According to lesbian lore, friendships, most notably those with other lesbians, offer opportunities for the formation of surrogate kin. Popular lesbian literature tends to emphasize the “community” as “family.” Former lovers, in particular, are expected to assume a role comparable to that of the extended family. This theme is pervasive in advice manuals and other popular works; yet lesbians, as we have seen, turn for friendship to other mothers, especially other mothers in similar circumstances—unmarried women, whether lesbian or heterosexual.

This pattern lends itself to interpretation at more than one level. From one perspective, the shared status of single mother may help to strengthen a developing friendship, or even provide the motivation for its formation. Some accounts suggest that over time mothers become closer to other mothers already in their friendship networks, or that an existing friendship may become more important after the friend has divorced or come out, and thus has reason to share the status of single or lesbian mother. From another perspective, it appears that friendships with married mothers and with people who have no children tend to fade over time. Both lesbians and heterosexual single mothers emphasize a view of children as selfish, superficial, or simply so unfamiliar with the “reality” of their lives as mothers as to make friendship impossible. Most important, lesbian mothers’ narratives about friendship reinforce their view of motherhood as standing at the center of their identities.

Tanya Petroff articulates this position in offering her views about the kinds of people with whom she can form friendships. Living
Lesbian Mothers

alone as she does with her seven-year-old daughter and holding a job that requires frequent overtime, she has to do a lot of planning to arrange childcare. Though she is on friendly terms with her upstairs neighbors, they are of no assistance in this respect because they are "single"—they have no children.

Tanya's most important friendships are with other single mothers, regardless of whether they are straight or gay. She believes that the values of childless people are so different from hers that they offer virtually no basis for interaction or trust, but that a difference in sexual orientation is a trivial matter among mothers. Tanya is convinced that no one who is not also a parent could be a consistently supportive friend.

There's a difference between people who have children and people who don't have children. People who don't have children, to my way of thinking, are very selfish... They aren't concerned about other people. They can do exactly what they want to do at any given time. And though I admire that, it's not possible for me to do that and I guess for that reason most of my friends are single mothers. Because it's hard for me to coordinate my needs and my time with someone who's in a completely different head set. "Why can't you get a sitter for the kid?"—that kind of thing... And I don't want to get into that resentment all the time or educating other women... I've spent years doing that and now I just prefer being with people who have some sense of what it's like to be me, and I understand where they are too.

But neither is Tanya interested in friendships with married women, even if they are mothers; maintaining a friendship with a married woman would demand some sort of relationship with her husband too.

I'm a person in my own right. I make my own decisions, I schedule my own time. And as able to manage who can't decide what to do because they're isolated or don't have them to do it or something— I don't want to hear it.

Tanya's feeling that she can find really supportive friends only among other women whose situations closely mirror her own does not stem only from her need to locate reliable sources of material assistance. As her comments indicate, friends are valued largely because...
Friends and Lovers

Far as they affirm or validate her identity. She wants friends who have "some idea of what it's like to be me," people with whom she need not struggle to establish a recognizable image of herself. Her essential identity, by implication, is a mother; her motherhood supersedes her sexual orientation, her ethnicity, her job.

Another lesbian mother, Harriet Newman, reports similar problems in efforts to maintain ongoing friendships with married women, even when they have children. Harriet lives in a rural area north of San Francisco with her ten- and eleven-year-old daughters. It seems to her that married women are less committed to friendship, and that problem is particularly acute when she feels that she really needs her women friends.

One thing that's difficult is that I want a certain intensity or level of relationship that [married women] don't necessarily need, because they have a husband at home... If you have somebody at home, if you just want an adult around, you don't have to go anywhere. I have to make dates, go out, all that business. Sometimes I have felt at a disadvantage. I always call, I'm always trying to see people who don't need that as much as I do.

Because she knows almost no other lesbian mothers in her community, Harriet often finds herself the only single person at parties or other social occasions. And when her straight friends "hole up with a boyfriend," she feels lonely and betrayed.

That's always a little betrayal. Or the married friends, who have a big to-do or a breakup with their husbands, and they come to their women friends and their single friends very suddenly, and very urgently, for support. You get very involved and then they power and they get back with the husbands, and they have to kind of put some distance between this state and what they were doing three months ago.

Following a somewhat different pattern, Leslie Addison, the lesbian mother of a twelve-year-old daughter, has tried to get other lesbians she knows more interested in supporting women with children. She has belonged, on and off, to a lesbian rap group formed by a local gay community mental health agency, but has found the warm-
Lesbian Mothers

Lesbian Mothers to be not only less supportive than she had hoped, but actively hostile to her situation as a mother. In her view, the "lesbian community" is oriented primarily toward "single" women's needs.

I have a lot of anger... that they don't make a commitment to their kids— I mean, I consider them everybody's kids, because there are the kids that are raised by lesbians, and on that women around them are the ones to borrow them, and to borrow them is in a way to caring them, to handing them to their society, or whatever it is, then they're going to grow up with a much more open mind, more tolerant, more open to being capable women than most of the other kids that are going to be brought up in a heterosexual home. The women just cannot look beyond their own little needs. "Well, I'm single, I don't want any responsibility. I don't want anything to tie me down." I just have a lot of anger about that. It really turns me against the lesbian community. I do nothing in the lesbian community now whatsoever.

