

THE NEW DAD: RIGHT AT HOME

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*The authors would like to thank our families
for their constant love and support and for always
making us feel “right at home.”*

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2012, there has been a steady and pronounced message in the media that gender roles are changing in American families. Witness, for example, the following:

- **“Behind Every Great Woman: As more women earn high-level corporate roles, more husbands are staying home, raising the kids, and changing the rules”**, *BusinessWeek*, January, 2012
- **“Young Women are More Career Driven than Young Men”**, *New York Times*, April, 2012, based on a study done by Pew Research Center
- **“Men Choosing Fatherhood Over Careers”**, *Forbes*, May, 2012
- *The New Yorker*, May, 2012, **Cover art depicts a woman with a stroller entering a playground and every other parent in the playground is a man**
- **“Are Dads the New Moms?”**, *Wall Street Journal*, May, 2012

As these headlines demonstrate, researchers, journalists, and the public are beginning to sense that American families are experiencing a significant change that specifically affects fathers. The visibility and consistency of the message that the American father “ain’t who he used to be” has echoed through the country and challenged our views of gender roles and the “typical American family.”

For the past three years, the Boston College Center for Work & Family has focused much of our research on the changing role of fathers in American society. We have chronicled the shift that seems to be occurring as working fathers strive to better integrate their professional and parental roles. The tremendous reception for our work from a wide range of sources and countries has reinforced the importance and interest on the part of many regarding what is happening with fathers these days.

Our 2010 qualitative study, *The New Dad: Exploring Fatherhood Within a Career Context*, took an in-depth look at the experiences of 33 new fathers, mainly in dual-career families with very young children, and sought to better understand what transitions these men made as they added the important role of father to their full-time professional responsibilities. Our second study, *The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted*, completed in 2011, used survey methodology to gather insights into the experience of 963 fathers working in white-collar jobs in four Fortune 500 companies. The sample was not only much larger than in our first study, but also more diverse in a number of ways, not least of all because it included fathers with children up to age 18 living at home. These men had what most would consider highly effective careers. As we said at that time:

At work, these new dads are succeeding by traditional measures: they work for highly respected companies, many are in leadership positions, and they are well paid. They are also succeeding in other important career aspects as well: 90 percent said they find the work they do meaningful, 87 percent said that they feel respected in their organizations, and more than 80 percent said they “really feel a part of the group of people they work with.” By any measure, this sounds like success.

Yet at the same time, our research portrayed a group of men who put a strong premium on good partnering and good parenting. They reported spending 2.6 hours per work day with their children. Most strived to share parenting responsibilities equally with their spouses, yet 70% of the fathers admitted that they were failing to do so. Importantly, most did not see their primary contributions to their

families in financial terms (i.e. as a breadwinner.) When asked to rate six aspects that defined them as good fathers, overall they ranked providing financial security behind other roles including providing their children with love and emotional support, being a teacher, guide and coach, and most importantly being involved and present in their children's lives.

Our studies on today's fathers showed encouraging signs on the parenting front – fathers who were significantly committed to and acting on their desire to be engaged caregivers – while at the same time documenting the frustrations they felt when they were unable to do so. But there were some seemingly obvious flaws in most of our participants' career-life planning that perhaps led to their frustration. While more than three-fourths of the fathers we surveyed wanted to spend more time with their children, virtually the same number were looking for a job with greater responsibility – and nearly 60% said they would like to attain a position in senior management in their very large organizations. What may have been missing is the understanding that perhaps these competing desires simply did not add up. It seemed that these men were trapped in the myth of “having it all”.

The public acceptance that most men are truly committed to shared caregiving is still, perhaps rightly, less than complete. While most media coverage of our research was favorable and represented our findings as evidence that men's growing commitment to shared care is real, others were more skeptical. It is evident that for some, and perhaps many, the “jury is still out” on just how legitimate men's commitments are to actively parenting the current generation of American children.

This year, we chose to focus our research on those fathers whose commitment to “hands-on” parenting would be difficult to question: the small but rapidly growing number of men who provide care for their children on a full-time basis – at-home dads. These men have chosen, for a variety of reasons, to be the primary full-time caregivers to the children in their families. We wanted to better understand these fathers, to see why they left the workforce, how they contributed to their families, and what has allowed them to successfully navigate this role. Initially, we debated the degree of relevance of this group to the primary consumers of our research – i.e. employers – since these men are not currently employed. However, we believed the information gleaned from this research would be highly useful, even to this audience, as the experiences of these men provide important implications for the workplace.

The reasons we focused on this group were:

- **Increasing number of at-home dads.** Although still a very small subset of the population, at-home fathers are a rapidly growing demographic in the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of at-home fathers has risen from 1.6% in 2001 to 3.4% in 2011 of all stay-at-home parents. This translates to an increase of at-home dads from 81,000 in 2001 to 176,000 in 2011. In our previous study, *The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted*, 53% of the nearly 1,000 fathers we surveyed indicated that they would be comfortable with being an at-home father if their spouse had sufficient earnings to allow for it. This statistic, and the attitudinal shift it implies, suggested that further exploration of men who had already made this choice was warranted. The large proportion of fathers who would consider this option also indicates potential for further growth in the at-home dad population in the future.
- **Impact on women in the workplace.** Research has shown that women's pay and advancement are frequently on par with men until children enter the picture. This challenges gender bias as the primary obstacle for women and instead, suggests that “maternal walls” are the primary impediment to women's advancement (Swiss and Walker, 2004). Following the life-changing event of having a child, researchers have shown that a “motherhood penalty” often comes into play and mothers are perceived to be less committed, less promotable, and astoundingly, even

less competent than their single counterparts (Correll, Bernard, and Paik, 2007). Much of this bias against motherhood is based on the sometimes accurate assumption that most hands-on parenting responsibilities will fall to the mother. The factual evidence that women are the primary caregivers and the existence of this bias (i.e. that, of course, they will be) are perhaps the most significant barriers to women achieving full equity in the workplace at all levels, especially in the most senior roles. Understanding the changing role of fathers and the enormous impact this can have on working women's career trajectories should be of importance to any employer interested in facilitating women's advancement.

- **Impact on fathers in the workplace.** Men are reporting more work-life conflict than women as they strive to combine their roles as provider and caregiver. Increasing job demands, the blurring of boundaries between work and home life, declining job security and flat earnings have made this more challenging for men (Aumann, et. al, 2011). Some aspects of work have been noted to discourage fathers' involvement in child rearing including inflexible, long hours and workplace cultures that ignore workers' family lives and define work as the most important aspect of people's lives (Prokos, 2002). It seems these cultural elements are more pronounced for men in many organizations. These factors negatively impact fathers' abilities to be the present, hands-on caregivers that many aspire to be (Harrington, Van Deusen, and Humberd, 2011), and may lead some men to "opt-out" of these demanding work environments in order to be at home with their children or, at least, to be less engaged in their work, which is becoming a major issue that will no doubt impact U.S. competitiveness. A recent study found that "seventy-one percent of American workers are 'not engaged' or 'actively disengaged' in their work, meaning they are emotionally disconnected from their workplaces and are less likely to be productive" (Gallup, 2011).
- **Understanding fathers' role as caregiver.** Finally, this small but growing demographic of at-home fathers may be seen as "canaries in the coal mine" when it comes to better understanding the experiences and challenges that virtually all men will encounter as they seek to be more active and involved parents. We have observed the shrinking number of traditional families (husband in the workforce, wife at home full-time caring for the children) in the U.S. which had decreased to approximately 20% of all American families in 2011 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). It is unlikely that at-home parents will once again become the norm in the foreseeable future, despite the increase in the number of at-home fathers and the fact that men are more willing to consider this option. In our previous study, 53% of fathers said that if their families could live comfortably on their spouses' salaries they would consider being stay-at-home parents (Harrington, Van Deusen, and Humberd, 2011). While staying home may not be an option for many, men will need to continue to step up their caregiving roles if they are to meet their own and their partners' expectations of their parenting role. Therefore it is critical for us to better understand the forces that enable men to embrace their role as caregivers.

With these important considerations in mind, we present our look at yet another perspective on fatherhood: *The New Dad: Right at Home*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent Research on At-home Fathers

Likely due to the historically small number of at-home fathers (who comprised, until very recently, only 1.6% of all at-home parents in the U.S.), the body of research on at-home fathers is not extensive. In addition, the issue of men's commitment to their parental roles, as exhibited by their actions, continues to be a subject of some debate. The research which does exist, however, provides some useful and important context for our study. The most salient points that we surfaced in reviewing the literature on at-home dads include the following:

- The accepted culture of masculinity in the United States is focused on career success and ability to perform as the family “breadwinner.” Although the tides have shifted over the past generation, these stereotypes endure, making it psychologically challenging for men to let go of the aspiration to be the “provider” for their family (Doucet, 2009). More men are making the decision to become the primary caregivers in their family due to a number of different factors. In general, it appears there are three primary reasons why fathers make the decision to stay at home full time, the first being economic. For some, it is economically feasible for one parent to comfortably stay at home due to the earnings of the other spouse. For others, it can even be advantageous for one parent to stay at home if that partner's earnings don't cover the considerable costs of daycare and other work related expenses. This might be seen as a “pragmatic” approach to the decision. The second reason a father may choose to stay at home is that he may feel that his personality is a better fit for the role than his partner's and that he would be better suited to fulfilling the responsibilities of parenting full-time. Finally, the third reason guiding the decision relates mainly to couples' often shared value that having a parent at home is in the best interest of the child(ren). Sometimes, this feeling is accompanied by a corresponding neutral or negative attitude toward day care, which makes having a parent at home dually appealing (Dunn, Rochlen and O'Brien, 2011).
- Another issue which has been explored is the stigma experienced by some men who choose to become at-home fathers. In one study, Rochlen, McKelley, and Whittaker (2010) set out to evaluate the experiences and perceptions of stigma that stay-at-home fathers felt they encountered as a result of their role, and specifically, who they felt had stigmatized them when it occurred. Nearly half of the more than 200 participants in their study reported experiencing a negative reaction to their status from another adult. Ironically, in nearly 70% of those incidents, the fathers felt they had received the negative reaction from a stay-at-home mother. Furthermore, men who reported experiencing a stigmatizing incident also had significantly lower levels of social support than men who did not report experiencing any kind of stigma.
- Social isolation is an important issue covered in the literature on fathers who elect to be at home. While at-home parents seem to experience greater social isolation than their partners who work outside the home (according to some research at about two times their partner's level), this issue is particularly acute for at-home fathers (Whelan, 2002; Rochlen et. al., 2008). In one study, on a ten-point scale (10 being high levels of social isolation), career (i.e. working) husbands reported a score of 1.7 on a “loneliness scale” while career mothers scored an average of 2.4. By contrast, stay-at-home mothers scored a 3.4 and at-home fathers scored 4.6 on the 10-point scale, suggesting that while being a stay-at-home parent is a more socially isolating experience for parents of either gender, the problem is especially salient for at-home dads (Zimmerman, 2000).

In summary, research on the experiences of at-home dads continues to be quite limited. Despite being a rapidly growing demographic, at-home fathers still make up only 3.4% of all at-home parents in two-parent families. The key issues which may prevent this number from becoming more significant seem to include the social isolation, stigma, and societal expectations that men are still the primary breadwinners, and that this role is central to their identity. When fathers do decide to stay at home, it is often a pragmatic decision based on their career prospects and earnings (actual or potential) when compared to those of their spouse. Often, the values of the couple also come into play with the belief that one of them should stay at home full-time with their children.

Our new research on this topic speaks to these key points identified in the existing literature, and contributes additional insights into the identity formation/re-formation process for men who are at-home full-time, the impact of at-home fatherhood on women's advancement, and the various implications for organizations seeking to recruit and retain talented men and women.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Study Objectives, Participants, and Methodology

Our primary objective in conducting this study was to develop an in-depth understanding of fathers who have taken on the role of full-time caregiver. We were interested in their experiences, their highs and lows, their sense of identity (including the career and parenting dimensions of identity), and the degree to which gender roles and stereotypes impacted their perspectives on full-time caregiving.

