the experience of Jane Mattes, a psychotherapist who had chosen to become a single mother. A number of other women thinking about the issue contacted her through the newspaper and were invited to a first meeting.

As of this writing SMC has evolved from a simple support group into a nonprofit corporation with a growing active membership and an informative website, www.singlemothersbychoice.org. SMC aims at mostly professional women who are single parents, contemplating conceiving or adopting; little special attention is given men or gay couples or collective households of more than two adults.

Single men raising children are becoming more common, though it is hard to determine how many of the male heads of households with children are single by choice or fathers by choice. Many are gay, and due to marriage discrimination may be inaccurately represented in statistics. However, tales are emerging of men who, like SMCs, find they are getting older and the focus of their attention is shifting from finding a partner to

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creating a family. The TV series "The New Normal" (NBC September 10, 2012 to April 2, 2013) explores some of these issues for men.

This book represents single mothering/parenting 30 years ago, but it may be useful to those who are confronting the issues it addresses. At the same time, the question of what is parenting has become very complex: surrogacy, adoption, step-parenting, custody issues are all in flux. A second edition, including the reports of children raised by SMCs, is contemplated.

Nothing in this book should be taken as representing the nonprofit corporation Single Mothers by Choice Inc. Visit the excellent website www.singlemothersbychoice.org for further information about the organization and for many good ideas and a blog about the experiences of current members. You can reach SMC at the following (current) address: Single Mothers by Choice Box 7788 FDR Station New York, N.Y. 10150 (212) 988-0993

As the website reflects, in general SMCs feel that it is better for a child to be raised in a good marriage than by one parent. However, in the absence of a good marriage, the divorce rate being what it is, SMCs feel we can provide stability and a good image of men by bearing or adopting children who will not be traumatized by divorce or poor relationships. Most SMCs are well-established professional women, able to support a child without recourse to public funds.

The word "choice" in SMC's title has two implications: a serious and thoughtful decision in taking on the responsibility of raising a child by ourselves, and the decision to have our child without waiting for a permanent relationship.

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Introduction

Here you are, a single woman, mooning about babies, gazing with envy into every carriage on the street. Maybe you're in your mid thirties and have realized that you don't have much time left, that the decision to have a child has to be made now or it will no longer be an option. Maybe you finally realized that Mr. Right wasn't going to appear in time, and you want to stop waiting and get on with your own life. Or perhaps you were watching a TV program about adoption and found yourself in tears, and that's when you discovered you wanted a child. And what of marriage? Is it too late to find someone before you're too old to have a child?

Women are postponing marriage in increasing numbers. The Census Bureau reports that 22 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine in 1981 had never married, double the percentage in 1970. For persons thirty to thirty-four years old in 1981, one out of ten women and one out of six men had yet to marry. There has been a significant increase in the median age for a first marriage, which reflects the tendency to postpone or to forego marriage, most likely in favor of continuing education and pursuing career opportunities.

A professional or businesswoman may have put her full energy and attention into her work, thereby achieving a measure of success and satisfaction, and then suddenly realized at age thirty-five that she has not put together the marriage and children that she also wants. She had felt until now that there would be plenty of time for children. When in her late thirties she becomes interested in a committed relationship, she may not soon be able to find one. With the time pressure of her age, she may decide to go ahead with having a child, because that can't wait, and then continue her search for a mate.

Some women are disillusioned about marriage, either because their parents had a difficult one or because they've been married in the past and find it hard to believe that "marriage is forever." Such a woman may start her family independent of a relationship.

Whatever your story, you're probably fascinated by other people's children. You're realizing that your assumption that you would have kids "someday" is being translated into, "I want a child now." You are not alone in your preoccupation.

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An increasing number of single women are having the same thought. There are over 5 million unmarried (divorced, separated or never-married) women aged thirty to forty-four in the United States today. Nearly all of these women will at some point confront the fact that they cannot wait forever to have a child (or another child) and will consider whether they want to have a child by themselves. By the age of forty, nearly all women have made a conscious choice about this important part of their lives; even if they get pregnant by accident they will have the self-possession to make a choice whether or not to carry and keep the child. If they do bear and raise children, they are single mothers by choice.

How does a single woman reach a decision to have a child on her own? In a collection of essays called *Why Children?*, one woman writes, "In the back of my mind, there was the feeling that no matter how well I performed in other ways, if I didn't have a child there would be a part of life that I could never experience or really understand; and I wanted to. I wanted to feel the bonding that everyone talks about that takes place between a mother and child - the maternal instinct, if you like. I wanted to be pregnant. I wanted my own baby. I suppose, too, that like a lot of people, I wanted to leave something of myself behind. Maybe I decided yes because now, unlike before, I felt more secure about myself as a person, more on top of things. Whatever the reason, I was ready."

Only in the past few years have a large number of women reasonably entertained such an idea. The labels "out of wedlock," "illegitimate," even "fallen woman" have only recently lost impact - but they have lost impact. Now unmarried women are intentionally conceiving and bearing children, a course of action that would have meant disaster for them only fifteen or twenty years ago. More and more women are making decisions about reproduction independent of families, of social dictates, and of men, not only by use of abortion and contraception but by bearing children in their own time and in their own way.

Is the mother-and-children family unnatural or emotionally incomplete? Anthropological research indicates it is not. When we consider all of human evolution rather than just the recent period of written history, the mother-child family unit is the norm rather than the exception. Marriage as we know it is a comparatively recent invention.

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On the other hand, women with children in or out of marriage have seldom been as isolated as they are in Western society today. Until very recently, mother and children were firmly embedded in a number of supportive concentric social circles. Very few women maintained a household by themselves; not only were husbands present, but so were in-laws, parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, servants and guests, all under the same roof or immediately adjacent. Then there was the more extended family nearby, and the entire village or town, all of whom knew not only one's face but one's intimate business as well. "Alone" has never been so nearly absolute as it is today.

If you are single and are considering having a child on your own, you are part of a growing trend in America. The 1980 census showed there were nearly 7 million single-parent families in the United States, about one in five of all families with children. Nearly two million children were living with a never-married mother in 1980, two and a half times as many as in 1970. In 1960, 5 percent of births were out-of-wedlock, in 1980, over 18 percent, and in 1984, fully one-third of all births were out-of-wedlock. White women accounted for the entire increase; the rate for black out-of-wedlock births decreased slightly. Unmarried women over the age of thirty gave birth to 31,500 children in 1970 and 57,100 children in 1980, an 81 percent increase.

A woman thirty or more years of age might get pregnant unintentionally, but just about all such women are able to make a choice about whether to have a child and to get help if they don't want to have one. Some of them bear the child because they are opposed to abortion, but we can presume that the overwhelming majority of these women are single mothers by choice.

Of course, women who make the decision to have children on their own do so individually, not because there is a trend. But it is easy to see that sprinkled among our friends and acquaintances are others who are making similar decisions. Many feel that they are all alone, that no one else would undertake so difficult and unusual an enterprise. Sharing experiences and support in such a situation is a great relief.

What is an SMC?

When SMCs get together they often feel a rush of recognition and delight in the company of other like persons, similar to the rush we may have felt in our first consciousness-raising group. As we continue together, many of us find good friends in the group and feel that we all have a lot in common, not just our situations but interests and personalities as well.