Leslie's decision to curtail her community activities has made a big difference in her daily life. She had been involved in women's writing groups, had worked with other lesbian mothers of daughters on an educational project, had written articles for lesbian papers, frequently attended women's concerts, and patronized local coffee shops, bars, and other establishments with a predominantly lesbian clientele.

I remember going in one group... The mothers in the group were trying to get all the women to donate for childcare expenses. And a lot of the women-- in particular that I remember—get up and said, "I don't ask you to pay for babysitting my dog, I'm not going to pay for babysitting your kid."

Leslie's experiences with lovers parallels her disappointment with the lesbian community as a whole. Shortly after her divorce she began her first relationship with another woman. Her expectations were that a woman lover would naturally offer a lot of support to her as a mother and that it would be easier to manage being a single mother once she had come out as a lesbian. But that isn't what she found. She finds that, once she came out, she had to rely on herself a lot more. Ironically, when she was married, she says, she could always get a boyfriend to babysit for her, as a lesbian, she feels that women usually refuse to help.
That wasn't quite what I expected. I expected there would be more sharing between women of the child. But I found it's really not, because another woman has a real identity crisis. She can't be the mother, because you're already the mother. She can't be the father, because she's not the father. Whereas the men sort of played that role. It was easier for them to fall into it. They could play daddy, I could play momma, and everybody'd be happy.

Leslie is sure that she really is a lesbian, but jokes that she occasionally thinks of getting involved with a man when she's desperate for child care!

But she sees other problems besides child care with trying to maintain a relationship with a lover. In fact, she has decided, somewhat fatalistically, that she must postpone her desire to have a lover until her daughter is at least eighteen. Her relationship with her daughter is very close, and it is difficult under the best of circumstances for an outsider to try to become part of their family.

It can't not be. This is a whole other person. You can't just take the mother, you've got to take the mother and the kid, too, in a relationship. That's two people to get along with, and it's hard enough to get along with one. It took [my daughter] and me six years to work out our relationship. I can't imagine anybody else coming into it.

Leslie's skepticism about relationships extends to her feelings about the durability of friendships. Most of her friends do not have children, and though she can give examples of favors she and one of her friends regularly do for each other—jokes to the airport, jump-starting each other's unreliable cars, talking about their feelings—she still feels that she must carefully ration her requests so as not to put undue strain on these relationships. Her description of her closest friendship reflects this hesitance.

Leslie: There's probably nothing I couldn't ask her, but I like to limit my asking. I don't like to do it too much.

Interviewer: Any special reasons?
Leslie: I guess I just think that people get tired if you get too asking too much. Since I have three friends, I can sort of swap them around. I feel that's easier on all of them, since all of them work.

Leslie's account of her experiences in the lesbian community is extremely negative, and is closely influenced by her more general mistrust of the intentions or sincerity of anyone but her daughter. While the overall pessimism she reveals is perhaps idiosyncratic, she does not feel other lesbian mothers in engaging friends and lovers in a single domain. Her disappointment in the "lesbian community" seems particularly acute in light of her unspoken assumption about how other women ought to feel about children. At the same time that her account underscores her feeling of distinctions as a mother, it reflects her acceptance of traditional gendered expectations for women and men.

Even mothers whose experience with friends has been more positive perceive a gulf between their needs and priorities and those of their "single" friends. Michelle O'Neill talks at length about the dramatic change her year-old son has brought to her life. She has the free time for the kinds of social activities she used to participate in, but to keep her time carefully organized to manage to complete her schoolwork (she began a nursing program shortly after having her baby), and often feels tired and overwhelmed by her responsibilities. Her concern for her son's welfare makes her feel more "conservative" as well. But along with these changes, she reports a major realignment of her friendship ties.

A big thing that has changed is my relationship with other people—with my friends. And particularly with my friends who are not mothers... I feel very isolated from them. Some I know have left me behind me, some I have left the friendship because it was just too difficult to deal with them around "I have a child" and stuff and I just get tired of getting them to understand. At the same time that I had to go through a lot of stress and work, they just get tired of that. I just get tired of the way I feel when I said I had to try to find child care... and getting the feeling that they were upset that I had to do that and that I couldn't give them an answer right away.
Like many other mothers, Michelle can’t imagine how she could manage the logistics of having a lover; her focus on her son, coupled with the time she needs to study, has made it hard for her to pay attention to other adults.

I’ve definitely become closer friends with other mothers… But the thing is that I don’t want to be only a mother. I don’t want motherhood and children to be the only thing in my life and I don’t want to associate with only mothers because I have found that… what you talk about and what you do is children. 

Heterosexual Mothers Speak

Like lesbian mothers, heterosexual single mothers view other mothers as the most reliable friends. Nancy Keenan, a secretary who had her two-year-old son on her own, has formed strong friendships with several women who meet regularly as a “single mothers support group.” Aside from this group and her roommate, who is also a single mother (and a group member), Nancy has found it difficult to maintain friendships with women who are not parents. One friend at her job has offered an unremunerated occasion to help out with babysitting, but Nancy has found that this friend is more likely to assume that babysitters can be obtained easily at the spur of the moment than to make a real contribution.

