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# Single Moms vs. Single Dads: Examining the Double Standards of Single Parenthood

While society's commitment to promoting equality for all parents is only getting stronger, social perceptions of single moms and single dads still vary greatly. Let's investigate the disparities and pinpoint how we can do better to support all solo parents.

By [Maressa Brown](#) | Published on November 25, 2019



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTINE MICHEL CARTER, DANIEL ORTEGA

We know all too well that while raising a child in a two-parent household is tough, raising a child solo is a whole different ballgame. And it's one that more and more parents are having to take on. Single-parent families have become increasingly common around the globe, according to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published in *The Lancet Public Health*. In the United States, the most recent census data found that while most sole-parent families with kids under 18 are overseen by a mother (8.5 million),

the OECD confirms that there is a large proportion of single fathers, 2.6 million to be exact, raising children here as well. While many studies on single parenthood focus on the health and wellbeing of single mothers, there is not much data out there to look to on single fathers.

The OECD report defines single parents as people living with at least one biological or adopted child and includes those who may have been divorced, separated, widowed, single, never married, or not living with a partner. As the number of single parents continues to grow in the U.S., we're fighting numerous battles to level the playing field for moms and dads. Everyone from influencers on social media to candidates running for president is pushing for policy and societal change that can support solo parent households. Yet, single mothers and single fathers continue to be held to different standards and face different expectations and pressures.

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## How We See Single Moms vs. Single Dads

"We consider childrearing to be largely women's domain in the U.S.," says Caitlyn Collins, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology at Washington University in St. Louis and author of *Making Motherhood Work*. "This is problematic for a host of reasons, but it means that society perceives single mothers and fathers differently."

This idealized view of motherhood has roots that are as old as time, but it bears looking at the concept of "intensive mothering," originally defined by Sharon Hays in her 1998 book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Intensive mothering is the "underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary caretaker and that the mother is the best person for the job," wrote Hays. Additionally, intensive mothering defines a "good" mother as one who devotes her full time, energy, and attention to her children, summarizes Dr. Collins.

This expectation causes single moms to be judged more harshly than single dads when things fall through the cracks like a forgotten homework assignment at school or being late to pick kids up from childcare, says Dr. Collins. "Because, again, women are supposed to be 'naturally' capable caregivers in a way we don't assume for men."

Jeffrey Gardere, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City and professor at Touro College of Osteopathic Medicine, adds that while women are expected to be perfect mothers no matter their circumstance, single dads are seen as less capable of parenting and

circumstance, single dads are seen as less capable of parenting and therefore called courageous or celebrated for taking on the primary parent role. "Single fathers are given much more sympathy, and they are cut more breaks when it comes to making parenting mistakes," he says.

This can be particularly problematic when looking at how custody is awarded in the U.S. "Because moms are assumed to be the 'better parent,' this often works against dads legally," Dr. Gardere points out.

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## The Single Mom Experience

Single mothers confirm they're facing these pressures and high expectations every day and are even shamed when their abilities don't match up to the ideal.

Sabrina Rickenbach, 40, a widowed mom of an 8-year-old daughter in Malvern, Pennsylvania, says she has seen firsthand that single moms are expected to be able to do it all—and then some. "Everything is up to me," says Rickenbach. "In terms of school, I am expected to be involved, but it is really hard to participate in any activities since I don't get a lot of help from anyone. It actually seems like everyone just expects me to be able to handle everything. I try my best to keep up, but there are days that I am just tired."

Then there's the fear for single moms that if they don't prove they can do it all and have it all together, they will be judged for it. "I feel that people assume I'm a hot mess all the time trying to go it alone," says Carolynne Harvey, 42, a New Jersey-based mom of a 7-year-old daughter. "I was at a school event, and I rushed in late, and one of the moms said, 'Wow, look who's making it all happen—surprised you even remembered!' Another time, I kindly shared a school picture reminder with another mom, and a bystander at school pickup said, 'Look at you reminding us! What are the odds?'"





