

Signs of a truce in the mommy wars ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Even though 70 percent of mothers and 93 percent of fathers have jobs, Americans' attitudes about working parents — mothers as caregivers, fathers as breadwinners — have been remarkably slow to change.

New research, though, reveals a shift in attitudes. Not only do as many as 92 percent of Americans now favor mothers working in many situations, but as many as 77 percent also support fathers not working when it is more ideal to stay home. The data uncover a sharply changing definition of fatherhood.

Americans recognize parents must make trade-offs as they try to provide for their children while rearing them, the new survey found. How they feel about working mothers and stay-at-home fathers depends more on satisfaction with jobs and child care and how much the family depends on their income — and less on gender.

"Americans no longer buy into this notion that gender is the most important defining criteria in how families operate," said Kathleen Gerson, a sociologist at New York University and a co-author of the paper, which will be published in the academic journal *Gender and Society* this spring. "Americans increasingly understand that families face a lot of pressures, and they don't make these judgments about what men and women should be doing."

There is a class divide regarding which parents Americans think should work or not, but no major divide based on the respondents' own socioeconomic status. People are more likely to favor single mothers working than married mothers, and less likely to endorse both parents working when their families don't depend on the extra income.

Still, it's a sign that the so-called mommy wars could be ending. The national debate seems to be shifting from whether mothers should work to how policies could help working parents manage.

"Our institutions have not caught up with those cultural changes," Ms. Gerson said. "We don't provide the satisfying flexible jobs, the high-quality child care and the economic resources that allow people to actually make the decisions that they deem best for themselves and others."

The most striking shift was the diminishing expectation that fathers must be providers. Over all, Americans are more likely to think that fathers should work than mothers, but their support for working fathers is as conditional as it is for mothers. The data show a more varied and nuanced view of fathers' role, the researchers said.

"We still have a breadwinner ideal for most men, but when it comes down to practical, everyday decisions that parents are making, especially in dual-earner families, there's been huge change," said Scott Coltrane, the provost of the University of Oregon and a sociologist who studies fatherhood. He was not involved with this study but said it supported findings from other research.

The main driver of the change, he said, is that job options and earnings for men and women have converged to the point that it is no longer a given that fathers should spend more time working than mothers.

Past research had found Americans' views on working mothers to be more traditional and unbending. Pew Research Center found in 2007 that 41 percent of people thought it was bad for society when mothers worked, while 22 percent said it was good. The General Social Survey found in 2012 that nearly one-third of people thought working mothers could not establish as warm and secure a relationship with their children.

Those surveys, however, did not probe various family circumstances. The most recent research did. Ms. Gerson and Jerry A. Jacobs, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, asked people questions based on eight different family and work situations. They used an online survey called Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences to poll a random, nationally representative sample of 2,452 people.

Support for mothers' employment varied widely. Slightly more than 10 percent of people thought married mothers who were not satisfied with their jobs or child care and whose families did not need their income should work. About 92 percent thought single mothers who liked

their jobs and their child care and needed the money should work.

Support for fathers' employment varied almost as much. It ranged from 22.9 percent for married fathers who were unsatisfied with their jobs and child care and did not need the income to 96.6 percent for those in the opposite situation.

Attitudes about certain working mothers "look so 1950s-ish, until you put it next to the results for men," Mr. Jacobs said. "I think there's a strong commitment that parenthood comes first."

Traditional gender norms clearly persist, particularly for married women whose families do not need two incomes. Then, only 51.4 percent supported the mother working, even if she was satisfied with her job and child care, while 70.5 percent supported men working in the same situation.

However, the rise of single mothers as breadwinners appears to be changing Americans' gender notions: In nearly every situation, people supported single mothers working more than married mothers.

Decisions about work and family are rarely clear-cut. In difficult situations, respondents were much more divided. When a family needs a mother's income but she is unhappy with her child care, for example, only 58.4 percent supported the mother working full time.

Class-based divisions reveal the complexity of these decisions for many families. People are more inclined to be in favor of working mothers who need the income. This is true even though low-income mothers are less likely to be satisfied with their jobs and their child care, which many observers see as a reason mothers should not work.

Respondents' views did not vary much based on their own background, including their education, age, gender and income. However, political conservatives and frequent churchgoers were more likely to prefer traditional arrangements.

Of course, reality is often more complex than the situations depicted in a survey. Families consider factors like health, the chance of a promotion or a layoff, or whether there is extended family nearby to help with child care. The survey did not specifically ask about that; nor did it ask about same-sex couples.

Yet among Americans, there is increasing acceptance that families will make these decisions based on their individual needs, whether traditional or not.

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