

SINGLE SENSATION

How does *Parenthood* star Lauren Graham, playing a mom in a hit TV show for the second time, so powerfully channel the hair-tearing challenges of solo parenting?

By Lauren Paige Kennedy, WebMD Contributing Writer



Reviewed by Brunilda Nazario, MD
WebMD SENIOR MEDICAL EDITOR

Seems there are two kinds of parenthood: The silly drivel we find on sitcoms, where the kid messes up, mom and dad hilariously intervene, and the Big Lesson is learned as the laugh track rises and falls. Then there's real-life parenting, which is much tougher to negotiate and leaves looser ends. In life, if there's a lesson in sight, it's often difficult to discern—a truism rarely reflected in television shows.



Unless, of course, you happen to be Lauren Graham. The actor, 43, has twice struck TV ratings gold with her portrayal of a single mother grappling with the opposing pulls of love and discipline, first in the critically acclaimed *Gilmore Girls* on the CW network, and now in the equally well-received Ron Howard-Brian Grazer production *Parenthood*, an NBC series inspired by the 1989 feature film of the same name.

Graham's current hit, whose second season premieres September 14, centers on the dovetailing lives of four siblings, their collection of children, plus aging (and separated) parents. "My character's in survival mode," says Graham. "The father of her kids is not around; he had a drug problem. She's working as a bartender and has moved in with her parents ... she's hit rock bottom and is asking for help from her family. It's powerful and relevant for the times, and reflects the struggles that interest me: If you're a single woman over 40, how do you start over if you didn't go to school, haven't been on a career path? What do you do?"

The first season of *Parenthood* also examines the trickiest subset of child-rearing, one that's fraught with tension: the mother-daughter dynamic. Graham's character, Sarah Braverman, is confronted with the growing pains of her oldest, Amber, who's both a rebel and a mirror image of Sarah as a teenager. After Amber has sex with her cousin's boyfriend, an act that ignites interfamilial warfare even as she's labeled a tramp by her schoolmates, she runs away. This forces Graham's character to examine every

decision she's ever made, leading her to this moment—courtesy of her feisty daughter.

Graham, who relishes being given the freedom to "improvise our lines in the moment" on *Parenthood*, plays Sarah with a realistic world-weariness coupled with a wry, defensive humor. Chatting with Graham on the phone, however, WebMD discovers a much sunnier personality. So how, exactly, does the actress nail *The Single Mom* so perfectly? Especially given that she's not a mother herself, and spent her childhood without a mother in her home?

Role Reversal

Graham grew up in the shadow of the nation's capital, raised by a single father to whom she remains close.

"It was very unusual when I was growing up to have the single parent be the dad. I didn't know another person in that situation. In fact, my dad did a local radio talk show for single dads; it was so unusual he was, like, on the news!" recalls Graham, who moved at age 5 to the Northern

Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., where her father worked as a congressional lobbyist. Her mother left the family at this time to pursue a singing career, eventually landing in England and starting a second family there.

If the actress struggles with any residual bitterness about her mother's departure, she reveals no trace of it—either that, or she's exceptionally talented at her craft. "I did see my mom—I'd visit her once or twice a year—and she was always a fascinating, interesting, gorgeous character to me. We weren't close"—she died four years ago—"but I did appreciate her. In a strange way I understood her. She was trying to be

a painter, a singer in a band, do something that made her feel fulfilled. Now, being an actor, I draw parallels with the women I play. It's the same struggle: *Who am I?* That was the path she was on," she reflects.

"There were some difficult aspects," she admits. "You know, when there was a Mother-Daughter Day, or if I was doing a school play and they sent home a costume to be sewed. My dad always did his best or got his secretary to help. That's just the way it was."

The loss of any parent—especially when that parent is alive and well, and living away from the family by choice—is almost always damaging to some degree, says

“ I draw parallels with the women I play. It's the same struggle: Who am I? ”

Lauren Graham's 4 Rules for Healthy Living

Don't (entirely) hang up your dreams when parenthood calls. Graham may not be a mother, but she seems keenly aware that many women put their own aspirations on hold—often forever—when their children arrive. "My character is trying to keep her kids in school, keep them going, give them some chance at a better life. ... But she's trying to have a personal life, too, and decides she can't—that there's no time or room for it. In the second season we'll explore more about her finding confidence, a better sense of self."

