

The new dad: A work (and life) in progress ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full report (pdf) ^[2]

Introduction

In homes across America, fathers are launching a quiet revolution. Catalyzed by the women's movement and women's steady and certain progress toward greater prominence in higher education and the fastest growing professions, men and women have come to understand that traditional gender roles only hinder today's fathers and mothers in their efforts to succeed at integrating their work and family endeavors.

While some of the changes that face today's fathers are the result of women's prospects and the shifting, uncertain economic fate of men, these changes are equally born of a new, growing spirit of determination among men to fully embrace their roles as fathers. They no longer want to be seen simply as economic providers operating at arms-length from their families. Fathers today seek roles that are much more integral to the lives of their families and require greater presence and engagement.

Four years ago, the Boston College Center for Work & Family decided to significantly increase our focus on men and work-family issues. At the time, the work-family field -- researchers, practitioners, and consumers-- was dominated by women and the overwhelming majority of discussion and debate emanating from the field was focused on women's struggles in relation to this balancing act. While this was appropriate given women's central role in the family and their on-going challenges to live up to their professional and personal commitments, it nonetheless kept our field in a box. That box suggested that family was women's domain and that men's work-family struggles were confined to the ups and downs of climbing the corporate ladder in their role as breadwinners. We felt strongly that it was time to break out of that box and explore more fully how men were handling their own balancing acts.

Since 2009, we have conducted research and published a series of annual reports on the changing roles of fathers titled "The New Dad." These reports have studied the transition to fatherhood, how men manage career and family priorities, how they share caregiving responsibilities with their spouses, and what supports fathers look for and, at times thankfully, receive in their workplaces. We also looked at the small but growing number of at-home dads who are blazing new trails and challenging outdated stereotypes that suggest full-time parenting is the exclusive domain of women. These men are demonstrating daily that effective parenting is about competencies and caring, not gender.

Over this time period we have interviewed or surveyed nearly 2,000 dads- mostly white collar fathers in professional and managerial positions - to learn about their joys, their struggles, their achievements and their setbacks. We believe that our work has helped to create a more complete, and hopefully accurate, portrait of today's fathers as men who care deeply about their work and their families, who strive to be active, engaged parents while at the same time investing significant energy in building successful careers.

The portrait we paint is encouraging and enigmatic, promising and problematic. At times it seems to be a glimpse into a future where men have fully embraced their roles as professionals and parents; at other times it can read more like a retrospective of days gone by with a clear delineation and separation of the roles of men and women. But even as the picture is at times mixed, the overwhelming feeling one gets in doing this work is that things are changing, and these changes are occurring with greater rapidity.

So just as it has been important to take stock of the challenges faced by working moms, it is important to see the challenges that confront working dads and reflect on the significant shifts in attitudes and expectations that have been taking place. Our research shows that the new dad increasingly runs counter to the old stereotypes of a workaholic, absent father who focuses on career, views his contribution to his family as a paycheck, and defines success as simply moving up the corporate hierarchy.

While television shows and the media seem intent on casting fathers as inept, clueless caregivers, out of touch with the daily concerns of the family, our work suggests otherwise. Based on what fathers are telling us, it is clear that they carry an appreciation of the important role that fatherhood plays in their own lives and the lives of their family members. Our work presents an image of male parents struggling with work family conflict, but at the same time striving to be good workers, good fathers, and good men.

This report summarizes the work of our prior studies and takes stock of how far fathers have come in adopting this more active and engaged family role. It also examines our places of work - how they have supported these changes, and what is yet to be done. It concludes with recommendations for both employers and for fathers based on what we have learned and a "call to action", catalyzing a conversation amongst the half of parents who have too often been silent on how they are coping with integrating their work and family lives.

Related link: 4 important ways men benefit from the gender equality conversation ^[3]

Region: United States ^[4]

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