In addition to these high level objectives, we also wanted to explore some secondary objectives through our study. These included:

- *The transition to being an at-home father:* What prompted the decision to become an at-home father? What was the transition to becoming an at-home father like? Has the transition been difficult and what expected or unexpected feelings have arisen as a result of the change?
- *Personal and Professional Identity:* Have their identities changed as a result of being at-home fathers? If so, in what ways? How do they feel they have been perceived by others? How have those perceptions impacted at-home fathers? Do they feel being at home has impacted their career aspirations and in what ways? Have the criteria they will use to evaluate potential future employers changed as a result of being at-home fathers?
- *Impact on the family:* How has this new stay-at-home role affected the men's spouses? Have the spouses' senses of personal and professional identities changed? Has having at-home husbands impacted the wives' career experiences and aspirations? How have the children perceived and reacted to having at-home fathers?

We used the following criteria to select participants for our study:

- The man was currently an at-home father who has been out of the workplace for six months or longer or someone who had very recently (less than three months ago) left an extended period of time as an at-home father.
- The father was currently married with a spouse who worked full-time. We did not feel that the experiences of single fathers would be comparable.
- The father had a minimum of five years of professional experience prior to becoming an at-home father.
- The father was the primary caregiver of at least one child under the age of 12. We selected this age as we felt that caregiving for teenagers represented a very different set of challenges for parents. In this study, we were interested in learning about fathers who were presently, or had in the immediate past, cared for young children.

We had considered focusing our research on the experiences of men who had lost their jobs during the recession and, as a result, been “forced” into the role of primary caregiver. This was perceived as a somewhat widespread phenomenon since the beginning of the recession in 2007 (or “man-cession” as it has sometimes been termed). For our initial interviews, however, we decided to focus on both laid-off dads and those who had made the choice to stay home of their own volition. Following an initial pilot of 8 interviews, we quickly realized that we should not place the major focus of our research on laid-off fathers. It was apparent to us that men who choose to be stay-at-home dads and men who

find themselves thrust into this role temporarily due to an unwanted job loss identify quite differently with their caregiving roles. Being a primary caregiver to fill a short-term need based on an employment gap does not make one a “stay-at-home father.” Most men who find themselves in this situation are likely actively seeking a full-time job, not re-configuring their identities as at-home fathers.

We planned to conduct interviews until we reached the point where little new information or few new themes emerged. In the end we conducted a total of 31 interviews of at-home fathers. To gain access to our sample of men, we used a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is often used for populations that are not easily identified or accessed and involves building a sample through referrals (O’Leary, 2004). We sent emails looking for candidates to a broad range of contacts that included friends, relatives, various groups, Center for Work & Family corporate members, and former graduate students. We further contacted at-home fathers’ support groups in various locations to help find potential participants.

Participants were not paid to participate in this study. A complete list of questions asked to all participants appears in Appendix C. All interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes with a mean time per interview of 72 minutes. Interviews were recorded and following the interviews, complete transcripts were created. Those transcripts were reviewed and all answers were coded by a team of the three primary researchers on the study.

At the conclusion of the interviews, study participants were asked if they would forward a link to an on-line survey to their spouses. The survey questions are shown in Appendix D. In all, 23 of the 31 spouses (74%) completed this survey, providing us with some excellent information from the spouses’ perspectives regarding the impact that having at-home husbands had on them from both career and family perspectives. This information also allowed us to better “triangulate our research” and look for alignment (or lack of alignment) between the perspectives of the fathers and their working spouses. Spouses’ responses were received in a written format and all were also coded by the research team.

We have interspersed some quotes from the spouses into the report to help illustrate their reflections on the experiences of having at-home husbands.

Description of our sample

The 31 fathers that participated in this study resided in 13 different states with a concentration of participants in Massachusetts and New York (13 and 5 respectively). Their ages ranged from 28-48, and the mean age was 39. In total, these men cared for 60 children ranging in age between 6 months and 16 years, with a mean age of 5. While fathers reported being at-home full-time for between 1 and 17 years, the mean number of years spent in this role was slightly greater than 5. Twenty-seven of the fathers (87% of the sample) had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher.

All but one of the fathers in our sample were currently married (one was engaged). We also asked the fathers to provide background information on their spouses. All of the spouses held a bachelor’s or graduate/professional degree and the most commonly represented professions were physician (6), executive/director (6), and attorney (4).

Please see Appendices A and B for additional information about the study sample.

THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The following sections provide important information obtained from the fathers in our study. We review their background and several other factors that may have led the men to become at-home dads. We describe the participants' accounts of what it is like to be an at-home dad, and also delve into their social experiences and how others perceive them. We examine the impact that being an at-home dad has had on them, on their spouses, and on their families. We hear from the spouses themselves and provide their perspectives. Finally, we look at what the future holds for the at-home dads in our study.

Throughout the report we include numerous quotations from the participating dads to support or illustrate our key findings from our study. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are substituted for the names of fathers that participated in our study. Actual participant names are not included anywhere in the report.

FAMILY BACKGROUNDS

As we spoke to the participants, we asked them to describe their experiences growing up and to specifically reflect on the parenting style and roles played by their own parents. Most of the study participants grew up in the early 70's through the early 90's in households where their mothers took the lion's share of responsibility for child rearing. Of the 31 fathers, about 2/3 said they felt their parents were in a more traditional marital arrangement for that time. The remaining 1/3 said they felt their parents arrangements were either non-traditional or, they were raised in single-parent households which made the idea of "traditional roles" less relevant.

About half of the participants' mothers stayed home for some significant amount of time while they were growing up and then returned to work. About one-quarter had mothers who stayed home full-time throughout their childhoods, and one-quarter had mothers who worked continuously throughout their childhoods. This provided something of a mixed picture, but still showed a strong bias in two ways: first the mother was the primary caregiver and second, in 75% of the households, there was a parent present

at home during significant portions of the participants' upbringing. Based on the information from participants, it was difficult to make inferences about the impacts of their mothers on the at-home dads parenting choices. Perhaps the evidence might infer that the presence of a stay-at-home parent in 3/4 of the households helped shape their desires to want an at-home parent for their own children.

Most of the at-home dads saw their fathers as examples for how they themselves hoped to be with their families – sometimes as positive role models to follow, and at other times, the opposite.

The portrait of their fathers was quite diverse. Virtually all of their fathers worked full-time. They tended to be very well educated and held jobs such as engineer, physician, attorney, minister, salesperson, and business owner. But as with the mothers, it was difficult to identify a consistent profile of the fathers of the dads in our study in terms of the way they balanced work

and family. They ranged from highly work-centric, to dual-centric (putting equal emphasis on work and family), to family-centric in roughly equal numbers.

Most of the at-home dads saw their fathers as providing powerful examples for how they themselves hoped to be with their families – sometimes as positive role models to follow, and at other times, the opposite. Drew (a former teacher), for example, stated that his father was the most influential person

in shaping his idea of a good parent. “Definitely my father was most influential. As a kid I always really admired him and it always meant a lot the way he spent time with me, and so I think that definitely has influenced the way that I want to be with my son.” By contrast, Evan, also a former teacher, son of a busy doctor and the child of divorced parents, was strongly influenced by a father who became less accessible following the break-up. As Evan discussed his role as a father, he states:

I guess in the most significant way, it's just to make a promise to myself and my wife that I won't leave, that I won't desert the family. So that's probably the most significant impact. But also I think in smaller ways, just wanting to be more available and participate more in the family and taking care of the family and the house and things like that.

The participants' fathers left a powerful impact on how they developed their views on fatherhood. But the range of their fathers' engagement with our study participants varied significantly. Those who were more engaged, even those with heavy work schedules, found time to be with their children. Ken recalled his father, a busy self-employed lawyer, going to great lengths to be so engaged:

He definitely was much more involved with kids than I think many of his peers might have been. I also remember my Dad doing a lot of that with me at the weekends and the other thing was my Dad is an attorney. He's self-employed and he was always home for dinner ... by 5:00 or 5:30 and we always had family dinner. He always put me to bed and read a story to me. It was chitter chatter for an extended period of time and then he would sort of go back and pick up the work he had brought home and worked all hours of the night so he could get up the next morning and do it again. He changed his share of diapers. He did his share of midnight “get up and deal with us”...he was the only one who did the “get up in the middle of the night and deal with the throwing up kid” - that was definitely his domain.

But the presence of work loomed large in the lives of many of the at-home dads' fathers and this often led to less than satisfactory time spent with them. As Alex recalled, “He was very traditional. In fact, [my parents'] business took a while to launch, so he also did some consulting on the side. So he was traveling a great deal over that time. For about ten years he was gone almost every week”. And as Sam recalled, most of the fathers were a product of a different time, far different than even most working fathers would relate to today:

My dad's role in the family was again modeled after the 1950's and '60s. He was basically the guy who came home and spent some time during or after dinner, being the authority figure. And on weekends we got some time with him, but he wasn't really engaged in day-to-day family activities. I mean nothing like a stay-at-home dad does. You know my mom tells me he never changed a diaper. Okay, five kids and he never changed a single diaper—are you kidding me?

THE DECISION TO STAY AT HOME

One of the questions we were interested in exploring was how the at-home fathers made the decision to leave the workplace and stay with their children full-time. In order to better understand this decision, we first explored the at-home dads' level of satisfaction with the work they were doing before transitioning into this role. We asked if they considered the work they were doing prior to being at home full-time a “job, a career, or a calling.” Of the at-home fathers, about 2/3 saw their previous work primarily as a “career”. One in six saw their work as strictly a “job” and the same number saw

it as a “calling”. This is significant in that most of the fathers saw their work as either a career or a calling, indicating a high level of engagement in their work. That said, surprisingly few of the fathers expressed any lament over giving up their work in order to be at home with their children.

In our sample, 30% of the fathers were laid-off from their jobs and this initiated their period of being at-home. For most, this lay-off was not unwelcome. It seemed those fathers were looking for an exit which the lay-off provided. As Gerald recalled in his situation:

It was a layoff. We discussed options and I wasn't particularly happy with the company at the time. So, yeah, it was an amicable layoff. It certainly was not a bad situation, but you know at the time I certainly never thought that I would be out of the industry or out of work for ten years. It was, we kind of looked at it at the time like this is, well, you got these young kids, we had a new baby on the way. You know the cost of daycare and the time constraints and feeling like, 'Is it right to have children that you need to bring and drop off for eight hours, ten hours, twelve hours every day?' So we realized we didn't need the two incomes and it certainly turned out to be, in our opinion, one of the best decisions that we have made.

In a number of other cases, despite the dads' overall satisfaction with their careers, the circumstances at their workplaces or with their workloads had prompted rethinking their options. Long work hours, often coupled with wives who also had challenging schedules, made the decisions to leave the workplaces obvious or even necessary. Kirk recounted his experience:

We knew that I wasn't going to be able to continue my same work schedule with a child. I was working 60-80 hours a week easily and was really passionate about it. I really loved my work but my wife and I didn't see too much of each other and a lot of my friends and colleagues in [the] organization were divorced or had children that they felt estranged from because they ... were passionate about justice but had not been able to find the balance between that passion and being able to be present in their families.

Most often the actual decisions to be at-home dads reflected two major considerations: the couples' **financial circumstances** and their **values** regarding how their children should be raised and by whom. In nearly all of the situations we explored with the research participants, their spouses' earnings or potential earnings were greater than the fathers'. In some instances, the male spouses' incomes were not sufficient to offset the high costs of daycare. As Paul stated, “whether I stayed at home or not, I was going to be the primary caregiver, my earning potential compared to my wife's, well, they just don't compare. So [child rearing] was going to be my responsibility one way or the other.” Drew echoed a similar sentiment when he said, “We realized it made sense for me to stay at home with [our son]. And because my wife made a lot more money than me, so she could be the single working parent, but I couldn't be the only working parent. So it almost wasn't planned, it just kind of came to that.”

The other factor that was clear in many of our interviews was that the decisions often reflected strong desires on the parts of both spouses to have one parent at home with the children rather than, as one participant put it, “outsource our children to a daycare provider.” As Marcus said, “And then we had our first son and had pretty much from the get go, really wanted one of us to be home, and quite frankly, she was the doctor.” Ken also made this assertion when he stated: “My wife and I had jointly made a very conscious decision that I would stay home prior to having a child and ...we started talking about that before we even were really serious about having kids.”

