

Is your partner a man-child? No wonder you don't feel like sex

November 25 2022, by Emily Harris and Sari van Anders



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A man sits on the couch, watching TV. His partner, a woman, prepares dinner, while mentally ticking off her to-do list. That includes returning her partner's shirts she'd ordered online for him last week, and booking a

GP appointment for their youngest child.

He walks in and asks her "what's for dinner?" then goes back to the TV.

Later that night, he's surprised she's not interested in sex.

The people in this scenario are a woman and a man. But it could be a woman and her child. The dynamics are very similar—one person providing instrumental and emotional care, and the other receiving that care while showing little acknowledgement, gratitude or reciprocation.

You're reading about a man who depends on his partner for everyday tasks that he is actually capable of. Some people call this the "[man-child](#)" phenomenon.

Maybe you've lived it. Our [research](#) shows it's real.

The man-child is real

The [man-child phenomenon](#) (or perceiving a partner as dependent, as we call it) describes the blurring of roles between a partner and a child.

You may hear women describe their [male partners](#) as their "dependent" or one of their children.

When a partner starts to feel like they have a dependent child, it's not surprising if that affects a woman's sexual desire for him.

We set out to explore whether this might explain why many women partnered with men [report low sexual desire](#).

Surprisingly, until our study, there were no studies that had tried to directly measure the impact of the man-child phenomenon on women's

sexual desire.

What we did

We conducted [two studies](#) with more than 1,000 women from around the world, in relationships with men. All our participants had children under the age of 12.

We asked the women to rate their agreement with statements like, "Sometimes I feel as though my partner is like an extra child I need to look after." We also asked them about the division of household labor in their [relationship](#), and their level of sexual desire for their partner.

We found consistent evidence that:

- when women performed more household labor than their partner, they were more likely to perceive their partner as dependents (that is, the man-child phenomenon)
- perceiving a partner as a dependent was associated with lower sexual desire for that partner.

When taken together, you could say women's partners were taking on an unsexy role—that of a child.

There could be other explanations. For instance, women who perceive their partners as dependents may be more likely to do more around the house. Alternatively, low desire for a partner may lead to the partner being perceived as a dependent. So we need more research to confirm.

Our research highlights a pretty bleak snapshot of what people's relationships can involve. And while the man-child phenomenon may not exist for you, it reflects broader gendered inequities in relationships.

Is there a man-child equivalent in same-sex relationships?

Our research was solely about relationships between women and men, with children. But it would be interesting to explore if the man-child phenomenon exists in same-sex or gender-diverse relationships, and what the impact might be on sexual desire.

One possibility is that, in relationships between two [women](#), men, or non-binary people, household labor is more [equitably negotiated](#). As a result, the mother-child dynamic may be less likely to emerge. But no-one has studied that yet.

Another possibility is that one person in the relationship (regardless of [gender identity](#)) takes on a more feminine role. This may include more of the mothering, nurturing labor than their partner(s). If that was the case, we might see the man-child [phenomenon](#) in a broader range of relationships. Again, no-one has studied this.

Perhaps, *anyone* could be the "man-child" in their relationship.

What else don't we know?

Such future research may help explore different types of relationship dynamics more broadly.

This may help us understand what sexual desire might look like in relationships where roles are equitably negotiated, chosen, and renegotiated as needed.

We might learn what happens when household labor is valued like paid labor. Or what happens when both partners support each other and can

count on each other for daily and life needs.

Women might be less likely to experience their partners as dependents and feel more sexual desire for them. In other words, the closer we are to equity in actively caring for each other, the closer we might be to equity in the capacity for feeling sexual desire with our [partner](#).

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