So it’s been hard, to make my friends understand that it’s hard to get a babysitter and that’s always been true to push me to get a babysitter to come in, or… she’s always said, oh, I’d love to help, but when it comes down to it… she doesn’t seem to help or what’s convenient for me.

Nancy attributes this insensitivity to the fact that her friend has no children of her own. In sharp contrast is her relationship with her roommate.

We don’t really do things together, we live about thirty minutes apart and discuss everything over the phone. Everything that goes on during the day, my problems that we’re having, we bounce them off each other and provide kind of a sounding board and the other will throw back ideas, try to help in any way she can, and that has just been the most important. It’s been like a marriage.
Lesbian Mothers

Nancy doesn’t have to tell these friends what’s important to her. As single mothers, these women share the same central concerns; in her view, the support they offer resembles what a marriage—something Nancy has never experienced—ought to provide.

Some heterosexual mothers are able to resume relationships they had with other mothers when they were still married after the friends end their marriages and become single mothers. Denise King, who lives with her fourteen-year-old son and her mother in Berkeley, has been on her own for five years. She recently completed a graduate program, and when her mother moved in after the breakup of her own marriage, the stress of managing the household while juggling a demanding schedule of work and school was eased. Before then, however, her friendships were essential to her ability to manage when things were, in essence, unmanageable.

Most of her friends are women she met when their husbands were students and they were all living in married-student housing. They are all single mothers now, and have remained more or less in the same neighborhood, largely in order to keep the friendship network operating.

We do a lot for each other, in just needing somebody to get drunk on wine with, or pain with, love with, laugh with, serve for the kids. Someone to jog with in the morning. They’re just there. There’s no ceremony involved. You can call them up any time of the day or night, doesn’t matter if they’re entertaining or not. We basically have open houses for each other anyway . . . They’ll be down as much as me, and I for them. [We] lend each other money, help each other with money, or paint, or move. They’ll do all that. Again, if you’re just feeling down . . . We do the following same, I should be out in ten in the morning, and I was phoning people up at three and four o’clock in the morning. They were delighted to hear from me. So you know that those are friends.

The rhythm of these friendships is determined largely by the fact that all the women have children and are single. Visits can be interrupted while children are fed (“Somebody turns off McDonald’s as says gee, I’ve got something in the refrigerator”), and the likelihood that there is never enough money or time to go around is understood.
If one mother is taking her kids swimming or to the park, she may call around and offer to take other children from the group.

I think we all feel like we participate in each other's lives, because we all know that one parent really isn't enough. And we feel very comfortable disciplining each other's children, taking them on. Mom goes off and we just shuffle another kid around the house for supper, and bed them down in their sleeping bags on the floor. They're just as comfortable in any of the houses. They all respect us all as mothers and as parent figures.

Denise says that there is nothing she wouldn't ask of these friends, including money. None of them has much, but by sharing they are able to make what they have sustain them all. Beyond this help, though, her account stresses that the women in the group give each other consistent emotional support, as during the long periods of unemployment most of them have experienced. She describes little parties they have to celebrate things—friend keeping a job she thought she would lose, another friend buying a filing system and getting her life organized. Recently several of the women have moved into new careers and celebrations focus on passing the bar exam or getting a real estate license.

It would freak me out not to feel that I had this kind of support. What would I do if my car breaks down? Christ, I don't have a car. Bill, I'm not broke since, I just haven't bought one. And the same is true if hers breaks down, she borrows mine. . . . None of us have everything we need, but as a group we do. We're a pretty good tribe, you know. So collectively our needs are met, but individually they wouldn't be. We would feel very deprived here. We're just very deprived if we were solitary.

Other mothers must make do with less extensive support systems. Gwen Murphy has faced many problems since she became pregnant almost two years ago. Her son's foreign-born father, whom she had hoped to marry, had to leave the country and she is uncertain whether he will ever return and whether she even wants her to join him, as he once claimed. Her family has been emotionally supportive but is unable to offer any financial assistance. And though her son's
Lesbian Mothers

Lesbian Mothers

A personal and financial strain has kept her off welfare. Child-care expenses have put her under a crippling financial strain. Gwen can rarely afford to go out and often feels isolated and trapped in her sparsely furnished apartment. She talks at great length of every purchase she has made and hopes to make, clearly keeping meticulous account of every dollar she has or expects to receive.

In this context, her friendship with her boss, a lesbian mother with three children, has become central to her survival. Gwen uses the same child-care provider as Gloria Frank, her boss, and they meet each morning when they drop off their kids. Gwen then gets a ride to work with Gloria, and a ride back to the child-care provider at the end of the day. Along with the financial pressures she faces, Gwen's struggles with child care and transportation (since she cannot afford a car) are the central themes of her daily life. She lives on the same bus line as the child-care provider and a supermarket, but her job is some distance from both places and is difficult to reach on public transportation.

