

DOES EVERY CHILD NEED A DAD?

When adopting baby Mercy, Madonna reportedly asked her ex, Guy Ritchie, to play the father figure despite their split. Can you grow up perfectly well-adjusted without a father, or does having one make a crucial difference?



YES
Annemarie Luck

Marie Claire copy editor

Dr Phil once said that most people have a hole in their soul the shape of their fathers. While I'm not in the habit of quoting Oprah's ex-sidekick, on this point I have to agree. And considering that 63 per cent of children in South Africa are growing up fatherless (according to the General Household Survey 2007), I imagine I'm not alone.

My parents split when I was three months old and I grew up visiting my dad at weekends and during holidays. While I knew him, I never really *knew* him. Still, it didn't occur to me that I was missing out on something as I had a large, loving family with plenty of male role models.

Then I turned 17 and got my heart broken. About six years and multiple heartbreaks later, I realized I was carrying around an annoying fear of abandonment. I started talking to my mom about her history with my father. And then I mustered up the courage to e-mail my dad and tell him that I thought my relationship with him, or rather lack of one, might have something to do with the love rollercoaster

I was on. Since I sent that e-mail my relationship with my father has flourished - and, oddly enough, so has my love life.

I'm not saying that every person who grows up without a dad at home is destined to re-enact *Romeo and Juliet*, or that those with present fathers won't have a blotch on their relationship résumé. But I do believe that (good) dads fill a space that no-one else can. That 'space' may affect you in areas other than romance - one American study* showed that 85 per cent of all juvenile offenders grew up in fatherless homes, for example - but it will always affect you.

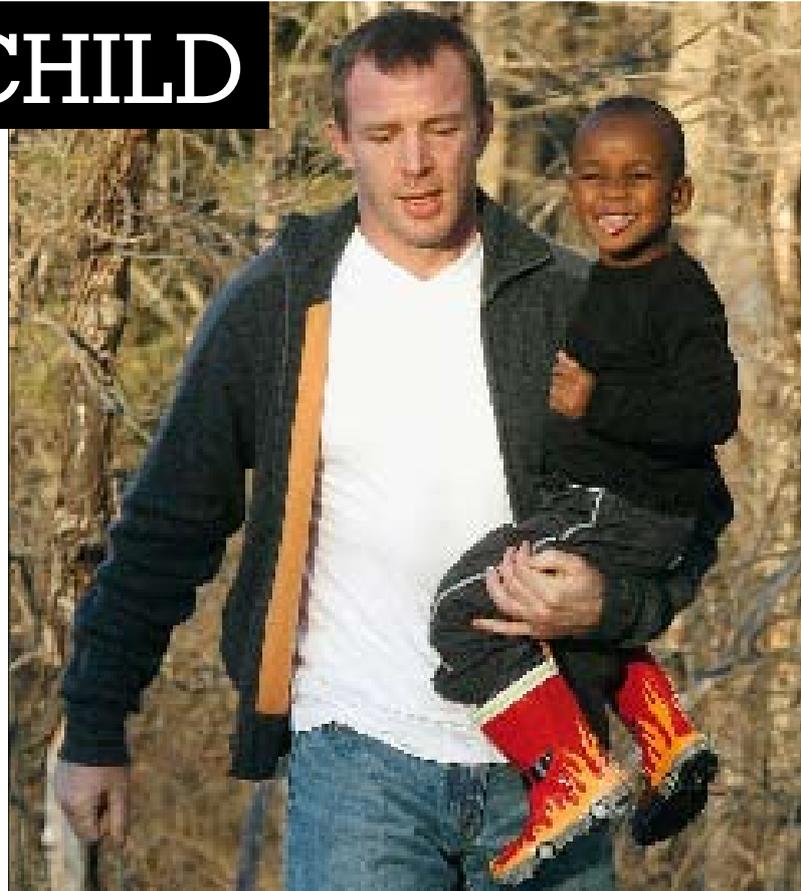
Sometimes a woman has no choice but to raise her child alone, and, yes, it is possible for that child to be happy without a father, but I believe they will feel, especially as they get older, that there's something missing.



NO
Natasha Distiller

Associate professor, UCT Department of English

After we'd been together for six years, my female partner and I decided to start a family. I became pregnant through artificial insemination.



I also began a research project on lesbian parent families. Since the 1970s, practitioners in psychology, psychiatry, nursing, family studies, sociology and law have been studying lesbian parent families to establish whether the lack of a father is detrimental to their children. Consistently, these studies find that what a child needs is loving parents, regardless of gender.

Children raised without fathers but with two mothers are not confused about their gender identities, tend to be heterosexual (like most other people) and have good self-esteem. What *is* damaging to these children, according to the studies, are the assumptions and prejudices of wider society. One such assumption is that every boy needs a male role model in order to come to terms with their masculinity. Psychologists have shown that gender development

does not follow a script in which masculinity needs to be linked to a male body, and femininity to a female one.

Of course, it is unhealthy for any child to grow up unexposed to diversity, including gender diversity. It must also be difficult for a child to have a disinterested, uninvolved father. But a child does not, by definition, have to have a father, no matter what. If this were the case, many of the world's children would be damaged from the start, as numbers of single mothers continue to grow.

Instead of idealizing a fantasy of protective maleness, we should be changing our expectations of what constitutes a family. This would also enable us to deal with the reality that some fathers are abusive, and to stop perpetuating the myth of the nuclear model as the best and safest for everyone. ■

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