When asked whether they thought they would have considered being at-home dads earlier in their careers and lives, the fathers were evenly split between those who had never given the idea a lot of thought and those who had considered it for some time. But it seemed clear that some combination of the finances working out (and their wives' earning an adequate income), some frustration on the job front, concerns about daycare, and the value of a parent being at home seemed to be common factors to many, if not most of the decisions. As Peter summarized his situation at the time he opted to become an at-home dad:

I was not very happy teaching. So, when [my wife] got pregnant, it became obvious to us. I had been thinking about leaving my school anyway and what was I going to do next? It became obvious to us that it made sense for me to be the one to stay home and...it was not a difficult decision in the least for me.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE AN AT-HOME DAD

More than half of the men in our study became at-home-dads when their first children were born. They were faced with adapting to lives with babies as well as the challenges of new roles, which in all cases were very different from the work they had previously been doing. Because of various circumstances leading up to the births, and their own desires to be active participants in parenting, about one quarter of the men were eagerly looking forward to the new roles and the transitions went smoothly. Kirk stated:

So I think right when I started I thought I just want to do this for the rest of my life, because I had been running so hard and so fast in my job just really, really hard and getting a lot out of it but it also took a lot out of me. I just found a lot of joy in staying at home with my daughter. It immediately felt good.

About one-third of the fathers became at-home dads sometime after their first children were born. They had a bit more time to adjust to their roles as fathers before being thrust into the roles of full-time caregivers. Most had taken some time off when their children were born, quite a few took 3 weeks or longer. This contrasts with our 2011 quantitative study, *The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted*, where the vast majority of the nearly 1,000 fathers we surveyed took one week or less off when their children were born. For those who had years of experience as a working father, like Richard, the transition also went well:

An easy soft transition exactly, but I'll be honest with you and I was honest with my wife by the time she was going back to work I was ready for her to go back to work. I was ready to try it by myself. I was ready to move on to the next step which was me being the primary caregiver.

Several of the men did feel it was hard to be removed from their professional work environments. Gerald recalled:

But it was a little struggle I guess to get my hands entirely around the idea that this is my life to be the parent and not be thinking about work. And being a male clearly our society, even though it has changed quite a bit in so many ways, I think there's still a stigma of sorts that "Dads can't be as good a parent as moms in terms of raising the children. Dads should be working and kids need their mothers."

But for the most part, the men were happy to find themselves in new circumstances. According to Anthony:

And so I switched from 70-hour weeks, and constant stress, and forever thinking about stuff that other people wanted of me, to this, where you have this little person who desperately needs you, and nothing in the world is more important to you. And I felt blessed, for want of a better word, that I was in a position where I could just allow that feeling to happen to me. Because most men don't get to do that, for which I feel profoundly sorry for them.

But the experience was not always rosy for most of the new, at-home dads. It was a bit of a culture shock going from an active work environment with many adults around to a much more isolated environment taking care of a single infant, or in some cases more than one child. It definitely required some adjustment, as Alex recalled:

It was hard. It was definitely: what am I supposed to be doing with myself? What am I supposed to be doing with this time? I remember thinking at that time that I've kind of given up everything; I'm now going to be the absolutely best parent that I can possibly be. What that meant, I don't - I can't tell you. It meant that we're gonna be on the floor playing all the time. Or we're gonna be going to the playground all the time. Or we're gonna be taking music class, or gym class, or whatever it was. So, it was really kind of a situation where, if I'm gonna do it, I'm really gonna do it well. I made all of his food from scratch when he started eating. And just kind of being - I was a type A parent, or probably still am a type A parent. But it was certainly hard from that perspective, I was trying to replace, I think, all of the work that I'd been doing in other aspects of my life and kind of focus it on this aspect of my life.

It was hard. It was definitely: what am I supposed to be doing with myself? What am I supposed to be doing with this time? I remember thinking at that time that I've kind of given up everything; I'm now going to be the absolutely best parent that I can possibly be. [Alex]

As many stay-at-home mothers can attest, the days could drag on. The dads weren't sure what they should be doing. Some talked of being overwhelmed at times and facing difficult moments when their babies were screaming and wouldn't stop. At other times, they felt bored, sometimes stressed, sometimes alone and socially isolated. In situations where the fathers had been laid off, like Brian, they often also faced financial difficulties on top of it:

It was the first time I was ever laid off. I have never been fired from anything. I've moved away or quit, but I've never been laid off. It was kind of hard...So it made sense financially and everything else, but it was very hard on me. You think, what did you do wrong?

A typical day in the life of an at-home dad

We asked all of the dads what a typical day is like for them. Although their answers were obviously all somewhat different, there were many commonalities as well. For the dads of very young children, the day was focused around meals and naps. Naptime is typically the only downtime for the dads when they can relax a bit, perhaps catch up on some housework or personal things. Here is a sample of how a typical day looked for dads whose children are not in school or daycare.

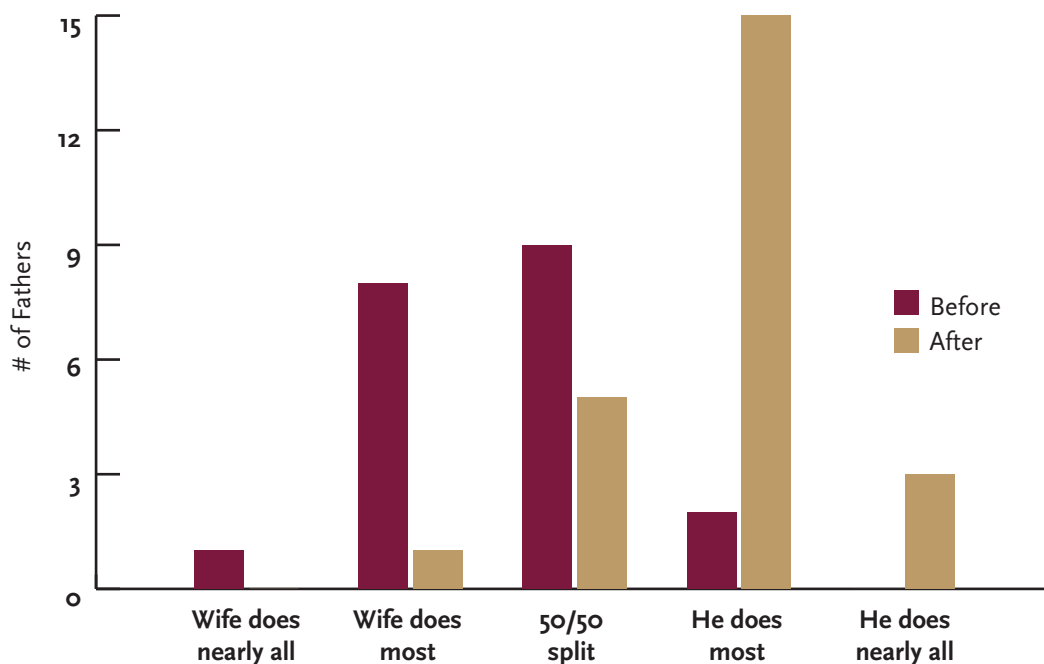
A day in the life of an at-home dad	
6:30 – 7:00	Rise with the kids, diaper change (and many more throughout the day), get kids dressed
7:00 – 8:00	Wife leaves for work, prepare breakfast, feed kids, clean up
8:00 – 10:00	Play time or perhaps an activity such as story time at the library
10:00 – 11:00	Morning nap
11:00 – 12:00	More play or reading
12:00 – 1:00	Prepare and eat lunch, clean up
1:00 – 2:30	More play or perhaps an afternoon activity – most of the dads tried to get themselves and their kids out of the house at least once a day – playgrounds, walks, museums, coffee shop
2:30 – 3:30	Afternoon nap
3:30 – 4:00	Snack
4:00 – 6:00	Reading, television, arts & crafts, potential child meltdown; dinner preparation
6:00 – 6:30	Family dinner (many of the wives are able to come home by 5 or 6, they participate in family dinner and post-dinner activities – in some cases there is a handoff from the dads to the moms who then complete the evening activities)
6:30 – 7:00	A bit of playtime
7:00 – 8:00	Bath / bedtime ritual
8:00	Wife comes home if not able to get home sooner; dad collapses (not all the time, but not uncommon either)

As expected, there was a marked difference in the typical day for dads of newborns versus dads of older children who are in daycare or school. For dads of these older kids, the day is focused around the school/daycare schedule and whatever scheduled afternoon/early evening activities there are. They typically had more time during the day while their children were at school to do some housework, run errands, exercise, or do some paid or volunteer part-time work. For these dads the late afternoon / early evening periods were particularly busy, picking up the kids and getting them to whatever after-school activities the children might be doing that day such as sports, music lessons, art classes or dance lessons. These dads were generally still engaged in the various meal and clean-up activities as well as the evening bedtime routines.

Domestic task division

We asked the fathers how childcare and housework tasks were divided before they became at-home dads and after they became at-home dads. There was a dramatic difference between the two stages of their lives. The graphic below highlights the differences based on the responses we received from the fathers. Before becoming at-home dads the tasks were often evenly split, with the wives tending to do a bit more. After they became at-home dads, they generally took over much more responsibility for both childcare and housework.

Division of Childcare and Housework Responsibilities Before and After Becoming At-home Dads



Before becoming an at-home dad the situations spanned a range from “wife does nearly all” to he (the dads in our study) does most. Only one person, who admitted to being “old school”, said that his wife did nearly all. More commonly the wife did more than half, as in Josh’s case:

As far as parenting responsibilities go, I would say when I was working, probably 85/15 her taking care of him the 85 percent, I’m the 15 percent. Domestic work/responsibilities like dishes and laundry and stuff, I would say we’re probably about the same, with her handling the majority of the domestic stuff.

Or there was an equal split, as reported by Gerald:

When we were both working, we were both so-called equals in the marriage. It worked. I can’t think that we were butting heads as far as whose responsibility was what. You know I can’t say the house was always immaculate or the meals were always well prepared, but we did fine.

This often shifted when the fathers became the at-home parents, and they assumed more of the domestic housework as well as the childcare duties. While a few reported that the split was still about equal or that their wives did a bit more, most fathers said they were doing the majority or nearly all of the domestic duties. Ben for example said, “Unlike a lot of the other dads, I do everything. I clean the bathroom, I clean the tub, I cook, I clean, I do laundry, I vacuum.” Several of the other dads in our study made similar statements:

My philosophy is, let’s get as much of that stuff done during the day and week as possible, so we can enjoy our time together as a couple in the evening, and then enjoy our time together as a family on the weekends. And ninety-nine percent of the time, I’m the one that does the laundry. A hundred percent of the time, for the most part, I do the cooking and lunches for the kids. [Alex]

I do a hundred percent of food related stuff in the house which is one of the reasons I ended up at home because my wife and I both love food, love good food and she knows good food, loves eating good food and is not the slightest bit interested in cooking. [Ken]

So the cooking, she plans the meals. She says what she wants. And I execute. So she does all the planning and I do maybe 70% of the cooking, and all of the clean-up. She does all of the laundry because of various sort of incantations that need to be said over her clothes. You fry one top in the tumble dryer and that's it, you're out of there. And that wasn't planned incompetence. I didn't mean to be an idiot there, and I would happily do the laundry, but she likes to do that. [Anthony]

Not surprisingly, there were still some tensions with their wives, particularly around house cleaning, which we learned about from several of the fathers. Curt's response serves as a good example:

There came a point at which we were discussing tensions around her wanting things to be more under control and cleaner and more organized at home. And I said, "Well then if you want it to be -- I'm obviously not able to do some things at a level that you want it to happen, you're going to have to do them if you want them to be that way." And she said, "That's not my job." And I said, frankly -- "If you were a man and you said that to a woman, you would be considered a huge chauvinist." And her eyes kind of got big and she said "You know you're right."

Some of the dads had cleaning services to help clean their homes. Lew, one of the very experienced at-home dads, had an interesting approach that worked for him, and presumably for his wife as well:

*There's a book called *The Stay-At-Home Dad Handbook*, by Peter Baylies, and I haven't read the book entirely. But there's one particular part of that book that I've taken to heart and have done. He says, "Find the one area of your house that your wife just can't handle the mess and make sure that part of your house is clean all the time." And in our particular house it's the kitchen. So I try very hard most of the time to have the kitchen as clean as I can get it every time she gets home from work, or at least by the time we go to bed that night. So try to alleviate some of her anxiety about that. So I, you know, that is what I do.*

Definition of a good father

Blake is a wonderful husband and father. I am blown away by how open he is to this experience; as he was raised in a very traditional family, and would fit, at first glance, into a hunting, fishing American male stereotype. But he is the most thoughtful, silly, giving, caring and loving father our kids could ask for. He is so confident in himself and this choice and I see his confidence coming through in our kids. [Blake's wife]

As with our two previous studies on fatherhood, we asked the at-home dads what it means to be a good father. Following is the list of attributes with the number of times it was mentioned in parentheses and a sampling of related comments from the fathers.

