Stay-at-Home Dads
At-home dads can benefit children and mothers.

Of the estimated 5.5 million stay-at-home parents in the United States, fewer than 100,000 are fathers, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But findings from a variety of sources suggest that there may exist special benefits to an at-home-dad arrangement.

In-home caretaking dads formed more-lasting bonds with their children than did working fathers, according to Robert Frank, a professor of child development at Oakton Community College in Illinois. Frank conducted two separate studies comparing households where the father stayed home as the primary caregiver to “traditional” households of stay-at-home mothers and employed fathers. Women, the studies found, were still able to form strong connections with their children even when they worked more than 40 hours a week. Frank sees the dual factors of gender-role stereotyping and the traditionally slanted distribution of labor in American households as the primary culprits behind the imbalance.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found in its 2003 American Time Use Survey that in households where both men and women were employed, working fathers were more likely to hold two jobs. The fathers tended to work longer hours and at greater distances, putting them outside of the home more than their

Fathers and Autism

Teaching fathers how to play and interact with their autistic children facilitates better communication skills in both parents and kids, researchers have found.

“Traditionally, mothers are the primary caretakers of autistic youth,” says Jennifer Elder of the University of Florida College of Nursing. “We found that fathers were getting frustrated because they couldn’t connect with their autistic child. . . . Through our training, we caused a shift in the paradigm of many of these families, with fathers taking on a more active role with their autistic children, sometimes even taking the lead in caretaking.”

According to the study, many of the fathers observed were more eager than were mothers to share with their spouses what they had learned in the training sessions. The participating fathers were more likely to initiate animated play with their children, who also became more vocal.

Over the course of the study, the children in the survey group increased their respective vocabularies by 50%.

“With the proper training at an early age, we feel that these techniques can help autistic children be more socially interactive and pick up language more easily,” says Elder.

Source: The University of Florida College of Nursing, P.O. Box 100197, Gainesville, Florida 32610. Web site www.nursing.ufl.edu.
wives. Meanwhile, women performed the vast majority of the child-care activities and the household chores even when they worked full-time jobs.

Both labor and child care were more evenly distributed in situations where the at-home parent was a male, according to Frank’s research. Fathers performed many more of the tasks historically associated with female homemakers, such as cooking, dressing and feeding children, etc., in addition to indoor and outdoor maintenance. Correspondingly, working mothers were much more engaged with their children on a day-to-day basis than were working fathers. They were also more willing to assume a greater share of parenting duties upon returning home from work.

“The child of an at-home-dad family has both a strong father influence and a strong mother influence,” says Frank. “Both parents play an important role in the child’s development. This is in contrast to the at-home-mother family, in which a child has a strong mother influence but little influence from the father.”

Frank’s surveys also showed that at-home fathers tended to be older than traditional at-home mothers (38 on average vs. 33) and were likely to still perform some paid work from home.

“These families are contributing to changing patterns in society’s traditional roles,” says Frank. “A new family structure is emerging, one in which the at-home father provides a strong but caring influence, and a mother continues to play a critical role in the child’s development. She continues to exhibit nurturing ability, and in addition brings new experiences related to working outside the home. The at-home-dad family model may serve as the catalyst that moves society beyond some gender-role stereotypes and may play a role in the future of the family as an institution.”

—Patrick Tucker


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