Gloria's support of Gwen goes beyond giving her a ride to work each morning. She has covered for Gwen at work when a problem with the baby has caused her to be late, tired, or distracted. She has also helped her to get advances on her salary when financial emergencies have struck. But with three children Gloria has her own money problems and cannot help Gwen personally.

We're both in such bad straits moneywise we can't ever lend each other, but I feel like if either of us at one point were ahead of the other, we would... The other day I was supposed to get an overtime check. The girl in payroll really fudged up my check so... she said she'd do me on my next check. And I said to Gloria, but that's not the point, the point is that I need the money now. I had everything accounted for, and she goes well, listen, if you get hungry, I don't have any money, but I have a credit card. We'll go to Long's Drug Store and you can use it. So it's just crazy. Two single mothers just flailing like you wouldn't believe.

Other heterosexual mothers report similar friendship patterns. Barbara Leary, who lives alone with her eleven-year-old son in Oakland, talks at length about the loneliness and isolation of her life as a single mother. She has only recently gotten off welfare, but her new
job pays very little, and she continues to feel vulnerable and anxious much of the time. Her relationship with her parents has been strained, at least until recently, largely because of her unconventional lifestyle and out-of-wedlock child. Relationships with men have also proved to be difficult. Barbara feels that they tend to be jealous of her son and that she is caught in between, trying to mediate her son's connection with her lovers and experiencing considerable stress in the process.

But her women friends have provided a solid core of emotional support. In particular, her former next-door neighbor, also a single mother, trades child care with her and does other little favors from time to time. More important, she serves as a vital source of solace, and Barbara describes her as being like a sister. She is always there, rooted, in Barbara's view, like a tree.

I go see her when I'm really bummed out. Or lonely. And there aren't too many people you can do that to. Most people are real fair-weather friends. But she's a real cloudy-weather friend, you know. Somebody you can just lay your head on. We sympathize together, we get hysterical together when we're feeling low, we can make each other laugh. We both get depressed sometimes, and it's usually around the same time, so I feel like it's mutual.

Rosemary Herrera, a forty-year-old mother of five, has found that the maintenance of a critical friendship has, ironically, intensified her vulnerability to a custody threat. After twenty years of marriage, Rosemary is in the midst of an extremely acrimonious divorce. In an apparent effort to reduce his child-support obligations, Rosemary's husband is suing for custody, falsely alleging that she is a lesbian.

Now she fears that her friendships with other mothers may be interpreted as evidence of lesbianism.

A number of friendships have helped sustain Rosemary through the difficult period that followed the collapse of her marriage, but one woman friend has had a particularly central role during this time. Every night at a prearranged time, she and her friend Charlotte Shafer (a divorced mother who lost custody of her children some years ago) have agreed to talk on the phone. They both discuss their problems, but at least times Rosemary often cries while Charlotte listens.
Lesbian Mothers

Rosemary helped Charlotte go through the trauma of her divorce and the loss of her children; now Charlotte is reciprocating. But the support Rosemary receives from this friendship goes beyond these telephone conversations. On occasions when Rosemary feels that she cannot cope with her children alone, she can call Charlotte and ask her to join them for dinner. In addition, without much explicit discussion of Rosemary’s serious financial difficulties, Charlotte often arrives at Rosemary’s door with a turkey or other food that she “doesn’t need.”

Rosemary has not reduced her reliance on this friendship, even as she knows her husband may twist its meaning to fit his litigation strategy. Like lesbian mothers, she is fearful about having to defend her “fitness” as a mother in court; at the same time, she desperately needs the support of someone who has faced and survived a comparable crisis. Her friendship with Charlotte not only provides her with solace and material assistance, it affirms that her experience is valid and her identity valuable.

I had no opportunity to observe friendships in action, but I did speak with more than one member of a few networks and was able to get some perspective on their relationships. It was not uncommon for descriptions of particular friendships to vary dramatically. What is critical here, however, is not whether the networks could actually provide the kind of support mothers expected of them. Rather, what they offer is a way to reinforce an account of the self that places motherhood at the center of identity. Friendships work, in the views of both lesbians and heterosexual single mothers, because friends share the essential reality of being mothers without the economic support of husbands or the institutional respectability of marriage. A friendship fails to work when the friend’s identity is not framed primarily by motherhood, whether the competing identity is lesbian, married woman, or non-mother.

Relationships with Lovers

It is difficult to disengage a discussion of mothers’ ties to lovers from the broader context of friendship. Like friends who are not
Friends and Lovers

sexual or domestic partners, lesbians’ lovers are, of course, women. With some lovers or potential lovers lesbian mothers share the reality of parenting; in other cases, though, the lack of understanding of what it takes to be a mother can contribute to problems and misunderstandings.

For some mothers, the possibility that the lover is anything less than completely dedicated to the child and to the mother’s family does not even come up. Rebecca Collins, who painted a picture of idyllic family harmony when I asked her about her tie with her partner, portrays her relationship with Sheila Ryan in the same vein.

Sheila is very much a part of the family, both as a son of my parents and [my son’s] father. So there was no pulling [my son] away from a relationship with what ultimately turns out to be a second mother. And from her end, she’s very receptive to that, whereas a lot of women aren’t; they really want the separation. Fine, we’ll live together, but it’s your child. She really doesn’t feel that way at all... In practice, she acts as much as a mother as I do.