- **Presence/involvement** (19): “not just being there, but emotionally and psychologically [being] present for your children” [Gerald]
- **Shaping character/leading by example/teaching** (10): “it’s important to understand them and help them become the person that they want to be; you need to model the behavior you want to see” [Drew]
- **Love/emotional support** (6): “the measure of my success as a father is bound up in loving my children and my wife, and receiving love from them in truly reciprocal, mutual, growing relationships” [Ryan]
- **Fostering development** (4): “being there for the emotional and psychological development of your child is very important” [Jesse]
- **Safe environment** (4): “creating a place at home where you, your wife, your kids can all feel like they are safe” [Charles]
- **Childcare** (2): “contributes to the day-to-day chores and tasks of raising a child” [Grant]

We asked the fathers to rate themselves as good fathers on a one to five scale, with one being low and five being high. The large majority rated themselves as a four and they typically commented that they thought they were doing a very good job, but there was still room for improvement.

We asked the fathers to rate themselves as good fathers on a one to five scale, with one being low and five being high. The large majority rated themselves as a four and they typically commented that they thought they were doing a very good job, but there was still room for improvement.

We also asked the participants if being an at-home dad had influenced their definition of what it meant to be good father. The reactions here were mixed. A few of the fathers said that it had increased their respect for the amount of work that full-time parents do. And some, including Sam, felt the change had been dramatic:

My model for fatherhood was, go off to work, come home from work, be at the table for dinner with the family, and be the authoritarian, after dinner and on weekends have some engagement. In fact it’s so far from that, what I actually do and what I believe is necessary. You know the old cliché about, you wait ‘til your father gets home -- nonsense. I had this idea that that was my role as a dad, and now what I recognize is actually that’s sort of a counterproductive role.

Most of the men we talked with were comfortable being at-home parents. They have had time to adjust to the role and for the most part have accepted it. Sam commented: “My wife surprised me recently with business cards that say ‘at-home dad’. And you know it’s very much who I am and who I want to be. Absolutely I would say that it is my identity.”

Some expressed mixed feelings about the role. They enjoyed the time they spent with their children, but felt discomfort with some of the negative perceptions that others held of them. According to Jeremy:

You get weird looks sometimes from the guys. Usually I don’t really care. But how I look at it and what I always say is I have a connection with my son that most men will never have.

Others had grown in their comfort level over time. As Jesse, an at-home father from Chicago stated: “I do now. I don’t think at first I felt comfortable, but I definitely do now.” Alex, a former teacher from New York commented:

It took me a while to get to the point that I embraced - I kind of said to myself at some point, this is gonna be a whole lot better for me if I decide this is what I’m going to do, and not worry about what’s next in my career, not worry about what’s next in anything. But just embrace the role of stay-at-home dad. And I would say that was probably after about two and a half years. I stopped thinking about what’s next and just kind of embraced that role.

Reactions of Others

I am surprised at the number of people who react negatively to our arrangement, including public figures and religious people. The arrangement has worked very well for us, and I think my husband is very happy in his role. [Paul’s wife]

At-home dads cited a variety of reactions from others regarding their roles as full-time parents. Many stated that initially, their families didn’t always understand or accept why they were at home full-time, but upon seeing how well it was working for their families, supported the decision completely. Alex, for instance, revealed that now that his relatives recognized this, he felt accepted in this role, “I think they see how happy the kids are, how happy I am, how it’s working for my wife and for her career. So I don’t feel judged, especially at this point”.

However, it was common for friends and family members of many of the dads to regard their role at home as temporary, wondering when they were going to get jobs. Often they perceived that being an at-home father was not a long-term commitment, but a brief hiatus which would lead to full-time employment again. Interviewees also mentioned that those close to them expressed concern about their families financial status as a result of them being at-home rather than in the labor force. Eli’s family’s financial status is a good example:

My mother hates it. She thinks all men should be working. My wife doesn’t mind it as a tool for child care, but wants me to make more money. My father doesn’t say anything and my sisters just worry that, do you have enough money? It’s not like a social stigma in my family, it’s more like a financial worry.

Strangers often had mixed reactions, sometimes interested in and supportive of the at-home dads, yet other times unsure how to respond upon learning about their role. Some of the at-home dads cited overwhelming positive responses, while others felt that judgments were made about how their families could afford to have someone home, or what the fathers did all day while at home. They found that some men were envious of their role, while others said they could never do it themselves. They often felt that those men wishing they could be at home often held an idealized image and did not understand how much work being a full-time parent entails.

The fathers in the study also remarked that in their encounters with complete strangers, the assumption was often that they were “off for the day” or that their kids were “with dad for the day”. This was frustrating to some. Lew, for instance, shared this reflection:

When I go out with the kids, people always say, “Oh, so you’re babysitting the kids today?” Or “Oh, it’s daddy’s day,” or “You must have the day off from work,” or something like that. They assume that I work somewhere and this is just this random day that I happen to be with the kids, which really irritates me.

Some men shared stories that were more troubling, from women approaching their children and rearranging their outfits because “dads don’t know what they’re doing” to women keeping their children away from them at the playground. In one particularly disturbing instance, one father described an encounter where he was confronted by a number of police officers who received a call about a “suspicious” man carrying a baby while he was on a walk on a footpath through the woods in his own neighborhood.

I get kudos just for doing it from the people that I care about... And I don’t actually care what the men think, because I think most men don’t know jack when it comes to this stuff. You know? They have missed out on something that I have been privileged to experience. [Anthony]

When it came to friends and relatives, as well as acquaintances or strangers, many interviewees found themselves wondering what wasn’t being said by others regarding their role as a full-time parent. Sometimes they knew others had their reservations or judgments, but just were not expressing them directly, in other instances it was entirely speculative. Evan, for instance, said that “Maybe some people go home and say this guy is a real loser staying home with [his] kids; but they don’t say it to your face anyway”, while Corey knew others were speculating about how well he was doing, “...I got a lot of ‘oh, that’s good, that’s good’. And then later you hear that, boy, Corey they’re

really worried about you because you haven’t worked in a year...I knew things were being said behind closed doors.” Some mentioned worrying that others thought they were “slackers” for being at home.

Ultimately, however, many interviewees expressed that they felt comfortable in their roles, and that if others appeared to have problems with it, it was exactly that—their problems. Anthony concludes that:

I get kudos just for doing it from the people that I care about... And I don’t actually care what the men think, because I think most men don’t know jack when it comes to this stuff. You know? They have missed out on something that I have been privileged to experience.

Sam seconds this thought, saying, “I think the people who matter most to me have not only accepted, but embraced the idea. And the people that don’t matter nearly as much, I really don’t care.”

Best and Worst Aspects of Being an At-Home Dad

We asked the fathers what were the best and worst aspects of being an at-home father. The tables below summarize their comments. Their responses reflected both the treasured moments they have experienced as well as the challenges of being an at-home dad.

Best aspects of being an at-home dad	Comments
Being able to watch one's children grow and develop – seeing it firsthand	...being there for them, and being there for those, you know, aha moments [Jesse]
Building a loving relationship/bond with one's children	...being able to give so much love and get so much love in return [Peter]
The amount of time one is able to spend with one's children	...the time that you're able to see your children and be involved in things that matter to them [Gerald]
Involvement in children's daily life, playing and interacting together	...it means I'm always there, whether it's the kindergarten play or the sixth grade play I'm able to be there [Ken]
Shaping/playing a role in a children's development	...you're doing something that will have infinite rewards, you're bringing up a child. [Ben]

Clearly the time with their children was the part they liked most. However, they also struggled with some trying experiences which point to the difficulties of being at-home parents.

Worst aspects of being an at-home dad	Comments
Lack of social network and adult interaction	...the loss of contacts with people [Blake] ... the isolation and the social stigma [Josh]
No release or break, little time to oneself	... it's a love/hate relationship with being on all the time [Ben] ...I could go pound nails - but I don't have that release [Charles]
Stress/frustration throughout the day	... there is nothing more stressful than a baby screaming in my face [Evan] ...the stress of trying to get everything done around the house [Lew]
Lack of positive reinforcement / unrecognized accomplishments	...not feeling a sense of accomplishment on my own [Alex] I hate driving...It's thankless [Ken]
Isolation from labor force/straying from one's career path	...[I'm literally] literally a path forward in my life beyond my children [Anthony]...I guess it all goes back to that idea of career and feeling that you're really giving back to society the way that you see others doing [Gerald]
Boredom	There were days... where I was just plain bored. [Corey] ... the repetitive nature of the job is going to be the down-side [Frank]
Exhaustion	...you feel like you're worn down [Dan] ... you just don't have the down time until he's asleep and then you're exhausted [Jeremy]
Missing the life that could be	There is a good deal of mourning for a life that I know that I would enjoy that I don't get to do. [Kit]

Social Networks

Actually, one thing that has surprised me about this process is that he has not been able to find more community. I am surprised that stay at home moms have not been more welcoming to him, and I am also surprised that he has not been able to connect with ANY other stay at home dads, especially considering we live in a major city. [Kirk's wife]

Our research generally supported previous studies that found that at-home fathers often struggled with feelings of social isolation. Those feelings, along with the lack of an effective social network, were cited by many of the fathers in our study as one of the aspects of the role they liked least. In our study, about a third of the fathers explicitly stated that their social network served as a strength in facilitating their role as an at-home parent, while a third had generally positive reactions to their network, and another third reported that it was difficult to forge or maintain a strong network. This last group of fathers cited several challenges to establishing a fulfilling social network. Many men, for instance, had relocated at some point due to their spouses' work, and found themselves in new parts of the country further away from their support networks. Some fathers found that mother's groups outwardly excluded or were unwelcoming to at-home dads. Several of the men had hopes that they would meet other parents through these groups, but found it much harder than they had anticipated:

I was just really surprised at how I would go to playgroups and how I would try to talk to folks and really felt like I wasn't making a connection with people and people would invite each other over to their homes and I wasn't getting those invitations...It was just this very strange sensation of not being welcomed. I don't know whether it was because the stay-at-home moms themselves felt uncomfortable with a male there... I'm not really sure what it was but it was really shocking to me and it hit me hard in a way I never expected....
[Kirk]

Even if accepted on the playgrounds or in playgroups, many dads found that they were the only males present. For some, who were used to being mostly around women, this wasn't necessarily a negative experience, but for others, it was more troublesome. Jeremy, for instance, revealed that some women, upon being asked to go on a play date with him and his child, "looked at me like I was a child molester, it was ridiculous." Some dads retreated from the idea of playgroups all together:

When we first moved here, I did join a playgroup because my son was three. He wasn't in school at the time, and we were new. So, besides me, it was all moms. So, I did that for a little while, but despite working similar jobs, the playgroups were just not fun for me.
[Paul]

Many of the at-home dads sought out volunteer activities and involvement at their children's schools. Some simply became more adamant about interacting with other at-home fathers, such as Ken, who upon moving to a new city, decided that, "there was no Dad's group, so I started one and it grew very quickly." Fathers' groups were cited by some participants as a great source of strength for their social network.

Many fathers also cited their social networks as a strength, whether comprised primarily of moms, dads, or a mixed group of parents, finding support for their at-home role in these friendships and in their family relationships. Clearly it is an important area, and some fathers are finding it easier to con-

nect than others. Marcus, for instance, has found that fellow at-home dads he associates with are now integral to his social network, saying “...the guys from the play group have become honestly some of my best friends.” Many found that other parents and parenting activities were now at the heart of their social network, which is evident in Sam’s response:

I never had a sense of community like I do now. When my kids started school and I started walking them to school every day and seeing the same parents every day and the same kids on the playground every day, you start to get to know them and then you find out that somebody lives right around the corner from you, and the bonds are genuine and they’re growing and they’re getting deeper.

Jesse, for example, shared that “I did find the...at-home dads play group a few months in, actually. And so that was very helpful to establishing some connections, and meeting some other men that were doing the same thing that I was doing”. Creators and proponents of these groups envisioned them as fostering men’s relationships with other at-home dads, helping them to find and connect with one another. Lew drew much support from his own involvement in such a group that he was involved with prior to relocating:

...having that connection with guys that get it and understand what I am experiencing has been tremendous...And my wife can attest to that. In fact, she always says that the guys that we met in [the last place we lived] when I was there, you know, they saved our marriage, they saved our family by being there for me and me being there for them.

