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**Boys harmed by fathers' absence**

The Age (Melbourne, Australia), By CHLOE SALTAU, Tuesday April 3, 2001

Boys are disadvantaged without the emotional presence of a man in their lives, according to a social researcher who is interviewing men about relationships with their fathers.

Patra Antonis, a psychologist, counsellor and Swinburne University masters student, says men should "be around the herd" and bond with their sons in an inherently male, "rough-and-tumble" way. Her theory is likely to reignite the debate about the impact of absent fathers on the development of their sons.

Ms Antonis is undertaking the research at a time when she says increases in the divorce rate and the rise of out-of-wedlock childbearing have changed families and the role of parents within them.

Her experience counselling men at her private practice in Elsternwick has convinced her that boys are disadvantaged without a man in their lives, although she says it is the emotional presence that counts.

It does not matter so much if a father is physically absent, so long as there is a close emotional bond. That bond can also be between a boy and his non-biological father.

Previous research has shown that the absence of a father figure damages boys' academic and psychological development and their future relationships. It also increases the risk of delinquency, drug addiction and even suicide.

Many of the men who Ms Antonis has seen feel "a great hollow" as adults because of their fathers' emotional absence when they were children.

"Just as oestrogen affects, in subtle ways, women's behavior, the fact is testosterone does affect the behavior of men so they are more active and external ... They need to cater to the inherent nature of the beast, but also in a civilised and loving way," she says.

However, the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children said "father-yearning" often came from the social expectation that children should be raised in a "normal family" with a mother and a father.

Children should not feel doomed if their father could not be with them.

Co-executive officer Elspeth McInness said children should instead be surrounded with as many caring, responsive, consistent, supportive adults as possible.

Research released by the Australian Institute of Family Studies suggests most children adjust to different family structures and "cope adequately" after the breakdown of a marriage whether they live with their mother or father.

Another institute study found fathers who had never been married to the mother of their children and subsequently left the relationship were less involved with their children than fathers who had been married. The fathers who had never married also felt less obliged to provide financial support.

"These results are of concern, especially given the increasing recognition of the benefits of paternal participation in separated family situations," said author Maggie Walter.

She also said "the level of emotional bonding between father and child, and the use by the father of an authoritative parenting style, were found to be positively related to schooling success and negatively related to problem behavior".

Ms Antonis said governments should develop policies that encouraged fathers to "be around the herd" and involve themselves vigorously in their sons' upbringing. She is seeking men between 20 and 35 to participate in her study.

Australian Mens Rights Association