Perhaps single motherhood is not what we have in common, but rather what we have in common is making us become single mothers. After all, most women don't do what we're doing.

Why are we single? The typical complaint is that there just aren't any good men around anymore. But many of us are starting to suspect that our own feelings and behavior have a lot to do with why we remain single. Some of us are surrounded by nice, eligible men who would like to marry us, but we don't follow through with it. Some find that we get involved only with unavailable men, often men married to someone else and intending to stay that way. Some of us avoid relationships altogether and may be recognizing an element of fear in that consistent avoidance. And some of us repeatedly enter relationships with immature or destructive people, or bring out such behavior by what we do ourselves. We may turn to psychotherapy, but treatment takes time we can't afford at thirty-five. One mother said, "We put the onus on the man but we have to look at what we do that triggers their walking over us or leaving us."

The women who attend our group do seem different from other women. Most of us seem to be articulate, assertive, unusually able to identify and take care of our own needs. One woman said at a meeting, "If I was with a group of women in management, or in the male-dominated field I work in, I would not get the same impression of power as I do here. This kind of assertiveness seems especially noticeable in SMCs." "It's woman-identity. I find that assertiveness among my feminist friends," said another. Others called it "inner-direction" and "an independent personality."

Cafeteria-Style Relationships

Intimacy means the acceptance of the whole person, faults and all, and working out problems within a relationship rather than constantly leaving relationships in search of the perfect partner. We SMCs are not

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alone in finding intimacy difficult to achieve. Modern life affords myriad opportunities to taste only selected aspects of many different experiences and persons. If you only see people at work, you avoid learning about their many other sides, just as you would if you never saw them at work. You might enjoy someone's company at a movie but not find him so enthralling for a whole weekend, let alone months and years of companionship. When you can meet your immediate needs in this episodic way, and perhaps if you've been hurt in relationships or find them difficult to form, you may not develop an intimate relationship.

Keeping our lovers, our jobs, and our children and home lives in discrete packages fits well with a new trend in Western or, more accurately, post-industrialist society. Rather than finding one situation to meet all our needs, we are finding many involvements that are not necessarily connected to each other. We are going from a global situation, such as a family farm in which we lived together, raised kids together, slept, worked, had our fun and our future and spent our whole lives and interests with one small group of people, to what I call cafeteria-style relationships. Now we may live with a roommate, see a lover, work at a job, go to the movies, eat, go to yoga classes and teach French at night, each with a different set of people, none of whom may know each other at all. It's as if we push our personal tray down the counter and take dessert, salad, beverage, vegetables, meat, each from a different section of the counter according to our own preferences and pay for ourselves, as opposed to the old-style common meal provided, cooked and enjoyed by all together. Aside from keeping us very busy rushing from one activity to another, this scatteredness prevents us from investing heavily in any one area of endeavor or group of people. In attempting to fill the voids in our emotional lives by getting out and becoming involved, we're preventing ourselves from making the deep commitments that can mean real satisfaction.

So perhaps we SMCs are simply part of this trend in the way we conceive a child with one person, look to another for sexual interest and perhaps a third to provide a male role model for the child. Fourth and fifth roles can be filled by our friends and our roommates, who can demonstrate negotiation of day-to-day life decisions. Then we also have work (while our child goes to school or daycare, where we are strangers),

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perhaps a political or volunteer involvement, our own families, and our various friends and acquaintances. We have a multiplicity of relationships, none of which is global in the old sense. Each represents connection with only part of another person for discrete periods of time. We have little sense of community and poor opportunities for intimacy. The prospect of a child may hold out an expectation of intimacy largely missing from the rest of our lives.

Considerations

Does motherhood seem like an impossible dream, or a road much too rough to travel alone? This book will help you to decide if single parenthood is for you, and, if you decide to go ahead, will help you make the experience as pleasurable and successful as possible for both you and your child.

In this book, we will examine the decision to have a child and the subsequent life of the single mother by choice. It is important to look at ourselves before we have a child, so as to notice our feelings and deal with them before problems develop. We will look at why we wanted to have a child. The decision can be agonizing, or can be simply something you discover after you make it. You need to be certain that children are right for you, and satisfied that what you do will be fair to the child.

Marriage has traditionally provided financial security and emotional support for a mother but these days only half of all marriages are successful. The majority of American children today will live in single-parent households for at least part of their lives. And having a single mother should not prevent our children, male or female, from developing positive attitudes toward men. You can bear and support a child by yourself in an enjoyable, responsible and secure way without entering a traditional marriage at all.

Advance planning is a major key. You must prepare for a number of challenges. Money, work and career, friends and family, life-style, and your age are all issues with which you must come to terms. Raising a child is a very expensive proposition, especially if you want to provide the best care, not just survival. A child will interrupt the progress of your career because your attention just isn't on work the way it was, and you're not nearly as flexible in terms of overtime and special efforts. Your social

network will change drastically, no matter how much your friends assure you they will stay with you and no matter how bored you may have been by the conversation of mothers before you had a child of your own. Your life-style will change drastically as well, losing spontaneity and time for yourself and gaining stability and home centeredness.

SMCs tend to be older in part because it often takes a long time to gain the emotional independence and financial resources to make this plan work well. There are pros and cons to being an older mother: you are a better mother, because you have maturity and wisdom far beyond what you had at nineteen or even twenty-five, but the entire process, from pregnancy through toting a toddler around, is harder on you physically.

A final issue revolves about knowing how to be a mother and how to care for a child. Many of us lack childcare experience, though others may have cared for nieces and nephews or the children of friends. Some of us have even babysat for a living or worked in daycare centers, so we're better prepared. Learning the basics of childcare may be an important item on your agenda.

The next step is getting pregnant or starting the adoption process. But often there is a long delay at this point. Many women wait for years while the plan to have a child simmers in the back of their minds. You may not be emotionally ready right away, you may want to get farther in your career or change jobs, you may want to save money or buy a house. Or you may be hoping to find the right man, and only when you are faced by what Gail Sheehy calls the "deadline decade" do you take action.

Once you have made the decision and are ready to take that fateful step, conceiving, you are faced with another problem. If you are not in a relationship, have no current lover, or don't want your lover to be the father, how do you become a mother? There are many options, from artificial insemination (AI) to adoption, and they all have their advantages and disadvantages.

The next issue, how to deal with the absence of a father, does not come up for children until their toddler years, but you must decide how you're going to handle it when it does. Can you picture explaining to your child how he or she was conceived? Are you comfortable with that explanation? Your answers to these questions will be crucial when you choose how to get pregnant or adopt.

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Once you have made your decision, completed your preparation and chosen your method for getting pregnant or for adopting, you may face an unexpected problem. Ironically, after all those years of being careful to avoid pregnancy, perhaps even having had an abortion, you may discover that conception is not so easy. Infertility may be a problem, especially for the woman past thirty-five, whom the medical profession calls the "elderly" mother.

Other questions for the older parent revolve around the risk of bearing an abnormal child, whether to undergo genetic testing procedures, and what to do if the test shows an abnormal fetus.