Rebecca reports that her son regards Sheila as a second mother, sometimes responding to inquiries about his mother by asking, “Which one?” Sheila attends all functions for parents along with Rebecca and her former husband, handles child care when Rebecca is busy, and spends a considerable amount of time alone with the boy, playing catch and attending his athletic events, all of which interest her more than they do Rebecca.

Helen Lynch, a blue-collar worker who lives with her lover, Betty Vaughn, and her four children (aged nine to twenty), sees her situation as very much like that of any other family. They’re been together for five years, and Helen feels that Betty often communicates better with the kids than she does. Helen reports a list of family leisure-time activities—ball games, picnics, weekend trips—in which the children frequently bring their friends. They own a house together, have a joint checking account, and do not keep much of who buys things for the children. According to Helen, the real mark of their being “strictly like a family” is that Betty often makes purchases for the
Lesbian Mothers

children without consulting Helen. They are close to Betty's mother, and in fact, it is to her that Helen and Betty would turn if they were to experience a financial emergency.

This experience contrasts sharply with that of Peggy Lawrence and Sue Alexander. Peggy has not told her parents that she is a lesbian. Her relationship with them has been stressful for years, marked, according to her, by their disapproval of everything she did, and the details their reaction if they were to find out. They have met Sue and spent time with her on their visits to California, but they gave the couple no acknowledgment that they are a family.

They don't understand the extent to which we're living our lives together and raising our children together—the extent to which we are involved and depending on each other to do all the things we have to do to run family life. . . . They just think it's a shame that I don't make enough money so I have to have a roommate.

But for Peggy, the fact that they both have children and have formed a family is absolutely central to her relationship with Sue. They met at a lesbian mothers' meetup and their both having children was a key factor in their becoming lovers.

It's important to me that she takes our lives very seriously. It's important to me that she's committed to what we're doing. That I can trust that she'll be here. . . . That we're both involved in our lives with our children, and then it's a relatively permanent situation that we are involved in our lives with our children. That's something I can count on.

But their differing views on mothering, as well as what Peggy sees as the sharply different needs of their children, have led to conflict in their relationship. Their ideas about discipline, chores, and money have all turned out to be at odds; at the same time, the children themselves have had a variety of disputes that have shaken the household and placed considerable strain on Peggy's relationship with Sue. This situation has made Peggy aware that the time and energy she has devoted to establishing her new family has led some of her friendships to atrophy; she is determined to find new friends so that she will not be totally dependent on Sue.
I'm trying to expand my support group, because I'm really worried about how small it is, I feel isolated. I need to feel that I'm with more people, that I'm really with and that I can really count on.

Many mothers with partners report that their lovers collaborate with them in the business of parenting, and Peggy's concern that this situation can lead to stress, if not outright conflict, is not unique. Women describe a range of experience, from ambiguity in the unspecified role of the "second mother" in comparison with the child for the mother's attention, to competition for the child's attention. It is not uncommon for conflicts over the child or over maternal obligations to lead to the collapse of a relationship. Overriding all of these variations is the primary commitment mothers feel to their children in the event that a lover's needs actually or apparently conflict with theirs. Some mothers articulate this commitment as powerful enough effectively to rule out an intimate relationship until the children are grown.

Doris Johnson has been involved with June Kepler for about three years. Her two daughters sometimes see June as another mother, sometimes as a close friend, sometimes as a big sister. No one ever quite knows how to define anything, which is fine with me. They're mutually very, very fond of each other. Which is one of the reasons that it works. There wouldn't be any way, at this point in my life, that I would live with someone who wasn't involved with the kids, and who wouldn't be involved. I don't want to split my life up that way.

According to Doris, her daughters were instrumental in getting June to move in, not long after she and Doris became lovers. The girls are very aware of the nature of the relationship, discuss gay issues openly, and have told most of their friends that their mother is a lesbian, even though Doris has told them it's fine with her if they'd rather keep this information to themselves. Both girls have invited June to more their mothers and to attend school events. Though June and Doris take turns cooking dinner and divide domestic responsibilities equally, June pays one-third of the rent and they have made no moves toward merging their finances.

Hannah Rosenberg, who has three children between the ages of ten and thirteen, also experiences some ambiguity in the relationship.
Lesbian Mothers

between her children and her lover, Lucy Weiss. Hannah and her former husband have joint custody of their children, so two are currently living with him, while Hannah lives with the third child and Lucy.

Sometimes Lucy’s role bothers her. She says she isn’t anything, because she’s not really a parent. She has no legal standing, and she has no real authority. . . . As far as behavior around the house, I think she has an equal role. However, I’m not sure that in their eyes she’s equal to my role, or if . . . they really accept her. . . . [My older son] said he didn’t know what to call her, if she was his stepmother or what.

For a number of lesbian mothers, however, these relatively mild concerns with ambiguity and parental duty have escalated into far more intense and combative disputes. It is not uncommon for mothers to report that the lover not only fails to act as a parent but requires mothering herself, sometimes competing with the child for the mother’s attention.

