## Single life

## Bitter fights surround men's rights

By JILL ZUCKMAN Wall Street Journal

OHN ROSSLER joined the ranks of men's rights activists after his divorce eight years ago, when he realized he might be cut off from his three children.

The prevailing view then was that "just because I was a man ... I couldn't be as caring and loving as a mother," says Rossler, who is the vice president of the National Congress for Men and vice president of the Fathers Rights Association of New York State.

To combat that image, about 200 men's rights groups have sprung up across the country during the past 10 years. Many function as support groups for divorced fathers, but they also are at the center of an increasingly bitter fight with women — in the nation's courts and in state legislatures — over the issue of joint custody of children in divorce cases.

Groups such as the Los Angeles-based Joint Custody Association have lobbied state legislatures to enact a "rebuttable presumption" for joint custody. Under such a law, joint custody would be considered the norm; a parent would have to argue against it in court to obtain sole custody.

Currently, most states allow joint custody as an option in divorce, but only a few have adopted rebuttable presumption or endorsed a preference for joint custody. Men's rights groups say that Louisiana, Idaho and Florida laws generally are the most favorable to their

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> - Noreen Connell President NOW chapter

cause; several others - including California, Michigan and Oklahoma — have variations on the notions of preference and rebuttable presumption.

Elsewhere, such as in New York, legislation pushed by men's rights groups has failed to pass amid lobbying clashes between the groups and feminists who argue that many fathers seek joint custody primarily as a way of punishing their ex-wives.

Most women's groups object to a rebuttable presumption, saying that joint custody should be a voluntary arrangement rather than subject to a court order. But James Cook, president of the Joint Custody Association, argues that joint custody wouldn't be forced under a rebuttable presumption; it still would be up to a judge, who he says would take a mother's objections into account.

Phyllis Chesler, a psychologist and author of a book called "Mothers on Trial, the Battle for Children and Custody," argues that all too often a father may seek joint custody not because of

his interest in raising children but as a way of "retaining the marital home and other assets and as a way of monitoring, controlling and harassing his ex-wife."

Noreen Connell, president of the New York state chapter of the National Organization for Women, asserts: "It always seems to come down to dollars and cents for them."

Not all feminists are so strongly opposed to joint custody. Karen DeCrow, the former national president of NOW and a lawyer in Syracuse, N.Y., believes that there are advantages to joint custody. "As long as women have the exclusive responsibility for raising children, we will never have equality in the marketplace,' she says. But that view is sometimes lost in the acrimony that swirls around the issue.

Although the rebuttable presumption issue is at the top of their agenda, men's rights accivists

say they also are pressing on other fronts. For instance, men's rights groups have lobbied against federal child-support enforcement laws, which could put fathers in jail for refusing to pay. Frederic Hayward, director of Men's Rights Inc., says that women often paint a picture of a father who just gets tired of paying child support and stops.

In truth, men's groups argue, the situation may be much more complex. For instance, they say, the mother may have refused to allow the father to visit his child. In effect, says Rossler, "mothers are using the children for extortion. They are trying to kill the father-child relationship."

#### Organizations for singles

NEW EXPECTATIONS

New Expectations is a Catholic group for the separated and divorced.

Meetings are the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at Star of the Sea parish hall, 515 Frederick St., classroom 3.

For more information about the organization, call 425-0764.

#### Singles conference

"Growing Free in Singleness," a conference for singles, will be led by Jim Smoke Friday and Saturday at Twin Lakes Baptist Church, 2701 Cabrillo College Drive.