At about five months into your pregnancy, after you've gotten the results of your tests and decided whether to carry the child, you will begin to look pregnant. You'll have gotten past the stage of morning sickness, which might have interfered with your job and normal routine at a time when you were not ready to tell anyone about your expectant state. But you'll be facing pregnancy alone, without a protector, in what may be the most vulnerable period of your life. You may worry that people will disparage or hound you as an "unwed mother." Even when your belly is out to here and you can hardly get your breath, you'll have to carry the groceries upstairs, move furniture, drive for yourself.

Birth itself, the culmination of your long wait for a child, may be anxiety-producing for anyone, but especially for a woman without the traditional supports. With advance planning, you can ensure that the birth experience will be as good as possible for both you and your baby, and you can certainly arrange not to be alone for the momentous event of birth. You can mobilize your family and friends, choose a special person to be your labor coach, and, early in your pregnancy, locate the best birth setting available. You can use the last few months preparing yourself and your home, emotionally and materially, for the real confinement, your first weeks at home with your newborn.

Newborns are demanding, and they restrict a mother's life in ways difficult to imagine. These first few months can be the loneliest period for a single mother. You should prepare your nest in advance, and ask your family and friends to be extra-supportive for a few weeks, not just days. Remember, if your needs are not met you will have very little to give your child.

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Sooner or later you will face the decision of when to go back to work. Guilt feelings about leaving their babies are a major issue for mothers who work. But you intend to support your children yourself, and that almost always means leaving them in the care of others. Who will care for your child(ren) while you work and play? Clearly this is not an issue only for single mothers, though it is more crucial for SMCs and requires very good planning. Poverty in households headed by single women is increasing in the United States; it is more than three times the rate of poverty of husband-wife households. In Europe, where national policy avoids punishing children economically for lacking a father, single mothers are adequately supported for at least a year. In our country, Aid to Dependent Children (welfare) is not generous. If you can find adequate housing and are a very disciplined and inventive cook and housekeeper it is possible to live in some comfort on public assistance. Nevertheless, your child will probably face deprivations and poor housing as well as social discrimination. And it will be very difficult for you. If you think you are likely to be financially very hard pressed when you have your child, we suggest that you do some better career and financial planning, or even forego the child for now. Neither you nor your child need to carry a double burden of poverty and no father. Don't forget, children grow up! Newborns do become toddlers, school-age and teen-age children.

Once your child begins to talk and to notice how peers live, you are faced with a new set of issues. How can you find male companionship and appropriate role models for them? And what do you tell them about the father? What to say to the child about "daddy" is the question that arises most often among mothers contemplating single parenthood, and it is one of the trickiest to answer.

The most important skill you need to develop is to learn how to mobilize resources and support systems for yourself and your child. Available resources include child development centers for learning about normal growth and behavior, counseling, career advice, financial help, and daycare. Support systems range from groups such as Single Mothers by Choice to family members who babysit or take your child for a weekend, to sympathetic friends.

If you decide to become a single mother, you undertake a difficult but important task, that of contributing to a new generation of human beings.

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Our children are important not only to ourselves, but to everyone, because they embody the future. For the same reason that we need to be responsible in our parenting, we should demand or create for ourselves the best support possible. A mothers' group is only one example of how this can be done.

This book was not written with the intention of advocating that any woman have a child alone, but rather with the intention of helping you make an informed decision, and if you decide to have a child, helping you mobilize resources in yourself and others to ensure that both you and your child will have the best future possible.

Chapter 1: Why?

Why would a woman choose to have a child alone? This chapter discusses a number of questions: why are you alone now when you want to have a child? Why have a child instead of becoming a renowned surgeon or a bank president (are there some opportunity costs)? Is an SMC a responsible parent? Is fatherlessness harmful to children? And what are the joys of being a parent that make it all worthwhile?

Why Alone?

Historically, the stereotype of a single mother has been that of a forlorn waif, a divorced, widowed, or abandoned wife, or a young girl who "got caught." We still have dismal images of grief and loss, of a marriage gone sour, of wife beating and alcoholism. Only such tragedies would separate a woman from the man she depends on and leave her to struggle alone with her children. We are told that the woman-and-child family is incomplete and undesirable. Is it a family at all?

Why is it that we single mothers by choice are not paralyzed by visions such as this one, which, in the past, have made wanting to have a child alone almost unimaginable!

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape, and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate," usually in poverty, always outside the law. In some cultures she faces murder by her kinsmen. Whatever her choice, her body has undergone irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event.

Not long ago, this scenario, described by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, was the inescapable lot of the unwed mother. Now, at least in urban areas of the United States, most women can ignore these attitudes in others when they meet them. It's harder when your immediate family

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feels that unwed pregnancy is worse than death, but you will not find such attitudes prevalent these days.

At one meeting of Single Mothers by Choice, we talked about our feelings about being single mothers. We were sure we wanted to do it, but ambivalent at the same time. Most of the ambivalent feelings centered around the question of whether fatherlessness is fair to the child, not whether it is acceptable to have a baby out of wedlock (social stigma is virtually absent nowadays), or whether the mother would prefer to have a husband to meet her own needs (that would be nice, if it were available).

The uncertainty and guilt a mother may feel about the fatherlessness of her child may push her to look for a man, even if having a child and not marriage is her priority right now. In effect, she'll be grabbing eligible men, even ones she can see aren't right for her, to quickly establish a relationship of sorts so she can have a child before her time runs out. This is bound to be a difficult way to start a marriage. Many decide that it is better to wait, have the child, and then, when they're ready, turn their attention back to the search for a mate.

New Autonomy

Following technological and economic changes, the social perception of women has evolved. Reliable contraception, generally higher levels of education, entry into better-paying jobs and professions, and the women's movement have pushed these reforms forward. Yet only recently have women been building their own nests and pursuing careers as a first priority.

Now, women are marrying later and having children later. Recent real-estate surveys show that a sizable portion of all suburban homes are bought by singles, not to mention the high proportion of urban singles living alone.

Once you accept your independence and self-reliance, you can ignore convention in many ways, among them having a child on your own. A woman who sees herself as a whole being does not need either a man or a child to be complete. Instead, man and child are extra persons with whom to share love and growth: she is not dependent upon them.

Being Single

In the course of discussions in our SMC group about why we are single, we found some patterns. Generally, members of our group felt that being in a good marriage would be better than being a single mother, but that being in a less-than-wonderful one would be worse. However, very few marriages are wonderful. Perhaps our standards are unrealistically high. On the other hand, many of us have been married in the past and we all have observed many marriages of friends, parents, relatives. Perhaps we've become so knowledgeable about what can be bad in a marriage that we foresee problems where a more naive person might not.

Several of us simply don't want to be married at all. When we discussed our relationships with men at the SMC meetings, we found that many of our reasons for not wanting marriage had to do with our intense desire for independence, one of the hallmark characteristics of single mothers by choice.

Popular wisdom might have it that our fathers were abusive or distant and that we therefore cannot relate to men. However, among SMCs, relationships with fathers followed no pattern. We seem more motivated to be unlike our mothers. Relationships with our fathers did not seem to be the relevant issue.

