

Stay-at-home dads shattering stereotypes ^[1]

Many faces of fatherhood reflect changes in traditional gender roles

Author: Vancouver Sun

Source: The Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 19 Jun 2010

AVAILABILITY

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A brief look at data from Statistics Canada's 2006 General Social Survey reveals just how much the face of fatherhood has changed.

As of 2006, there were a total of 8.14 million fathers in Canada, including 3.65 million with children under 18. More than 241,000 of these are single fathers, who now make up about 20 per cent of all single-parent families. Lone-father families rose 14.6 per cent between 2001 and 2006.

Needless to say, single fathers, like single mothers, are required to be both mom and dad to their kids. But the last few decades have revealed another face of fatherhood that has become increasingly prevalent: That of men who choose to assume the stay-at-home parenting role traditionally played by mothers.

According to StatsCan's unpublished Labour Force Survey, in 2007, 18 per cent of two-parent families had one parent staying at home full time. And in 11 per cent of these families, the "homemaker" was the man.

This means that the vast majority of stay-at-home parents are women, but the number of men staying home is growing dramatically: In 1976, 52 per cent of families had a stay-at-home parent, and in only one per cent of such families was it the dad.

There are many reasons for this change, including the blurring of gender roles, the increase in the number of high-earning women, and the advent of telecommuting.

And there also seem to be many benefits to the rise of Mr. Mom.

A number of psychological studies have affirmed that fathers' involvement in child care is essential for children's well being, including the development of emotional balance, self-assurance and compassion. Furthermore, some research has shown that when men stay at home, children benefit equally from mothers' and fathers' influence, while when women stay at home, the fathers' influence is limited.

Stay-at-home dads also benefit moms' careers, obviously. But studies suggest they also benefit the dads, in that they permit men to fulfill one of their most basic desires -- to love and care for their kids.

That's not to say everything is coming up roses. Stay-at-home dads do still suffer from negative stereotyping, and there is disturbing evidence that men who stay at home have higher rates of heart disease and death than their gainfully employed counterparts.

It's not clear why this is, though it may be because some men stay at home out of necessity rather than choice, and many of those men are either suffering from, or are at risk of suffering from, a variety of ailments.

In any case, the changes we've experienced are likely to continue into the foreseeable future. Fatherhood is a dynamic characteristic, one whose manifestations are nearly unlimited.

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- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/parent-involvement> ^[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/5668>