Be open to an evolving definition of "family." As an adult Graham has accepted extended family members—and benefited emotionally from it. "My mom passed way four years ago. She was in England most of my life. I'd go there once or twice a year as a kid. Eventually both of my parents had more kids. My half-sister came to live with me after my mother passed away. Now she's in her own apartment, but we've become really close."

A little competition is good for you. Whether it's vying for a coveted role or clearing a high fence while cantering across an equestrian course, Graham is "drawn to things where people warn: 'Be careful! You might not make it!' There's a sense of exhilaration and accomplishment when you *do* make it," she enthuses. "I'm not a daredevil. But I am competitive."

Don't worry about your age. Worry about your alignment. Graham has a healthy attitude about aging in Hollywood: She's less concerned with Botox than with better posture. "As you get older, your body shifts and changes. It's so important to not get into bad habits, which can create somebody who can't stand up straight! Pilates is helpful for me as I look forward."

Graham shot to fame in her hit series, *Gilmore Girls*, co-starring Alexis Bledel.



LEFT AND PREVIOUS PAGE: ANTOINE VERGLASCOBIS; RIGHT: WARNER BROS./EVERETT COLLECTION



Graham consistently receives raves for her TV and film work, including, from left, *Gilmore Girls*, *The Answer Man*, and *Parenthood*.

William Doherty, PhD, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities at St. Paul, family therapist, and author of *Take Back Your Kids: Confident Parenting in Turbulent Times*.

“When children don’t see a parent, they grapple with doubt and issues of self-esteem ... and if it’s the mother who’s left, it’s harder on kids because it goes against the cultural script. We see mothers as having the primary bond and, regrettably, give cultural permission for dad to move on. But if a mother leaves, our gut responds differently. As a society we ask: ‘What happened there?’”

Graham’s character is dealing with a former spouse who’s an absent dad. The actor can’t help but bring her own experiences of being raised by a single (if truly attentive) father to her televised alter ego, which may explain why she’s so very believable in the part.

“When you’re a single parent, you have to be mom and dad,” says Graham. “So little stuff with my character, like her trying to find someone to toss a baseball with her son ... I told the producers, ‘No, she’d do it herself! She’d get out there and play catch because she has to. That’s how it works.’ And that found its way onto the show.”

As a teenager, Graham didn’t experience the mother-daughter drama *Parenthood* plays for maximum impact. “I’d go to my friends’ houses and their mothers would be all over them: ‘What about this? What about that?’ they’d nag,” she remembers. “But I had more freedom and independence, which worked well, I think, with my personality.”

So, why, exactly, is this feminine connection so often a fiery one? “Girls are socialized to

be intensely relational and confiding ... so the mother-daughter dynamic is both more passionate and at times more negative than is the father-son or mother-son relationship,” explains Doherty.

“For example, mom wants to know what’s going on with her daughter’s friends and feels betrayed if her questions are met with silence. But with sons, as one of my patients aptly put it: ‘The deeper my son’s voice gets, the less he has to say.’ Generally, we accept a certain degree of withdrawal from boys, but with our daughters we take it personally—that’s what leads to fireworks.”

Acting on Her Dreams

Before Graham wanted to become an actress, she was a girl who loved horses. “I didn’t have dolls,” she jokes, “just a million little horse figures.” She adored the stables, the one-on-one connection with the animal, the competitive sport of jumping at equestrian centers. “I was trying to figure out what I could do [for an occupation] to be near them—jockey, maybe? Mounted policeman? Veterinarian? But then I landed a part in a high school production and everything shifted.” At once hooked on theater life, Graham finally found her true calling, which

4 Secrets for Single Parenthood Success

Raising children on your own? Family therapist William Doherty, PhD, offers these tips for avoiding solo parents’ top mistakes.

Be the leader. You’re exhausted after a long day at work. The kids are antsy for attention. It’s so much easier to cave and let them eat pizza in front of the TV while you retire to your room and recoup, or to trade sarcastic quips when they resist your authority—but you mustn’t. “Don’t give up that position, or things will quickly degenerate,” Doherty says.

Pick your battles—and your policies. Be willing to give on small things—“how tidy their rooms are, or the crazy haircut,” suggests Doherty. “Tell your kids: ‘I’ll do my best to work around your schedules, too, but these are my rules and they will not be bent.’”