Several of us have had bad relationships with our fathers, either because they were abusive (in some cases sexually) or because they were too distant to allow a close relationship with anyone. This may not be different from the background of a married woman, but we react differently. One woman said, "My father was too much a macho man and my mother lived to serve him. We kids were happy, so I always believed this is the way a marriage had to be. But it's contrary to my personality. Possibly in the back of my mind I knew that the traditional marriage would have been a problem."

Few of us were raised to dominate the marital relationship. When we took a straw poll at a 1984 meeting on the question of which parent dominated, about half said the mother dominated and about half the father. But when we changed the question to, "Who were you more afraid of being yelled at by?", the overwhelming majority said Dad.

Some of us got along very well with our fathers but had difficult relationships with our mothers. One woman's father practically raised her

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unaided because her mother was chronically ill. She is very close with him and always was. He pushed her academically, she says, and "he knew so little about girls that he didn't know I wasn't supposed to be smart." She feels very lucky to have such a father.

Several of us noticed a pattern to our relationships with men even before we began thinking about children. One group member says, "I always picked men who were unavailable. They were usually married, or had told me they didn't want to get married. When it seemed I was to have my child alone, I wanted to know why. I went into therapy for a while, but partly because of my age I decided to go ahead with having a child and to practice what I learned about improving my relationships with men later."

"I've had one ten-year relationship, with someone who did not want to get married," another single mother says. "I push men away who are serious," admits another.

A schoolteacher says, "I always went out with traditional men who would have supported me, but I was never ready. My last relationship ended a year ago; we're still friends."

Another mother reminisces, "I got tired of being a strong, successful woman, but I picked men who needed that. I went out with young, "hot" men, ten to fifteen years younger than myself; I was "going out with my baby." I looked at men for their bodies and minds, not their income levels. I would never have married any of them."

Many of us are "too smart" to marry; what we think of as enlightened self-interest makes us shy away from marriage. Those of us who grew up in traditional marriages are often the most reluctant to replicate such an experience in our own lives.

Have our role models been happy ones? We reject what in *Of Woman Born* Adrienne Rich calls "marriage as economic dependence, as the guarantee to a man of 'his' children ... the token nature of fatherhood, which gives a man rights and privileges over children toward whom he assumes minimal responsibility ... the burden of emotional work born; by women in the family ..."

On the other hand, some of us may be consciously or unconsciously trying to duplicate the traditional marriage in a social and economic milieu where it couldn't possibly work. We seek the freedom and control of the

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modern woman and yet we want the sense of protection a traditional husband provides.

Just because we have not found our ideal mates does not mean we are disparaging the institution of marriage. We hope to find ways to resolve the conflict between the search for freedom and the longing for protection.

Those of us who demand a lot of participation in parenting and a lot of flexibility in roles from a man we might marry may find such men to be few and mostly already committed, but they do exist. For instance, in James Levine's book *Who Will Raise the Children?* we can meet quite a few men whose commitment to children and family was so strong that they restructured their jobs and home schedules to allow them to participate fully in family life. Several of them had to push their wives to change!

Many of us are as wary of emotional dependence as economic dependence. In *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, Collette Dowling points out many of the pitfalls we wish to avoid. Dowling says that she found her first marriage to be stifling her independence and her creative talent. For years after her divorce, she supported her three children and managed the many roles of the single parent quite adequately. Then she married Lowell.

Without my being aware of it on a conscious level, my idea of myself had shifted drastically. So had my expectations of Lowell. In my mind he had become the provider. Me? I was resting up from those years of having struggled, half against my will, to be responsible for myself. What liberated woman would ever have imagined this? The moment the opportunity to lean on someone presented itself I stopped moving forward-came, in fact, to a dead halt.

Echoing the thoughts of at least a few of us in the group who have been married ourselves or have observed excessive dependency in mothers or friends, she says,

Married, I hadn't had the strength to fight off those overwhelming dependency needs; alone, I was forced to. In a way,

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the instinct was correct. Although the underlying dependency was still there, lying dormant beneath the frantic struggle of my life as a single woman, at least I wasn't acting on it all the time, reinforcing my helplessness with every passing day as I had done when I was a wife.

Collette Dowling describes the magic transformation that occurs when a heretofore independent, coping woman marries: she suddenly becomes a completely helpless, passive entity virtually unable to get dressed in the morning without her husband's direction. Not only does this feel terrible to the woman, it transforms her into a person completely different from the one her husband married, and, needless to say, he'll react, too. An SMC group member says, "Many women start a relationship dependent, then as it grows they become more confident and independent. I'm the opposite. I start out very independent and then as it gets more intense, I am very anxious and want to be told that the person loves me all the time." And another woman said, "When I become involved with a man I get very wimpy all of a sudden. My mother was a straight A student at a fancy college, married my father and never went out again. She had eight children. She was dominated by my father. I found myself repeating that pattern and I don't want it."

SMCs are not willing to be in the one-down relationship with a man. Being cared for, taken care of, feels bad to us-it's threatening. "I give away my boundaries. I'm afraid of losing myself." Perhaps we overcompensate for our dependency needs by apparent independence.

When we think about or face marriage, many of us feel overwhelming anxiety. "My marriage won't succeed. I wouldn't be able to hold onto a man forever and forever," said Ella, who had never been married. Said Marjorie, "I'm certain a marriage won't last. I demand a lot of guarantees beforehand that no one could realistically give me." Several of us report that we always find unavailable men. "You can't be vulnerable or rejected in that situation because you know when you start that it can't work." The Behavior column in *Time* magazine of June 4, 1984, discussed female masochism. Many women are trained to convert anger into hurt so as to be taken care of. They then hurt themselves in the belief that it will ward off a worse fate, "like a wolf bearing its throat to a more powerful

aggressor." Masochistic women may be showing a very low tolerance for ambiguity; it may be easier to suffer a sure injury than to experience uncertainty. Are we avoiding ambiguity by avoiding relationships?

Another way to avoid uncertainty is to stay in control all the time. One of the characteristics of adult men we dislike is their independence. "With a child you don't have to go back and forth so much about who is in charge. With a man you may go back and forth several times even in an hour."

"A lot of our relationships have difficulty because of how strong and assertive we are. At the same time we have a lot of feelings of being doormats. What is actually overcompensation for our own weakness they [men] experience as control.

"In every way except possibly financially, living with an unsupportive husband can make childbearing and child rearing harder than it is alone. Many women in traditional marriages both work and raise the children, anyway. Their husbands may help pay the bills, but they take very little part in the day-to-day lives of their children. Adding an unsupportive husband may just complicate the mothering job by adding another demanding relationship. "It's like having two children at once," one mother said.

In addition there may be a sense of disappointment in such a marriage. Women today expect more of men, especially when they work themselves. And now women have less need for the "provider" role of the father. Most members of our group are well-established in fields that they enjoy, and they are used to the independence and responsibility that go with such jobs.

Part of our problem is that we are generally well-established professionals with better-than-average education and income, who are used to relying on ourselves. Women traditionally marry "up" in terms of age and status and maturity, which often go with age. Thus the higher-status, better-established men have a wide choice of women, and most of those men are married. This coupling pattern leaves the less successful males and the more successful females single.

In an article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Second Stage*, writes,

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Much is being said among American women today about the strange dearth of vital men.

