'I had no idea about the hidden labour': has the pandemic changed fatherhood forever? [1]

For the past year, many men have spent more time with their children than ever before. Could it force a permanent change?
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EXCERPTS

imary school spelling tests ringed by coffee stains; office printouts splashed with paint from GCSE art projects; laptops running out of puff in the middle of Zoomed-in geography lessons; and everyone in the family, from the mildest of adults to the sweetest of children, arguing with the fury of stockbrokers over their fair share of the wifi bandwidth. By shutting schools, by taking away the familiar avenues of social escape, by crunching together our working lives with our home lives, this marathon Covid pandemic has changed the terms of parenting beyond all recognition. Mothers have absorbed most of the blow: taking on more of the extra childcare; surrendering more of their scarcer work hours; being interrupted by children more; and any one of them would be justified in saying it was ever thus. But in the midst of it all, fathers have been undergoing some quietly radical changes in behaviour, too.

Or so research suggests. Dads are spending more time than ever before with their children, according to a report last year by the Office for National Statistics. Meanwhile, those dads who were already inclined to take on the playful aspects of parenting (what's known by sociologists as "non-routine care", and by the rest of us as "the fun shit") have started doing more of the unpaid, unglamorous work of child-rearing, according to a joint study of lockdown behaviours by the Universities of Birmingham and Kent. Two of its authors, Holly Birkett and Sarah Forbes, believe that this year of intermittent lockdowns and school closures, along with the widespread adoption of home working, has hurried on an evolution in caring roles we might otherwise have waited decades for.

There's nowhere to go without your family. They're annoying. They don't leave you alone. But there are special moments

"One has to acknowledge at the outset that the burden of these lockdowns has fallen disproportionally on women," says Michael Lamb, a psychology professor at Cambridge and the author of several academic texts about fatherhood and the division of parental labour. "There will be huge variability in the experiences of fathers, too, some of whom have the option to work from home, some of whom don't, some of whom might have lost their jobs altogether."

"That said," Lamb continues, "what we're seeing now is that a large number of men have stepped up, have been more involved, have recognised that actually it's pretty hard to manage a house, and be a good parent, and keep up with work demands, all at the same time." He sees this as an opportunity: "For many fathers, this year will have been a chance to establish relationships that are deeper and broader than might otherwise have been the case. There will be fathers out there who are recognising some of the joys and benefits of fatherhood in a way they've not been able to do in the past."

Is this true of people's experience on the ground, in cramped kitchens, around dining tables strewn with school textbooks, borrowed laptops, pencil shavings, tangled headphone leads? Right about the time the UK government put out an extraordinary (and soon withdrawn) advert, in which a woman was depicted doing household chores while a man relaxed on the sofa, and soon after the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, was accused of being tone-deaf when he said, "We owe mums everywhere an enormous debt of thanks for doing the enormously difficult job of juggling childcare and work at this tricky time", I set out to speak to families around the country. Where were fathers in the midst of that enormously difficult juggle? Dozens answered a Guardian Weekend request for candid testimony.

Talking to me while palming off babies, bribing away toddlers, tossing foam Frisbees at under-10s or shouting at their teenagers to be quiet, dads recount a wide array of epiphanies, stresses and resolutions about fatherhood, near-unanimously swearing that they've been exposed to a more thorough and exhausting version of parenting during this period than ever before in their lives. I speak to some of their partners and ex-partners, too, asking them what changes they've observed. And what things haven't really changed at all.

Am I a better or a worse father for this?" wonders Joseph Mullarkey, a council worker in Leytonstone, east London, chatting while absent-mindedly peeling a banana for his son and throwing about a half-deflated football. "I don't know. But I'm definitely a different father."

Mullarkey stares into the middle distance for a while, wistfully listing the things he used to do with something called spare time. Bit of woodwork. Gym visits. Two hours of reading every day on his commute. "Having an individual life has been completely obliterated," he says, describing a recent attempt to have a shower during which his wife, Claire, their five-year-old son and their three-year-old daughter

all ended up in the flat's cramped bathroom, just watching him. "There's been nowhere to go without your family following you around. They're frustrating. They're annoying. They don't leave you alone. But there've been some really special moments."