Carolynne Harvey and her daughter. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CAROLYNNE HARVEY

Christine Michel Carter, 33, author of *Mom AF*, says the pressure for her to present as a perfect mom is even harder for her as a single black mom, since she says the stereotype makes her out to be "struggling, angry, unkempt, and depressed." While it feels to some single moms that society is just sitting and waiting for them to fail, Carter, mom of two, ages 8 and 4, says that if she doesn't make it to the after school activity because of work, she is likely going to be perceived as more negligent or less involved than other mothers, even other single mothers.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTINE MICHEL CARTER

"I have to prioritize my time with work and my two kids, since I am the only person handling, for example, emergency visits to the doctors followed by visits to the pharmacy," says Carter. "I'm definitely *not* staying for a Girl Scouts meeting when there are other mom leaders there or volunteering during my lunch hour."

# The Single Dad Experience

Daniel Ortega, a 34-year-old dad in Boston and founder of [Solo Parent Society](#), has sole custody of his three kids, aged 6, 5, and 3. He says that when he's out with his kids, it's not unusual for strangers to act surprised that he is parenting and say things like, "Mom have the day off?" or "Looks like you have your hands full!"

"I always feel compelled to tell them I am a single father, that I am doing it on my own," says Ortega. "My insecurity about it all made me feel like I had to explain myself. When they learn I was a single dad, that's when all the praise comes. 'Good for you!' 'I don't know any man who would do what you are doing.' 'Those kids are lucky.' I've never encountered a mom who received the same praise."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DANIEL ORTEGA

He agrees with Dr. Gardere that remarks like these stem from the "inept dad" stereotype. "Men are assumed to be buffoons who can't even dress a kid, while women are supposed to be the ones who can do it all for the kids," he says. That's likely why dads are praised when things go right and moms are shamed when they do not.

Ortega adds that he feels for the single mothers he knows. "If single moms have multiple children, they are asked if it's the same dad," says Ortega. "If the kids are misbehaving, it's because they are a terrible

Ortega. "If the kids are misbehaving, it's because they are a terrible mom. If they look at their phone at the playground to take a break, they are a terrible mom."

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Damon D'Arienzo, a 43-year-old Boston-based dad of a 9-year-old girl, says that dads are generally perceived as the subordinate parent, and this has caused him to feel like he has to constantly prove himself in order to be taken seriously as a parent. "I see it in action," he says. "A parent hesitates when I ask if their daughter can come over to play. A teacher defaults to the mother when sharing school information. I typically just shrug it off as letting it get to me does no good. Instead, I can use this energy to be a better father for my daughter. I've accepted that these preconceived notions are still very present."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF DAMON D'AIRENZO

## How We Can Better Support Single Parents

### Support research on and resources for single dads.

Most of the research on single parenthood that exists has been centered on moms, says Michelle Janning, Ph.D., a professor of sociology at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington and board

member of the Council on Contemporary Families. The report in [\*The Lancet Public Health\*](#) confirms the fact, citing findings that single moms have a greater risk of mortality, poorer self-rated health and mental health, higher levels of psychological distress, and generally lower socio-economic status than partnered mothers. But despite being a growing population, single fathers are largely understudied.

"Scholars are good at comparing single moms to married moms and married people to single people and moms to dads," says Dr. Janning. "But we're not so good at comparing single moms to single dads." Yet, the more we include them in the research and make them a part of the conversation, the better our chances become to understanding disparities between them and single moms, and, ultimately, leveling the playing field.

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Research might also help inform more resources for single dads that they say are sorely lacking—such as support groups and forums. "There are many non-profit and educational programs designed to support single moms," says Carter. "But we still have far to go as a society in accepting that a single dad can be a primary caregiver, from the stereotypes they encounter to basic needs, such as [changing tables in men's bathrooms](#). It's as if we demand their support, but neglect to provide them with the tools to set themselves and their children up for success."

## **Consider the challenges single parenthood presents both genders.**

Ortega wishes society could better understand what it's like not to be a single mom or single dad, necessarily, but to be a single parent—full stop. "It's as though you work a job and your colleague quits or gets fired and now you have to do both of your jobs for the same amount of pay in the same amount of time," he explains. "It's as though you go through life every day with a weighted vest on. You are still doing everything everyone else is doing; it's just more difficult and more exhausting."