I go into a town to lecture, and I hear about all the wonderful, dynamic women who have emerged in every field in that town. But, frequently, whatever the age of the woman, she says, "There don't seem to be any men. The men seem so dull and gray now. They're dreary, they're flat, they complain, they're tired." And, if they're my age, they're dead.

Numbers are also against us. When you look at unmarried- single, widowed or divorced-persons age thirty and over in the United States, there are 2 unmarried women for each man. For the ages thirty-five to forty-four into which most SMCs fall, there are 1.3 unmarried women for each unmarried man. (The difference between the two figures is due to the overwhelming number of unmarried older women.) In addition, many more single men than women are gay, and many older unmarried men are seeking much younger women.

If an unmarried woman is trying to "marry up," she faces an even stronger disproportion. There are nearly two unmarried women age thirty to thirty-four for each unmarried man age thirty-five to thirty-nine. Paul Secord and Marcia Guttentag, in *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question*, suggest that the disproportionate supply of unmarried women has many consequences for social mores and structure, among them feminism and sexual licentiousness.

If an unmarried woman can think of marrying down in terms of age, the ratios are reversed, 1.7 unmarried men for each unmarried woman. A younger man might also be less established in his career than the woman, or might have less education and income as well, if only because he's younger. Perhaps a woman who is accustomed to running her own life and career and taking full responsibility for herself is in a better position to consider being the senior partner in a relationship. Marrying a man five years younger will also considerably reduce the period a woman can expect to be alone at the end of her life. Of course, we must still convince men that older women make good partners. There may be a biological imperative that encourages men to seek only women of childbearing age. Or perhaps this is another instance of the lag of men's liberation behind

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that of women. Why should they not be able to relax in the protective arms of a wiser, richer and more mature partner? Or do we want it all—protection and autonomy both? We discuss in the introduction the typical personality of an SMC; here is an incentive to put that personality to work to find innovative solutions to our problems.

Most of us began our adventure of having a child by ourselves because we wanted to keep our independence and because we were unwilling to settle for a less-than-wonderful man. Now that we have the child, we still needn't rush into a relationship. We can await the right man to settle down with, or we can quite successfully pursue our lives without such a commitment.

Why a Child?

Almost all of the members of Single Mothers by Choice have good careers, careers we enjoy. Despite the "supermom" myth, we can see that we may sacrifice advancement at work and relationships with lovers and friends in order to devote ourselves to our children.

Building the Brooklyn Bridge, or saving a neighborhood, or saving people's lives as an emergency medical technician can all be intense, fulfilling occupations. A woman who was director of an adoption agency said, "I have a dog, and the children, and that's enough." She was fulfilled in her contribution to humanity.

So why a child? Why is bearing and raising a child so important to us?

The Physiological Desire

In Adrienne Rich's view, the very existence of children is a continuous assault on their mothers. In *Of Woman Born* she tries to find out why women have them and what exactly is the hold they have on their mothers. Why do women put up with such mistreatment and frustration? Rich writes,

To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness. But also, it can mean the experiencing of one's own body and emotions in a powerful way. We experience not only physical, fleshly changes but the feeling of a change in character.

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We learn, often through painful self-discipline and self-cauterization those qualities which are supposed to be "innate" in us: patience, self-sacrifice, and the willingness to repeat endlessly the small, routine chores of socializing a human being. We are also, often to our amazement, flooded with feelings both of love and violence intenser and fiercer than any we had ever known.

A woman who was considering having her own child said that a woman is not using all her "parts" if she does not have a child. A man, she thinks, uses all his physical capabilities at least to some extent through work and sex. A woman, however, will not have used her womb and breasts unless she bears a child, and will not have used her capacity to nurture fully unless she rears one.

In *Why Children*, a writer tells us,

I want to have a child.

I don't need to have a child to please a husband or cement a marriage. I have no husband; there is no marriage. I don't need to have a child to give my life a purpose. It is already filled with purposeful activity: work, politics, friends.

My family has no expectations of me as a mother-person.

My friends do not expect me to confirm dubious notions of womanliness by childbearing. On the contrary, I see their picture of me much more clearly as a childless woman, an attentive midwife at the birth of books.

The choice to have a child is mine alone. The luxury to have a child to please only myself is real. The privilege is mine; the work will be mine; the support-financial and physical-will be mine. I hope others will love my child and the more complicated person that I will become. But in the dark of night and in the light of day, it will be up to me. And why not? I want to be filled to the limits with pregnancy. I want to stretch myself with motherhood beyond any proscribed group of activities which the world might call enough. I do not want to choose between work, lovers, a child. I want everything.

Participation in the Future

Children are hostages to the future. They are a kind of continuity that makes us care a lot more about what our world is like and how it will be. They give us a kind of immortality, through our genes but also through our works, in that what kind of job we do in raising them will determine what kind of people they become. They give us participation in the future of humanity as we give them roots in its past.

An Intense, Intimate Relationship

Intimacy is a big problem for many of us. Intimacy involves accepting the whole person, faults and all (not necessarily liking everything they do). It means not solving your problems with the person by leaving them, but working out the problems or accepting the relationship with the problems intact. It's easier to have longstanding friendships than long-standing relationships because when you get tired of a friend's behavior you can always make an excuse and go home, but you can't do that so easily with someone who is living with you. "I've had close friendships for twenty years," says Olga. "But I have not been able to transfer that closeness to relationships with men."

Human beings need emotional involvement. We need to take the risk of forming intense bonds with someone. A child can be a natural partner in such a relationship. Children reach and stir us at our core. Sometimes we can have a much more intense, intimate relationship with children than with men, if only because we can't solve our problems by leaving each other; we have to work them out some way.

These days there's something to be said for a companion who you know is going to be around for twenty years, especially if it's someone you can be reasonably sure you will like most of the time. Not too long ago we felt that a marriage meant a commitment of a least that length of time, but now with so many marriages breaking up, we can no longer count on satisfying our need for a long-term relationship through a husband. Relationships with other adults often seem ephemeral, of short duration, and unreliable.

Members of our group are without husbands or current live-in lovers, the usual source of intimacy offered to women. Often we feel the lack of intense involvement in another person. We want someone to whom it will

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matter whether or not we get up in the morning. And reciprocally, we want someone to care about.

Some of us are "homebodies," family-centered at heart. We are unhappy returning alone every night to an empty apartment. We do not want to have to go out to meet our most basic need for companionship. In this age of pared-down and fractured families, we may feel at a loss. Is our only alternative marriage and a nuclear family? These days families take many forms, from the single person living alone to communes. We and our children can make our own nest and our own family to come home to. The women's liberation movement has had a profound effect on us. We demand equality, communication, growth in our relationships with men. And we are suspicious of our own desires to give unstintingly of ourselves to a loved one. The women's movement seems to be telling us, "Devoting yourself to a child is okay, but nowadays giving yourself to a man creates conflicts."

We don't compromise easily. We want our own way. "I find compromise with a man is hard. I feel it would be giving up my freedom. I don't mind giving up freedom for a child. But I don't want to give up spontaneity to feed a man what he wants for dinner, for example."

"In a marriage, you have to have a partnership, where you share responsibilities. One very seldom lives with a friend. Negotiation and compromise are essential to a marriage, whereas with friends you each go your own way."

