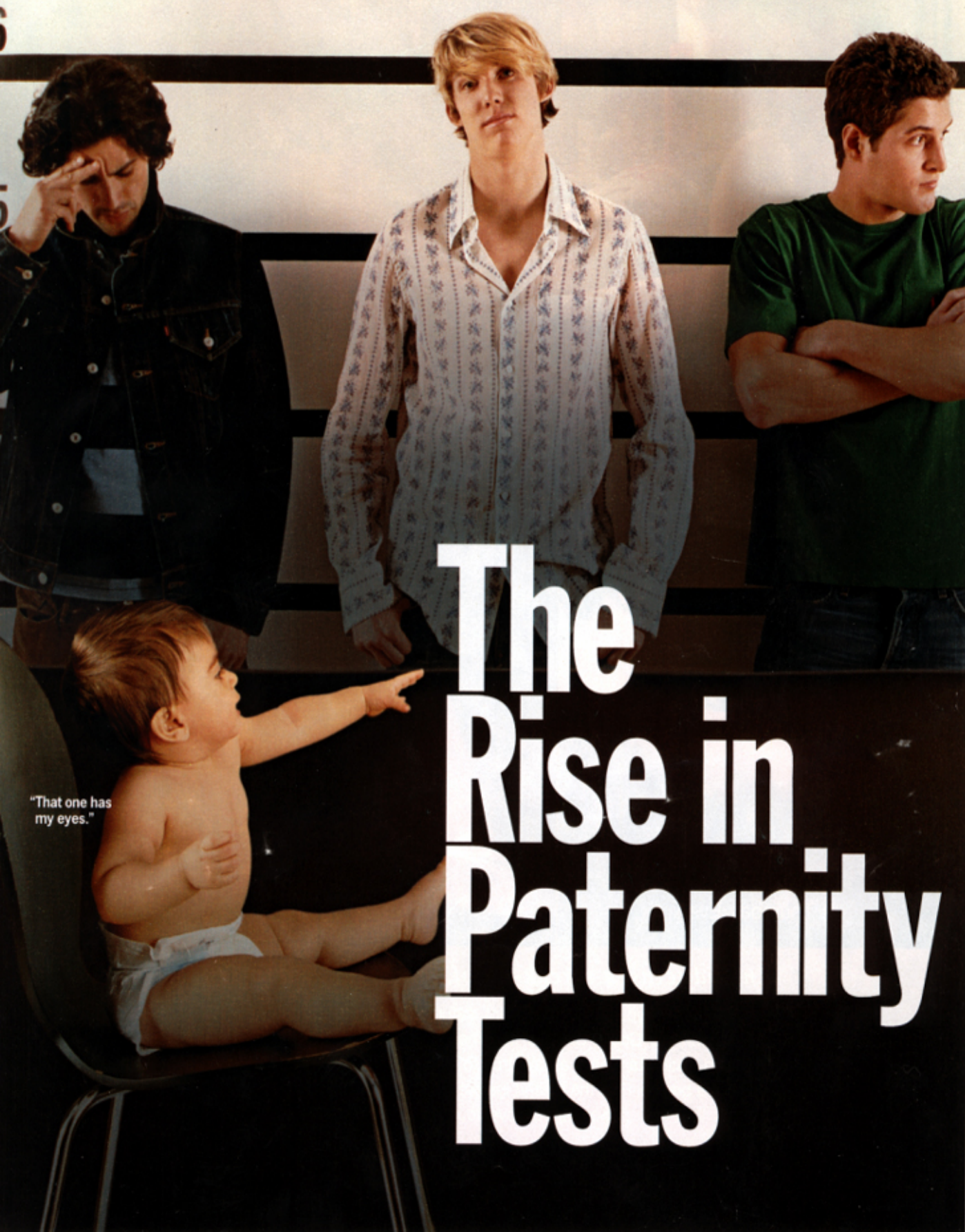


WHAT YOU'RE DYING TO KNOW ABOUT



"That one has my eyes."

