

Yo, Mr. Trump, here's what's missing in your childcare policy. Me. ^[1]

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Source: Glamour

Format: Article

Publication Date: 13 Oct 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

When Donald Trump announced his new child care plan last month, which included six weeks of paid maternity leave for women, I thought, A step forward in policy; a step backward in language. His rhetoric focused on mothers—there was little mention of stay-at-home dads like me. And that hurts moms, dads, and all primary caregivers.

The last thing I want to do here is start mansplaining the benefits of full-time parenting. And I won't argue that stay-at-home dads have it tougher than women. No contest there. But if we want more moms and dads to be supported in their parenting choices, we need to talk about some of the challenges.

My brief story: A year ago, I left my office job in New York City to become the full-time caregiver to our son, then five, and two-year-old twins. My wife had put her career on hold after having the twins, and when she went back to work, and after weighing the childcare options, it just made the most practical sense for me to move into the primary role. I also recognized that my feminist values didn't mean much if I couldn't put them into practice in a very personal way. I needed to actually challenge myself to expand what I saw as the role of men, while also making space for my wife to advance her career. Plus, I was excited to spend more time with my kids.

I knew the learning curve would be steep, but one of the biggest challenges had nothing to do with actual childcare. When announcing that I was leaving my job, I had a lot of anxiety about being judged harshly for it. Not having any stay-at-home dads among my family, friends, or colleagues to be role models intensified the sense that I was crossing an invisible line. I was surprised how much I felt captive to a stereotype of manhood that I had intellectually rejected but couldn't emotionally escape. And so while I received kind words of support from others, I still feared silent judgment.

In the first weeks at home with the kids, that fear was isolating. One night out with a group of dad friends, as the only stay-at-homer, I suddenly felt like I had gone through the looking glass. I confessed that I had a new perspective: I now saw things from the other side, and they should absolutely be more grateful to their wives. But even with their good intentions, I had the sense they had no idea what I was talking about. At the same time, hanging out with my new at-home mom friends, I felt like I was taking my wife's seat at their community table—and performing her role inadequately. In both groups, I felt like an outsider.

The numbers of stay at home dads are increasing (apace with trend pieces about them and dad blogs), but from my personal experience, men are still rare in this space. Last year I was the only full-time dad in my son's kindergarten class. This year I'm not the only one at the school but we're a visible minority. And I seem to attract attention.

While outside pushing my big double stroller for the twins with a ride-on board in back for my son, I get comments—a lot of comments. "Daddy's day out with the kids, huh?" or, "Looks like you've got your hands full, dad." And then there's the inevitable low-bar praise, "There goes super dad!" or "Look at father of the year!" So yes, I do feel conspicuous at the playground with all the moms and the nannies. I do feel added pressure to keep the kids calm at the grocery store because I'm very aware of being observed. I wish I didn't, but I do.

I am also aware that I am held to distinctly different standard. The very attitude that awards me a supportive-sounding-yet-patronizing comment at the grocery store also gives me a pass if my kids' clothes aren't perfectly coordinated or my daughters' hair isn't styled—or some days even adequately brushed. But the point is, while that low-bar standard seemingly praises me for taking care of my kids, it makes it abundantly clear that in 2016, fathers are still not expected to do so. It is considered remarkable that I am participating in childcare at all. And that's a problem.

I recognize that my challenges are nowhere near what women face balancing career and childcare. Not even the same universe. And actually, in the past year my support system has gradually gotten better. I've made connections in a community of stay-at-home moms (and a few dads) who have sustained me and helped normalize my experience—and it's partly, and critically, the result of me talking openly with them about my new role and the difficulties of parenthood.

So if we want to reduce barriers to mothers and fathers taking time at home with their children, we need to be aware of who we talk about and how we talk about them. If we want to encourage more men to be stay-at-home dads, we need promote an inclusive culture with language that reflects the reality. So, yes, let's push for tax deductions and family leave policies, but ones that impact all full-time caregivers. We need more voices, a wider range of experiences represented, and stronger community and policy support to raise healthy kids. Not as a trend but just an unremarkable fact of modern life.

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