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Let's make a baby!

AN EXTRAORDINARY AND MOVING STORY OF ONE WOMAN'S LONGING TO START A FAMILY

Jennie Withers, 'happy, single and soulful', pictured in her west London home
Photographs Abigail Zoe Martin



| Cover story |

WANTED: WOULD-BE FATHER TO CO-PARENT A CHILD

PRETTY, SOULFUL,
HAPPY AND
HEALTHY WOMAN,
41 (SINGLE AND
HETEROSEXUAL),
WOULD LIKE TO MEET
A MAN PREPARED
TO FATHER A CHILD
AND TO HAVE A ROLE
IN THE CHILD'S LIFE.
LONDON BASED.

TERMS OF
RELATIONSHIP TO BE
NEGOTIATED

How does a single woman, longing for a child, go about starting a family? Here, in an extraordinary and intimate appeal, Jennie Withers reveals her unorthodox solution. Interview [Caroline Phillips](#)
Photographs [Abigail Zoe Martin](#)

Maybe baby: Jennie Withers, at home in west London, knows she wants a child. All she needs is the man...

It's strange that I've come to this. I always used to say, 'I'd rather die than be one of those women pushing a pram around Sainsbury's.' The mundane and domestic terrified me. It's only in the past two years that I've started to acknowledge that I'd like a family. I've been looking for a partner – more a soul mate, really – for ages. But the right person hasn't come my way. Then, about six months ago – profoundly, peacefully but really clearly – a thought came to me: 'I want a child.'

It made me cry. It felt as if it came from such a true place. The idea that I could want a child and not have a partner was extraordinary. Then I felt full of grief that I should suddenly be feeling this – at my age and single. I texted a girlfriend. 'I've decided I want a child.' 'Lucky child,' she texted back. That made me cry, too. You see, it's taken me a long time to get here because I've spent most of my life running away from myself.

I've had many years of feeling lost, depressed and desperately trying to make it all look OK on the outside. Trying to cope with bulimia, drinking too much, drugs and mad relationships. Ten years ago I stopped all that and everything changed – I'm now happier than ever before. I laugh a lot. I've so much love in my life.

Still, more than anything though, I'd like to have a child with a partner. I don't know why the right person hasn't turned up, but he hasn't. So I've decided to look for a co-parent. It's not an ideal solution, but it's better than the other options. But how to make it happen? I've wondered where I can place an ad. I haven't found a co-parenting forum. I can't think of anyone I know who'd want to co-parent. I've thought about it all endlessly.

How did I come to this? In the past, I crashed from one relationship and liaison to the next. Mostly with unavailable men, men as dysfunctional as I was. Someone mature, ordinary and nice wouldn't have come near me. (I don't want to scare men off any more. I love the men that I have in my life now. For the first time ever, I have good male friendships.)

I lost my virginity when I was 17. I was drunk and can hardly remember it. The man was about 35 and it was a casual encounter. After that, everything changed. I realised that sex was something that men wanted and that I could 'trade' for the approval I desperately sought. I became promiscuous. It didn't feel tawdry. Just free-spirited.

I had an infatuation that lasted 10 years. Sometimes it was on, sometimes off. Then, sensibly, he married someone else. Next there was a year with a crazy guy. Afterwards came a painful cohabitation with my boss, an older married man who lived with his wife at weekends. Then my husband, James, a lawyer, rescued me temporarily from the chaos. I married him when I was 26 and we were together for three years. I deluded myself that he could 'fix' me. I got pregnant and miscarried at three months. I didn't want the baby. The marriage wasn't right and – how sick is this? – I didn't want to get fat. I feel upset about my marriage, sad that I hurt him. I'm full of regrets about that.

In between these relationships, I had sexual liaisons. I was rarely without a man or some intrigue going on. Apart from my first love and Nick, my most recent relationship, I was never with anyone I wanted to be with. That kept me safe. I couldn't feel abandoned if I was with someone I didn't care about. If I'd risked being with somebody I really wanted to be with, I'd have risked being hurt.

But I really loved Nick. We were soul mates and lived together for three years. It was the first time I'd experienced real intimacy with a man and had sex that was sacred and beautiful, as part of a supportive, committed relationship. I did a lot of healing in that relationship, healing the rift between sex and love. Moving on from my damaged past. But we probably both had too much emotional 'baggage' to stay together. In the end, he walked away. That left me on the floor. It was the first time I'd ever cared enough about anyone to know what heartbreak meant.