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When I talk to David Lockwood, a graphic designer from Glasgow who used to work nine-to-five in an office before the Covid outbreak, he is joggling his 20-week-old son on his lap. For months, David and his wife, Sally, tell me, they have been discussing whether David should give up his job and become a stay-at-home dad. He has figured out that if he'd been working his usual hours, he would have missed his son's first giggle already. "That stopped me in my tracks," he says. "I want these initial things. I want to see his first steps. I want his first words."

Harsitt Chandak, a station manager from Milton Keynes, tells me how fascinating it has been to observe his boisterous six-year-old sit down for virtual lessons every day: "His shifts between concentrating and not, how he gets distracted by the birds chirping outside, his shyness in a school setting – I never knew he was shy."

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Ashley John, a train driver from Bedfordshire, splits the care of their son 50-50 with his ex-partner – though he acknowledges that, until the pandemic, this largely meant being Super-Fun-Activities Dad. Snowboarding! Dog walking! Season tickets at Spurs! "His mum used to swear his behaviour was completely different with me than it was with her," John says. "To which, I always thought, 'Maybe you're not giving him enough things to do… ' Now that he's with me for home schooling, now that I have to make him do something he doesn't want to for eight or nine hours a day, I'm seeing a much greater spread of his behaviour. I'm seeing him when he's fed up. His mum always said, 'You don't ever see that side.' Now I'm seeing it. Not a lot. But enough to give me a new appreciation."

Nick Leader, a documentary-maker from London, speaks of appreciation, too. "As a father, I've always helped out, or manned the fort while my wife wasn't there – kept it all going. But there's a difference between manning the fort, keeping your children alive for periods of time, and actually doing the work of a primary parent." When schools closed last March, Leader says, his wife was in full-time employment. As the freelancer, he gave up work for four months to look after the kids. "And I had no idea about the hidden labour of childcare until I did that," he says. "It changed my whole idea of parenting."

He continues: "I hadn't understood before how you can finish your day, you're exhausted, you try to pivot to adult company, and your brain is just mush. I suddenly understood why my friends who are mothers have this whole canon of jokes around being so fucking tired. If you do it properly, if you take on the responsibility of colouring their world, it takes everything out of you."

Joseph and Claire Mullarkey are sitting together when I ask them exactly how they divide parental labour between them. "We will have different opinions on this," says Claire, diplomatically. "Wanna go first?" Joseph clears his throat and cautiously mentions making the children's beds. Hoovering after them. Doing the washing.

"The washing?" repeats Claire. "I do the washing."

Joseph: "You do the washing up. I do the laundry."

Claire: "I don't touch the laundry because I'll mess it up. But I'm their chief cooker. Their chief snack-maker. I do the home schooling."

Joseph: "You take the phone calls from school. I know it's not equal."

Claire: "It's not fucking equal."

Joseph: "That's what I said. It's not equal."

There will, I expect, have been many tense discussions like this over the past year. Who really does what. Whether it's fair now. Whether it's ever been fair. One night, when our two children are in bed, I tentatively suggest to my wife that we both write down, year by year for all the years we've been parents, the division of labour between us.

“Honest numbers?” she asks. I gulp.

For the years 2015, 2018 and 2019, I have us down as a 55-45 split, with hers the bigger share. She doesn’t agree. For these years she gives me a 35. For 2014 and 2017 (when we had newborns and my wife was on maternity leave), I plunge to uncomfortable lows: 75-25 in my evaluation and 90-10 in hers. For 2020, I climb to 50-50 in my evaluation and 55-45 in hers.

When I put our ratios side by side, I have to sulk a bit. It is sobering that for years you can imagine yourself a good dad, get called a good dad, be a good dad – and not be a 50-50 dad, not even close.

According to the academics Birkett and Forbes, there are countless social, economic and historical forces that have helped create and sustain unequal parenting partnerships. “But if we focus on the issue of paid parental leave, it highlights one of the major problems,” Forbes says. “For women, paid parental leave has been available since 1948. Men got it in 2003. There was half a century in between when mums were told they should be taking that leave and dads were told, essentially, to stay out of it.” This helped embed certain professional norms, Forbes says, that have proved difficult to chip away at.

