

Riley, four, and his dad Mark love playing rough and tumble games together



# Man about the house

Fathers get a bad press, for being absent or setting a poor example. But sometimes, after a bereavement or a divorce, they are literally left holding the baby – and these three doting dads have found it a richly rewarding experience

Words by Dawn Doherty

Mark Garratt, 46, lives in Long Hanborough, Oxfordshire. His wife Debbie died at the age of 37 from ovarian cancer and Mark is now bringing up their son Riley, who is nearly five. "When Riley was born in August 2003, I was overjoyed. I was 41, a relatively old dad, and there had been periods in my life when I thought I was destined never to have children. So to hold my baby son in my arms was the most wonderful experience. It changes your life forever.

I'd met Riley's mum Debbie 12 months earlier. We'd both been married previously and Debbie had two children – Jono now 15, and Kristina, now 18 – from her first relationship. Ours was a

whirlwind romance – we knew very quickly it was something special. Within months we were living together and decided early on that we wanted a baby together.

During the year before Riley was born, Debbie had begun suffering discomfort and bloating in her stomach and was back and forth to her doctor's surgery, though our GP put it down to irritable bowel syndrome. Then a few months after Riley arrived her stomach swelled so much she looked six months pregnant again. One night in January 2004, she collapsed in the bathroom and was rushed to hospital where it was discovered she had ovarian cancer.

Debbie underwent a hysterectomy, followed by chemotherapy, and seemed to respond to the treatment. We were full of hope, but then the cancer started to grow again and despite more chemotherapy, it spread to her digestive system. Debbie spent the last few weeks of her life in a hospice and we married there three days before she died, on October 24, 2005.

Riley was 26 months old when he lost his mum. He goes to nursery while I'm at work and I get lots of help and support from people around me. My mother has been brilliant and Debbie's parents have Riley on a Sunday evening so I get a night off. But, without question, the biggest help of all

has been Riley himself. He's a really good boy, very bright and helpful. It's almost as though he understands the situation.

Before she died, Debbie never tried to tell me how she wanted Riley brought up – I think she had faith in the way I would do things. I take Riley to visit her memorial stone every fortnight and we have a little chat about Debbie and how we miss her. I've explained the facts in a very simple way – that his mummy was very poorly and the doctors tried to make her better, but they couldn't and so she died. Debbie made him a memory box with pictures and trinkets and wrote him a letter which I'll give him to read when he's older.

Riley is a very sociable little boy and he's on the go non-stop. He's into Thomas the Tank Engine and is mad about Dr Seuss. We enjoy each other's company and I get so much out of him. We play rough-and-tumble games, go for walks and visit the library together. I've also joined the WAY Foundation, a support group for people who've been bereaved at a young age. We go to social events and Riley gets to mix with other children who've lost a parent and experienced the things he's been through.

As a lone dad, you are a bit out on a limb sometimes. When I'm home by myself in the evenings, I don't settle well. I can't go out often because I can't afford babysitters and I can feel a bit isolated. I'm also very conscious Riley is growing up in a male environment and I try to make sure he spends time with my mum and sister so he has some female influence in his life.

Father's Day is a sad day for me because it brings home the fact that I'm the only one looking after Riley. Debbie would always do something special to mark the occasion – one year she made me a cup with Riley's handprint on it and another year she gave me a Father's Day plate. There will be no one to do that this Father's Day.

Riley starts school in September and that will also be an emotional time. When Debbie was ill, one of the goals she set herself was to be alive to see Riley's first day. It's such a shame that she's not here to watch Riley grow up and develop. I know she would be delighted by him – just as I am."

*For more information about the WAY Foundation visit their website at [www.wayfoundation.org.uk](http://www.wayfoundation.org.uk) or call 0870 011 3450.*

Bob Greig, 43, lives in Dartington, Devon, and is a full-time dad to daughters Priya, 11, and Anya, eight. "Anya had just turned four and Priya was seven when their mother left four years ago, turning all our lives upside down. I've brought the girls up by myself ever since and was granted full residence by the courts.

For the first two years as a single dad I continued to work. I was juggling a demanding full-time career as a property consultant – which involved travelling all over the country – with running our



**Bob gave up his job to bring up his daughters Priya, 11, and Anya, eight**

home and caring for the children with the help of the children's grandparents, after-school clubs and an array of childminders.

In the end, it all got too much. I was suffering panic attacks and anxiety. My GP said I was exhausted. On his advice, I gave up my job – I just couldn't do it all. My health quickly recovered and I loved being able to drop the children off at school, collecting them each day and being there for them when they were ill.