Yet we have the same needs for intimacy and family as anyone else. We haven't managed to put it together with a man, but we can still have the family. We have all the same reasons to have a child that a married couple does.

Is intimacy easier with a child than an adult? "As our children grow up they may become more and more like the people [men] we avoid," said one mother. Another rejoined, "Hopefully, you've already instilled your values into the child. It's easier to compromise with your own child."

One might make the argument that it's more "natural" for a woman to have an intense relationship with her children than it is to have one with a man. Anthropologist Evelyn Reed's *Women's Evolution* is a thorough and detailed cross-cultural study of the development of the family. She points out that the patriarchal family is a recent invention, only

four to six thousand years old. It was brought about by the introduction of the concept of private property; when men had something to exchange, they began purchasing rights in their wives' children from the wives' families, and eventually purchased the wives themselves.

Before the patriarchal family, Reed says, a much longer evolution occurred from mother-horde, the first social organization, to the matrifamily. Women were the producers of life's necessities (food, shelter, tools) as well as producers of children, life's continuity. Throughout this long period, loyalties were always to the mother and the maternal clan. The child's male relatives were the mother's brothers, the grandmother's brothers, the child's own brothers. Physical paternity was unprovable until historical times.

Clearly in our day and society a good marriage is better than single parenthood, both for mother and child. Nevertheless we can appreciate that the patriarchal family, which has dominated only during the period of written history, is not the only alternative. We can see that there is some precedent for the mother-and-child as the basic unit of society, rather than husband-and-wife. We can question whether we are necessarily harming our children through simply remaining single; we are not denying them any male contact or teaching them to dislike men. Perhaps with the disintegration of the patriarchal family we are simply returning to an earlier form of the family. We may move back toward what we think of as the traditional family in the future or we may move in some as-yet-unforeseen new direction.

In the current period of social upheaval, many of us think it is a "better bet" to invest in children than in marriage. Many marriages do last for decades and provide intense and meaningful relationships for both partners. But many more are short-lived; currently one half of all marriages fail. From 1970 to 1981, the number of two-parent families declined by 606,000, while the number of one-parent families increased by 3.4 million.

In our post-industrialist society we have far fewer long-standing and caring relationships of any kind than ever before. The extended family - parents, children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living in the same community - is fast disappearing. Relationships at work or work itself seldom fill these needs. We are entering an era of the "atomized" society,

one in which units are reduced to their minimum size and maximum mobility. It's as if we took a hunk of ice in one shape, composed of many molecules in a secure, solid matrix, then melted and vaporized it, destroying the matrix and putting each molecule into independent motion. Then we might freeze it into another shape. In terms of our family ties we are entering the vapor state now, awaiting new social bonds and a new social framework.

A Child No One Can Take Away

We can find kids to spend time with. Several members of our group have established relationships with other people's children. "I get along really well with other people's kids," said one member, "and I like spending time with them. One of my neighbors, who is rather overloaded, regularly sends her young daughter down to me in the mornings before school for a couple of hours, and we are great friends. More than that, I want to be involved in the girl's life."

Relationships like these are not formal social structures nor are they recognized by most people as important, but their disruption can be traumatic. A woman may feel that she wants a child no one can take away.

Carmen had been married before and adopted a child with her husband. A few weeks before the court date to legalize the adoption, her husband moved in with someone else, and the agency took the child back. She says, "As you can imagine, it would be very difficult for me to adopt again or do foster care. I couldn't give my love to a child that could be taken away like that by a bureaucracy or institution."

Hers was not the only such story. "I got very attached to my brother's kids," said another woman, "but my sister-in-law decided I was a witch or something, and she removed them from me. I cried a lot."

"I was a godmother twice, then the mother suddenly wouldn't let me see the children any more."

"I was a big sister, but the child moved away."

"I lived with someone who had custody of two kids. I loved being a stepmother. But the relationship broke up."

"I was married to a man who was a weekend father. He died and now the mother does not want me to see the kids. I want a child no one can take away like that."

Someone To Take Care Of

Some of us love to give care. We want to be in the "mother" role in a way that others may recoil from. We want to make a nest for someone, to be the mother hen. We enjoy what may seem to some like one-way giving. We get our rewards from making our surrounding creatures glow.

It is certainly possible to sublimate, or substitute objects for this kind of attention. We might care for an ailing relative, pour our energy into our business, care for our boss at work, or adopt cats or plants as objects for our ministrations. But if we can have a child, why substitute? All those other things can get done, too, if we really want them.

Roots, Stability

We want to have someone to whom we matter, someone for whose sake to settle down, put down roots. As one mother said "How many times can you go to Club Med? There's got to be more to life than that." Another woman was looking for a centered feeling, a sense that she had a place and a purpose. Many of us feel unable to invest in a career or a home, unable to stay in one place long enough to accumulate experience. We are always looking for a better place, a better environment, a better job. One woman has been doing temp word processing for ten years. She is very good at it and can command a good hourly wage, but she is still doing temp work when other women have worked up to management or found some other rewarding, interesting niche for themselves. She feels sure that if there were someone to do it for, she would overcome her inability to commit herself to a job and a home. She would grow up.

Settling down certainly has its costs, too. Single and childless women have flexibility not only in what they do for the weekend but in changing their whole life plan. If you have no one to consider but yourself, you can respond freely to a new opportunity. You can drop a career and go back to school, or join the Peace Corps or take a trip around the world. Or you can put all your energy into a job; you can get ahead by working extra hours without distraction. Such freedom allows personal and professional growth, and fun. But for many of the mothers in our group, self-development and new experiences are not enough, and they have not adopted their business or other involvement as their main creative enterprise. A mother of triplets says in *Why Children*,

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I guess I've lost a bit of freedom. But freedom is a funny thing. It hasn't always made me happy to be able to do exactly what I want, when I want. In my amazingly irresponsible youth I used not to appreciate that freedom. I used to worry about silly things like the way I looked, the number of men who fancied me, whether I would do well in exams, things that now have proved to be of absolutely no importance.

We want to see a long-range product of our efforts. For some this satisfaction can be achieved through dedication to a career or to good works, but children too can be a commitment we want to make for the long haul.

Someone You Like To Share With

Who better to plan on sharing some of life's special moments with than your child? You can pass on your love of nature by taking the child for hikes and camping trips, nature walks and excursions to the botanical garden. You can indulge your love of sports by playing soccer or canoeing with your child. You can instill your love of reading by reading to your child, and later share your appreciation for great books. If only because they form a context for giving attention and spending time together, you are likely to pass along your passions, to form the child into a person who likes what you like, or at least appreciates what turns you on. Whatever you do while giving your child attention is likely to be associated with joy for the child. If you spend long weekends building things out of wood or tubing down the Esopus River or sewing clothes with your child, your child will not only develop competence but a warm feeling about these activities.

Of course, this influence sometimes has the opposite effect. Your child may develop as passionate a hatred of model trains as you have a passionate love. No child can be forced to develop interests, but your child's tastes will probably be similar to yours, just because that is what he or she is accustomed to at home.

We Want To Improve on the Child Rearing We Received and on What We See Around Us

Several of us in the mothers' group are critical of the way we were raised. A few of us were abused or neglected as children. We feel proud of our adjustments to life now. Often those adjustments are the product of years of self-study, either on our own or with the help of some kind of therapy. We recognize how intense the identification between parent and child can be. As an added benefit to motherhood, we can use our identification with our children to help us understand our own early lives.

