Why we need more at-home dads [1]

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Author: Wallberg, Mike
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EXCERPTS

A month before my daughter was born, I sent an email to a local mommy group, introducing myself and hoping to join. I was a former investment banker, ready to take on the role of at-home father. The group I'd found ran a blog where members swapped tips about diaper coupons, re-sold kids' clothes, set up book-club events and the like. They also met up in person to share the joys and (let's be real) drudgeries of parenting. Just the kind of support I need, I thought, as, worriedly, I stared down my year in the hot seat.

It took a few weeks before the moms informed me that my application to become the charter male member had ''been approved.'' But then I discovered an old electronic bulletin board chain of messages related to a nearly identical application to mine -- one subsequently withdrawn. I squirmed to read the archived conversation among the women in the group. I didn't copy down the exact words, but their tone was loud and clear: ''What kind of man wants to be part of a mommy group?'' ''Is he some kind of pervert?'' ''Why does he want to come to our events?'' And, ''There must be something wrong with him.''

It would be unfair to suggest that these views represented the majority of the feedback to the application. Over the next many months, I did forge friendships with moms, through prior relationships or persistence. Many a morning, my wee lassie and I strolled with her infant ''friends'' and their moms, looping a local park, stopping for Starbucks, swapping formula advice and commiserating over lost sleep. I think back on those days fondly, grateful for the community and the fresh air. But I was never able to fully shake the feeling when I met new moms that my intentions, my character, my manhood was somehow under the microscope.

Taking stock now, I think it's fair to say the real critic I needed to face down was myself -- thanks to 37 years of programming I'd received about how fathers should, and should not, spend their days.

Binary strain

Cameron Phillips is a former CBC Vancouver radio host and father of two who understands the personal cost of buying in to such social stigma. Finding himself suddenly laid off and staring anxiously at his one-year-old son, he confronted an uncertain future and all-too-certain bills to pay. He fell into a depression. With time, he identified the main source of his turmoil -- his failure to satisfy a perceived fundamental requirement that a man must earn money to sustain his family.

Scholars describe his internal struggle as ''gender role strain.'' The theory contends that men are held to a narrow standard of masculinity: stoicism, strength, the need to be a successful breadwinner. When they fail to meet these definitions or challenge them outright by doing ''female'' things such as raising children, men can be prone to stress, anxiety, and depression. And since ''emotional distance'' makes the top 10 list of manly characteristics, they can be doubly at-risk of spiraling downward -- because they won't speak up and they won't get help.

Luckily for at-home dads, studies have also shown that men are better able to escape gender role strain while being around children, as compared to with peers or even spouses. Innocent of the social expectations that get hammered into us as we mature, children create a safe place for men to demonstrate traits like nurturance and affection.

Making of a dadvocate

Sitting with me in a Vancouver coffee shop, six years after his journey began, Phillips is no longer depressed. A ball cap pulled over a tousle of salt and pepper, he evangelizes with his hands as he warms to his theme. His is a story of stumbling through phases: self-loathing and doubt and confusion and anger and epiphany.

''Men's identity is still wrapped up in their role as provider,'' he said. ''This is what I do and this is how the world values what I have to say. That conditioning, that programming is still there.''

Today Phillips makes his living as a self-styled ''dadvocate.'' He advises companies how they can better promote work-home balance for their male employees. His consultancy has consulted focus groups of dads and solicited surveys from parents at two large organizations, Vancity Savings Credit Union and Clearly Contacts.

His work had him asking employees, ''What do you see as your primary role as a parent?'' The answers he got, he says, are ''pretty staggering.''

The answer choices he offered were:

1. Breadwinning

2. Being physically and emotionally present

3. Shaping the goals, values and ethics of my child

''Just over 50 per cent of full-time working dads said breadwinning was their primary role, but less than one per cent of the working moms did,'' said Phillips.

When he got the men to open up in small focus groups, often he heard they were wracked with guilt. In striving to win that bread, they were failing their families on the home front.

He'd hear: ''This is hard. I'm up most days before anybody stirs in the house and I'm out the door before anybody's awake. If I'm lucky, I'm home in time to kiss the kids but most nights I'm not. I've missed every one of my daughter's softball games this year. I missed my son's piano recital on Saturday. I promised him I'd be there and I wasn't there. My wife's up for a promotion and I've been totally useless for her on the home front, so she's pulling two jobs. And I don't know what to do.''