# The Rise in Paternity Tests

**Cosmo** examines the reason why who's-your-daddy disputes are commonplace today and gives a crash course on the simple DNA procedure that can clear them all up in record time.

By Sara Bodnar

■ Recently, some well-known names have been linked to paternity disputes. There's Amber Frey—the other woman in the Laci Peterson murder case—who last fall acknowledged that the man paying child support for her 4-year-old daughter turned out not to be the father. That nugget of truth was uncovered after he took a paternity test, which uses DNA samples to identify a child's biological heritage.

A paternity test also proved that actress Elizabeth Hurley's former boyfriend, movie producer Stephen Bing, was indeed the father of her now 4-year-old son—something he had questioned publicly for months. Daddy doubts are even in TV story lines: When *Desperate Housewives* vixen Gabrielle became pregnant, her hubby asked to take a paternity test, knowing his wife had cheated on him with their hunky gardener.

Paternity tests are hardly limited to these high-profile examples. Though the test has been around since the late 1980s, its popularity has skyrocketed in the past few years among regular couples, says Caroline Caskey, CEO of Identigene, a paternity testing company based in Houston, Texas.

Nationwide stats bear this out: In 1995, about 150,000 DNA relationship tests were taken, mostly to determine paternity. But by 2003, their use more than doubled to 354,000, reports the American Association of Blood Banks. *Cosmo* takes a closer look at what's behind the surge.

### PATERNITY TEST PRIMER

Establishing paternity is simple—if the party in question consents. First, you order a testing kit from a lab (they're advertised all over the Web

and TV as well as in the Yellow Pages). With the cotton swabs included in the kit, genetic samples are taken from the child and the alleged father. "Saliva and skin cells contain DNA, so a guy rubs the swab inside his cheek to retrieve his genetic material and then the same is done to the child," says Caskey.

The swabs are sent to the lab that issued the test kit, along with a consent form signed by the alleged father

**"When two samples match, odds are greater than 99.9 percent that the man is the father."**

and the child's parent or guardian (results may not be legally binding if a person is tested without his knowledge). Within days, the lab contacts the test taker with the outcome. If neither DNA sample matches, there's zero chance of paternity. But if the lab determines that half of each sample is identical, daddyhood is definite. "When two samples match, odds are greater than 99.9 percent that he's the father," says Caskey.

### FASTER, CHEAPER RESULTS

Experts say it's this ease and accuracy that have made the test so much more widespread. "Paternity tests used to require blood samples, which were messier and more invasive to obtain than the swab," says Caskey. "Also, in the past few years, technology has improved, enabling a lab to complete a test in a few days, rather than the two months it used to take."

This efficiency has also helped drive down costs, so clearing up daddy doubt is more affordable for the average citizen. "Ten years ago, the price of a test was more than \$1,000, but now it's about \$500," explains Randall M. Kessler, an Atlanta family-law attorney experienced in paternity issues. "As prices plunged, more labs were able to set up shop and compete with one another, further reducing the price."

### COURT-ORDERED CASES

Despite the cost-cutting, it's usually the law that compels a guy to be tested. "They are either denying paternity and want to stop paying child support or are attempting to get legal custody of a child they've been raising," says Kessler. Since more men are involved in custody and child-support cases than ever before, the number of legally related paternity tests has increased.

A child-support skirmish is what helped Mary\*, 31, to get the father of her now 3-year-old son to take a test. "When I found out that I was pregnant, I told the father—a guy I was casually dating at the time—and he stopped returning my calls," she says. "Even after I had the baby, he

*\*Names have been changed.*

### Parent Trap

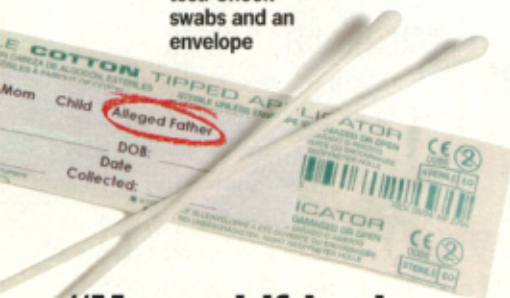
Hard to believe, but a small number of women "father shop." They sleep with several guys, get pregnant, and tell the man who makes the most money that he's the dad...hoping he doesn't demand a test.