Some of the men I get to know for this story describe the pre-pandemic difficulty – perhaps even impossibility – of being more hands-on with their children while also thriving or surviving at work. David Read was employed by a large legal firm when his first child was born, a decade ago. “Paternity leave was a dirty notion in the office,” he recalls. As for the idea of adjusting a working day to make room for childcare, school runs, “you wouldn’t even conceive of asking”. Eventually, unable to reconcile this environment with his desires as a father, Read left the firm and founded his own smaller business, with a saner parenting/working balance.

Nick Leader says that creative industries can be just as unimaginative as corporate equivalents. Before he had his first child, he remembers, he was told by two male bosses that neither of them had taken more than a few days’ paternity leave. He got the message. He returned to work quickly. That early decision set a tone, Leader thinks, establishing him as a secondary carer in a way he did not question or correct until lockdown forced his hand.

Forbes and Birkett have been studying British fathers and their behaviours for some years and say that whenever they interviewed working fathers before Covid, the men often fell into one of two broad groups. “A group who really wanted to be more involved in their children’s lives, but felt there were huge barriers they just couldn’t overcome, maybe because they were the primary earner in their family, maybe because they were worried about losing their jobs,” Birkett says. “And then another group who were definitely happier to leave it to their partner, who wanted to be the ones who went out to work.”

Not many of the fathers I interview for this story voluntarily put themselves in the latter, leave-it-to-her group – but I do meet a few. Harry Borden, a photographer from Devon, is admirably candid about his failings as a father when he first had a shot at it, two decades ago. When Borden and his ex first had their children, he says, “I was in my early 30s. I had a raging ambition to succeed. I was overly concerned with being financially secure. I thought, if I bring home the bacon, provide materially, that would be an expression of my fathering and love.” It was only after his marriage broke up, Borden says, “that I had to reassess, pick myself apart”. Later, when he had another child with a new partner, the divide was strictly 50-50 from the start. “I had realised by then that work, ultimately, doesn’t mean a thing if my kids think I’m an arsehole.”

Birkett and Forbes believe that the pandemic year has provided a needed jolt for many fathers (“a eureka moment”, they call it) – but also, crucially, for employers. “Things are not likely to be the same after the lockdowns end,” says Birkett, “largely because the experiences of employers has changed. There used to be this really clear distinction between work and home. But as it’s become more blurred, it’s been harder for employers to see their employees as people who just come to work and then disappear into the ether. They’ve been forced to recognise them as holistic people.”

Bobby Thandi tells me a story about an important work meeting with investors he hosted online during one of the lockdowns. Thandi was trying to clinch some funding and his children, 10 and five, were shakily under way with their school work in the room right next door. The 10-year-old was bribed with a few quid in Fortnite money to keep the younger one in check, but even so, at a crucial point in the meeting, through the wall, came the five-year-old’s wail: “Dadd-eeee! I need! A poo!”

Meeting halted. Poo dealt with. Meeting resumed. Deal clinched anyway. Thandi tells me he cannot imagine that same professional scenario playing out so smoothly at any time before 2020. “There’s been a brilliant level of understanding, at least in my industry,” he says, “because a lot of the highest people in the largest organisations have been dealing with something similar themselves.” Harsitt Chandak and Ashley John, both employed by the rail operator Govia Thameslink, tell me they’ve become used to seeing colleagues’ children pop up on screen during work meetings. It’s fine: things still get done.

Certain industries have been hit harder than others by this pandemic; there has not been an equal share of the economic pain. But at least in the desk-based jobs that account for so much of the UK economy, says Birkett, “employers have been able to see their employees working flexibly, juggling home schooling and work, and they’ve seen that the world hasn’t fallen apart.”

Fund manager Andy Round tells me candidly that when he first became a father he was working around the clock, and as a result resisted, even resented, the new domestic incursions. In Round’s words: “I was bloody awful. I found the early years with young children very, very difficult. Some days I just preferred to be at work than to have to deal with them.” The mother of his children, Karen Oldman, tells me: “It came as a shock, how much Andy didn’t want to share in the baby experience. I thought, ‘We’re in the 21st century now, all dads muck in.’ He said, ‘Nope.’”