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HOW BEING AN AT-HOME DAD HAS AFFECTED THEM

Identity

The importance of work has often been tied closely to the male identity. As Nicholas Townsend, author of *The Package Deal* writes, “Men’s prestige, their value to others, and their self-worth are measured by their identity as workers and their earnings from their work. Men who do not have jobs are frequently branded as unworthy, morally inferior, and failures as men” (2002).

In order to better understand how at-home fathers define their identity, we asked the men in our study how they describe themselves when they are asked “What do you do?” In the great majority of cases the at-home dads did not define themselves by their prior work experiences.

Many of the fathers, particularly those who had been in the at-home dad role for two years or longer, and were comfortable with the role, simply said “I’m a stay-at-home dad.” Ken, from the West Coast and formerly in retail sales and who had been an at-home dad for 12 years said “I’m an at-home dad and I have always worn that label really proudly because that is my career.” Anthony, a former consultant from the East and an at-home dad for 10 years said:

I don’t think I’ve ever defined myself by what I did, except as being a stay-at home [dad]. I mean being a stay-at home dad has probably been the first thing that’s defined me, has

been the first thing that's felt like it's defined who I am. The other things I've done in my life have not. And that's very important in terms of just having a sense of self.

Many of the fathers had more mixed feelings about how they identified themselves. Drew commented that "I usually say something like I'm trying to be a screen writer and I stay at home with my kid in the afternoons, but I don't use the phrase stay-at-home dad."

For some it took a while for them to identify themselves as at-home dads.

I definitely struggled with this label early on; I struggled to find the right term for what I do. I mean on my taxes I describe myself as a homemaker, which I laugh about every time I do it because I don't feel that I do a particularly wonderful job of that, but - and maybe I should write "bad homemaker" - but you know, usually when people ask me I say I'm a stay-at-home dad, or I stay home with my kids; and that's what I do. It was, it definitely was a weird, a strange adjustment for me because I considered early on I would say, I used to be a math teacher but I stay at home with my kids; but I've become more sanguine about it the longer I've done it and I'm pretty comfortable with it now. [Frank]

I say I'm an at-home dad. And, you know, I think it used to—there was a time when, first, I would start out with, "Yeah, I'm at home with the kids, but I do web stuff." I'd always qualify it with some "real job," to kind of soften the blow. But I've long past stopped caring about pleasing other people like that. So, yeah, I'm just, yeah, I'm a dad. That's it. That's the only label I got. Take it or leave it. [Paul]

And several said that their answer depended on the situational context.

It very much depends on who is asking. I've found that, and I kind of surprised myself, for some I will say I am an educational consultant with a very flexible schedule. And there are a lot of people it seems, at least in this part of Los Angeles who have that kind of professional career - extremely flexible schedule doing a lot of childcare, but think of themselves, or at least describe themselves as a worker. To others I will say I'm a stay-at-home dad, and for others I will joke I am a childcare worker and run an extremely exclusive daycare, one student, we do a lot of field trips. I would say there's a male-female split; when I'm talking to men, I'm more likely to say I'm a professional with a flexible schedule. [Kit]

Nearly all of the men were able to point to a number of ways that being an at-home dad had changed them. Their awareness of what it takes to be an effective at-home parent increased as did their empathy for others in this role, both male and female. Many said they had become more patient, more relaxed and calmer. Several commented that they were now more competent doing the family chores. Some felt better able to focus and be more productive. All felt that they had developed closer relationships with their children.

Career Implications

I'm worried that this long break will prevent Grant from working again, which is a difficult thought. He's young, smart, talented and well-educated. I really hope that this sacrifice doesn't jeopardize his future career prospects. [Grant's wife]

Perhaps the largest impact of being at-home dads was the impact on their careers. We asked the dads if they viewed themselves as a career person, a career person who has taken a temporary detour, or a full-time parent. Nearly half of the dads identified themselves as full-time parents and any future professional work plans were not clear. For some, being an at-home dad was their professional identity. Others had never felt defined by a professional identity:

The professional thing has never been important to me, even when I worked. I have some friends who worked at the same place who did the same thing and they were all about it, and it's all they could talk about on the weekends, and I've never been that way. I've had a life outside of work. [Marcus]

Several who viewed this experience as a temporary detour, were not sure what their next job would be. Anthony, for example, said "I think that first it's a function of being a stay-at-home dad in that I have lost my career. I have lost my ability to be independent."

Several wanted to find a way to integrate their roles as caregivers and breadwinners:

Alright, I'm not a career person. I would like a career that is integrated into a life that puts me in a primary family care position for basically the full length of my family being in one place, which perhaps should be my entire life and their entire lives too. I think that the separation of career and home is a historical anomaly that is fading; or I'm happy to push it back into the dustbin of history as much as I can. I don't know exactly which careers fit within the current paradigm of career and home and separation - which career I would be happiest with that would allow for integrated home and work, paid work, I guess. [Kit]

One father who had been laid off, and felt especially strongly about the traditional male role as worker and breadwinner made the following comment:

Yeah, you know, I love earning money for my family. I love feeling, to me, it's an old school way. I'm the man, I bring home the bacon. I love earning money for my family. I wish the roles could be reversed. I definitely do. Because sometimes I feel emasculated, like when I don't have enough money and my wife laughs, do you have enough money and I'll say oh no, give me some money for gas. It feels emasculating. [Eli]

IMPACT ON THEIR FAMILIES

The peace of mind that comes with having Frank home is as I expected it to be. What has surprised me is the unwavering dedication Frank has to parenting. He's not just making sure the kids don't kill themselves; he's committed to what I would call real, "old fashioned" parenting. The kind of parenting that I think most people envy, he does it every day and - thanks to him - our kids are awesome! [Frank's wife]

Most of the men we spoke to felt that their families had thrived as a result of having them at-home full-time. From the reactions of their children and spouses to the impact on their financial situations and spouses' careers/work experiences, most fathers perceived that their family unit was doing well in

this arrangement. Most of their children had only ever known having their dad at home, and therefore felt nothing strange or atypical about being raised in this caregiving arrangement. Frank, for instance, made this point, saying, “I don’t think it has ever occurred to them that it is somehow different that it is me at home and not Mommy”.

Many fathers felt that, whether or not their children were aware of this “different arrangement”, their experiences with an at-home father were mainly positive ones. When asked if he believed his being at home had an impact on his children, Richard quickly remarked, “I think one hundred percent. I don’t know what their experience would have been without me being here, but I think having a parent here, at home full-time is unbelievably positive”. Corey, who had just recently returned to work when we interviewed him, echoed these sentiments, sharing the following about his son, “Oh he loved it. You know every time I’d pick him up from school there was a big smile on his face. He absolutely loved it”.

A few fathers were vocal about the fact that their children were aware of the difference between their upbringing and that of the majority of their peers, but none mentioned this being a source of discomfort or confusion. Sam, for instance, who actively ensured that his children were aware of this being a unique situation, said, “I want them to understand that I do believe in the very core of my being, that this is an opportunity that not a lot of other people get – especially men. I want them to understand that we made choices that were not traditional.”

When it came to their spouses, fathers cited a range of generally positive reactions to their role as a full-time parent. They mostly felt supported and appreciated by their spouses, though many also mentioned that their spouses felt some jealousy for the time the fathers were able to spend with their children. In Lew’s experience, his wife was outwardly appreciative of their family arrangement and of his role in it, “She routinely says that our family wouldn’t work if I wasn’t an at-home dad right now. So she very much is grateful for what I do.” Yet for Jeremy, it was more difficult:

She wanted to be a stay at home Mom...it’s been rough and I know that but, it is what it is and there’s nothing you can do. We’re trying to fix it but she feels that she kind of got cheated out of being the stay-at-home Mom that she wanted to be.

Yet the inverse was also true in a few cases, where the interviewee’s spouse had never previously and did not currently want to be the at-home parent. Anthony, for instance, shared that:

She absolutely acknowledges that I’m a better at-home parent than she would be...I mean I can only leave her with the kids for - at the end of two hours, she’s done. You know, she needs relief.

We also asked fathers whether they perceived that the dynamics of their relationship with their spouse had changed as a result of their being in the full-time caregiver role. Some changes, they noted, were simply a function of having children, such as spending less time together or their conversations revolving around their family lives. While other changes seemed more directly related to their particular caregiving arrangement with dad at home and mother at work. Many cited that their relationships had grown stronger, illustrated for example in Evan’s case:

I think our relationship has grown leaps and bounds because of my enhanced perspective on life because of what I do...There’s no question in my mind that it has made us a stronger couple and just on every level.

The changes were not all positive however, with some fathers citing discomfort about financial issues, about their spouses’ stressful work experiences or demanding schedules, or about their spouses’ lack of

knowledge regarding the daily ins and outs of their families lives. Zach, for instance, responded that:

...She's the one bringing home the money right now so I feel, in financial decisions, I feel a little, I don't want to use the word uncomfortable, but I mean a little bit more uncomfortable about, saying oh, we should spend, we should buy this or do this or that sort of thing. Yeah, I guess I'm a little self-conscious in a way that I'm not contributing to our financial means.

A few men reported that their partners felt left out or kept out from participating in the home sphere. Alex, for example, shared that:

I'm the gatekeeper in our house...I'm the gatekeeper kind of preventing her from doing things her way, just because I've been doing things - I do things my way during the day and we've had situations where there's absolutely no reason that things needed to be done my way, but I gave her a look or I said something or went back and fixed it later. That, again, takes away from being the mom that she wants to be.

Impact on their spouses' careers

While there was variation in fathers' reports of how their spouses reacted to having their partners at home full-time and in the changes to the dynamics of their relationships, fathers perceived the impact on their spouses' work experiences to be overwhelmingly positive. They asserted that this arrangement allowed their partners to have flexibility and increased focus at work, and diminished their worries about the quality of care that their children were receiving while they were away. Craig felt strongly that his wife's career benefitted as a result of his being the full-time caregiver, saying, "Absolutely. Her career has taken off. It has taken off, and it would not have, if I were not staying home". Gerald echoed these sentiments in his response:

The good thing about our situation is that she can go to work and feel one hundred percent confident that the kids are going to get fed lunches and if they need to go the doctor they'll be there, if there are any appointments it will get taken care of. So I think because of that she is better able to be a working woman and know that she can tell her boss and co-workers that, "Hey, I'm here for you. I'm not going to have to leave."

The fathers asserted that this arrangement allowed their partners to have flexibility and increased focus at work, and diminished their worries about the quality of care that their children were receiving while they were away.

Ben's experience is similar. His wife "...is able to concentrate on her job 100% knowing that I'm there...if something comes across her desk at 6:00 that needs to get done she can take care of it. She doesn't have to make any phone calls to schedule anything."

Finally, when it came to the impact on family finances of having only one partner in the labor force, the respondents were split, most not experiencing many economic difficulties or significant changes, or in some cases asserting their financial situation had actually improved. Others admitted to feeling the effect of their reduced household income on the family more profoundly. In their language, some fathers referred to "cutting back" or things "being tight", while others had never contributed greatly to their families income to begin with, and therefore didn't experience any new financial strains. Frank's family

represents an example of the former. His family has altered their lifestyle significantly as a result of his being home full-time with the children:

It has meant that we're not saving nearly as much, I mean if I was working we could probably save most of my salary at this point, we could do things like take vacations or I mean it is really, we pay for the bare necessities - I mean we don't have a TV, we don't, we've made a fair amount of sacrifices to make it happen which has been totally worth it, so has it had an impact? Yes, certainly.

By contrast, Craig, a former scientific analyst with a PhD, finds the opposite to be true in his experience:

Our financial situation is better than it was before I stayed at home...If you have -- you have two jobs, and still take care of your kids, but the difference financially between a good job and a good career is huge and, yes, her career has taken off. She has got a great career now. We spend less; we are not spending all this money on day care and things like that, that we would be.

THE SPOUSES' PERSPECTIVES

I'm proud to tell people that I have an at-home dad for a husband and that I'm the breadwinner. I'm also really happy that we each are so good at what we do. There's no competition over which role is more important, or even regret that we each aren't doing what the other one does. We're genuinely happy in our respective roles and content with our division of labor. [Ken's wife]

In order to obtain a more complete picture of these fathers' experiences, we asked each of the at-home dads' spouses to complete a short electronic questionnaire to provide their perspective on the impact of having a spouse home with the children on a full-time basis. 23 of the 31 eligible spouses completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 74%. The sections below provide an analysis of their answers to our questionnaire, shedding further light on some of the critical aspects of our study.