SOURCE: JEFFERY M. LEVING, CHICAGO DOMESTIC-RELATIONS ATTORNEY

refused to contact me. So I hired an attorney, who launched a lawsuit, and the court made my ex get tested. The results came back positive, and now he makes monthly support payments.”

Legal proceedings don't just force fathers to take responsibility—they also enable supposed fathers to learn the truth. When Larry, 34, was involved in a custody battle, he discovered that the little boy he thought was his biological kid was actually fathered by another man. “After breaking up with my girlfriend, she told me she was pregnant with my baby—so I became a father from the minute the child was born,”

DIY paternity test: Cheek swabs and an envelope



**“My ex-girlfriend knew that another man could have been the father, but she let me think I was.”**

he recalls. “Four years later, I was convinced my ex wasn't a good parent, so I went for custody. My attorney said I had to take a paternity test for legal reasons...and it came back negative. When I confronted my ex, she admitted that she didn't know who the father was.” Larry then dropped his custody bid.

## WOMEN BEHAVING BADLY

Paternity experts also cite a disturbing reason for the uptick: More men are questioning whether women have intentionally misled them into thinking they're dads. “In the past five years, I've seen a growing number of these cases,” says Kessler. Dad duping may be easier

because of the rise in unmarried women giving birth. Federal data shows that a record number of babies—1.5 million—were born to unwed mothers in 2004 (the most recent statistics available).

The unmarried parent boom has triggered more opportunity for deception, explains Jeffery M. Leving, a Chicago domestic-relations attorney concentrating in paternity fraud. At least three national support groups geared toward male paternity-fraud victims have cropped up in the past few years.

Mark, 30, says he was deceived. “Before I took a required DNA test to buy a life insurance policy for my 5-year-old daughter, I never doubted that I was her father,” he says. “But the results came back saying that the probability of paternity was zilch. Shocked, I approached my ex-girlfriend, who confessed to having a one-night stand while we were together. She knew that another man could have been the father, but she let me think I was.”

## BREAKING THE SILENCE

Paternity problems have long been a staple of soaps and daytime television talk shows. But now you can barely turn on the news or flip open a magazine without hearing about fatherhood fraud. This increased visibility may also explain the testing boom. “The topic is less taboo; celebs and real people are dealing with it in the media,” says Caskey. “So more men feel comfortable initiating testing.”

After Aaron, 41, found out that his ex had been having an affair around the time his 7-year-old daughter was conceived, he had no qualms about getting tested. “I'd seen paternity-fraud victims on TV, and that made me less embarrassed,” he says. When the test revealed that Aaron wasn't the biological dad, he handled this discovery with the same openness. “I confronted my ex and let my family know. Being upfront helped me cope. Plus, it allowed me to see that I needed to be a father to the girl I was raising, regardless of what a piece of paper might say.” ■

# 5 Fascinating Paternity Test Facts

**Fact 1** If the potential father skips town, his DNA can still be tested. Genetic material culled from chewed gum, cigarette butts, razors, even a licked envelope can last 30 years and still be in good enough condition to determine paternity.

**Fact 2** Dead men sometimes take one. If a court deems it necessary to resolve a fatherhood dispute, a corpse will be dug up for tissue samples, which are then tested and compared to a child's DNA in a similar way to how a live guy's tissue is tested.

**Fact 3** If a woman has slept with identical twins, a paternity test would prove inconclusive because the men have the exact same DNA.

**Fact 4** In about 35 percent of paternity test cases, the presumed dad turns out not to be the biological one.

**Fact 5** Even if a test proves a man isn't a child's biological father and the real dad is located, the non-father may still have to pay child support. If a judge thinks it's in a child's best interest, he'll order the wrongly accused father to support the kid—and the real father doesn't have to contribute in any way.

SOURCES: CAROLINE CASKEY, CEO OF IDENTIGENE; RANDALL M. KESSLER, FAMILY-LAW ATTORNEY