Breaking up with him brought back all my feelings of being abandoned when my father died. That pain that I'd buried all those years ago. I felt I was going to die. But even though it was devastating, it was life-changing. I know now that I have the capacity to love a man and risk being truly intimate. I'm no longer enslaved to that fear of abandonment. It's not possible to love with a safety net – love has to be wholehearted. After years of therapy, let me assure you, I'm now officially 'fixed'.

I haven't had a relationship since Nick. So I haven't been with anyone for four

years. That has felt important. Casual, recreational sex doesn't work for me any more. Emotionally, it's too painful. I'd rather have nothing. I'd rather be happy and peaceful on my own than with someone I don't want to be with.

Since Nick, I've met men through friends, work, singles' events, ads, dating agencies and the internet. Generally, I'll meet the man in a bar or cafe. Journalists, doctors, designers, businessmen. Nice people, not no-hopers. But nothing that has gone beyond two dates.

Why has this happened? People always blame their problems on their parents, don't they? It's true that my childhood has affected me. My father, Pete, was a manic depressive – often hospitalised and not around for much of my childhood – who was delusional and aggressive. He was working class, which led to conflict with my mother, Mary, a nurse, who was upper middle-class. We lived in an enormous Victorian house in Plymouth. But she resented being a penniless, single mother, as she saw it. (We were the ones with the black-and-white TV who didn't go on holiday.) They had a violent relationship. From the age of four, I watched my father hitting her. I got beaten too, but it was acceptable in those days to whack your children.

I didn't confide in my sister, Lucie, although I've always loved her dearly. (She's 40, unmarried and without kids, too.) And my relationship with my mother was difficult. I felt that she was desperately disappointed in me. To this day we do our best, but we're not close.

When I was eight, my father committed suicide. My parents were divorcing and he was with his girlfriend. She rang in the middle of the night and said he'd taken an overdose. I picked up the phone. Afterwards, my mother simply said, 'Your father has just died.' I felt too ashamed to cry in front of her. We didn't do feelings in our family.

Mum had boyfriends after my father's death, but nobody hung around for long and there were no father figures. There was one man, a student in his twenties, who lodged with us for a while. Over a year, he molested me sexually. I was 10 years old. I didn't tell anyone.

I've had therapy over the past 10 years. I went to recover from my addictions, ▶

What sort of man am I looking for? He'll need to be middle class, professional; age and ethnic origin aren't important

◀ wanting to rebuild my life. It has helped me come to terms with my past. To feel compassion for myself and others. But, more than anything, it has taught me how to 'mother' and 'father' myself.

I think I've probably spent most of my life looking for 'Daddy' in various dysfunctional ways. Mostly by getting involved with older men. I've also spent so much of my life desperately wanting a family, meaning a mother and father for myself. I've so much wanted to feel part of a family. It has taken me until now to realise that I have the emotional resources to create a family of my own. Ideally, I'd like to be pregnant by next year.

I love holding babies, snuggling them, smelling them. I see my girlfriend's children at least once a week. I adore watching them grow up. Sadly, I don't have any child relatives. The other day I was sitting in a cafe with a friend. Sunday morning and everyone was out with their kids – mums with kids, dads with kids, families. We just looked at one another and said, 'It can't be that hard, can it?' But, yes, it seems to be...

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I've considered various options for having a child. I'm too old to adopt in Britain, and I'd prefer to have my own child while I can, if I can. I think having a child should be a joint venture. So I wouldn't be a single parent. So that cuts out donors.

I know in my heart that I have what it takes to be a mother. (All my life, I realise now, I've had a subconscious desire to be a wife and mother, rather than to be madly involved in a career.)

I anticipate that motherhood will be very hard. I imagine that there will be terrible pressures and that my life will change dramatically. But everyone tells me that I'd make a great mum. I like cooking, making a home, ferrying around, wiping tears. I can give my love, presence and wisdom. Loving unconditionally and supporting another human being feels like the most important thing anyone can do.

Looking for a co-parent doesn't feel to me ▶



'It has been too far beyond my wildest dreams to imagine that I would ever have a child. Now, the excitement I feel – it may be possible, after all – is overwhelming'

like a 'sad victim' thing to do. It feels like a pragmatic option born of a profound sense of wanting to fulfil my potential as a human being, woman and mother. My deepest joy comes from having people in my life that I love and to whom I offer support. But it has been too far beyond my wildest dreams to imagine that having a child could ever happen to me. Now the excitement I feel – it may be possible after all – is overwhelming. New life. With that comes hope, new beginnings, a new soul.