When working spouses were asked how they felt about having their partner at home full-time, the vast majority of the wives (more than 3 out of 4), were highly positive about their arrangements. They expressed feeling grateful and fortunate to have their spouses at home with their children, and "blessed" to be in a position where one of the parents was able to be at home full-time. As Frank's wife stated, "I feel very grateful that my husband stays home with our children; it gives me peace of mind. I feel proud; I feel that my children are better off because of his decision."

Most of the spouses expressed their appreciation for their husband's role and were clear regarding both their husbands' significant contributions to the family and the fact that having an at-home spouse enabled them to focus more fully on their work. They also appreciated not needing to rely on daycare to meet their children's needs:

It makes my work-life situation much easier. I like that we don't have to spend money on daycare or on a nanny. It's also great to have someone raise our children who shares my values. Grant keeps me updated on what the kids are doing throughout the day and

sends me pictures of cute moments. My friends who have nannies never get that, so I feel extremely fortunate.

The spouses were asked how having their partners at home changed the dynamics of their relationships. They expressed a wide range of responses and the answers seemed to take a somewhat more “negative tone.” At times, the spouses’ answers seemed to reflect more how becoming a parent has affected the dynamics of their relationships, as opposed to the impact of having at-home husbands. Certainly, the responses did reflect a mix of the dynamics resulting from both of these changes.

It was clearly difficult for many of the spouses to adapt to the new roles they and their husbands were taking. In many cases, their answers reflected a level of stress in working through the roles that was perhaps exacerbated by prior expectations. In this first quotation, we hear about the husband as the at-home parent, and cultural stereotypes that persist:

Certainly he has stepped up to take care of more housework and cooking, etc., than he used to. Sometimes I worry that he feels a subtle pressure (from himself, society - hopefully not from me!) for him to ‘hurry up and make it big’ at his career so he can ‘contribute’ (i.e. financially).

It’s great to have someone raise our children who shares my values. Grant keeps me updated on what the kids are doing throughout the day and sends me pictures of cute moments. My friends who have nannies never get that, so I feel extremely fortunate [Grant’s wife].

In a similar vein, Jesse’s wife, an attorney stated that, “I used to be the one ‘in charge’ of the house. Now he is and I have to give up a lot of control over things.” On the flip side, some of the working mothers felt a bit out of place in the role of sole breadwinner:

Our relationship has been tested to the point of breaking but it is better now. I have to place more trust in my husband and have to accept his decisions as the primary caregiver. Even though I have always viewed myself as being quite progressive, some days it feels surreal to be in the “man’s” position in my household. It’s somewhat difficult to grapple with and has certainly changed my relationship with my husband.

So while these couples have broken from the traditional gender roles that most couples fall into, it has not been without some questioning and struggles.

When it came to measuring its impact on their home lives, the presence of at-home fathers received a mix of positive and negative responses from the spouses. Many comments reflected that domestic tasks were being taken care of while the mother was at work, thereby enabling the family to have better quality time in the mothers’ non-working hours. As Jeremy’s wife enthusiastically replied when asked if having an at-home dad was having an impact: “Yes! I no longer have to clean! :-). Really though, my husband is doing a great job of making our house feel like a home. I love how well he takes care of us.” In a similar vein, Kit’s wife said:

I receive a lot of care at home, especially in walking in the door from work and having a meal ready to eat prepared for me, before I go back to work in the evenings. Also many things are fixed or attended to without my effort.

Where negative comments were present, they often concerned two issues. First, some of the spouses

felt that they had lost a measure of control in their home lives. Some specifically pointed to the fact that relinquishing control over the way the house was managed meant that they needed to lower their expectations to match their husband's standards for what constituted a "clean house". Frank's wife stated that:

My house is usually much messier and dirtier than I can stand. I have lowered my standards significantly. I'm also much more organized in general, so I have learned to tell myself, "Just because it's not the way I would do it, doesn't mean it's the 'wrong' way."

A similar sentiment was expressed by Paul's wife, a pediatrician, who responded:

For the most part it is very helpful, because I can come home to a home-cooked meal and happy kids. I do still stress some about how clean the house is, because my husband does not clean the house like I would like.

The second issue that surfaced in some of the spouses' accounts had to do with feelings of jealousy or even some resentment. For example, when asked how she felt about her family arrangement, Jeremy's wife replied:

It depends. Some days I (feel) confident that he's doing a great job and this is working well for our family, especially considering the economic situation. Other days, I resent him for doing what I have always perceived as "my" job.

There seemed to be less controversy regarding the impact that an at-home dad had on the children. As the dads also reported, in many cases, the children had never known anything different as many fathers had been the primary caregivers since the children were born, or so soon after that it is all the children have ever known. Therefore, virtually none of the mothers felt that the children's experience or even awareness of the fact that they had at-home dads mattered in any significant way to the children.

The working mothers were consistently very positive regarding the relationship between the fathers and their children. As one spouse stated, "My son is so close with his Dad, it is wonderful to see!" and "They love having their dad around all day."

At times however, the wives expressed some ambivalence or regret as they both appreciated the relationships the fathers have with their children, yet at the same time, felt the loss of not playing that role themselves:

[The children] feel very comfortable knowing that their father will take care of them and cares about them deeply. They are very attuned to his moods and respond when they sense he is not happy in his role. When they were younger it stung a little when they would go to Gerald for comfort even when I was there. However, I have always been the parent who is up with them in the night and takes them to doctors' visits and spends time with them on the weekends so I feel that we are very close. In fact, I think we have an easier relationship because I am not there all the time. When we are together we try to make the most of it and we share our feelings about me being the working parent often.

Again here, one can sense some of the spouses' ambivalence or regret regarding what they have given up. They also expressed fears that they are not as connected to their children as their spouses are. Responses from both Blake's wife, a Global HR Director, and Jeremy's wife, a Director of Education are illustrative:

My children adore my husband and love being home with him all day; it can be hard for me when they run to him first or look to him first, but ultimately, I am happy with our choice.

Our son loves having his dad at home and one huge benefit of him being home is that my husband and son have such a wonderful relationship. At the same time, our son sometimes asks me when I'm going to "get a daddy job" so dad can go to work and I can be at home.

The impact of this family arrangement on spouses' work efforts and career trajectories

A question that yielded almost universally positive responses from the spouses concerned how the presence of an at-home dad impacted them professionally, both in terms of their current work and their career trajectories. This is a critical issue as we know that many women's careers are delayed or derailed after having children and that while women have made great progress in the workplace, the majority of those at the top of major institutions – in business, education, government, health-care, etc. – are men. What is very important to realize is the fact that many of these men in the most senior positions also have at-home spouses. This arrangement allows the "working spouse" the luxury of focusing primarily on the needs of their workplace. As such, this study may help us better differentiate to what degree men's dominance in the highest echelons of senior management is "a gender issue" vs. the result of having a stay-at-home partner that enables them to focus more time and attention on their careers.

This study may help us better differentiate to what degree men's dominance in the highest echelons of senior management is "a gender issue" vs. the result of having a stay-at-home partner that enables them to focus more time and attention on their careers.

The spouses in our study again and again expressed the freedom that they had been given in their work and careers as a result of their at-home husbands. As one spouse stated:

Of course! I generally have complete flexibility to schedule work travel, schedule early meetings, late meetings, etc. I also know I will generally not have to alter my schedule if a child is sick or has a day off from school.

This flexibility and freedom in terms of career pursuits is a "luxury" that most working mothers simply do not have. As one mother stated ... "the impact on my career has been positive as I am perceived as a go-to person rather than someone on the 'mommy track'." As previously stated, many of the mothers were engaged in work that was highly demanding and required tremendous time commitments – doctors, business executive, lawyers – and in these cases, the time they were able to focus on work was not seen as a luxury, but a necessity. As Evan's spouse, a doctor replied:

I would not have been able to have been pregnant and to have an infant at home while working my 80+ hour work weeks, unless Evan were at home with our 2 year old. So it did allow us to have kids in the time frame we wanted. If he were not home, we would not be able to make it work in terms of me still being a physician, but I would feel much more guilty about the long hours I'm required to work now during my training, were someone else at home.

That said, fewer wives suggested that increasing (or improving) their career trajectories had been the result of having at-home husbands. In fact, many stated that although they had the luxury to work

more, they had purposely not “stepped on the accelerator” in terms of their career advancement. Many were still looking to spend more time with their husbands and children and while being the primary breadwinners translated to greater pressure on their earnings, they had not used this situation to ratchet up their expectations. As Kirk’s wife, a health teacher stated:

My husband being home gives us flexibility that having a day care provider would not. At the same time, I do feel pressured to come home ASAP, for a variety of reasons, including wanting to give my husband a break after he has been with my daughter all day. If we had a daycare provider I would feel a pressure to come home ASAP as well though, because I would want to get her out of daycare ASAP. If she was in daycare and my husband and I were both working full time I think we would take turns picking her up, which would give me more time at work, but that would reduce the time I would spend with my daughter, so again, I think we have the best possible situation.

A final area that we explored with the spouses that proved interesting was how they felt others reacted to their situation (i.e. mom goes to the office, dad stays home with the kids). Reactions ran the spectrum from highly positive reactions (e.g. “awesome”, jealous, etc.) to fairly negative with the majority of responses leaning positive. As one spouse noted:

Most women I speak with think I’m very fortunate and envy the fact that I don’t have to worry about nannies, driving my kids around or putting dinner on the table, not to mention never having to turn down a promotion or relocation opportunity because of my husband’s career. Most men also seem envious that they don’t get to spend as much time with their children as my husband does.

Another, Peter’s wife, offered a very similar perspective:

I think many of my women friends might express some envy with such a capable and involved father. Usually if mom works she’s still the chief cook and bottle washer so to speak; in this case I knew the kids were secure and well cared for and didn’t carry any worry about them while at work; other women who work feel the burden of carrying the responsibility for the children’s well-being and that can be draining. I’ve had a lot of people express to me how lucky I am.

A number of the spouses noted that while others were often impressed when they heard about these arrangements, there remained a strong sense among some that men were meant to work and this arrangement was outside the norm. In a number of cases, the nature of the responses had a generational component to it. Members of previous generations, it seemed, tended to react more negatively than younger people to the idea of fathers staying at home. A good example is provided in this response from Jeremy’s wife:

When it comes to families our age, most are quite supportive. When it comes to older adults who are over 60, the response is quite negative. Older adults often think my husband is some kind of a “deadbeat” and we are always defending our choices. While our peers are generally supportive, our friends often ask when my husband will be returning to work.

Some of the negative reactions can be gentle and appear intended mainly to make light of what people see as a “man bites dog” situation. As Alex’s wife said in her reply, “Almost always positive – the only

negative sentiments usually come from men who are trying to get a laugh in a large group.”

Interestingly, on occasion, it was reported that it's the fathers or fathers-in-law of the at-home dads that have the most difficulties with the arrangements. As Kirk's wife pointed out, the uniqueness of the situation was met with a particularly negative reaction by her parents:

My parents have been negative about it, especially my father. I am not sure where that is coming from, but it blew up at one point and it was very upsetting. It almost broke my relationship with my father. We worked through it, but it was very stressful.

In another case, the parents were more accepting, but only because they viewed this arrangement as temporary:

My husband's father is glad that it is not a permanent situation though as my husband plans to go back to work in a few years when I am able to cut down my hours from 80 now to about 25-32 weekly. My father-in-law would not be happy to see his son being "only" a stay-at-home parent as a career.

The idea that a stay-at-home parent “doesn't really work” was also reinforced by a number of the reactions the spouses received from others. In one example, which perhaps again has an age and gender bias, Grant's wife pointed out this example:

My female colleagues are envious. One male colleague who is much older made a comment once that he couldn't "do that to his wife because it would be so hard on her". In other words, he thought that holding a job was much harder than staying at home with the children and that I was getting the raw end of the deal. Male relatives and male friends of Grant's have made slightly derogatory comments to him about his position. One friend this morning made a crack that Grant should get a job, in which we both responded quickly that Grant already has a job. We get a lot of comments like that. People don't consider being a stay-at-home parent a full-time job.

For the most part however, the spouses perceived positive reactions to their arrangements, at times bordering on jealousy. As one working mother perhaps best summarized, “They think it's awesome that I didn't have to give up my career because I had kids. And they think it's great that dads are staying home with the kids”.

