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Selfish or selfless?

Society has a hard time understanding a mother's decision to relinquish custody of her kids

"My name is Nadine. I am a weekend mom. By choice. I am not a drug addict, bag lady, psychotic (sic) or criminal, and my kids live with their dad. Am I the only one?"

--posted on the Mothers Without Custody Meetup Group Web site, June 2005

It's no wonder Nadine feels so alone. While mothers who lose custody of their children because of court decisions may be the subject of gossip and whispers, moms who voluntarily relinquish custody of their kids often are outright scorned by family, friends and community.

She can't be a good mother.

She must do drugs.

She's probably crazy.

And the mom who actually agrees to give up custody?

She's just plain selfish.

But more often than not, it's just the opposite, say psychologists and those who follow custody issues. It takes a brave, introspective woman to decide that giving up custody is in the best interest of her child, they say.

Although such mothers often still feel stigmatized, many--like Nadine and the hundreds of women who have visited the Web site of the National Association of Non Custodial Moms Inc. (www.nancm.com)--are reaching out to share their stories.

When author Maria Housden and her husband, Claude Martell, divorced, she came to realize that as heart-wrenching as it would be to relinquish primary custody of their three children to Martell, it was the best solution for the family: The kids would stay in the New Jersey house in which they grew up, Martell could continue to maintain the routine he craved and provide the physical care at which he excelled, and Housden could devote herself to writing a book about the death of their 3-year-old daughter to cancer four years earlier.

Still, "when Claude suggested it, I completely freaked out and thought, 'What kind of mother would do that?'" said Housden, of Fairhaven, N.J., whose surviving children are now 17, 11 and 9.



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In her memoir "Unraveled: The True Story of a Woman Who Dared to Become a Different Kind of Mother" (Harmony Books, 2004), Housden writes: "The reason I was hesitating to say yes to Claude's proposal wasn't because I was afraid of losing my children's love or because I felt it would mean I was an incompetent mother. . . . I was afraid of what other people would think."

Her fears were not unfounded. Housden said a former friend called her selfish and to this day avoids her. When the principal of her children's school asked her to be a guest author at a small book club meeting, some mothers were outraged and insisted she not be allowed to come. They felt her decision was irresponsible.

Other parents have faced similar reactions.

"Whether I related the story 22 years ago or today, I hear, 'How could a mother leave her kids?'" said Dave McGerald, of Tampa, whose ex-wife, Annette Pagano, relinquished custody of their three children in 1983 and went back to school, eventually writing her doctoral dissertation on the topic.

Too painful to discuss

Pagano recalls her inability to discuss with anyone the fact that she gave up custody even after writing a book, "Journeys of Women Without Custody: From Ambivalence to a Renewed Sense of Self" (Netsource Dist Services, 2000)

"I'm still amazed at how difficult it was for me to talk about it," said Pagano, of Nashua, N.H.

Her ex-husband said they did what was best for the kids. "Nobody ever asks, 'How could a father leave his kids?'" McGerald said. "I want you to imagine how hard it was for her to make that decision."

Approximately 35 percent of divorced parents share custody, a growing trend, according to the Children's Rights Council in Hyattsville, Md. That leaves about 55 percent of mothers and only about 10 percent of fathers with sole custody of their children--and many of them fight for it.

"There are times when I see that the woman is fighting for custody totally because of the societal perception that she may not be a fit person, even when she knows it would be really good for the kids to be living with the father," said Robert Baron, presiding judge of the family division, Will County Courts, Joliet. "I don't see [a mother relinquishing custody] very often, but the most intelligent decisions I see sometimes are exactly that."

Some dads are devoted

Many dads, after all, have risen to the occasion.

"We wanted the fathers of our kids to be more active and involved, to change diapers," said Jennifer Isham, of Chicago, who retained custody of her 3-year-old daughter but honored her ex-husband's request to have custody of their sons, 5 and 7, after they divorced 22 years ago. "Why would dads who are now becoming more involved in the everyday lives of their children not want to be with their children?"

The reasons moms have relinquished custody voluntarily vary. Among them: the belief that the ex-husband can provide better financially for the children, and the chance to finish an education they may have given up. Some feel strongly that relinquishing custody gives the kids a chance to know their fathers in a way they might not have otherwise.



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Some studies suggest that children without fathers in their lives fare poorly in many ways. They are more likely to end up in jail, have emotional or behavior problems and run away and abuse drugs, according to statistics quoted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"If I'm representing a dad and he doesn't want primary custody because he thinks it's in the best interest of the children, I don't vilify him," said Chicago father's rights attorney Jeffrey Leving. "A lot of lawyers will do that with women and force them into battles they don't want to win."

Northbrook psychologist and mediator Earl Jann agrees that people shouldn't assume it's always best for mothers to get custody.

"If you maintain the type of parenting you want your children to have and get along," it can work, no matter who has primary custody, he said.

No bitter words

"My father never said anything negative about my mother," said Avery O'Neal, 25, of Clearwater, Fla., McGerald and Pagano's daughter. "That's one of the reasons we never thought `She left us.'"

Moms who have relinquished custody say they were committed to maintaining the bond with their kids.

"I remember enforcing that `I will always be here for you, I will always be in touch,'" said Isham, whose experience led her to become a therapist and co-found the Sunrise Institute of Human Development, which conducts couples counseling and mediation.

"There were lots of phone calls, lots of letters. I was a long-distance room mom at school."

"I think we [she and her mom] tried to stay closer because we were so far," O'Neal said.

"Honestly, it seemed pretty natural to me," said Matt Grossman, 26, Isham's son, who lives in Delray Beach, Fla. "I'm definitely 100 percent comfortable with what they did. They did what they needed to do."

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