So I hope I'll get some responses to this article. Photographs would be good, CVs, a letter explaining why the writer wants to co-parent. Anything will do – just to give me an idea. I'll contact those who interest me and meet up with them. I don't know how I'll test the person's suitability to be a parent, beyond sensing it. I'd consider having him do a psychological profile and he might wish to do the same on me.

What sort of man am I looking for? I envisage a co-parent being middle class, professional and with values similar to mine. Age and ethnic origin aren't important. Physical characteristics don't matter that much, although obviously I'd prefer an attractive father for my child. In fact, the only thing that really matters is shared values. Whether he's gay, straight or in another relationship is irrelevant. I just want someone who's willing to be a father and co-parent. I'd also like him to offer some financial support.

What of my relationship with the co-parent?

'It'd be best not to have sex... unless it's someone I want sex with. I envisage using a home insemination kit'

I think it'd be best not to have sex with him. I think sex is a bad idea unless it's with someone I want to be having sex with. In which case, why wouldn't that person be a lover and partner? In all cases, I'd screen for HIV. Then I envisage using a home insemination kit. I wouldn't want a co-parent to live with me. Maybe he'd have another partner, male or female. Ideally he'd live nearby.

I think it would be important to lay down guidelines for our relationship and what would happen in the event of our finding other partners or having more children. The quality of the relationship is important. We wouldn't have to be lovers or best friends. But, like business partners, it would need to be a civil, working relationship. In many ways, I'm having the

divorce before the marriage. That's when people normally work things out financially, emotionally and logistically.

What's in it for the child? Well, me as mother. I'm in a position now to be a good and loving mother. The child will also have a relationship with a father. Am I being selfish? Is the child a commodity? I don't feel that. It's more responsible than having a child on my own. This arrangement puts a child's interests at heart as best as I'm currently able.

Am I replicating my own childhood experience by not having an available father for the child? A traditional father who is rarely there because he's travelling, leaves or has affairs is not a present father. I'll choose a man who will be emotionally present and play an active role.

I'll seek guidance from my therapist and a child expert, but I think I'll explain the situation to the child as soon as he or she is able to understand. They may feel special or disturbed by their parentage. They might have to handle having a gay father or two. But surely that can't be worse than experiencing a lousy parental relationship or a messy divorce? Or the child being abandoned by one parent? Or my resenting the kid because I'm on my own? I think modelling a mature, workable adult relationship that's not a love relationship has to be better.

I haven't told my mother yet. I don't know how she'll react. I don't think she'll have much of an opinion about it. But my friends have been really supportive. I have some who have children within conventional partnerships, some divorced and some on their own.

I've got one friend who is pregnant by a donor. I can't think of another way to do this. A year ago, some gay friends joked that they'd be up for co-parenting. Then it wasn't something I wanted to do. Now they've broken up and it isn't viable. I asked one of them last week: 'I don't suppose you're still interested in having a child with me, are you?' 'Pass the maple syrup,' was his response. 'If you want to consider it, perhaps we should have coffee,' I continued. 'It would take more than coffee to get you pregnant,' he pointed out.

I've even thought about living in a commune. Then I could have a child on my own and know that he or she would have lots of 'parents'. But I can't imagine myself in Findhorn in a caravan or on a kibbutz. Still, a child needs as many parents, step-parents, uncles and aunts

as possible. It's impossible for a child to have too much love and support.

I hope it happens. In my bleak moments, I still sometimes feel I don't have a right to be on this earth, let alone have a child. That the gods, whoever they are, have lost my file. That having a child is not something for which I'm destined. For too long I've hidden this unspoken desire to be a mother beneath a fatalism: oh well, it's not the right thing for me. Maybe it's for the best. That sort of thing. So it has been a relief to acknowledge it. Before it was too painful for me to admit. Because in doing so, I have to face the fact that I may not have children, and grieve that loss...

If it doesn't happen, there will be a big hole, something missing. What if I can't pass my love and what I've learnt on to another human being? In a way, my surviving what I have and developing so much as a person will have been pointless. But I'll find fulfilment in other areas. If I do nothing else in this life but heal myself and get happy, then I've done a lot. If I manage to give what I've learned to another and to raise a child, then I'll die very happy indeed.

Would I have a child at any cost? No. I don't think that would be responsible. But I have to believe that it is possible for me to have a child and partner. To dare to have that dream.★

If you'd like to get in touch with Jennie, email jennie@observer.co.uk. Or send a letter to Jennie Withers, The Observer Magazine, 3-7 Herbal Hill, London EC1R 5EJ

'The child may have a gay father or two. But that can't be worse than a messy divorce. Or being left by one parent'



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