Deborah Cohen, having broken up with a number of lovers in disputes over her ten-year-old daughter, now finds that the most sensible plan is not to move in with the woman she is currently involved with. While Deborah was living with her previous lover, Carolyn Fishman, her job required her to work long shifts and she often had to depend on Carolyn for baby-sitting. Carolyn was openly resentful and Deborah ended up feeling guilty. This problem did not seem to be unique to this relationship. Deborah believes that it has been a feature of most of her past relationships and can explain several earlier breakups.

I’ve had a lot of trouble, actually, with women lovers around [my daughter], and not being able to leave her with them because of the resentment and jealousy.

Deborah claims that her daughter has often behaved more maturely and responsibly in these situations than her lovers. All of this has come as a surprise to Deborah. When she first came out, she assumed that women, because of their socialization, would more readily assume responsibility for a child. She found instead that interest in her child was peripheral.
Women would be real interested in my child (if they were trying to get it in with me, when they first met me. Oh, how wonderful, a girl child. They had all kinds of expectations about her, you know. . . . Oh, we're going to raise an Amazon, we're going to wear the little fish, and my daughter wanted to be in long dresses, and don't want to be a little dyke. . . . Then when I started feeling this . . . I wasn't going to accept my child that way, then my lover used to freak out. It wasn't OK with her that I was letting my daughter be what she is. When I started accepting (my daughter), it wasn't OK with my lover at all.

This was not the only problem she faced. Deborah feels that she was put in a position in which she had to ration her time and energy, dividing her attention between her child and her lover, while her lover directed energy only toward her. She ultimately became quite resentful about this situation, as she saw her child as the only legitimate focus of a mother's care.

I was in the middle, and being torn all the time, to where, like, at the dinner table, we'd sit down to have dinner together and they'd both talk to me at the same time.

Finally these conflicts became disputes over money. Deborah contributed more to household expenses because she had the child, though she felt this arrangement wasn't fair because her lover earned as much as she did. After she stated her complaints, they began to avoid expenses evenly (though they never pooled their funds), but then her love became resentful because there was too much of one eating and one of the other. . . . There was always this two-of-us-and-one-of-her trip. Carolyn was not a mother and could not (or would not) try to be one; she could never get the part of the essential constellation created by Deborah and her daughter. Deborah's unspoken assumptions about how women ought to be when they were offered an opportunity to act as mothers made her disappointments and sense of abandonment all the more acute.

Meg Jordan, a twenty-six-year-old mother of a six-year-old son, reports similar problems. She thinks her relationship with Vicki Foster is in trouble because of what she calls "the co-parent issue." Vicki has told her that she doesn't want to be cast in the co-parent role, but Meg feels that she cannot continue the relationship without help and
Lesbian Mothers

Lesbia

Lesbian mothers often find themselves in the process of working out some compromises. They are in the process of working out some compromises. Lesbia will take the child once a week overnight so that Meg can have a little time for herself. They also begin to share child-care costs equally when they go out and take turns locating child care. At the same time, Lesbia has been in the habit of picking up the boy at his after-school center almost every day, a task that is easier for her than for Meg because of her work schedule.

Meg feels strongly that these negotiations are forcing her to divide her life into three parts: her child, her lover, and her job. She imagines an ideal situation with someone who would be prepared to form a meaningful relationship with her son—

whether he be a single woman or a woman with a child, someone who is into co-parenting, so that the responsibility of a child or children is a mutual thing.

While for some mothers, another lesbian mother seems like a good bet for a person to become involved with, other mothers see this arrangement as yet another pitfall. Louise Green thinks it would be better to have a lover who doesn't have her own children. People with children, to her way of thinking, are preoccupied with their kids, and the inevitable result is a series of conflicts for the mothers and the children. Yet she cannot imagine having a relationship with anyone who doesn't want to share the care of her daughter.

If someone is going to be my lover, they're going to be for my lover and something for my daughter. If they're not into her, I don't want anyone who doesn't want to share the care of her daughter.

Heterosexual Mothers with Lovers

We might expect heterosexual single mothers to have similar experiences as they try to integrate male partners into the care of children, and perhaps feel equally discouraged when men fail to assume some parental duties. But heterosexual single mothers and lesbians differ dramatically in this area. Apparently, heterosexual mothers have more modest expectations for the men they find themselves involved
Friends and Lovers

...with. Whereas lesbians tend to assume (or at least hope) that their female partners will "naturally" be predisposed to care for or make sacrifices for children, heterosexual mothers tend to doubt that their male partners will offer any sort of meaningful support. When the men do show interest in the children, such concern is welcomed with both enthusiasm and some surprise. Lesser commitments by men tend to be overlooked or seen as not worthy of notice.

Susan Bender lives in Berkeley with her eight-year-old son and her boyfriend of six years, Steve Cramer. Steve technically lives in the in-law apartment connected to her house, but in fact they share meals and some of the household chores. But Susan is cautious; she feels it is important to keep their money separate and to establish herself as a single woman. In part this attitude seems to reflect the process she experienced when she left her husband, a "blooming" of her sense of herself as a separate person and her first taste of independence. Although Susan and Steve have recently begun to speak tentatively of marriage, she fears that the legal tie might have a destructive effect on their relationship.