Phillips says that ''at that moment, every time, every single time, every guy in the room looks around at each other, the tension leaves the room, and somebody says, 'I thought I was the only guy who felt that way.'''

''What I try to say to the men in the room is, 'You're not alone.' Women's groups come together at the workplace and support work-life balance and everything else -- you guys have to start doing that here too, now.''

Men, he contends, have much to learn from decades of feminist struggle.

Meanwhile, to employers, he stresses that ''just because guys aren't talking about it, it doesn't mean men aren't suffering from this lack of life-work balance.''

Phillips offers employers a number of recommendations. In addition to maternity benefits, he advises offering time that is only available to dads and giving them access to parental leave ''top-up.'' He also suggests creating a working-dads task force that gets together every few months to look at workplace policy specifically from dads' perspectives.

''Companies need to change their workplace culture and expectations around working dads. They need to say, 'Our expectation is that you're going to be an involved parent. Our expectation is that you're going to be the best possible father you can be. And we're going to do everything in our power to support that.'''

'Make dad pregnant'

In the still macho world of law enforcement, differentiating between a hungry cry and a tired cry is not a job requirement. But when Sergeant Bryan Carkner's wife delivered their first child, the stocky Vancouver gang task force officer decided he wanted to take three months' parental leave. He hadn't seen any other police officers make his choice. Nor had any other male friends. When he told human resources his plan, ''the first thing they said was, 'Oh, don't you have some holiday time or banked overtime you want to use? Do you really want to go on a parental leave and sort of have that tag?' And I was like: 'I want to take parental leave. '''

''Mr. Mom,'' some fellow officers taunted him while he took his leave. But most expressed admiration. Carkner proved to be a trailblazer, as other male officers have followed his lead. And when he knocked on HR's door three years later, it was smooth sailing -- this time, for a six-month tour. During this second leave, Carkner put VPD's attitude towards his choices to the test. He applied for sergeant. And was promoted.

Carkner's decision may have helped his own health. A 20-year Swedish study found that men who stayed home with their kids prolonged their own lives significantly. Women whose partners stayed home lived longer, too.

The kids do better, as well. A longitudinal study began tracking several hundred male Harvard grads in 1938. While a warm relationship with their mothers correlated with many benefits, including better lifetime earnings, higher IQs in college and mental competence at 80, it was the relationship with their fathers that determined a key part of their lives.

''Warm relationships with fathers (but not with mothers) seemed to enhance the men's ability to play,'' wrote study head George Vaillant in his 2012 book Triumphs of Experience. ''They enjoyed their vacations significantly more than the others, employed humour more as a coping mechanism, and achieved a very significantly better adjustment to, and contentment with, life after retirement.'' A good childhood relationship with their mom, it turned out, didn't correlate with happiness at age 75, but the relationship with dad did.

Men spending more time at home and being more directly involved in raising their children may even make society more egalitarian. Take the case of (you guessed it) Sweden. Named the world leader by the World Economic Forum in 2013 for its ''equality in the areas of economics, politics, education and health,'' Sweden pioneered progressive, pro-father policies, launching the world's first paid leave program for dads in 1974 as part of an initiative to ''make dad pregnant.'' The aim was to de-stigmatize traditionally gendered roles of both men and women.

Sweden today provides a total of 16 months of paid leave to a family. Two months of those are available only to fathers. Fathers can claim

another six of the months, and must sign these away before mothers can take them. The government also offers a cash bonus if parents split the leave equally.

Women still take the majority of the leave days and represent a larger portion of part-time workers once leave is done. But the effort to entice men home has borne fruit. In 1987, daddy days comprised seven per cent of all Swedish leave days taken; in 2011, the figure had risen to 24 per cent. And 44 per cent of parental leave claimants were men.

Canada's dad policies

In the global context, Canada provides a middling level of support to dads, with middling results. While it varies by province, Canadian parents, on average, can take up to a year without risk of losing their job and, assuming they qualify, receive up to a maximum of about 55 per cent of their employment income. A ceiling of about $27,000 applies on pay-outs for the year, however, and 15 of the weeks are not available to dads.

Quebec, not surprisingly, does it differently. In 1998, then-cabinet minister and later Quebec premier Pauline Marois rolled out subsidies allowing parents to pay just $7 a day for quality day care. In 2006, Quebec followed Sweden's example and introduced a program of ''dad-only'' weeks. The program, which provides dads between three and five paid weeks to stay home during their child's first year, has worked. Eighty-four of 100 dads took leave in 2011, versus only 56 who did so before the weeks were introduced.

