

# The dangers of celebrating single motherhood

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By Naomi Schaefer Riley | February 11, 2016

*Each week, In Theory takes on a big idea in the news and explores it from a range of perspectives. This week we're talking about singlehood in America. Need a primer? [Catch up here.](#)*

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“Single Mom by Choice: A Great Option for ‘Strong-A-- B-----.’” That was the headline of [a post on Jezebel](#) last year exploring the question of the ups and downs of single motherhood. Citing a recent piece by Kate Bolick in Cosmopolitan, the author notes that the moms who were interviewed all said having a child as a single woman was “the best decision she’d ever made.”

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Whether it's good for the kids, though, is another story entirely. According to

research done by Pew's Economic Mobility Project, 54 percent of young adults today who grew up in an intact, two-parent home in the top third of household income have remained in that bracket, compared with just 37 percent of today's young adults who grew up in a top-third divorced family.

So while our culture often celebrates the single life as empowering, this empowerment rarely trickles down to children. We can cheer the mother who dragged her son away from the rioting in Baltimore after Freddie Gray was killed, and we can find it sweet that the former star of "16 & Pregnant" is taking her young son on "dinner dates" to teach him how to treat women, but there is something sad about the fact that these boys do not have a father to offer these lessons in a more effective way. Children of single-parent families are less likely to finish school; more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol; and more likely to be incarcerated. Disadvantages for boys in particular are especially pronounced.

So how did we go from thinking of single motherhood as the fate of widows to seeing it as a "great option"? In part, it stems from the feminist notion of women needing men like fish need bicycles. But it's not only sisters these days who are doing it for themselves. It's everyone. In 1950, 22 percent of American adults were single. Now we are at almost 50 percent. One in seven adults lives alone.

And it's little wonder: Family today is a choice, not an obligation. And we have chosen to make it matter less and less. We are marrying later — if we are marrying at all — at an average first age of 29 for men and 27 for women. We are having fewer children — an average of just below the number needed to replace our population — if any. Extended family is increasingly seen as a burden, from which we have to distance ourselves and "draw boundaries."

*[Being single shouldn't mean being alone]*

What's strange, though, is that we spend our young adult years trying to create a new family for ourselves, with friends instead of relatives. It's

become cliché for many young adults to refer to their urban tribes of friends as a kind of “extended family.” They get together for “Friendsgiving” rather than going home to be with parents and siblings.

But these ties often do not last, and sooner or later, 20- and 30-somethings figure that out. Meg Jay, a clinical psychologist and author of a TED Talk titled “Why 30 Is Not the New 20,” tells the story of a 25-year-old woman named Emma who came to her office for help:

*“She sobbed for most of the hour. She’d just bought a new address book, and she’d spent the morning filling in her many contacts, but then she’d been left staring at that empty blank that comes after the words ‘In case of emergency, please call ...’ She was nearly hysterical when she looked at me and said, ‘Who’s going to be there for me if I get in a car wreck? Who’s going to take care of me if I have cancer?’”*

Many emerging adults go for a decade or more without an “in case of emergency.” It’s an odd way to live, this kind of wandering through life with ever loosening ties. And while our culture celebrates singledom as being not only fun but also a symbol of strength, it ultimately makes our lives, and the lives of our children, harder.

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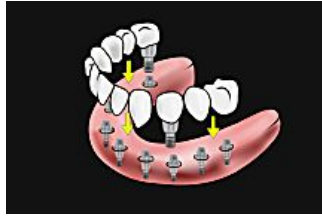
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