

THE  
**Single  
Mother's**  
BOOK

A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO MANAGING  
YOUR CHILDREN,  
CAREER, HOME,  
FINANCES, AND  
EVERYTHING ELSE



2ND EDITION

Joan Anderson

THE  
Single  
Mother's  
B O O K

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YOUR CHILDREN,  
CAREER, HOME,  
FINANCES, AND  
EVERYTHING ELSE



2 N D E D I T I O N

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Joan Anderson

  
PEACHTREE  
ATLANTA

*To Laura, Jonathan, Andrea, and Michael, with the hope that you will  
always say yes to life, reaching outside yourselves to embrace others because,  
in the end, we are all one family*



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## INTRODUCTION



One night in October 1986, four women—strangers to each other—gathered in the Vanderbilt University Child Care Center for the first meeting of the Single Mothers Group. Organized by the Margaret Cuninggim Women’s Center of Vanderbilt, the group was the first of its kind in Nashville. That was not important to the women who had come to talk about their lives as single mothers with others who, they hoped, would understand. All four women soon learned that they shared the same problems: difficulties with ex-partners, overwhelming responsibilities, too little money, and uncertain futures.

The Vanderbilt group grew in number and in a sense of community. In coming together, the mostly middle-class women aired problems with both practical life skills and human relations, and they found solutions to those problems. Members of the group discovered effective ways to reduce their feelings of isolation, frustration, anger, desperation, low self-esteem, and on occasion, hopelessness, and they replaced them with a sense of empowerment.

Ellen Jewell and I co-facilitated the meetings. I had been a single mother for four years, and I identified strongly with the concerns expressed by the group; they had been or still were my own as well. Because other local women wanted to attend meetings but were unable to do so, it soon became apparent that one way to share the information generated by the group would be to write a book. The tremendous work of the Single Mothers Group members in identifying their problems and finding solutions became the foundation of this book. With the help of many people, the idea has become real.

## Who is a single mother?

Anyone who considers herself a single mother is a single mother. She may be divorced, married but separated, never married, caring for a family member's child, a widow, a separated stepmother, or in some circumstances, a married woman. Proximity to a man—or lack thereof—does not make a woman a single mother; the presence of a child in her home does. (Some women are married or live with men who abdicate their responsibility to their children or even may be dangerous to them. Some women are married to men who for whatever reason are absent from the home for long periods, such as military duty in another location.) The single mother shoulders heavy responsibilities, including the financial, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well being of the children who live with her.



The single mother shoulders heavy responsibilities, including the financial, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well being of the children who live with her.

## What's in a name?

Two terms are used in this book when referring to fathers: ex-partner and ex-husband. An ex-husband has specific legal rights, which requires the term “ex-husband.” In more general circumstances, the term “ex-partner” is used. As you read, adapt the “ex” terms to fit your own circumstances.

## A game plan

This book identifies options, information, and advice that have worked for other single mothers. You will find a resource section at the end of the book for more sources of information.

The stories of single mothers who have met their own challenges and prevailed are meant to be instructional and inspirational.

It is as if the women you will read about are on the other side of a ravine, holding out their hands to single mothers following behind them. The book shows paths taken by others who have gone before. It includes personal challenges, strategies, triumphs, and wisdom.

Single motherhood can have some advantages:

- control of your time and resources
- doing things your way
- not having to be accountable or subservient to a partner.

Still, single motherhood is never an easy road, especially in the early stages when economic and emotional crises often overwhelm a woman. But crisis does not mean doom. It is often said that the Chinese character for crisis is a combination of the symbols for “danger” and “opportunity.” If you can overcome your fear, maneuver through danger, and take advantage of opportunities for positive change, you will grow stronger.

When a woman first becomes a single mother, her problems may seem insurmountable. Some women collapse under the weight of responsibilities. Many problems are due, in part, to a faulty societal structure that pays women too little for their work, does not legally mandate paid leave for working mothers to stay home with their newborn children, undervalues the importance of good quality and affordable child care, and too readily excuses fathers from their caretaking responsibilities.

If you are a single mother, it is up to you to carve out your own success. While the possibility of disappointment is real, so is the possibility of success. With careful planning and the passage of time, your life can and probably will settle down to a secure and comfortable pattern, and you will see that you have done a fine job for your child—and for yourself.