"My mother wasn't able to be a very good mother," Ellen says. "She was seldom home and passed the responsibility for raising me on to a succession of housekeepers. I'm redoing through Sam what she could not do for me. And because she's involved with us, my mother is helping me see what I got and what was missing and is discussing my childhood with me. But she is also competing with me for the title of 'best mother.' "

Angela had a difficult childhood. Her father deserted her mother when she was pregnant with Angela. In those days, almost forty years ago, there was no affordable day care. Angela's mother had to work. So Angela spent a year with her grandmother in another state, than three years with a foster mother, where her mother visited her once a week. She returned to her own mother at age four and one-half.

Each home had different ways of doing things, making it hard for Angela to gain a sense of mastery in the world. But most crucially, Angela's attachment to her mother or mother-substitute was severed three times during her early childhood. When she thought about having her own child, Angela wanted to see how she might have turned out under different circumstances. What if she had had a constant mother? For Angela, constancy was what she wanted to give her daughter most. And she feels wonderful when Abbie pats her on the knee and says to her friends, "My mommy." Angela does feel that the fundamental anxieties stemming from her own childhood are calmed when Abbie's needs are met.

Jeanne is a public health nurse who visited many poor young mothers as part of her job. Recognizing that she was dealing with a particularly troubled population, she was nonetheless horrified at the lack of a future for the children of these mothers. Because of their environment, many of these babies were destined to lives of frustration and failure, and perhaps

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they would express their justifiable anger in destructive ways. She could have devoted her life to working with disadvantaged children, and that might have been the more laudable endeavor. However, she faced a very hostile reaction from the mothers when she tried to intervene, and she found herself longing to take those babies home with her. So she began thinking about having her own child, a child who would have what those babies lacked.

Virginia is a teacher. She found herself thinking, as she counseled parents, that she wanted to put her "good advice" to the test. She had many ideas about how to improve on the child rearing she saw around her and wanted to apply them to her own child.

Ariel, who does individual counseling, has become very aware of how "mistakes" in child rearing can have far-reaching consequences. "Because of my background," she says, "I know so much about what not to do! I wanted to produce a superchild, though I recognize that it's not fair to my son."

CAN WE DO A BETTER JOB?

What makes us think we can do well at such a difficult and complex task as raising a child when we are so critical of the job many other people have done? And what makes us think that we can do a wonderful job alone, when so many couples have found difficulties? Perhaps we're a bit arrogant. It does take self-confidence to consciously plan to take responsibility for the entire life and development of another human being. Are we just feeding our own egos? Are we having children to satisfy our own needs at the child's expense? Are we likely to do a good job?

What is "a good job" of parenting? We need to be financially able to support a child. We must be able to understand and meet a child's emotional and developmental needs. And we must be able to love the child. As a general rule, members of our group are able to meet these three criteria well.

We are teachers, lawyers, nurses, social workers, legal secretaries, psychotherapists, fashion models, government executives, day care workers, saleswomen and doctors. One of us inherited wealth. Two are on welfare, largely as a result of poor financial planning, but have work they

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can return to. We are better educated than most Americans. We can offer superior resources to our children, not only directly through our work and paychecks but also because we are better able than most to find out about and mobilize resources such as counseling, legal advice, private medical care, and general manipulation of "the system."

Our children are wanted and planned for. Wanting your child is no guarantee against unrealistic expectations, such as thinking the child will be as cooperative and undemanding as a doll or look like Sophia Loren (or whoever you admire) the day she's born. But it does guard against that "I've been had" feeling that a person might get who didn't want the child. And planning for the child will help ensure adequate resources and guard against desperation and being overwhelmed with responsibility, which can lead to child abuse or long-lasting mental health problems for both mother and child. Thus in general, SMCs are comfortable and confident as mothers.

We are older than most women are when they first give birth. We have had time to face ourselves and to "get our heads straight" about a wide range of issues. We have had time to become established in careers and to have found life-styles to suit ourselves. We've had a chance to have our adventures, sow our wild oats. We know ourselves, so we have more to give in every relationship, and in this sense, too, we can offer superior resources. Speaking of women who made a smooth transition into motherhood, Jean Curtis says in her book *Working Mothers*:

Most of these women had worked long enough before they had children to establish their careers—at least to the point where they could resume them without much trouble. They had more professional self-confidence and enough experience with the working world to know how to prepare for it. Because they hadn't had their babies when they were right out of college, they usually planned them better. They first developed professional skills and professional status. Then they had a baby and stayed home for a couple of years before going back to work. Their professional experience prepared them for hiring help and for making mature judgments without a lot of conflict.

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Being older has put us under time pressure to decide whether to have a child and has made pregnancy somewhat more risky, but it also has given us the emotional maturity and self-confidence to make a sound decision, and to find the wherewithal to act on it.

Conflicts Among Our Commitments

Why is the issue of conflict between the three main endeavors of modern life—work, marriage and children—confined only to women? In *Who Will Raise the Children?*, James Levine details the way that sexism hurts men by depriving them of a close connection with their children. Increasingly, men are making the same sacrifices of career or marriage that women must make, to spend time raising their children.

Many single mothers point out that we are simply choosing a different compromise with "having it all" than others choose. "We talk about how hard it is to be a single mother," says one. "But what we are doing is really easier. You can't have quality time for all three, a marriage, children, and a career, too. So we're eliminating a lot of frustration and failure by having more realistic expectations of ourselves."

THE EFFECT OF FATHERLESSNESS ON CHILDREN

How will our children manage without fathers? Almost all the research on this question is contaminated by the effects of desertion and poverty, because until very recently most fatherless children were made so by divorce, desertion, or death, and even today most unwed mothers are poor to begin with. What little research we do have shows that in the absence of divorce and desertion, fatherlessness does not mean that a child will automatically have problems.

In his article in *Children Today* magazine, "Growing up a little faster: children in single-parent households," Robert S. Weiss (author of *Going It Alone*, an excellent book for the newly divorced), writes,

There are, of course, many ways in which the experience of growing up in a single-parent family can affect later functioning of children and adolescents. Those whose experience with children who have grown up in single-parent families comes primarily from

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working with those in trouble are likely to emphasize the pathogenic potential of the single-parent family. But for many children, both younger and older, the new demands on them for autonomy and responsibility may lead to growth. Although these youngsters may regret not having a more traditional family and a more carefree youth, they often respect themselves for having been able to respond to what they recognize as their family's genuine need for their contributions.

The single-parent family, insofar as it requires that the children within it behave responsibly, may, in this respect, be a better setting for growing up than the two-parent family.

Barbara Gold, a pediatrician with the Health Service Plan of Philadelphia and associate at Hahnemann Medical College, says in the article "What to Tell a Child About the Daddy She's Never Seen,"

The kids I see who are having trouble, are having trouble because their father died or walked out when the child was old enough to know, and the child feels abandoned.

I haven't seen kids who are having trouble dealing with the issue of a parent who's never been there. And it's not such an unusual situation anymore: so many kids are in single-parent families that I can't think of very many first- or second-grade children-which is when I'd expect them to start noticing these things-who don't know some families they can compare themselves to and say, "That kid doesn't have a father at home, either."

