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Increase of Stay-At-home Dads

Various sources are somewhat conflicting; not more than two years ago, the U.S. Bureau of the Census report in its May, 2006 press release, tallied about 143,000 stay-at-home dads. In 2003, that number stood at 98,000 as reported by the same government agency (U.S. Census, 2006, 2004).

But in a recent article by CBS news entitled “Women Bringing Home the Bacon” that number has suddenly leapt to almost 2 million stay-at-home dads. A perusal of the U.S. Census Bureau doesn’t reveal that number but assuming that CBS has its reliable sources, the exact numerical statistic is not as important as the question as to why there is reason to believe that the number of stay-at-home dads will continue to increase (Roberts, 2008).

First of all, the path that feminism has taken towards equality for women has had a great impact on gender roles. The assignment of the role of primary parent traditionally placed upon the mother had to be more flexible when considerations for income were paramount. Of all the reasons to be cited here, this is the most significantly impactful of all- when a woman has to be the breadwinner, someone ultimately had to stay at home to take care of the children.

Another significant factor is when divorce compels the father to take the role of the main parent. In a lot of same-sex partnerships and marriages, the same dynamic works in essence- a male parent stays at home and is in charge of the children while his partner goes to work.

The compelling reason in all these situations of course is economic because on a universal level, when a family's survival is on the line, gender assignments of roles and work are not as important as the immediate priority of survival. But there are several ways of putting "a spin" on the phenomenon of stay-at-home dads and the discussions and debates that they inevitably raise, shed important light and understanding on why we're going to see this is as being more than a trend.

The CBS report points out the 2 million stay-at-home American dads as a counterpoint to the compelling statistic that there are ten million working mothers who earn more than their husbands. Economics is an issue for families, but for some women, it's obviously more than just about being the one assigned to become the breadwinner. In cases where the mother is earning more, the effort has a lot more to do with personal aspiration than need. The report quotes a prominent female editor who says that this number presents the;

"First generation of women who moved through corporations, women who have been diligent and have worked so hard in order to break barriers for all the women who have come up behind them." (Roberts, 2008).

This hard work for some has translated to about "nine million businesses owned by women and generating more than \$3.6 trillion in sales as the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. economy" (Roberts, 2008). Clearly, if a woman is earning this much as CEO of her own company, the husband wouldn't really have to work!

But this is not representational of the larger segment of the population who don't have to deal with the issue of the wife having to work beyond the fact that a child (or children) below 15 needed direct parental supervision; that there was no other way but to have one parent- and in this case, it had to be the husband- accomplish that role.

In most of these cases, the decision is mutually agreed upon and arrived at with much thought and deliberation. The parameters really are not gender specific, but based on practicality; which parent earns more money? Who possesses the better health insurance policy? Who stands to eventually lose more money by taking time off from career? (Jayson, 2005).

Other relevant questions include; can either parent switch to part time or a more flexible schedule? Can either parent work from home? The possibility of course to arrive at the answer of “wife” is inevitably and more exponentially bigger than “husband”, but as we have seen with the statistics, the numbers who arrive at “husband” are increasing year after year (Shaver, 2007).

There are inevitably the expected arguments against such arrangements, but even as there is little study on the effects of having fathers stay at home, the larger body of literature supporting strong father-child relationships strongly bolsters the positive aspect of it and that regardless of the setting or the context, having the father at home and being a truly responsible parent is a good thing:

"Fathers who are able to develop into responsible parents are able to engender a number of significant benefits for themselves, their communities, and most importantly, their children." (MFAP, 2007)

And yet the numbers of this growing segment it would seem are still small and belie a vulnerability that puts a fresh spin into being the “strange one at the playground”. There are stories of fathers being “excluded from mothers' groups” and of law enforcement authorities questioning “strange men” at the playground who turn out to be stay-at-home fathers in a predominantly female area. Others feel conflicted about whether to socialize with stay-at-home mothers and questioned whether this was even appropriate.

Race also appears to be a factor- there are far fewer black stay-at-home fathers than whites but even this statistic has to be confirmed along with the exact number of stay-at-home fathers in general. The U.S. Census Bureau, according to analysts, doesn't include single fathers, those fathers with children older than 15 years old or those who actually do part-time work or have flexible hours the majority of which are spent at home as categorically being stay-at-home so the number could be quite higher.

Again, regardless of the number, the significant increase in stay-at-home fathers presents a whole new dynamic in parenting. There is certainly much to expect that stay-at-home fathers are fundamentally changing the way their children are growing up. On a personal level, the constant calculations that families often go through to balance ever more increasingly complex lives begins to weigh more on the father as he assumes the perspective of the wife. Husbands most often get to experience how it is to juggle work and family when traditionally, they only kept their hands on work.

And like women who tend to bond naturally, stay-at-home fathers have reached out to others in the same situation through means both new and traditional.

There are websites and support groups both virtual and actual. There are even annual conventions for stay-at-home fathers as well as classes, PTA meetings and school-sponsored events specifically for them. Some male restrooms give recognition to such fathers with diaper-changing tables and companies are trying to tap into this segment with products which would be relatable to stay-at-home fathers (Shaver, 2007).

It's a changing world and at the end of the day, what ultimately matters is how the family is taken care of and it doesn't really make much of a difference which gender accomplishes that.

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