I hope this book serves as a useful tool in that process.



## CHAPTER 1



# Redefining the Family

What happened?

The Wall of History

“Who am I now?”

Blood, paper, and heart

Transformation



*I, a tomato born,  
Budded from flower,  
Fleshed red from green vine,  
Ripened in the sun,  
Grew heavy with life,  
Fell to ground,  
Rolled away to blank soil,  
Relaxed, and  
Seeded new life from the old.*

## What happened?

Some time after you have become a single mother you may wake up in bed one morning and ask yourself, “What happened? The kids are tucked in their beds, and I’m in mine. But there is supposed to be a man in this bed too.” Maybe your hand glides slowly over the empty sheets next to you. You remember well a man, the father of your children. Gone.

If you were married to him, you probably had a traditional biological family—Mom, Dad, and the kids. But many families no longer fit that model. As of 2002,

- 68.7 percent of families with dependent children in the United States had a father and mother living together (either married or blended)
- 22.7 percent were headed by single mothers
- 4.5 percent were headed by single fathers
- 4 percent were made up of other combinations, mostly grandparents.

*(U.S. Census Bureau Population Division, Table C2, March 2002)*

It is important to know the great numbers of families that now fall outside the traditional pattern. Since World War II in the 1940s, the family has changed dramatically. Television is one media indication of change. The series “One Day at a Time,” which premiered in 1975, was the first to feature a divorced mother and her children. Now, people are well aware, and often accepting, of the single mother with children as an established family pattern in society. Children are raised in families that may be traditional, single parent, or blended. Families with two same-sex parents (gay/lesbian) are gaining legal acceptance. Today’s young parents may have grown up in non-traditional families.

In the twenty-first century, people accept a wide range of living circumstances before, during, after, and instead of marriage. The rapid change that defines U.S. culture in this century makes the family less like the rock of Gibraltar and more like elastic.

When a father no longer lives in his children's home, the family structure in the home changes, but the family continues, redefining itself as members die, are born, marry, or divorce. The essence of family remains regardless of whether there are two parents or only one parent in residence. With or without Dad, the family nurtures, protects, promotes, worries about, nudges, celebrates with, and otherwise interacts with its members. When there is a commitment to living and loving together, there is family. Non-relatives may be accepted into the residential family unit. Young children are often quick to adapt. They seem to think operatively, so that their Dad's new live-in partner, for example, may soon become an emotionally adopted member of their family. When they say, for example, "I wish my parents would take us to see that new movie," they may define "parents" as Mom in one house and Dad and his partner in another house.

When a biological family breaks apart, it is not shattered like glass but rather knocked horizontal for a while, like fallen building blocks. Usually, by the time a judge pronounces a husband and wife divorced, the family has already begun to rebuild in a different form. Later, either parent may add other people, like building blocks, to alter its form again.

If a man leaves his wife, people may say, "He broke up the family." And they could be right. But the woman needs to remember that she has the power to redefine her family and rebuild it into a structure that suits her as much or more than the original family. It will not be an intact biological family, but it need not be inferior, either.

A lot of guilt may accompany single motherhood, whether the woman leaves the man or vice versa. Because society emphasizes the importance of the biological family, the break up of that family generates strong feelings, a collective grieving for the loss of the ideal. Even to say that the family has "broken up" connotes failure. How refreshing to read Owen Edwards's article "There Are No Failed Marriages" in *Working Woman* magazine. He wrote, "Even when a

marriage doesn't last, it often can be viewed as a success rich with the rewards—children, knowledge, growth—that do last... a lifetime.” He talked not about his own “divorce,” but about his “completed marriage.” While that phrase may seem to sugarcoat the wrenching feelings and the complicated and sometimes expensive process that accompany divorce, the idea has merit. When you think about your marriage as completed, you allow for the good times, the meaningful intimacies, the rituals, the explorations, and the struggles together—the closeness which was also a part of your life with the person who is the father of your child.

It is useful to see and accept your marriage or relationship as part of a continuum of your life history. If your partner had died, you would not burn all the evidence of your lives together just because the leaving was painful. Nor do you have to deny the value of your completed marriage—the good part *and* the bad—just because it is over. To deny it would be to bury part of yourself. The more open you can be about your completed relationship, the easier it will be for you to learn from it and accept your involvement in it with assurance.

