Single parents still stung by society stigma

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S elf-esteem plays a key part in a single mother’s happiness, but makes little difference to the life satisfaction of single fathers, research reveals.

Research by Edith Cowan University academic Bronwyn Harman into the life satisfaction of different family formations revealed single parents believe they are still viewed negatively by society.

She found that while all three factors contributed to the happiness of single mothers, self-esteem "had no impact" on the life satisfaction of single fathers.

"Single mothers can have lots of social support, but unless they have that internal self-belief, they don’t believe what they’re doing is good," Dr Harman said.

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Ms Proctor said her "saving grace" was the Single With Children support group. She said the best thing about her family set-up was her bond with Luke. "I’m hoping the bond is going to last through the teenage years.”

I’m hoping the bond is going to last.’ Justin Proctor

mother five years ago when her husband — from whom she was separated — died. "There are a lot of good things about being a single parent," she said.

Now her son Luke Harford is on the cusp of adolescence, Ms Proctor feels keenly the lack of a partner.

"My son is just at the age where he doesn’t need a father figure around, a good male role model," she said.

SINGLE-FATHER households are officially on the rise but, instead of being seen as a threat to women, mothers are being urged to let go and realise the growing trend is the key to their emancipation.

Monash University demographer Genevieve Heard calls it the "creeping rise" of single-father households.

"A research fellow at Monash University in Melbourne, she has analysed census figures to track the growth in the number of single-father households. "The vast majority of lone parents are women," Dr Heard said. "However, there is a creeping rise in the phenomenon of single-fatherhood."

Single fathers represented 17.6 per cent of all lone parents in 2011, whereas in 2006 it was 16.9 per cent. This effectively means in real terms an increase of about 20,000 single-father households over five years.

Over the same period, single-parent families nationally increased by only 0.1 percentage points of all families. "If you look at the numbers, you are now more likely to meet a single dad raising children," she said. "It’s just now more of them around."

In 2006, the Howard government overhauled the family law system: The centrepiece was a requirement for shared parenting, allowing children the right to continue to know both parents.

The move received bipartisan support from Labor despite strong internal resistance from feminist elements in the party, who were concerned it would deprive mothers of rights and could put children at risk. Five years on, the Gillard government — after reports criticizing the new shared-care system — changed the laws, placing greater weight on child safety, meeting a key criticism of the Howard reforms.

University of Sydney academic Charles Areni said he thought those laws had made a difference to the numbers and he regretted that they were rolled back.

He said single fathers also have stigma but our stigma is more to incompetence, whereas the single motherhood stigma is more like you don’t have your values or something is wrong with you," Professor Areni said.

The role of men doing the majority of child rearing has been explored in a forthcoming book by Professor Areni and fellow academic in behavioural sciences Stephen Holden, who have written about their experiences.

The Other Glass Ceiling, due to be published this year, argues that the growth in men taking the single-rop role is something women should welcome because it provides them with the ability to progress their other ambitions while still having access to their children.

"If you’re a career-oriented woman, if you want to become a mother, then you’re probably going to like the book a lot,” Professor Areni told The Weekend Australian.

Although he is remarried now, he wrote the book during a 3½-year period when he was a single father with then majority custody.

He said he was staggered by the lack of support and the stigmatisation of men in these roles where they were the dominant sole carers.

In the study, it found 60% of primary school parents (59%) reported involving their children with their ex-partner, while 39% said they did not. "Oh, I don’t get many of those,” he said.

Gavin Wright has been the main carer for his two children since his relationship with their mother broke down last year.

He has met only one other man in the same situation, and said there was still some stigma attached, even though single dads seemed to be becoming more common. “A few friends said, ‘Why didn’t you send the kids with her?’ he said. “I find that attitude bizarre. It can be challenging, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

While Mr Wright is at work, his parents help look after his son Ryan, 5, and daughter Bianca, who turned 8 yesterday.

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