

Fathering from home [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Several years ago a male friend of mine quit his job as the president of a busy company to stay home with his kids. Missing out on special events in his children's lives was eating away at him. So he decided to trade the big salary and high status for mountains of laundry and driving to hockey practice. He's just one of a growing number of men who has chosen the "daddy track" — not necessarily for a lifetime, but for a couple of years anyway.

Years ago a stay-at-home dad was virtually unheard of. These days it's difficult to drop off kids in a playground and not see a couple of men chatting as they wave their children goodbye.

According to Statistics Canada, the number of Canadian fathers taking parental leave increased from three per cent in 2000 to 10 per cent in 2001. In 1991 there were 88,000 fathers at home. By 2002 that number had jumped to 110,000.

Carleton University professor Andrea Doucet, who is writing a book entitled "Do Men Mother?", says it's difficult to estimate how many men are at home with their children. "They are not like the '50s stay-at-home mom who has given up work. A lot of these dads are taking a break, retraining, working from home. Perhaps the term "stay-at-home dad" needs to be deconstructed. Very few of them are giving up work forever," she says.

Through her interviews Doucet has made some interesting discoveries that echo what my friend noticed during his time at home. She says men feel more scrutinized about their decision to stay home and that they are viewed as losers if they don't say they are doing something else as well as staying at home.

My friend says when he first quit his job he was praised all round but over time he noticed he was being excluded, especially by other men.

So what kind of a guy stays home with his kids? Super-secure and confident? Not necessarily. My friend falls into the minority of men who are successful and have decided to chuck it all to stay home. Doucet says the broad majority of men she interviewed were always struggling with the decision and had usually chosen it because the couple needed child care and the woman made more money. Another group was single men who had their children full time or for extended periods on their own.

Despite some disadvantages, there are huge benefits for men who stay at home. They glean insight into the 24-hour load women carry according to stay-at-home dad and writer John Hoffman. He says, "Men in the workplace tend not to feel it. Mothers who work outside the home carry it more than guys. It's in a woman's head. I carried the load about the domestic stuff, cooking, food and laundry, but she never lost the 24-hour load about her kids."

Doucet says, "When stay-at-home dads take on what we consider mothering, the way they do it depends on their partner and what their partner gives up and whether they move over. The woman's role is critical."

And she says, "The spin-offs from that are enormous. You can never know what it is like to juggle all of these things, along with perhaps a difficult child, if you don't do it. Men can take on some of that load, but the only way is by being there and doing it."

Doucet says parental leave is something that has made it more acceptable for men to be home with their children and more men are discovering they aren't the only males at the playgroups.

Hoffman says when he told men he stayed at home they all said they wished they could do it but, "I was never sure how sincere they were. They often said they wished they had the guts to do it."

In Sweden there is something called a Daddy Month, allowing fathers to take a month with their children, but only fathers can take it. Maybe a Daddy Month is worth considering in Canada.

Hoffman says the experience has been good for his relationship with his wife, explaining, "It's good for a marriage when each partner understands the other's perspective." And he continues, "I understand the experience of most mothers better than most men, because I have done it. I know what you think about, what you worry about, what you are in tune to. I know the mother's secret — how great it is to be intimately involved with a kid. It's a wonderful experience, something no one can take away from me."

- reprinted from the CBC

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