If you are open about the subject, that will help your child talk with you about what happened, rather than dwell privately on his muddled thoughts. One twelve-year-old boy, for example, overheard his mother complain that the children did not keep their rooms clean; then she left the family without an explanation. The boy went to his bedroom, cleaned it up, and announced, “She didn't leave because of my room.” But it was clear that he did think that, and throughout his teenage years, his room was always oddly immaculate. Since his mother never explained why she went away, he was left with a sense of guilt and a groundless, self-imposed penance. Talking openly with your child about your completed relationship will absolve his perceived guilt, should he have such feelings, and help him through a difficult period, allowing him to feel good about his family history and claim it for his own. (Chapters four and eight go into detail on this topic.)

From the time you and your child's father choose to live apart, your "family" and your child's "family" are different. Your family is you and your child; it doesn't include his father. Your child's family, on the other hand, includes you, his father, and any stepparents and relatives on either side of his family. The original biological family has become two overlapping circles with your child in the middle, so that when you talk about "our" family, your child thinks, "Mom's side of my family." And it is natural for you to speak to your child about "your dad's family," or "your other house."

### **The Wall of History**

A certain woman married for the second time and moved into the home of her new husband. She found pictures throughout the house of his female friends and his former wife—all of which caused a slow burn somewhere in the core of her insecurities. She wanted those pictures gone, especially those of his ex-wife. He refused. "That's my history," he would say. "Do you think I was a virgin when I met you? And what about my kids? They need to be reminded of their mother. She's part of their life." He had a point, but the new wife had a lousy feeling that she needed to address.

First, she found a photo of her ex-family that featured her children, her "ex," and herself. She went through photo albums and found several other pictures to frame. Then she gathered up all her new husband's photos from around the house and, along with her photos, nailed them onto what she called "The Wall of History"—his on the left, hers on the right. Fortunately, everyone loved the wall. It localized the new husband's history, maximizing it as a statement about the important people in his life, but minimizing its negative impact on her as she walked through the house. As the years went by, this couple added to the Wall of History, so that now it represents "Yours, Mine, and Ours" in a kind of chronological family review.

The wife says that she often looks at the photo of her "first-husband family." In it the children are young. She is young. Togeth-

er with her ex-husband, they were a unit; they had good times, and he was a part of those times. In a way, the picture represented the best of their lives together. Putting it up on the wall has enabled her to claim that part of her life with some pride. Six years after the divorce, her ex-husband could still push her buttons to make her furious or depressed, though he did so much less frequently. But the photo expressed the better part of their relationship; it was a gift that allowed her to think and feel positively about her ex-partner family. Somehow, that reflected positively on her self-image. It also made a positive statement to her children about their biological family. It made them feel more secure.

■■■■■■■■■■  
 Even the most independent woman asks at some point, “Who am I now?”

### “Who am I now?”

When a woman first becomes a single mother, she likely will be confused about her identity. Previously she was defined, at least in part, in relation to her husband, as in, “This is Sarah, John’s wife.” The more independent Sarah’s life was from John’s, the more she has to lean on while rebuilding her family structure and personal identity. Still, she was John’s wife and now she is not. It takes time to separate herself emotionally from her ex-husband. On former Saturday nights when she might have been at home with her ex-husband thinking, “We never go out on Saturday night anymore,” now she is at home by herself, not being able to think “we” thoughts; instead, she feels a void.

Even the most independent woman asks at some point, “Who am I now?” The answer, first of all, is that you are a provider and protector for yourself and your child, since food and shelter come first in the natural order of life. Second, you are a nurturer in the traditional sense of mothering. The traditional roles of provider and nurturer are no longer divided between two partners, the father

and the mother, but reside within the same person—you. Even if you and your ex-partner share joint custody, when your child is with you, you are responsible for fulfilling both roles.

Your salary may be less than your ex-partner's. You may not be able to support yourself and your child as well as your ex-partner could. Few women receive enough child support and alimony to allow them to stay at home and care for their children. Even when they do, that money may come after a bitter court battle that is destructive to the adults and the children. And while men often complain about the financial burden of child support, the average man's standard of living goes up after his divorce, while the average woman and children's standard of living goes down, often dramatically and especially during the first years after the divorce. Society may view the man as the provider for his family, but the reality is that over 27 percent of families are headed by single parents—most of them women—with custody of their children. Those women are the major providers for their families.