Steve and Susan's son, Daniel, get along well, and they spend some time together on their own. Daniel's contact with his father, who lives in another state, is for more visitation, confined mainly to summer visits and occasional holidays. Nevertheless, Susan feels strongly that Steve should not make significant decisions about Daniel and in particular should not discipline him. She explains that though he is Daniel's "surrogate father" some of the time, he is still not his real father.

It just seems to me like the blood ties—it's really amazing, the blood ties business. No matter how much time is spent, the real father really is the father. After all, saying that no matter what, I think [Steve] will always be second. He will not be the real father.

Some women would trade their problems with their lovers for Susan's any day. Phyllis Shapiro has two children, a fifteen-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. She and her former husband, a physician, have been divorced for two years, and she continues to live in the spacious Berkeley home they occupied during their marriage.
Phyllis received a temporary spousal support award in addition to child support and hopes that by the time it expires, in three years, her new career in commercial art will permit her to maintain her current standard of living. Phyllis got involved with Greg Kaufman about a year ago, and is already experiencing some stress because he is unwilling to form a meaningful relationship with her children. Greg has a regular schedule of visits with his daughter from a previous marriage and is not eager to become involved with Phyllis's children. This is the major reason he has not moved in with her.

I'd like to think that ultimately I'd be in a relationship with somebody in which I would share my life... We've gone through some very rocky times... He's not a nurturing sort of person. He's supportive, but not in that nurturing sort of way.

Greg prefers not to plan many activities with Phyllis and the children because he doesn't like "the noise." She has been obliged to devise a complicated schedule on the weekends in an effort to spend time alone with Greg and also to spend time with each of her children. Sometimes Greg makes plans that require her to find a babysitter for her daughter.

Greg lives in San Francisco. When Phyllis's ex-husband used to take the kids for weekend visits, she was able to spend time at Greg's apartment. But her ex-husband recently stopped arranging regular visits, so Phyllis cannot plan to spend the weekends away from home. The present arrangement is that Greg stays at Phyllis's about four or five nights a week, though he rarely stays until after dinner, apparently because he's "uncomfortable about the family situation." Greg, a stockbroker, is quite well off financially. He and Phyllis share interests in music, fine restaurants, and other expensive diversions, which Greg always pays for. Phyllis wonders at times if her interest in him isn't reduced to some extent by the financial need she has experienced since her divorce.

A recent dispute was sparked by Phyllis's recognition that she is contributing more than Greg to the stability of the relationship. She would like Greg to help her with her income tax, but is afraid to ask...
him because he will criticize her for not keeping adequate records. Nonetheless, she has been doing his laundry regularly for some time, a burden she only recently started to consider excessive.

What am I doing this fucker's laundry for? Here's his linen, and his blankets, and I'm washing and folding them. He's expecting me to do all the little things a wife does, and he doesn't want to take on the costs of things. He doesn't want to feel like he's in that kind of relationship. And it's not that it costs me any time or energy to do them, but I just thought it was a sort of symbol. So I told him that I didn't want to do his laundry anymore and he got really put out. He said, "Well, if that's how you feel about it, I think we should end the relationship!"

They compromised that she would wash the clothes he uses when he's at her house. But she feels that she can never ask him to help her with the kids, and arranges help from friends when problems arise.

Other Issues for Heterosexual Mothers

For some heterosexual mothers, how to deal with a man who doesn't collaborate in the business of parenthood is less of an issue than whether they can even establish a relationship in the first place. Alison Kahn, a successful professional woman who lives in San Francisco with her seven-year-old daughter, is acutely aware that her situation corresponds to wider historical changes affecting women. Her former husband, she claims, saw his career as more important than hers, and expected her to assume total responsibility for finding child care and other services that would enable her to resume her career. She sees the resentment this situation generated as the major impetus for their separation three years ago.

Near the end of her marriage, Alison has experienced considerable stress in her efforts to form workable relationships with men. On the one occasion when a man spent the night, her daughter became so upset that Alison now has a date stay over only if her daughter is visiting her father. More serious has been her father to secure what she considers adequate recognition of the importance of her professional life. This problem is compounded by what she regards as virtually all men's insensitivity to women's sexual needs. In short, the
Lesbia regards most of the men she has dated as so self-centered that they are oblivious of both her sexual and her intellectual needs. Paradoxically, even when she has found a man who seems to have a real interest in both her and her daughter, Alison avoids involvement, fearing that involvement would raise her daughter’s expectations only to disappoint and hurt her in the end. All of these contradictions come together in Alison’s expression of a very basic kind of loneliness. She wants intimacy and sharing even while she shies away from them. “I’d like the companionship and the sense of loving and being loved for someone and being cared for.” But she is convinced that such wishes are futile.

I have this sense . . . of being in the cross-currents of social change. When women of a generation of divorced backgrounds who are professional women and are quite feminists. And it is awfully hard to meet a man who is willing to accept that because men haven’t undergone the kinds of changes that we all have.

