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The Incredible Shrinking Dad

An old debate finds a new twist: fathers may not be essential after all

LIANNE GEORGE

Seven years ago, on the eve of his 23rd birthday, Adrian Grenier, the preternaturally laid-back star of the HBO series *Entourage*, decided to set up a camera outside Yankee Stadium and ask passersby what a father meant to them. The assorted responses -- "a best friend," "a leader," "no clue" -- comprise the opening sequence of Grenier's first feature-length documentary, screened this week at the Toronto International Film Festival. *Shot in the Dark* chronicles the New York-based actor's own floundering journey to reconnect with his estranged father -- an attempt, he says, to overturn the social stigma of being raised without one. More concisely, he says in the film, with a 23-year-old's bravado, "to prove that I don't have to care."

When he was growing up in a family of two, Grenier says, people regularly assumed he was "at a loss," that without the guidance of his father -- a man he hadn't seen since the age of 5 -- his upbringing had been somehow broken. "I was setting out to prove that fatherhood is just biology," he says. "Just fluid and empty spaces." Early in *Shot in the Dark* -- so titled because, he figures, that's what his own conception amounted to -- he seeks to challenge that theory by consulting a psychiatrist, who suggests Grenier is repressing his hurt; a psychic, who warns him of impending heartbreak; and a Catholic priest, who insists his childhood must have been more traumatic than he realizes. (To this, he shrugs. "I had a good life," he says. "My mom was a good father.") In one scene, Grenier observes a father-and-son team engaging in manly backyard horseplay. He looks on from the sidelines with mild bewilderment and the scientific detachment of an anthropologist scrutinizing the bonding rituals of primates. Still, he's no closer to an understanding of what he's missed. For his grand finale, Grenier parachutes himself, unannounced, into his father's life to address, once and for all, why he left. After a series of fraught, airless exchanges, he draws the inevitable conclusion that his dad is human and flawed. "It wasn't about me," he says. "My parents had their issues." He seems to forgive his father easily, thus neatly proving his point that he didn't suffer without this man.

Shot in the Dark comes at a moment when the debate over whether children -- and boys, in particular -- need their fathers has become intensely polarized. On the one hand, there is the recent typhoon of alarming statistics, all of which seem to suggest that the absence of a father at home significantly increases the likelihood that a teenaged boy will abuse drugs, drop out of school, become a parent, engage in criminal activity, and wind up incarcerated. These anti-social behaviours, many experts say, prove the fact that fathers play a role that is distinct and essential in order for their sons to reach "psychological manhood." In his 2001 book *Father Hunger*, Harvard child psychologist James Herzog identified a blanket yearning among fatherless children that he defined as, in part, a boy's struggle to transition into manhood when he has no blueprint to work from.

On the other hand, psychologists have recently set out to challenge the idea that fatherless boys are bound to fail as men as a fallacy rooted in antiquated and idealized notions of

family. Parental gender, they say, is irrelevant. Rather, all kids need is at least one parent who is a responsible, loving and steady caregiver. Overwhelmingly, though, mothers tend to fill that role. In a 1999 issue of the journal *American Psychologist*, Louise Silverstein and Carl Auerbach of Yeshiva University in New York published a study called "Deconstructing the Essential Father," in which they concluded -- to considerable outrage in family-values circles -- that the available data "do not support the idea that fathers make a unique and essential contribution to child development."

Earlier this year, Peggy Drexler, a Cornell University psychology professor, took this position one step further in her book *Raising Boys Without Men*. She asserted that, all things being equal, boys often fare better without a male influence in the home. In the course of her research, Drexler followed a cohort of mostly middle-class boys, ages 5 to 9, from mother-only families, and charted their emotional and behavioural growth compared with boys from conventional mom-and-dad families. "I wanted to find out if sons can prosper through the power of mothers alone," she says. In the end, she decided that not only were they functional, they often outshone their more traditionally reared peers. "The boys in my study were not sissies or mama's boys," she says. "Nor did they compensate for the lack of a father figure by becoming overly aggressive. They were thoughtful communicators who were caring and sensitive, but they were just as willing to engage in boyish activities like skateboarding and roughhousing." Also, she says, they were remarkably resourceful in securing male role models in their extended families and communities. "It seemed clear that their essential boyishness was hard-wired."

Fatherlessness is not inherently problematic, says Drexler. The trouble, she points out, lies in the unfortunate reality that the average single mother has to contend with socio-economic factors -- namely poverty, gender discrimination and systemic racism -- that often prevent her from providing her children with the kind of support they may need. It is these factors, says Drexler, and not the absence of a male influence at home, that are most likely to determine a child's behaviour and performance. "Parenting is not anchored to gender," she says. "Parenting is either good or deficient, not male or female."

The question is not merely academic. A cursory glance at census data indicates that, as the traditional nuclear family model continues to erode, a shocking number of children are growing up without at-home dads. In North America, more than 10 million households are headed up by single mothers (up from three million in 1970). Some now argue that, considered in a larger, historical context, fathers are perilously en route to being written out of the cultural script altogether. In his 1995 book *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, David Blankenhorn, now considered a pioneer in the "fatherhood movement," reminds readers that, historically, fathers were the ones who claimed primary responsibility for their sons' moral and religious education. "Throughout the 18th century," he writes, "child-rearing manuals were generally addressed to fathers, not mothers." But with the physical separation of work and home, brought on by the Industrial Revolution, the domestic sphere became increasingly "feminized." "In some respects," he writes, "it has been all downhill for fathers ever since."

In response to theories like Drexler's, the fatherhood movement has devoted its energies to keeping fathers -- and men in general -- from being pushed even farther into the margins of society. "Fatherhood itself is under attack," wrote Mark Honigsbaum last month in an article for *New Statesman* on American boys in crisis. "Although some feminists may desire it, you cannot simply wish away patriarchy and a certain type of masculinity."

In the years since his documentary was shot, Adrian Grenier has cultivated a steady but

tentative relationship with his biological father. "We're just keeping at it and getting to know each other as people and trying to get some shared experience under our belts," he says. "Do I think it's important to get to know him as a person? Honestly, I don't. But I want to. He's a good guy. That's really what it is. He wasn't my father, so now what is he? He's a guy. We don't have a lot in common. But I'm still struggling with an ideal. I still want somebody to look up to."

This sentiment may be what Herzog would classify as classic father hunger. Or it could be something else altogether. In the debate over fatherless boys, one subject less frequently discussed is the effect of being stuck with the lifelong knowledge that a parent -- and it does more often tend to be male -- decided somewhere along the road that he didn't want the job. The fact of that rejection alone, it would seem, is bound to leave a kid, regardless of circumstances, feeling a little lopsided in the world.

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