Christine Coppa, author of [\*Rattled!\*](#) and a single mom of a 12-year-old boy who resides in Riverdale, New Jersey, agrees that gender shouldn't matter—if you're a parent, you show up. For Coppa, showing up looks like devoting "150 percent" of herself to her son's well-being, academics, and athletics. "I'm the only parent," she says. "I'm the good cop and bad cop. I'm the cheerleader on the soccer sidelines, I'm checking his grades online every day, I'm driving him everywhere, fielding homework and life questions." And the weight of that responsibility is carried by anyone who is parenting solo.

It's undeniable that gender disparity continues to exist between single fathers and single mothers. "Men tend to receive praise in the public sphere when caring for their children—in the grocery store, at the park—because it's seen as going 'above and beyond' typical expectations for fathers," says Dr. Collins. "Women in the same scenario are just seen as doing their job as mothers."

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## Destigmatize caregiving for boys.

Dr. Janning believes promoting equality among single moms and dads starts with the way we socialize kids. In addition to encouraging girls to both be the breadwinner and have children if they want, she would like to see us socialize boys and young men to see themselves as caregivers and nurturers.

"For a young man to say, 'I want to be a dad' when asked the question, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' shouldn't be a weird answer," notes Dr. Janning. "The only way that we can have that happen, I would argue, is if we have some policy and structural changes that make it incentivized for fathers to participate in a more pronounced way."

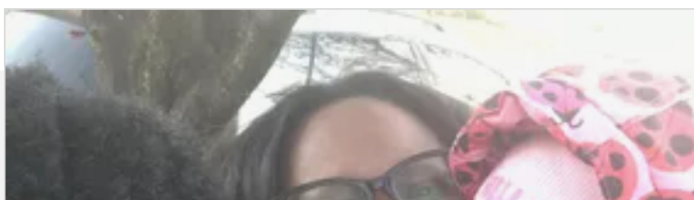
## The Bottom Line

It's time we kicked these antiquated perceptions to the curb. Dr. Collins says that as a country we can look to other developed nations like Sweden that offer much more support for single parents for inspiration and motivation for change. For instance, single parents in Sweden receive 480 days of government-mandated paid parental leave and financial support for housing. Without similar benefits and given the added social pressures, it's hard to be a single parent in the U.S. In order for that to change, single parents must be seen and supported equally.

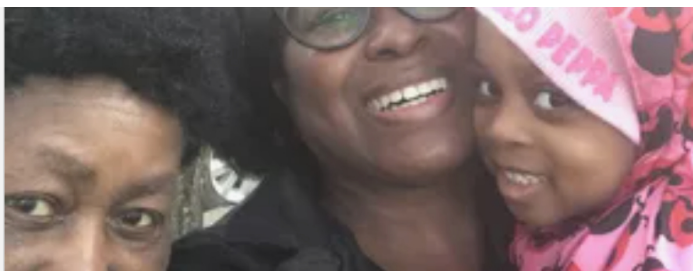
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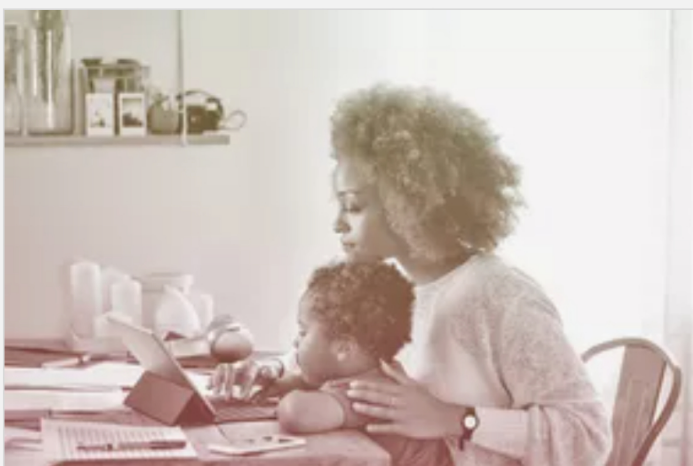
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