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR THE AT-HOME DADS

With few exceptions, most of the men we interviewed were content with their current roles as at-home dads, and were not actively job hunting. Many were married to women who were very well compensated in their professional roles. For those dads who had made the decision consciously and voluntarily to become at-home dads, the factors had not changed significantly. Paul stated:

You know, she makes good money and we're pretty cheap, so we're [doing fine]. When she got out of medical school we bought a small house. We had more in school loans than we had in our house. And, now, you know, we've got the mortgage, but we buy used cars that are paid for. We've got a pretty good chunk of money in the bank and no other debts. And so, I think it's worked out quite well.

And for some, like Lew, going back to work simply did not make financial sense:

It's funny. If I had worked, we would be making less money, the two of us together, if I worked, than if I didn't work. Isn't that crazy? I mean if I was a professional - I have some dads, some friends of mine who are lawyers. So they could go back into practice and make some decent scratch. I can sell classified advertising. I'm going to make ... \$20,000-\$30,000. That's not going to pay for any of the other stuff we've got to do to cover [the children's] expenses. I mean it just doesn't make any sense.

A few of the dads were working in part-time jobs that allowed them to continue to meet their home responsibilities. For example, Brian was working as a handyman, Kirk was doing consulting, Peter

A small number of the men found themselves in more difficult financial situations and were actively job hunting, although they too were looking for work that would complement their roles as at-home dads. Some of the men had turned down offers because they demanded too much travel and time away from home.

had just taken a job with an afterschool program, and a few others were writing and hoping to make a living as a writer. A small number of the men found themselves in more difficult financial situations and were actively job hunting, although they too were looking for work that would complement their roles as at-home dads. Some of the men had turned down offers because they demanded too much travel and time away from home.

We asked the fathers if they chose or needed to return to work in the near future, are there ways that they would approach their work and their work-life balance differently. The majority of the men in our study said that they would look for jobs that provided more flexibility, jobs that enabled better work-life balance. Only one of the fathers said that he would like to go back to a challenging position that

would demand travel and long hours. The rest all wanted to have work that would allow them to spend a significant amount of time with their children. Zach's hope is consistent with several others. He would like both his job and his wife's job to have sufficient flexibility to allow them both to spend time with their children:

I've finished the MBA in December so I'm looking right now for work doing financial analysis type work. I actually had an interview almost 2 weeks ago at a small investment bank ... an internship which seems promising. I want something that's, ideally, part-time or flexible enough to take care of the kids at least a couple of days a week or one day a week. Kind of the grand master plan is, if we could make it work at some point, would be to have [my wife] cut back to 4 days a week and have me work 4 days a week and that way we only put them in daycare or aftercare or whatever for 3 days and we each get a day to hang out with them.

From a career perspective, being an at-home dad was clearly disruptive; albeit for many of the fathers it was a desirable disruption. They were not particularly enjoying what they were doing at work, or the circumstances at work were such that it made sense for them to leave their jobs. For quite a few, they had little choice; nine dads in our study were laid off from their previous jobs. Many of the dads were not at all sure what they would do next for work, or even if they would go back to work. About a quarter of the dads said that they would like to have jobs that allowed them to integrate their work and family responsibilities. Four of the dads who worked as teachers (Evan, Frank, Jesse and Richard) saw themselves returning to the profession. Kirk, who worked in the field of social movements, also wanted to return to that field, but in a position that

better supported work-life balance, as did Curt who worked in the environmental field. But most of the dads were not at all clear on their next steps. Anthony who worked for a number of years at a consulting firm before being an at-home dad for the last ten years is a good example:

My issue has been that there really haven't been career plans. I mean there's not actually very much to say. This is something that I have kind of fallen down on, which is that frankly I've been so content at home, that there hasn't been a, you know, [my wife] makes enough that we can have a reasonably comfortable life, more than comfortable life. For me the urgency to return to work really hasn't been present. In the last quarter of last year, we have now made the decision that I should return to work. That's kind of the next thing for me. But I'm literally starting that process right now, starting to reach out to some of my [previous company] contacts, not because I want to go back there, but I'm happy to go back to something similar. So you've caught me just where life is probably headed in another direction again.

Similar to the situation for many at-home mothers, the fathers acknowledge it will not be easy to return to the workforce and that the longer they are in the role of at-home dads, the harder it will be to do so. Several talked about the need for additional training to bring their skills to the needed level. And many were simply avoiding thinking about it at all. We asked Paul, a long term at-home dad of eleven years, what he was thinking about now, and did he have any career plans. He told us “Honestly, I really don't. I'm just not -- not focused.”

CONCLUSIONS

Our in-depth discussions with 31 at-home dads yielded some interesting findings about this small but rapidly growing demographic of men who provide caregiving to their children on a full-time basis. In addition, the feedback we received from most of their working spouses helped us better understand the experiences of these fathers and the impacts their roles are having on their spouses, their families, and the fathers themselves. Overall the experiences for these fathers were very positive and they felt gratified by having the opportunity to be at-home dads.

Due to the limited sample we interviewed, our conclusions must be tentative, and obviously cannot be generalized to the population of all at-home fathers. With that caution, we present some of our key takeaways from this study.

First, in spite of all the media “hype” regarding laid off fathers becoming full-time caregivers, this image did not match the data or our experiences in speaking with the at-home fathers. As Al Watts, president of The National At-Home Dad Network, asserted in his recent blog, *The ‘Mancession’ and the Rise of the Caregiving Dad*, census data over the past 10 years does not support the assertions that the number of stay-at-home dads is increasing as a result of the recent, prolonged recession. In fact, the number of at-home dads actually decreased slightly from 2009 to 2010 during the height of the recession. In our research, we found that being a stay-at-home dad is a choice, often made by both spouses for pragmatic and value-driven reasons, not simply a reaction to an unanticipated lay-off. A man who is out of work and actively seeking his next job may be engaged in the critical work of providing full-time care, but his situation is not the same as that of the men we spoke with who made a conscious choice and a long-term commitment to be at-home fathers.

Second, there is no one type of person or style of upbringing that makes it easy to predict who will choose to be an at-home dad or will be effective in that role. **Men from widely varying backgrounds make the choice to be at-home fathers and indeed, may flourish at the role.**

Third, like their female counterparts who become at-home parents, men who make this decision face a number of obstacles and challenges, perhaps to an even more pronounced extent than their female counterparts. Issues of social isolation, loss of an adult network, uncertainty about future career plans, and concern about how they will be perceived by future potential employers are of concern to most at-home parents, but men often experience these feelings even more acutely. Research suggests that **feelings of social isolation and stigma regarding the role of at-home parent are even greater for men than women.**

Fourth, the existence of at-home fathers greatly enables and facilitates the careers of their working wives or partners. Throughout our study, the questions that received the most consistently positive responses were when we asked the spouses of the at-home fathers, “Has your ability to take on specific work tasks changed as a result of your spouse being at home? Has it had an impact on your career trajectory? If so, how?” **The overwhelming response we received was that having an at-home spouse enabled the wives to pursue their careers in a much fuller fashion, without the limitations that virtually all other working mothers experience.**

Fifth, **although the at-home fathers are having a positive impact on their wives’ careers, their own careers may be suffering.** Being an at-home dad was clearly disruptive to the dads’ careers and many that we interviewed were unsure what their next career steps would be. The degree of consternation this engendered varied widely. Some fathers who disliked the work they had been doing and had little

desire to go back to the field they had left, saw this break as an opportunity to forge a new direction in the future. Many felt fortunate that their families could continue to live comfortably on their wives' salaries. Those that wanted to return to work expressed their desire to find jobs that would enable them to spend significant amounts of time with their children, even if this would limit their career advancement possibilities.

Sixth, it seems that **at-home dads are very good parents**. Not only did the fathers we interviewed view themselves as good parents, but their spouses strongly confirmed their assessments. The at-home fathers were clearly devoted to their children and very involved and active parents. They were surprisingly similar to our images of at-home moms: committed to their children, supportive of their spouses, and doing the myriad of daily tasks needed to maintain their households.

Finally, perhaps too often, we focus on work-family conflict and the burdens and responsibilities of parenting that often fall to the mothers in American families. There is little question that this conflict places an undue burden on women and limits their career progression. That said, **we should not let this conflict / burden paradigm lead us to forget the richness and rewards that also go with parenting, a richness that most men do not fully experience**. The men we interviewed made it clear that they love and relish the opportunity to be primary players in their children's lives. **The at-home fathers are not simply stepping up to their responsibilities; they are increasing the fundamental sense of meaning in their lives.**

IMPLICATIONS

FOR ORGANIZATIONS

While most of the men who participated in our study were not currently in the workplace, what we have learned from them does have significance for today's employers. We have identified three specific implications based on our research:

- As we mentioned at the outset of this report, men's involvement in child rearing and other domestic activities is clearly on the rise, whether or not they are in the workplace. While the number of at-home fathers is still very small, it is clear that virtually all fathers will be more actively engaged with their children in the future as fathers need and want to be more than simply breadwinners. While the at-home father demographic is growing rapidly, we do not expect this will represent a majority, or even a large minority, of fathers in the future. That said, it does appear that fathers are increasingly likely to participate more fully in active caregiving and the result will require employers to make adjustments to support all parents and family configurations, irrespective of gender. Work-life is not exclusively a "women's issue."
- The men in this study have amplified the call for increased flexibility in organizations today. As they consider the prospect of returning to work at some future point, virtually all of the fathers we spoke with expressed their heartfelt desire to find jobs with significant flexibility that will allow for greater work-life balance than they had before leaving the workplace. Like women who have been home with children, these men want to put their talents to work in organizations that understand the importance they place on both their work and family roles.
- It is interesting to note that the percentage of at-home fathers, 3.4% of all stay-at-home parents, exactly mirrors the percentage of woman CEO's in the Fortune 1000 (also exactly 3.4% in 2012). We co-conducted a study a number of years ago with Families & Work Institute and Catalyst, of male and female leaders in ten highly respected Fortune 500 companies. We found that *63% of women in senior executive positions versus only 1% of the men said that they had the primary responsibility for child care in their homes* (Galinsky, Salmond, Bond, Brumit, Kropf, Moore, and Harrington, 2003). This finding speaks to the fact that it is very rare for even senior executive women to enjoy the support that most men in top leadership positions do. Further, it is clear that there is a strong correlation between support at home and achievement and advancement at work. The comments of the working spouses in our study make clear the invaluable role their at-home husbands play in helping these women reach their full potential in the workplace. Without such support, it seems unlikely that women will reach the most senior level roles in major organizations, despite well intentioned organizational efforts to create gender equity at all levels.

FOR FATHERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

It is often a difficult decision to give up, delay, or reduce one's career aspirations in order to dedicate oneself to meeting the care-giving needs of one's family. Most, if not all, individuals would like to reach their full professional potential. But as women have shown through their experiences, it is also difficult if not impossible to "have it all." Men are finally coming to grips with this same reality, however slowly. As the recent Pew Research Center study *A Gender Reversal On Career Aspirations* (2012) indicates, young women are now exceeding young men in valuing a high-paying career. The statistics cited indicate that in the future, it may become increasingly likely that the female spouse will be the primary

breadwinner, thereby increasing the likelihood of the male playing a significantly larger primary caregiving role. With that as a backdrop, we see the following important implications from our study:

- As mothers have known for many years, being an at-home parent can be difficult. Feelings of isolation, career derailment, and even social stigma are often attached to being an at-home parent. Men who choose to be at home experience the same challenges, perhaps even more acutely. Understanding this will allow fathers to better prepare for their role as at-home dads, and perhaps find the right support systems to ease the down sides of the experience. The at-home dads in our study who were successful in finding and participating in support groups placed a high value on these groups. Those who were unable to find them often felt isolated.
- The decision for the father to stay home and become the primary caregiver can be beneficial for both spouses. According to Stephanie Coontz, a family studies professor at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington: “By going against the grain, men get to stretch their parenting abilities and women can advance” (Hymowitz, 2012), creating a win-win scenario for both adults in the dual career family. Career-life discussions between couples should consider this as a potentially viable, acceptable, and even desirable option.
- As mothers have also known for many years, being an at-home parent can be one of the most rewarding of all human experiences. The fathers we spoke to in this study expressed very similar sentiments. They were, for the most part, a very happy group who felt they were following an important calling in their lives. Following that calling, though it may still be particularly difficult for men to do so, can lead to enormous and sometimes unexpected rewards. Considering this as a viable career-life option is something that more men should be open to in the future.

