

# Stay-at-home fathers face unique challenges as full-time caregivers <sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Brandon Sun, Manitoba

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 12 Jun 2012

## EXCERPTS:

When Kevin Pratt's wife, Sue, was offered a promotion at work, the couple was faced with a pivotal decision as they weighed the demands of careers and the need for child care.

"We decided it made sense if one of us were to stay home," he recalled. "At this point, money-wise and everything, that sort of defaulted to me. I was working as a retail manager so my hours were kind of all over the map, anyway.

"One of the key decisions (was) (a) we always wanted someone to stay with the kids and (b) it meant that there would be way more structure to things."

It's been a year since the Langley, B.C., resident joined the swelling ranks of Canadian stay-at-home dads. While balancing his role as caregiver to daughters Ruby, 4, and Annie, 2, Pratt documents his adventures in parenting on his blog, Cosmic Dad.

With Ruby at preschool three times a week, most days are spent mainly with Annie who helps Pratt with household tasks like laundry and shopping. He keeps the girls engaged with library visits and picks up new supplies every few months to help them dabble in a variety of artistic projects from moulding plasticine to fingerpainting.

After last Christmas, Pratt said he started to feel more confident in his new role.

"I felt much more like, 'Yeah, this is what I'm doing, and I'm happy and proud of what I'm doing. And I love the girls, and I love being able to watch them accomplish things, and just see the small steps they take.'"

Pratt admits his main worry was maintaining his social network.

"You have certain sets of friends, and my concern was that would all sort of disappear or dwindle, and that it would be more difficult to break into the stay-at-home parent networks."

He's managed to forge those connections, participating in many impromptu outings and playdates which typically sees a 2-to-1 ratio of moms to dads.

Pratt said any initial trepidations he felt about being among the relatively few at-home dads were "self-imposed."

"It was my thinking that 'I hadn't earned my stripes,'" he said. "The mums, especially, have been stay-at-home from Day 1, with maternity (leaves,) and they made the decision long before they had their kids: 'I'm staying at home.' Whereas mine was, 'Hey, there's an opportunity, let's jump into this.'"

Figures from Statistics Canada reveal a steady increase in the number of stay-at-home dads in recent years. Last year, the majority of the 2.7 million couples with at least one child under 16 living at home were dual-earners. But one in five of those families had one employed parent and one stay-at-home parent. Of those, 12 per cent, or about 61,000 families, saw the man stay home. That was up from 10 per cent in 2006, seven per cent in 1996 and four per cent in 1986.

Michael Vickers hadn't planned on life as a stay-at-home dad being a long-term arrangement. But as his wife, Kathryn, approached the end of her maternity leave, the couple thought their eldest son was "too little" to send to daycare.

"I guess we were a little soft-hearted and so we thought, 'I guess if I just stay home until he's 18 months old' or something like that — and it just kind of went from there. And partly because it's difficult and expensive to find good quality child care," said the former federal government worker.

While becoming the primary caregiver for son Alec, now 7, on weekdays, Vickers decided to create a meeting place for stay-at-home-dads in his community.

He is moderator of the group **Ottawa@Home.Dads** <sup>[2]</sup>, affiliated with the National At-Home Dads Network. Vickers said he's had people from Montreal and Brockville, Ont., join the group, with membership including more than 80 dads. It's open to men who are staying home to care for their kids indefinitely or are on parental leave, as well as dads doing so while also working part-time.

In addition to online discussion groups, play groups and meetups, there are also dads night outs for the men to engage in a little social

activity without the kids.

"It's a mom-dominated universe, so I was kind of looking around to see if there were other dads around to meet up with them," said Vickers, also father to Calum, 4. "(It's) not because it wasn't possible to talk to the moms ... but just to expand the social networks that I would have."

In the group's introductory online posting, Vickers writes candidly about some of the reasons behind wanting to create a "special place for dads," including not being fully aware of the degree of isolation at-home parents can experience — especially those with young kids.

Vickers said he's also spoken to other dads who've had "strange experiences" going to a drop-in program or something similar and being the lone dad in attendance.

"When your kids are very small, at first I'd say the play group get-togethers are for the kids; but really, when you're younger — or when your kids are younger — they're more for you," he said.

"Knowing you've got someone you can talk to on the phone or plan to meet up with ... or you're having conversation on a discussion group, that can help to kind of break those days up and give you something to look forward to in your day."

Andrea Doucet holds the Canada Research Chair in Gender, Work and Care. The Bread and Roses Project is part of her current research with a primary focus on breadwinning mothers.

"I think the increase in male unemployment has certainly accelerated this trend where men are more involved in the home," said Doucet, a professor of sociology and gender studies at Brock University and author of "Do Men Mother?"

"They may not be stay-at-home dads in the sense that they're home exclusively or by choice or full-time, but they're more involved both by necessity and by choice."

Doucet said there's also been a noted shift — particularly in the past five years — with respect to gender norms surrounding work and care and fathers wanting to be more involved.

"It does change gender norms because the assumption is not just that children are women's responsibility and that breadwinning is a male responsibility. That's been, I think, really thrown to the wind now. It's a myth. It's no longer the case."

She said it's also important not to dismiss the role of dads engaging with kids in activities outside the home, such as involvement with sports, whether it's instructing from the bench or cheering from the stands.

"A lot of researchers would say: 'Well, that's the fun bit' but I don't think so. That's care as well," Doucet said.

"You're driving your kids hours a week and coaching them and volunteering and showing up. That's very important to children's development and fathers play a really large role. I'd say that's actually one of the big areas of father involvement."

- reprinted from *Brandon Sun*

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** maternity and parental leave <sup>[4]</sup>

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