

How and why fathers in China are sharing more childcare duties than before ^[1]

Author: Junzhi, Du

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EXCERPTS

For Xie Jiachen, giving his daughter a loving and joyful childhood is more important than anything else, including his job.

"When my daughter wasn't even a month old, my boss asked me to think about the company's overall marketing strategy while looking after the newborn at home," said the 34-year-old father, who lives in China's eastern city of Nanjing.

At that time, Xie and his wife were battling with sleep deprivation along with other helpless moments of new parenthood. Moreover, none of their grandparents or other relatives were available to pitch in on the babysitting duties, which is a common practice in China. When his daughter was 3 months old, Xie ditched the position of marketing manager and became a freelance video director, hoping he could take care of his daughter while preparing for a new career.

"Childcare duties really take time, money, energy and an enormous amount of patience," said Xie, whose daughter is now 2 years old. "We really needed a family-friendly working environment to ease the burden on being parents."

In the past, mothers usually took on the overwhelming burdens associated with raising children at the expense of their careers. But new trends are emerging.

Nearly 49 percent of working fathers said they shared childcare responsibilities equally with their wives, and another 10 percent said they were the main caregivers in raising children, according to a survey in May by BOSS Zhipin, a Chinese online recruitment platform.

Men's willingness to do more in childcare is encouraged by the government as well. Late last month, China's eastern Shandong Province revised its regulations on population and family planning. Parents of children under 3 years old will enjoy at least 10 days of newly added parental leave per year starting this November. Moreover, new fathers will have at least 15 days of paternity leave, which was previously only seven days.

"During the increased days of leave, the salary will be paid as usual, and the welfare benefits will remain unchanged," the regulation noted.

Since China introduced its three-child policy last August, about 30 provinces and cities have made legal changes to help build a family-friendly social environment. Most of them added parental leave to the regulations.

Happier wives and children

During the past three years, Xu Qi has been a vital runner in the childcare relay race in his family. Xu, 35, is an associate professor at the school of social and behavioral sciences at Nanjing University. He said jobs affect how he and his wife assign childcare duties.

In the morning, Xu usually tends to their son's needs because his wife leaves for work early and he only goes to school for classes and meetings. During the day, Xu's parents take over the nursery duties when he is busy working from home. In the evening, his wife picks up the baton.

"I usually work when my son is asleep. Otherwise, I would not be able to fulfill my teaching and research tasks," said Xu.

The young sociologist had expected to accomplish much academically, but he experienced the drag of parenting duties on his career. However, he received positive feedback from his family. Xu noticed that his son's cognitive and linguistic development was ahead of his peers, which he thought might be related to his companionship.

"My wife's colleagues envied her because I was able and willing to share more parenting responsibilities," said Xu. "She even wants to have a second child."

High-quality father-child bonds can lead to more optimal adjustment in children, especially their interpersonal trust and security, according to an article on father's co-parenting published in Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology in 2019.

Xu pointed out that teamwork is the only way out for young parents as they all have high expectations for their children, which requires

lots of parenting efforts. He said parents nowadays not only feed and clothe their children, but also pay special attention to their intellectual and psychological development.

"In our culture, parents want their children to surpass them and usually provide the best resources they can offer for their children's education and growth," Xu added. "In this matter, quality is more important than quantity."

New trend, old problems

In China, mothers and grandparents continue to play the dominant role in providing care and emotional support to children. As more men are open to the idea of sharing more child-rearing duties at home, they come across old problems that women face.

"I was afraid that others would look down on me, and worried that people would say I was dependent on my spouse," said Dakui, who has been a stay-at-home dad for more than three years. "But my wife tells me that we both contribute to our family, just in different roles."

Dakui, who lives in China's southwestern city of Meishan, has been sharing videos illustrating how he takes care of his two daughters and performs housework on Chinese short-video platform Douyin. More than just a side-hustle, he hopes his videos will make more people recognize the contribution of stay-at-home parents, regardless of their gender.

In recent years, a growing number of stay-at-home dads have been creating and sharing videos of themselves babysitting or doing housework, challenging the stereotyped gender roles of breadwinning men and homemaking women.

"Fathers will become more involved in childcare, and this trend is irreversible," said Xu. "But they are bound to face social pressure when they choose childcare over career because society has not fully embraced the phenomenon."

The birth rate in China recorded a historic low in 2021 of seven births per 1,000 people, the lowest since the 1950s, according to the National Statistics Bureau.

A report published by the United Nations titled "World Population Prospects 2022" says that China's population is expected to decline as early as 2023. Chinese experts say the country's population may begin shrinking as early as this year.

According to the National Health Commission, major reasons for declining interest in having babies include financial burden, lack of childcare and motherhood penalty in career development.

Last Tuesday, 17 agencies in China jointly announced a series of new measures to encourage families to have more babies, providing support from supply of childcare services to more paid leave and workplace equality.

These policies are intended to reduce the cost of raising children and promote the sharing of childcare responsibilities between men and women. However, some argue that increasing paid leave will impose greater human resource costs on companies, and instead push companies to discriminate against all employees with parenting responsibilities.

"As long as the heavy burden of raising children still rests on families, whether it's on women or men, people will be reluctant to have more babies," Xu said. "Moreover, the most fundamental reason for the decline in fertility lies in changes in people's views."

According to Xu, traditional ideas of raising children for old age and the preference for boys to carry on the family line used to be the main driving force for people to have children, but these concepts are gradually being abandoned by young people with the establishment of the modern pension system and improved literacy rates.

"Young people of the future will have higher levels of education and demand higher quality of childcare," Xu said. "As the main force of future fertility, they need a more compelling reason for having children."

Region: Asia ^[3]

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