The societal view of the ideal family remains Mom, Dad, and the kids. But that biological family is having a hard time surviving intact, according to contemporary divorce statistics, which predict that 50 percent of first marriages will end in divorce. Eighty-five percent of those who divorce will remarry and form blended families that include children from previous marriages. But blended marriages fare even worse; 60 percent end in divorce, according to Census figures. The third family structure, single-parent families, has its own set of challenges, which this book addresses. Calling any of these three family structures ideal is misleading.

In the best scenario, the biological family in which Mom and Dad live together and are best friends and nurturing parents is the least complicated family structure. Sadly, regardless of high hopes and good intentions, traditional biological families can break apart. Partners forget to nurture each other. Dual careers and a fast-paced society place pressure on the family. The temptation to wander from one partner to another in a society that emphasizes the thrills

of new sexual encounters destroys some families. So this best scenario of Mom, Dad, and the kids living happily ever after faces heavy odds against its survival.

The other two family structures—the single-parent family and the blended family—face challenges as well. First of all, they are more complicated than the biological family. But the problems are solvable, the compensations bring their own rewards, and these family structures, while also vulnerable to dangers within and without the family, can be nurturing to each family member. And they may be an improvement over the biological families that preceded them.

Important elements in the success of any family are:

- economic stability
- trust
- commitment among family members
- unconditional love.

Each of these elements involves a daily recommitment to the family. Through thick and thin, you stick together, work out your problems, and share the good times and the bad. That's it. And whether that happens in the biological family, the single-parent family, or the blended family, it is possible in all three.

The answer to the question, “Who am I?” for you as a single mother begins with the roles of provider, protector, and nurturer for your child. Beyond that, how you choose to define yourself (work, community, and social involvements) and to structure your family is up to you.

### **Blood, paper, and heart**

Relatives come in all sizes and shapes, but you may define them to fit your special circumstances. One woman divides her relatives into close family and extended family. Not all relatives are biological. Families have often included people outside the family. These people may even have all the rights and privileges of family—voice, vote, and inheritance—depending on the choices everyone makes.

It is helpful for a single mother to have a vocabulary that gives voice to the important relationships in her life, those that may be different from the ones she would have if she were in a traditional biological family with the father of her children. Here are some words that may help express meaningful relationships:

- **blood**—relatives who are connected to you biologically, such as a grandmother

- **paper**—relatives who are connected by marriage, such as a brother-in-law

- **heart**—relatives who are not blood or paper, but who are like family, such as a close friend who is like a sister, or a next-door-neighbor's child for whom you are a second mother. You choose them. If

your father is dead or otherwise out of the picture, find a substitute father of the heart. For chosen relatives of the heart, your home is their home. You share time, experiences, joys, and sorrows.

The last category of relatives offers a new way of thinking about family and an opportunity to develop a family that is mutually supportive. Ideally, blood and paper relatives are also relatives of the heart. But if not, you can create your own family, including relatives of the heart who meet your needs and those of your child.

## Transformation

Single parenthood brings freedom: Friday night relaxing with just your child, a video, and a bowl of popcorn; sleeping till noon one day a week when your child is with her father; and doing things your way. With freedom comes responsibility. But you must understand and believe that as the years pass, you will become stronger



Relatives come  
in all sizes and shapes,  
but you may define them  
to fit your special  
circumstances.

emotionally and financially. You will have more time for yourself as your child grows. And watching her flower into a healthy, caring adult will bring you great joy.

The choices that you make will define you. The rhythm of the days will become a new, familiar hum in your life. Your child—needing to be fed, needing to be bathed, needing to be hugged—may keep you frazzled for a while, but she will also keep you grounded in reality and will draw out of you a strength you did not know you had. And your family and friends—some old and some new; blood, paper, or heart relatives—will walk with you while you figure out a new game plan for your life.

As a single mother, you may feel you are alone in your struggle to answer the question “Who am I?” and to build your new family structure. But you are not alone. Over 9 million single mothers in the United States are living through the same process. A few of them may become some of your new friends. As with much of the rest of your life, the choice is yours.