

Catch of day: Single dads

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By Elaine Moyle
Toronto Sun

Devoted dads are a hot commodity on the dating scene.

Nurturing tendencies exhibited by single fathers are powerful magnets to women drawn to the vulnerable, compassionate traits associated with responsible parenting.

The sight of an adoring male cooing and fawning over a young child is enough to attract a babe fest, say some fathers.

"Open season" has practically been declared in London, England, where "Open lone males toting infants in public places are stalked, then questioned about their marital status" by "predatory, single women," The Sunday Times reported recently.

Closer to home, Caroline Regimbald watches the scenario unfold at a Mississauga indoor playground, where single women -- some with children, others without -- mingle with unattached dads and their offspring.

"I've had women ask me for the specific times the (single) dads come in," says the owner of Runts & Rascals. "I've overheard women direct conversations to determine whether the men are married or not. Then they'll broach other questions such as, 'How often do you come here?' "

The presence of children makes a casual introduction less threatening, Regimbald speculates. "Kids remove the discomfort. They provide a source of conversation and it's a way to a man's heart."

And a woman's too, so it seems.

A couple of years ago, one pair -- both divorced parents -- actually tied the knot after meeting at the playground.

Danny Guspie, of Toronto Fathers' Resources, can attest to the appeal of single dads among the female population.

When he tentatively ventured onto the dating scene a year after splitting from his wife, Guspie was shocked and flattered to discover women embraced his status as a custodial father of two.

"It was probably the best pick-up line I ever had," recalls Guspie, now firmly ensconced in an eight-year relationship with Heidi Nadert, who co-founded the National Shared Parenting Association with him.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I think that being a single dad would be an aphrodisiac," says Guspie.

Neil Campbell, founder of Dads Canada Initiative, says the phenomenon has been brought to his attention by several members of his organization.

He attributes the trend to an increasing number of dads awarded custody of their children, theorizing that "women are attracted to the male who proves that he can be involved (with his kids).

"It's the ultimate masculine experience to be a father," says Campbell, a psychotherapist and assistant professor at the University of Western Ontario. "Women are cultured to be attracted to a man who proves he can care for the next generation."

But Campbell discourages women from making the sweeping generalization that all custodial dads are upstanding citizens. "You can get some bad apples as single dads," he warns.

"I see why women are attracted to single dads -- I am," says Sarah Harris, 31, who's presently dating a single dad. "Seeing Dave's gentle and caring approach to his son definitely attracts me to him."

Harris says single dads' devotion commonly extends to other parts of their lives, including dating and personal relationships.

"If he's a responsible and devoted dad, that usually means he's a trustworthy and devoted partner," she says. "A single dad's relationship with his kids is very telling. It reveals how you'll eventually be treated."

Meanwhile, Marilyn Belleghem, a registered marriage and family therapist in Oakville, says the unattached, devoted father persona projects "a person who's happy to share in household duties and nurture children -- someone with a heart."

In sexual terms, women may assume a man's tender compassion for his kids will be reflected in his approach to lovemaking.

"If he's nurturing to his children, it stands to reason he'll be nurturing in bed," Belleghem says. "The jock type tends to be linked with a 'wham, bam, thank you ma'am' style."

But such generalizations are unfair -- even sexist -- protests Betsy-Anne Barton, a sales executive who has dated single fathers.

"Why should we reserve terms like 'sweet, caring and nurturing' only for men with children?" she asks. "Why not assume all men possess these qualities?"

Society shouldn't marvel over men who are attentive to their kids -- instead, it should be expected behaviour, Barton adds.

She finds it ironic that kids are considered an asset for a single man, while they're often a liability to single women seeking a partner.

She points out the somber realities often overlooked by women romanticizing about potential relationships with single dads.

"Resentment can build around the amount of time he spends with his children and away from you ... Many women are totally unprepared for the huge emotional and time commitment expected of them."

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