This is a particularly painful conclusion for Alison because she has maintained a rather poignant nostalgia for the world of ordinary, two-parent families she left behind. She is consciously aware of being excluded from the way of life of “families,” conscious of the ways in which being a single mother sets her apart and deprives her of support and intimacy. [Being a single mother] is very different because what’s missing is the family weekend structure which I think has a rhythm to it that the single parent doesn’t.

For one thing, a lot of my time is spent doing chores. Between doing the laundry and going to the cleaners and doing a full marketing. . . . is often how I spend one day. And the other day my daughter is not with me. I either work or I see friends or I try and unwind or do something that I enjoy. But it feels less structured and somehow less integrated into what one thinks the real world is.

Alison has two close women friends, both professional colleagues, but single and childless. Her time with them is limited to activities they can pursue when her daughter is with her ex-husband, usually attending a concert, going to a dinner, or going to a movie. She has occasionally asked these friends for favors related to her daughter, but
tries to do so as infrequently as possible. Though she works with a group of committed feminists, she feels that because none of them is a mother she cannot ask them for any kind of support. Whenever a babysitting emergency or other problem related to her daughter has required her to leave work early, she can see her coworkers’ resentment—striking contrast, she remarks, to their feminist ideology.

I guess what I feel is a sense of aloneness and a sense of a lack of community. I have a lot of feelings of rapport with single parents when I meet them. [But] I’m not sure that I would go to the child-care switchboard and seek out a single-parent support group.

Despite Allison’s need for support from other women who share her situation, her resentment at having been deprived of a traditional family in which to raise her daughter keeps her from developing meaningful friendships with women. The ironic contrast between the nostalgia she voices and her acute understanding of its unrealistic foundation frames her struggle to formulate an acceptable identity as a mother.

Negotiating Motherhood through Friends and Lovers

Though these accounts reveal a wide range of personal styles in the formation and maintenance of friendships, some patterns can be discerned which lesbian mothers tend to share with heterosexual single mothers. On the one hand, women in both situations tend to ration their reliance on friendship, to be acutely aware of how much pressure a relationship can sustain, and to attend carefully to issues of reciprocity. Such concerns are sharper for mothers whose friends are not also single mothers. The accounts of mothers who attempt to continue relationships with women who have no children point to a strong perception that children’s needs can alter or undermine the dynamics of a friendship. When the child emerges as a competitor, the friendship must be relegated to second place.

For those mothers who have been able to construct close friendship networks with other single mothers the picture is somewhat less
Lesbian Mothers

These women view friends as reliable sources of instrumental support and consider exchange to be a necessary element to ensure balance. Even when friendships provide the benefits of loans, assistance with child care, and other forms of help, concerns about reciprocity may loom large.

Friends who can be called upon in this way tend to be other lesbian and/or single mothers. Because they face similar difficulties, they can be counted on to provide assistance when it is needed. More importantly, they can provide a kind of moral support, affirming the gravity of situations the mother faces, stressing that they are inherent in the circumstances of the mother's life rather than as evidence of her ineptitude. Simply by facing a similar set of challenges, friends validate the mother's experience, confirm that departure from the norms of the two-parent family is reasonable and necessary. In short, they understand "who she is.

Beth Romano, a thirty-six-year-old lesbian who has been estranged from her parents for many years, describes what her best friend means to her.

She is [like a] lifeline for me. She's perfect, and validating. I can tell her anything: She's just my best friend. I guess. There's an understanding and an ease in communication. I don't have to explain things is ten, and she's not putting and accepting of me. I really trust her. I know that she cares about me and that she's there... I feel that she's a lifeline. . . . There are other people in my life that we close, but I have to explain a lot.

Patricia Atkins, who has a seven-year-old son, also focuses on the unconditional support of her friendship with another lesbian mother whom she met at a workshop for lesbians with sons. They do a lot of things with their children and help each other with child care.

I can share anything and everything with her without feeling put down or scheduled out or any other thing. And she feels the same. We laugh together and because we can share our children and not feel bad about it... I can take hers, she can take mine, and yet there are no expectations on either part.
Another lesbian friend who is not a mother has little interest in being around Patricia's son. This friendship has become more and more limited over the years; they share interests in photography and philosophy (both are adherents of twelve-step programs), but her friend's dislike of children conflicts with Patricia's feeling that she should spend more time with her son. Nevertheless, Patricia feels that she continues to gain some basic validation from this friendship and is reluctant to let go of it completely.

One thing I found out about my relationships with my friends is that regardless of how long it is between times I see someone, it seems like yesterday in that we can continue from where we are without any hesitation.

Variations are evident when the friend is a lover. Some lovers provide much more tangible service and than other friends, but many women resisted placing too much reliance on them. As we have seen, expectations of male and female lovers differ largely along the lines of traditional gender roles, although the extent to which the actual behavior of male and female partners diverges may not be great.

The varied stories of friendships and partnerships which both lesbian and heterosexual mothers offer demonstrate the centrality of motherhood not only in the formation of the women's identities but in the way they characterize their friendship networks. They measure friendship by its ability to respond to the exigencies of motherhood, relationships that fail, or seem to fail, in this regard are relegated to the margins of their lives or abandoned altogether.