But it wasn't easy. As a lone father at the school gates, you do feel conspicuous. It's a very female dominated world which has been hard to break into. You don't have the same network as the mums and it has taken time for the barriers to start crumbling. Priya once said to me she wished everything was normal at school pick-up times. When I asked her what she meant, she said she would have liked to have a mummy collecting her like the other kids.

Nights out are a rare treat. By 9pm I'm usually

tired and ready to curl up in front of the TV. Besides, I don't have the spare cash to splash out on meals out and babysitters. It's easy to feel isolated and like most single parents, financially I'm worse off. But I've learned that money and status don't really matter. There's nothing more rewarding than bringing up children and having the time to be with them.

We have a lot of fun and good times together. We go swimming, play on the trampoline in the back garden and enjoy outings to the zoo and theme parks, and picnics on the beach in summer. They're great children and I feel a huge sense of pride. Anya is very easy-going, loves reading and has lots of friends. Priya is learning the keyboard and is a lovely, thoughtful, caring girl. She's just started getting interested in music and clothes and is slowly but surely turning into a teenager. We recently had a talk about periods and the facts of life. I'd been dreading it and thought the last person Priya would want to

discuss it with was me. But we have such a good relationship and talk so openly that there was none of the embarrassment I'd envisaged.

When other men discover I'm bringing up the girls on my own, the usual reaction is: 'I don't know how you do it'. From mums, I get offers of support and they're often quite admiring that I've chosen this path and that I do it reasonably well.

Even though there are a quarter of a million lone dads in the UK, we're still very much an invisible group. I think fathers generally get bad press – all you read are stories about dads failing to pay maintenance or running off and there's an automatic assumption that children are better off with their mothers. But I think men can do a brilliant job as single parents.

My priority is that my children grow up happy and are fulfilled. The bond I share with them is precious. A lot of men hardly see their kids because they're working, whereas I've had a huge input into their lives. You can't put a price on that."

*Bob has set up [www.onlydads.org](http://www.onlydads.org), offering support and helping them get in touch with other single dads in their area.*

**Simon Clayton, 45, lives in Hay-on-Wye, Powys, and has shared custody of his daughter Esti, nine.**

"I split up with Esti's mum Aneta when Esti was 18 months old and now our daughter lives with me for one week, and spends the next with her mum 20 miles away. Shared care is virtually all Esti's ever known.

I worked as a pilot before Esti was born, but gave it up so I could spend more time at home with my family. I had very much wanted a child and her birth was the happiest moment of my life. I loved being a dad – fatherhood was everything I imagined it would be, and when my marriage ended, I was determined I would always be a big part of Esti's life.

I live in the country and when she's with me we lead an outdoor life. We go for walks, explore the countryside, and she has horse riding lessons. I don't own a TV and we spend time reading and looking after her pets. She has rabbits, a duck, chickens, and a pony, as well as ferrets which she breeds and shows.

Esti's mum lives in the town so she gets the best of both worlds. She lives two lives packed into one. It might sound stressful, but it's not. She has her own room at my home and a second set of clothes and toys. She knows everything is organised for her and I think she understands the arrangement is a good thing. Kids need to see both their parents and it's making the best of the situation. And she sees the fun of it too – she gets two Christmases, two birthdays, and two Easters.

As a single parent, you live on the breadline. I do voluntary work but there's no way I could have a big career or run a business and look after my daughter. I've had to give up money and status, but to me it's no sacrifice. It's also been hard to form a new relationship because I'm so



**Esti enjoys the country life with her dad Simon who has shared custody of his daughter**

busy with Esti. It means I'm less available to a new partner to have fun or go on holiday with than I would have been in another life.

While some people have been wonderful, it has surprised me how mothers don't hold out a hand to dads like they do with other mums. Unless you know people really well, there's a slight reticence to bringing you into the fold.

I'm incredibly proud that we've made this work. There are many dads who don't get proper access to their children and I know I'm very lucky to have an equal balance with my ex.

Esti is the centre of my world and watching her grow and develop is a constant source of delight. She's top of the class at school and a very down

to earth little girl with a great sense of humour. When she's not with me, I do miss her but I always know I will see her again in a few days.

Esti will be with her mum this Father's Day, but she will give me a ring to send me her love. It's my birthday a few days later and we'll have a double celebration then. I know in my heart that Esti and I have a relationship that will last a lifetime and our bond is as strong as can be."

*Families Need Fathers is a charity that provides information and support to anyone worried about not seeing their children after a relationship break-down. Visit [www.fnf.org.uk](http://www.fnf.org.uk) or call 08707 607496 for help and advice.*