I ask them both how this strange year has altered things for them. Round believes he is a better dad. He has taken on an extra day’s care recently, and is more hands-on than before. “Me and the kids are having breakfast together. We’re staying up a bit later than we should.

We're destroying Amazon and Netflix. We're becoming closer friends." Oldman offers a more cautious reading of the arrangement. "Andy can see that other professional people around him are also being impacted by the pandemic, which has meant his attitude has softened a little. He's said to himself: 'OK then, I'll step up and do my bit.' I would say it's still only a bit, though."

For all the incremental changes for the better some fathers may have made, it's still been a privilege, something they can opt into. "The demands on, and expectations of, mothers tend to be consistent," says Michael Lamb, "in that there isn't really a back door, or the option to opt out." Karen Oldman has a full-time job at AstraZeneca, the pharmaceutical firm producing one of the world's most in-demand Covid vaccines. It hasn't exactly been a quiet year for her. "One thing I have felt every day during all of this is guilt," she says. "When I'm with my children I think, 'I should be working.' When I'm working I think, 'I should be doing more with the children.' I often wonder if men, if dads, if they have those same thoughts."

Some of the dads I speak to certainly do. Chandak, aware that his two children have had more PlayStation hours this year than ever before in their little lives, mentions his guilt. Mullarkey, so obliterated by the employee-father-partner juggle that he feels he isn't fulfilling any one role well, refers to "the elephant-on-the-chest, ever-present sense of guilt". Han-Son Lee, a father of one who runs a parenting website called daddilife.com, says that dads definitely feel parental guilt: "They're just better at masking it." Lamb believes this has been a significant era for fathers, not only because of the fresh positives it might have exposed them to, but also the fresh negatives. "For many fathers, it's not only been about seeing what's possible in a relationship with children, it's been about understanding the demands, the stresses, the ups-and-downs that are part of parenting, too."

Seeing children from a more typical mothers' perspective would be another way of putting this. Nick Leader, reflecting on his first full-immersion experience as a primary carer, tells me: "It's left me with endless respect for whoever it is in any family who carries the motherlode." He pauses after saying this and adds: "But that's an interesting-sounding word, right? Mother-load? It makes a different kind of sense to me now."

David and Sally Lockwood, in Glasgow, have come to a big decision about David's work. When the lockdowns end, and the culture of nine-to-five resumes in some form or another, David will not return. For the foreseeable future he will be a stay-at-home father. "Things going massively awry, globally," says Sally, "in a funny way, it's given us the mental freedom to think about the world differently. We can divide up the parenting the way we want to divide it, rather than trying to fit it to the way life was."

Ashley John, the train driver, is about to undergo some major changes, too. When we speak he is about to head off to the antenatal ward with his partner. "Twenty-week scan," he says. "Wasn't planned, mate, but I blame the lockdown. Just when you think you've got everything sussed and settled… " In Leeds, Bobby Thandi is about to take his children over to the nearest woods for a run-around. Caspar Salmon, in London, is aching to get to the middle of the week and his day with the kids. "I don't think I realised before what a salve they are," he says. "I hope I can take that forward from all this. At times during the last year, when my morale has been really in the gutter, I've needed to see them so badly that it's focused my mind on what is important to me – which is them."

The Mullarkeys, in their Leytonstone flat, are picking up strewn fruit peel and dropped balls in the wake of their son, anticipating a slightly less shattering few weeks ahead. Their daughter's nursery has just reopened, they say, which will ease some of the pressure. Joseph has exciting plans to have a shower all by himself.

In my own flat, I say goodbye to the Mullarkeys and start making notes when my four-year-old son drifts into the bedroom where I normally work. He stands still for a while, then draws in a breath, leaps once into the air, and asks me, solemnly: "Was that the biggest jump you've ever seen?"

We spend a few minutes practising his favourite knock-knock joke. He shows me how to write the letter D. When I turn back to my computer and carry on working, he asks what I'm doing. "Trying to figure out if the past year has made me a better or a different father," I say. "What do you reckon?"

My son draws another slow breath, as though to answer – and jumps.

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