In this study, we began looking for the highly publicized group of laid-off dads. Victims of the “he-cession”, they had reinvented themselves as primary caregivers. While no doubt such men exist, they did not represent the majority of the at-home fathers we found. Instead, we met men who had, in concert with their spouses, made pro-active decisions to dedicate themselves to full-time parenting for an often indefinite length of time. These men did not define themselves or decide what role they would play based on gender, but rather on their competencies and the needs of their family as a whole. These men, and others like them, are forging a new path for what it means to be a successful father. And in doing so, are opening up another world of possibilities to live lives of meaning for today’s new dad, right at home.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This year's study of at-home dads is our third effort in the past three years to better understand and represent the changing face of fatherhood in the United States. From the outset, we were committed to ensuring that the important role that men play in family life is better understood and communicated. We are hopeful that this series of studies will help us move away from outdated gender role stereotypes that limit men and women and will bring a more objective and accurate view of men than is often conveyed in many media outlets.

As always, we are very thankful to all those who help to support our work at the Boston College Center for Work & Family. First, we are eternally grateful to the Corporate Partners of the Center who enrich our work in countless ways. They are truly the lifeblood of the Center. Second, we would like to thank the administration of the Carroll School of Management and Boston College who continue to support and promote our work at the University. Third, we appreciate our past collaborators on our fatherhood research, Prof. Jamie Ladge of Northeastern University and doctoral candidate Beth Humberd from Boston College. They have helped us maintain momentum for our fatherhood efforts and have willingly acted as sounding boards on each stage of our journey. Fourth, we would like to thank our tremendous colleagues at the Boston College Center for Work & Family who contribute in so many ways to our research. Specifically, we are grateful to Danielle Hartmann, Lauren Stiller Rikleen, Kaitlin O'Malley, and Maryellen Carr. Most importantly, we would like to acknowledge our editor Jennifer Sabatini Fraone. Jennifer does an amazing job in every aspect of her role as the Center's Director of Marketing and Communications. This is especially evident each year in the great work she does to get the word out on our latest research on fathers.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

At-home Fathers Study Sample Descriptive Data: 31 Participants

	Average	Range
Father age	39.15	28-48
Child age	5.43	6 months-16 years
Number of years at-home	5.28	1-17
Work Satisfaction	7.18 on a 1-10 scale	2-10 (one response=15, coded as 10)
Fatherhood Rating	4.12 on a 1-5 scale	3-5

APPENDIX B – JOBS AND EDUCATION

Name	Last Job	Education	Spouse Job	Spouse Education
Corey	University Sr. Administrator	BA	Sponsored Research	MBA
Craig	Analysis of explosion detection systems	PhD	Director, Acquisition Pgms	MBA, TESL
Blake	Assoc. Dir. Facilities Planning	BS	Global HR Director	BA
Anthony	Consultant,	BS	Physician-allergist	MD
Alex	Teacher	MA	Real Estate Portfolio Mgmt	MBA
Charles	Youth Counseling	BA	Managing Editor	BA
Brian	Handyman	High School	Psychologist	PhD
Evan	Ed/Community Service Coordinator	BA	Medical Resident	MD
Ben	Director, On-line Grocer	BA	Banker	BA
Curt	Energy Efficiency Analyst	MBA	HR Executive	MBA

Name	Last Job	Education	Spouse Job	Spouse Education
Dan	IT Consultant	BS	Investment Banker	JD, MBA
Frank	Teacher	BA	Supply Chain QA	BA
Drew	Teacher	BS	Research Translator	PhD
Gerald	Environmental Consultant	BA	Commercial Lending Officer	BS
Eli	Sub-prime Mortgage Sales	High School	Financial Aid at Univ.	MA
Grant	Television Script Writer	BA	Attorney / Journalist	JD
Jeremy	Construction Inspector	High School	Director of Education	BA
Jesse	Teacher	MA	Attorney	JD
Josh	Analyst, Government Agency	MA	Medical Education	MPH
Ken	Retail Sales	ABD	Credit Card Marketing	MBA
Kirk	Community Organizing	BA	Health Teacher	MA
Kit	Museum Education	MA	Minister	Mdiv
Lew	Classified Ad Sales	BA	Director of Sales	BA
Marcus	Handyman	Assoc. Deg.	Pediatrician	MD
Paul	Web Page Designer	BA	Pediatrician	MD
Peter	Teacher	MA	Pediatrician	MD
Richard	Teacher	MA	Attorney	JD
Ryan	Teacher	MA	Global Pediatrics	MD
Sam	Engineer	BS-eng	Attorney	JD
Tom	Publishing	MA	Graphic Designer	BA
Zach	Construction Crew Supervisor	MBA	Researcher	BS

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This study is focused on men’s experiences as stay-at-home parents. We’re interviewing a small group of professional men who have transitioned into becoming full-time parents. All of the fathers will have previously had significant work experience / a career. Then, either because of a loss of job, or out of choice, they have now become full-time stay-at-home parents for a period of at least six months.

We are interested in learning more about the transition process and the way your new role, as a full-time stay-at-home parent has altered (if at you’re your concepts on work, career, and parenting issues. Your identity will be held in confidence and just the thematic results will be used as a basis for refining the study. Note: ask them to send their resume if they haven’t already done so prior to the interview.

Part 1. Warm Up and Basic Information

Let’s begin by covering some of the basic facts. Could you tell me some basic information about your current situation?

1. Where are you living?
2. What is your current family situation? How many children do you have? What are their ages?
3. How long have you been a stay-at-home dad?
4. Is your wife working? What kind of work does she do? What is her background in terms of education and experience?

Part 2. Your Own Upbringing and Family Experience

1. Could you describe your own background a bit? I’d like a basic chronology of your life - where were you born, where you grew up, where you went to school/college, when did you graduate, get married, have kids, etc.
2. Please tell me a bit more about your parents, their marriage, and the roles they played in the family. Did/do both your parents work? What roles did each of your parents play in your family? Did they adopt fairly traditional male/female roles?
3. Specifically, could you go into some detail about your father? What was his primary focus? How did he split his time between work, caregiving, hobbies and other personal, external pursuits? What kinds of roles and domestic tasks did he perform around the house? How important was family life to him versus career?
4. What aspects of your history (family life, religion, work experience, friends, other parents, etc.) do you think have influenced your views of fatherhood and your career?

Part 3. Career and Career Aspirations

Now let’s talk about your career and career aspirations prior to becoming a full-time stay-at-home parent.

1. Please tell me a bit about the various jobs you have had in your career, again in chronological order ending with your most recent job.
2. Why did you leave your most recent job?

3. On a scale of 1-10, how satisfied were you with the kind of work you were doing before staying at home full time?
4. When you worked, did you consider your work a job, career, calling?
5. What were your career aspirations? Where did (do) you see your career unfolding in the future? Did you have a specific role in mind you wanted to attain or a clear plan for where you were heading professionally?
6. At the time you first became a father, did you anticipate that becoming a father would impact your career? In what ways?
7. Have your career plans changed now that you have been a stay-at-home dad? How have they changed?

Part 4. Balancing work and family while you were working

1. Again, focusing on the time when you were working at your last job, how many hours were you typically working, and how were you balancing work and home life?
2. Did you take a paternity leave when you child(ren) were born? Did you make use of flexible work arrangements?
3. How would you have characterized the split of domestic and parenting responsibilities with your spouse when you were working?
4. Had you (or for how long had you) considered the possibility of becoming a stay-at-home father?

Part 5. The Transition to full-time parenting

I would like to explore the process of becoming a stay-at-home parent. Could we discuss a few questions regarding this transition process?

1. What were the circumstances that prompted you to become a stay-at-home father?
2. To what extent did you feel the decision to be at home full-time was yours vs. being foisted upon you?
3. How did the transition feel moving from full-time worker to full-time parent?
4. Now that you are at home full-time, could you describe the split (perhaps in percentages) of how you and your wife divide caregiving and domestic tasks? What are the tasks that you take primary responsibility for?
5. Could you describe a typical day for you?
6. Could you talk about your social network and connections? Who do you maintain contact with on a regular basis? Has that network changed significantly since becoming a stay-at-home parent?
7. Do you view your network as strength or a challenge in terms of facilitating your role as a stay-at-home father?

Part 6. Identity

In America, many people (and especially men) feel their identity is tied to their career (so much so that the question “What do you do?” might be seen as a surrogate for “Who are you?”). Here we would like to explore the role of identity in your life and how, if at all that has changed since you have become a full-time parent.

1. If you were asked to describe yourself today, what would you say?
2. Do you feel comfortable with being in the role of a stay-at-home parent?
3. How do others close to you (i.e. family, friends, etc.) react to your role as a stay-at-home parent? How about others that know you less well or those you just met?
4. When you think about yourself, do you see yourself as a career person, a career person who has taken a temporary detour, or a full-time parent?
5. Do you feel that your current state (whichever one they’ve chosen) is driven primarily by you at this stage, family circumstances, or labor market conditions?
6. Are you currently looking for work or have you done so since you left your last job? What has happened with your job search and how has that affected you?
7. If you chose or needed to return to work in the near future, are there ways that you would approach your work or your work-life balance differently?

Part 7. Questions Regarding Fatherhood and Career Identity

1. What does it mean to you to be a good father today? On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate yourself as a father? Why?
2. Has being a full-time father influenced your thoughts on what it means to be a good parent? If so, in what ways?
3. Has being home influenced your thinking about your professional identity?
4. What are the best aspects of being a full-time stay-at-home parent? What are the aspects you like least about it?
5. Do you feel you have changed in any way as a result of becoming a stay-at-home father? How?

Part 8. Impact on Your Spouse, Your Spouse’s Career, Your Family Finances and on Your Kids

Obviously, as we know from the experience of men over many years, having a stay-at-home spouse can have a great deal of impact on working parents. We would like to explore that with you now.

1. What has been your spouse’s reaction to your being at home full-time?
2. How has that changed, if at all, the dynamics of your relationship?
3. Are there specific impacts that you feel your being at home has had on your spouse’s work experience? For example, are there specific work tasks that your spouse has taken on as a result of you’re being at home?
4. Has you’re being at home impacted the career trajectory of your spouse at all?

5. Has it had an impact on your family finances?
6. How have your children reacted to your being at home? How would you say it has affected them?

Part 9. Miscellaneous and Wrap-up

1. Are there any areas we have not covered that you feel you would like to discuss?
2. Can you recommend anyone who might be a good candidate for this study?
3. We have a very short on-line survey for your wife to answer if she is willing. We want to be able to collect your wife's perspective on your being a stay-at-home dad, and how that has had an impact on her professional and home life. This additional perspective would be of great value to our study. It takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. If you think she might be willing to take this survey I will send you the survey link to forward to her. Do you think she would be willing to complete this survey?

APPENDIX D – SPOUSE SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What is your spouse's name?
2. How do you feel about your spouse being at home full-time?
3. How has it changed, if at all, the dynamics of your relationship with your spouse?
4. How have your children responded to your spouse in this role? Has it changed the dynamics of your relationship with your children?
5. How would you describe other's reactions to your work/family arrangement?
6. Are there specific ways in which your spouse being at home has affected your home experience?
7. Has your ability to take on specific work tasks changed as a result of your spouse being at home? Has it had an impact on your career trajectory? If so, how?
8. In what ways has this experience of having your spouse at home been consistent with what you had anticipated? What has surprised you?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experiences of being the spouse of a stay-at-home dad?

I heard a comment that developing self-confidence in our children is one of the most important roles that parents play. What I think is more helpful is for our children to give and receive love. Then their identity and security is not bound up in their performance or failures, so that they feel good about themselves when they have done well, or bad about themselves when they have failed. If their identity is bound up in the giving and receiving of love, then they're free to go out and try all sorts of things, and fail, and not feel like Mom or Dad is going to love me less. Love is not contingent on their performance, and likewise, when they succeed, it doesn't redefine who they are. It is, I guess, icing on the cake. An extra thing to enjoy, and so that is something that I am deliberately pursuing and embracing.

To the degree that I [have] learned to do it, it [has] opened up a whole lot more authentic relationships with other people because I'm not defining myself over again or trying to impress them by saying, 'this is what I've done,' or 'here's my resume.' But I'm much more ready to engage them as a real human being.

[RYAN, AN AT-HOME DAD FROM THIS STUDY]



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