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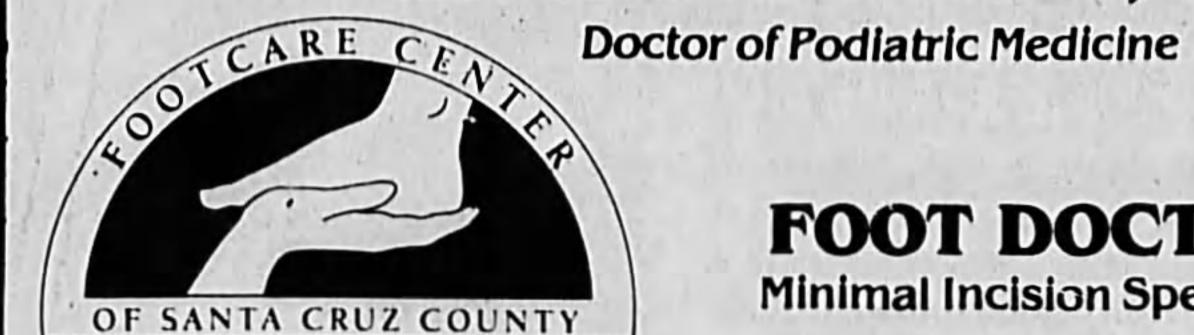
P.O. Box 7933, Santa Cruz, 95061.

For a sample newsletter, send a

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## Positive signals say 'I am open to liking y

ODAY, a look through the mailbox yields a question on 'signals.'

Q.In a recent column you mentioned "negative signals" women send to men. What do you mean? Could you please elaborate on this?

A. Men and women can send negative signals that cause people of the opposite sex to ignore or avoid them. To understand what negative signals are, let's look at positive signals.

Positive signals say, "I like the opposite sex in general, and I am open to liking you. While I am not naive, I will assume the best about you unless and until you give me reasons to believe otherwise. I am willing to risk some openess so that we can get to know each other. Let's enjoy getting acquainted and let's have fun together."

This can be conveyed by smiling, greeting others warmly, and displaying curiosity by listening attentively to what the other person has to say,

Howard Halpern On your own

and pursuing points they have brought up.

Negative signals convey the op-

You ask specifically about the negative signals that some women send out to men. Some women, usually because of past experiences, are so suspicious and wary of men that they can make a man feel that his interest is not trusted or is unwelcome. Others are programmed to believe that all men want "just one thing," so they have defenses that make men feel rejected if they at-

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tempt to get close or become better acquainted. Other women fear abandonment, so they pressure men for reassurances that this will not happen before the relationship has gotten off the ground. This may make men perceive them as too needy and lacking in self-esteem. Some women fear being dominated by a man or have a need to be dominant themselves, so a budding relationship quickly degenerates into a power struggle. Past romantic or familial ties that were traumatic also leave some women with fear and anger toward men. Even though they may want a relationship, this underlying fear and hatred get communicated.

The negative signals come from negative feelings. They may take the form of outright belligerencee and criticism, withdrawal into coldness or stiffness, defensiveness, sarcasm, a general air of "I couldn't care less," or in some instances, severe shyness, which a man can easily misinterpret as lack of interest.

The problems these negative sig-

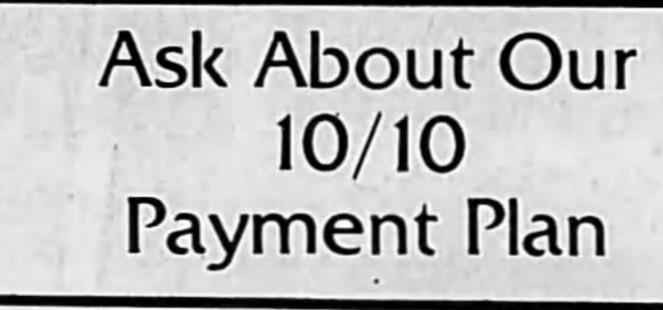
nals can create for a woman are twofold. Obviously, the signals can drive away men that they might have come to care about. But they may also attract just the kind of man they don't want. For example, a woman who is critical and gets into power struggles with men will drive away a nice guy who wants to be close and sharing. On the other hand, she may be a magnet for men who are drawn to a power struggle and who want to show that they are the

These negative signals, with some variations, are also sent by men with the same unhappy consequences. And most of the time, the people who send these off-putting signals are unaware that they are doing it and are surprised and puzzled when the other person is not interested.

Questions and statements about the single life may be addressed to Howard Halpern, "On Your Own," care of The Santa Cruz Sentinel.

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