On the surface, Canadian policies appear to be effective in encouraging fathers to take leave. A 2011 Statistics Canada report noted the number of stay-at-home dads had tripled from 1976 levels, bringing the ratio of at-home parents who are dads to nearly one in eight.

Another 2011 figure pegs the duration of leave taken, among those dads who stayed home, at three full months.

As with bouncing a toilet-training toddler on your knee, however, one must exercise caution with statistics.

The three-month figure actually marked a decline over previous years, from a peak of 18 weeks taken in 2009. Chances are good that these declines reflect a rebound in male employment after the credit crisis: when at its most ferocious in October 2008, the ''he-cession'' claimed four male jobs for every female one.

'This is the new reality'

As the number of at-home dads in Canada grows, social norms evolve. Folks can be simultaneously supportive and unintentionally condescending. I knew with reasonable certainty, even before I appeared at any café door with my adorable six-month-old strapped to my chest like a bomb, what looks would appear. The old lady in the corner would sigh audibly. The two teenage girls would giggle and point. The dude with the muscle shirt would arch an eyebrow. The mom nursing her child while her husband watches the game on the wall would smile weakly. The two 20-something hipsters would manage to not see us at all.

While of course it's wonderful to be recognized as a caring parent, it doesn't count when you get effusive praise just for showing up. It's like applauding a bellhop for holding the door open for you.

Carkner, the policeman, recalls the awkward conversations. ''People would pause when I said I was taking time off,'' he said. ''And then they would say 'Of course, oh that's so great of you, it's so noble, you're moving mountains.' Well no, I'm raising my kid.''

''Catch up with the times,'' he wanted to tell those people. ''This is the new reality. Dads stay home.''

Phillips recalls enduring the same sort of patronizing comments. He thinks they exhibit a lack of expectations about men's aptitude for childrearing. ''We should expect more,'' he said. ''Do we ever ask a mother if she's babysitting her child?''

Phillips is now rolling on a favourite theme of his. ''When you hear the term 'to mother,' when you say she's 'mothering her child,' you imply she's loving, she's nurturing, she's educating, she's protecting.

''You say 'to father' a child, and what does that bring to mind? Impregnating! So the capacity of a mother is to love, care, nurture, whatever, and to father is just to knock a woman up and walk away.''

He is passionate in his belief that his dadvocacy is on behalf of not just dads, but everyone.

''When have we ever in business, in society, in culture ever solved a problem by looking at half of it? In the simplest terms, we've looked at all of the hurdles to getting women into the workplace and we've spent almost zero time looking at the cultural hurdles and barriers about getting men out of the workplace to be more involved fathers.

''I'm trying to change workplace culture to make it not so male dominant. And I'm trying to empower men to be better fathers, better partners, better husbands. And to get society to value those qualities in men…without making them some caricature.''

Floored

It's 3:30 a.m. and my daughter, now two, is asking for her water bottle. She can reach it herself but she says ''pease'' and so I cave. I'm on her floor, sprawled among a zoo of stuffed turtles, penguins and, inexplicably, a Barbie wearing a dog collar.

While I'm down here, I reflect on Cameron Phillips' crusading energy, his effort to change outmoded ideas of fatherhood that ''strip men of their ability to be sentient, feeling, caring, compassionate, loving beings.''

I guess sometimes it can feel that way. Even scientists have caused me to wonder whether I am a natural at parenting. Consider a 2013 study out of Emory University that found men with lower testosterone and smaller testicles are ''associated'' with better parenting. The

scientists were not ready to claim a causal link. Which means, I guess, that it's not clear whether my best days of parenting will shrink them, or my original equipment will help or hinder my skills.

This I do know: What at-home dads do is hard but not new and certainly not heroic. We do it to help our children and our spouses and ourselves. We struggle but we are not the bumbling fools of media portrayal.

And as I hear the wee lassie's breathing deepen as she drifts off to dream of puddles and peanut butter and piggyback rides, I am reminded of the astronomic value of what every caring parent does, whatever the motivation. Big balls or none.

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Region: Canada [3]
Tags: fathers [4]

Links
[1] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/06/why-we-need-more-home-dads [2] https://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2015/06/20/Why-We-Need-More-At-Home-Dads/?utm_source=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=200615 [3] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864
[4] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/fathers