Maintain rituals. Whatever you did together before as a family—dining out every Tuesday night, following special holiday traditions, or reading stories before bed—be sure to continue after a separation. “You will be doubly exhausted now, but it’s doubly important,” says Doherty. “And most studies on the subject indicate the family dinner is the most important family ritual to maintain.”

Monitor your teens. “A big mistake single-parent families make is losing track of their teenagers,” Doherty says. “Know who your child’s friends are. Know where she’s going. Insist she check in whenever you ask her to.”

led her first to New York and then to Hollywood. Now, she rarely goes riding but claims she’s planning a return to the saddle “when I retire. It’ll be an old-age kind of thing.”

Graham’s dream of playing Broadway came true when she won the role of 1930s nightclub singer Miss Adelaide in the 2009 revival of *Guys and Dolls*.

“It was a dream, but then there’s the reality,” she laughs, recalling the toil of performing in eight shows a week for six consecutive months.

“It was physically demanding ... I discovered the neti pot. I was on [prescription medication] the whole time for heartburn. Everyone on Broadway is, because you have the adrenaline of performing, you eat after the show, and then you ask your body to go to sleep—you just can’t digest properly.”

“A friend who’s done a lot of Broadway sat me down before I started and said: ‘You will not eat tomatoes [because of their acidity]. You will sleep 12 hours every night. You will not eat heavily after a show. I did all of those things ... I even saw [former President] Bill Clinton’s voice doctor when I thought I was losing mine.’”

Just a few months after the show’s run, Graham got a surprise call from *Parenthood*’s producers. Fellow NBC medical drama ER alum, Maura Tierney, who’d originally been cast as Sarah Braverman, faced a sudden diagnosis of breast cancer last summer before production began. (Tierney is reportedly doing great, according to her rep Christina Papadopoulos. She “has finished treatment and is doing very well and is happy to move forward with the next phase of her life.”)

So Graham got the script—and the part. “I’ve been doing this long enough to know when I have a real emotional reaction ... I connected to these people. It reminded me of the shows I loved growing up, like [the ABC series] *Thirtysomething*. There’s nothing cheesy or melodramatic, just truthful.”

Back in Los Angeles, Graham has replaced her Broadway regimen with a more, well, normal approach to health and nutrition: “Listen, I’ve done everything: cleanses, fasts, I’ve gone vegetarian,” she says. “Now, I think the thing is to eat only stuff [when] you know where it comes from and close to the source ... I try to

“In my business it’s so easy to worry about your body and aging—but you know what? That’s unhealthy. So I try to have a greater ease about it all.”

earn whatever bad choices I make by being healthy throughout the day, or by making sure I exercise. It’s all about balance: I can do this because I did that. I’d rather have a small amount of something I love than fill up on tree bark and rice!

“In my business it’s so easy to worry about your body and aging—but you know what? That’s unhealthy. So I try to have a greater ease about it all.” Graham stays fit by doing Pilates and attending regular spinning classes. Once an avid runner, she’s also recently taken up cycling, just like her dad. “He’s been into it for the last five years or so. We went on a cycling trip together through Ireland, which was a great time. You can be anywhere, any age, and you can always get on a bike.”

What’s Next?

Professionally, the actor is excited about her upcoming feature film, *It’s Kind of a Funny Story*, where she plays—you guessed it—another mom, due out Sept. 24. But she’s also anxious to further explore what makes Sarah Braverman tick on the second season of *Parenthood*.

When asked what her character does right—and wrong—when it comes to motherhood, Graham thinks for a minute and offers this: “Sarah puts her kids first, which is right. In a weird way, though, that’s also what she’s doing wrong. She’s never asked herself: ‘What will make me happy?’ ... She tries to take care of her kids, and is now trying to pursue something that gives her a sense of accomplishment. That’s where we’re headed in the second season.”

With Graham’s insight into both sides of that parental conundrum—a mother’s search for identity versus the sometimes painful fallout of being raised by a single parent—it’s certain to be dramatic fare. But it’ll also be, as she puts it, “truthful.” ■



FROM LEFT: WARNER BROS.; EVERETT COLLECTION; MAGNOLIA/EVERETT COLLECTION; HARPER/SMITH/NBC UNIVERSAL, INC.; RIGHT: IIR PHOTOCORBIS OUTLINE

How do you balance it all? Get **healthy living** tips from the experts.  **WebMD.com**