Now, obviously, the whole adoption experience has given us evidence that I'm being a little bit too rosy about the whole thing; kids do seem to have an underlying, tremendous need to know about their real roots. On the other hand, adoption has such an emotional charge to it-parents gave up a baby, and he or she doesn't have either real parent. That child has an even greater emotional need to know the biological parents.

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In fact, there is little discernible difference between the children of married parents and those of single parents. In a carefully controlled study, published in *Child Development*, Marsha Weinraub, Ph.D., and Barbara M. Wolf of Temple University found that while single mothers are more stressed than married ones,

When families were matched on a number of child, maternal and income variables, there were no significant differences observed in mother-child interactions in the two groups. The single parents fared no better or worse than their married counterparts in ability to exercise effective control, display of maternal nurturance, ease in communicating with their children or extent of child maturity demands. In addition, no differences were observed among children from single or married homes in compliance with these demands.... We cannot say that mother-child interactions in single-parent families are less optimal than those in two-parent families.

Weinraub's study compared fourteen single parents and one child each with fourteen married mothers. Among the single parents, seven would satisfy our definition of a single mother by choice, and seven were single as a result of divorce, but in all cases the father had been absent for at least two years. The only difference she found between the divorced single parents and the never-married mothers was that "never-married mothers were more nurturing toward their children than divorced mothers."

In a subsequent study with a larger sample, Weinraub and Wolfe found that children of single parents are not different from children of married parents in intelligence, readiness to learn, moodiness, or risk of having school problems. Single mothers saw their children as slightly more aggressive and their boys as less compliant with mothers' requests than did married mothers.

Weinraub concludes: "Despite increased pressures and reduced supports, single mothers were similar to married mothers in ability to handle their children. Given their age [median age 32], educational [average number of years in school: 16] and financial level [\$8,721 per

year per capita in the household], our sample of mothers may be considered unusual. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that with adequate financial resources, and with maturity, vocational competence and personal resourcefulness, single parents may be as successful in parenting as married parents, at least during the child's preschool years [the age of the children tested]." Weinraub does point out, however, that due to fewer supports, single mothers are more "at risk" than married ones.

Dr. Robert Weiss of Harvard Medical School's Department of Psychiatry cautions about not only the difficulty of doing research in this area but the difficulty of making conclusions from what we do find. In personal correspondence with the author, he wrote,

The situation of the child of a never-married mother is different from the situation of a child of divorce in several ways. There is a sequence of disturbing experiences common to children of divorce that children of never-married mothers will not have: living in a home in which parents are antagonists and witnessing the dissolution of that home; dealing with the departure from their everyday lives of one of their parents; dealing with parental visitation and custody arrangements and disarrangements; and, very likely, dealing with new figures in the parents' lives. Children of never-married women, although spared all this, will have their own problems, including the question of their fathers' identities and, if their fathers' identities are known (as they might not be if artificial insemination was used), the question of how they relate to their fathers.

It must be recognized that children of never-married women can be in quite different household situations. Some live with the mother and the mother's boyfriend, some with the mother and the mother's girlfriend, some with the mother and the mother's parents, some with the mother alone. Even though each of these arrangements has its own benefits and its own vulnerabilities, living alone with the never-married mother is quite distinct from the others in requiring children, often, to display high levels of responsibility for themselves.

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It should also be noted that most children of never-married mothers are only children. This too is apt to foster in the children a need for self-reliance. And should the mothers marry and have additional children, the children whom they were bringing up alone may experience loss of a special closeness to the mother even as they gain a new family.

The Joy of It: What Makes It All Worthwhile

So, now that we've looked at our motives in having children, are we happy with them once they're here? Overwhelmingly, we are. Yet it's very hard to put into words just why. The incidents mothers recount when asked this question are both profound and silly. For instance, when I asked Ellen to tell me an example of the joyful feeling she gets when she's with Sam, she said, "I have a number of quotes written down in my diary, things Sam said that just gave me a warm glow. Once when I was very tired he said, 'If I kiss your eyes will it help them stay open?' Once he said, 'I want to make you happy, Mommy, because you make me happy.'

It took him a long time to wean from bottles. We made a habit of leaving them in the house and not taking them out with us. One day we went out for a few hours. When we came back he saw the nipples and said, 'Why do you have those here, for when babies visit?' as if he hadn't been using them himself a couple of hours before. He asked me once where my husband was. I said that I wasn't married. He said, 'I'll be your husband.' I said, 'But I can't marry you,' and he said, 'That's all right, I'll marry you.' "

These quotes may not strike a responsive note in anyone who is not the child's mother, yet they are a key to a profound experience, and they remind the mother of the deep feelings she had at the time. Raising your child is a profoundly satisfying thing to do.

But it's not satisfying the way a nice vacation or writing a good report is or having fun at a party. It's a more profound nourishment, like food when you're hungry, sex when you're full of desire, or the rush of blood in your muscles when you've just finished a fast sprint. It's not a transient joy like a kiss, an intimate conversation with a friend, reaching a mountain peak after a hard climb. Perhaps it's more what the engineer Roebling might have felt looking at the Brooklyn Bridge at last completed after fourteen years of unremitting labor, or what a surgeon might feel about

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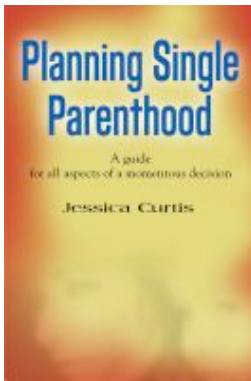
the skill he has sweated to acquire over decades that allows him to save a young person from a debilitating injury.

There is something wonderful about meeting the needs of another living creature. Our children show us daily that they need us. One mother says, "My child can't leave me and must love me. I can go to work, meet men, then come home and have these little hands come around me and this little voice say, 'Mommy. I love you.' "

Children are not jobs; they don't pay us money. They are not grateful, they never say thank-you (maybe they'll appreciate you a little when they're thirty years old, if you're lucky). Children are selfish, impulsive, often cruel and insensitive. They don't take care of us, they absorb care and attention like ever-dry sponges or bottomless pits. They are like a garden of flowers, which you care for endlessly in return for simple satisfaction of a job well done and enjoyment of the beauty of the garden itself. In *Children of the Dream*, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim writes,

The child also gives in a very different way from his parent. Essentially he gives to his parents through his steps in growth, through his social, intellectual, even his physical growth. He gives by proving them good parents. And he proves it by having a satisfying life of his own. He gives to his parents not so much by playing with them as by his learning to find enjoyment in play, most of all with his friends. He gives, in short, by the unfolding of his personality, by his coming to full flower on his own. This is obviously a very different giving than the parents' giving of dependent care.

If you want someone to care for you, don't have a child. But if you're ready to give care, love and nourishment in return for seeing your own child blossom and grow in his or her unique time and way, you're ready.



Making the decision to bear - or adopt - and raise children alone is a step that increasing numbers of women, especially career women over thirty, are deciding is right for them. This trailblazing guide provides women the information they need to take a responsible choice and, if the decision is affirmative, to prepare for a happy and secure future for themselves and their children.

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