

POLICY ALERT: WORK AND FAMILY

Why Dad Can't "Have it All"

By Karen Kornbluh and Shelley Waters Boots

Father's Day holds few surprises. A gift from the kids-usually a bad tie-and dinner with the family. Fatherhood itself, however, has undergone dramatic changes over the past few decades as Dads have taken on far more responsibility at home and, in many ways, changed the very definition of Father. The rest of the world has yet to catch up with the new Dad. As a result, even in 2004, too many fathers must still choose between being good breadwinners and good parents – when they'd like to be both.

In 1960, Dads in 70 percent of all families with children could kiss the kids good-bye and leave for work knowing that Mom was home to answer any calls from the school nurse. Today, Dad's work number is likely to be on the school emergency card – as there's no one home full-time in over 70 percent of all families. As working mothers have increased the number of hours they work – by over 1/3, over the last two decades, according to the Economic Policy Institute – Dad has been under ever more pressure to pick up the slack.

Dads have responded -- increasing the time they spend doing household chores by almost 45 minutes a day (while mothers have decreased their time by about the same amount), and spending twice as much time devoted to child care responsibilities as they did thirty years ago. The results tend to be positive. The more involved Dad is in family life, the better the kids' cognitive development, self control, self esteem, life skills and social competence – and the less stereotyped attitudes they have about appropriate roles for men and women.

Michael Kimmel, a leading scholar of fatherhood, believes “the most dramatic shift in family life in the 21st century will surely be the changing roles of men, just as the demographic shift in the workplace in the 20th century was the dramatic entry of women.”

But while dads seem willing to expand their role in family life, there's a third party that has not been so quick to change: the workplace. Dad may want to spend more time with the kids, but his boss isn't too eager to give him the flexibility he needs. Fathers are now working slightly more than they did in 1979. And the pressure on them to do all that is asked of them at work is on the rise. Offshoring is just one of the threats to a family's economic security. Job tenure and benefit coverage are down. Wages have stagnated while fixed costs like housing and college are through the roof.

Dads can't risk losing the family's health care and pension benefits that are often tied to working a “full-time” schedule. Meanwhile, full-time jobs often lack access to parental leave or flexible work arrangements that would help them balance work and family. More than half of wage and salaried employees lack the ability to change their starting and quitting times, and a similar percentage lack the ability to work a compressed schedule. In fact, Dads often face hostility by their employer for taking time off to meet the needs of children and family. In a study released this week by the Program on WorkLife Law at American University Washington College of Law, fathers were found to risk pay loss, disciplinary action, and even dismissal when they choose family responsibilities over work.

For dads, like moms, cash competes with care. Much has been written in the last few years about the financial sacrifice this often entails for Mom – especially in the event of a divorce. But less has been said about the price that Dad and the kids pay when a demanding boss, or fear of a pink slip, trumps Dad's ability to attend to a sick child or show up for a parent conference.

It is simply a myth that dads wouldn't choose to “have it all” if given the option. A study by the Families and Work Institute shows that 70 percent of fathers reported feeling that they do not have enough time with their children. And when two federal agencies implemented flextime for their employees, half of the male employees with children changed their work hours in order to spend more time with their families.

Institutions need to change if men are to be allowed to succeed as fathers, both at work and at home. For a start, employers need to understand that their workforce has more family responsibilities than in the past and needs more flexibility. Family economic security – in the form of health insurance and pension benefits – can no longer be tied to working long hours. More supports – like child care and after after school – are required to help care for children while dads and moms are at work.

It's not too late to return the tie.

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