

## **Of Myths and Men** What's fact, what's fiction about today's fathers

By John Hoffman

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"Hi, Valerie, everything's fine. I just changed her and she had some banana and cereal at about 12:30. See you later."

"Wait a minute, Drew! Has she had a nap yet?"

"Yeah, but it was only half an hour. She's going to be tired soon. It's all in the journal. Bye."

That conversation might have taken place between Drew and Valerie Ellis on a midweek afternoon six years ago. When their first daughter, Cleary, was a baby, the Aurora, Ontario couple seriously rejigged their working hours so they could take turns looking after her. Valerie would get up at 3:30 a.m. and work from five until early afternoon at the YMCA. Then she'd race home so Drew could get to work by about 3 p.m. When he got home around 11:30, Valerie had already been asleep for two hours. "Sometimes we were literally passing each other going in and out the door," he recalls. "We used to communicate by writing each other notes in a journal." This went on for about a year and a half.

Benoit Methot's life is less complicated. However, last summer the mechanical engineer from Sept-Îles, Quebec took a three-month leave of absence to be home with his baby daughter. When Ariane was seven months old, Methot's wife, Sharon Coyle, returned to work. Not wanting to put Ariane in daycare yet, they decided that Benoit would stay home with her. He went back to work last September, but describes the time at home with Ariane as "the best three months I ever took."

Clearly, these dads do things on the domestic front that their own fathers wouldn't have imagined. But how typical are they? Some people have been celebrating the "new, involved father," but others suspect that, with a few exceptions, dads haven't changed that much. What's the truth? Here's a critical look at some of the current perceptions and stereotypes about fathers.

### **1. Fathers are more involved than in previous generations.**

**True.**

Once a week or so, Colin Mickie of Waterloo, Ontario gets together at the doughnut shop with his buddies - and their babies. "We're all firefighters with working wives, so we're often looking after our kids when we're not at work," he says. "Before we had children we used to get together for coffee. Now some of us are new dads, so we bring the kids along." Mickie is certain such gatherings were unheard of 25 years ago. "I definitely think today's fathers are more involved."

Is he correct? It was only about 30 years ago that researchers began studying what fathers did, but Joseph Pleck, a social psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana, says that at least eight studies confirm that today's fathers are more available to their children and spend more time interacting with them than previous generations. "The increases are modest, and we're still a long way from parity with mothers, but there's little doubt that fathers are more involved in child-rearing than they were three decades ago."

This shift did not come about because young dads were pounding on nursery doors demanding to change diapers. In fact, men's increasing involvement in all things domestic (except cleaning toilets) was driven primarily by the migration of mothers into the workforce in the 1970s. If women were going to do more outside the home, men would be required to do more inside the home, including look after children. They still haven't caught up to women in that department (more about that later), but most at least have progressed to the "I should" stage. Drew Ellis puts it like this: "Nowadays, men share more [child-rearing and domestic tasks] because they think they should." But he hastens to add that he sees his own involvement and the skills he's acquired as a matter of pride.

## **2. Fathers may be more involved, but they still spend far less time than mothers with their kids, and don't do their share of housework.**

### **Less true than most people think.**

Popular perceptions of this issue were greatly influenced by a 1989 book called *The Second Shift*. American sociologist Arlie Hochschild argued that women were working two shifts - one at work and one at home. She said that the average working woman spent three hours a day doing housework, compared with her husband's 17 minutes. Further, she spent 50 minutes a day in direct interaction with their children while dad spent only 12 minutes.

That sounded pretty bad, and the 12 minutes a day has become an often-quoted and unchallenged figure. But those numbers were based on research done in the mid-1960s, before women had entered the workforce in great numbers, and when attitudes about domestic tasks were almost certainly less egalitarian than they are today. Moreover, Pleck says Hochschild left out certain data from the original study. She didn't count weekends and she didn't count parenting tasks like driving kids around, which men often do.

According to Pleck, the best available American research shows that the figures for fathers are more like 1.9 hours each weekday, and 6.5 hours on Sundays (the research didn't count Saturdays). That's a lot better than 12 minutes, but still less than half of what women do, he says.

Another problem with household-task comparisons is that researchers have often ignored fathers' tendency to be less available for domestic duty due to employment.

Notes Pleck, "No study has computed fathers' participation in household duties as a percentage of available time."

Until now. A Statistics Canada study, based on 1992 data and published in 1995, showed that full-time employed mothers (aged 25 to 44) were doing a daily average of 4.8 hours of household work (including home maintenance and repair, and primary child care) compared with their partners' 3.2 hours. However, when you add employment and commuting hours (6.6 hours per day for fathers, 5.3 for mothers) the gap shrinks from 1.6 hours to about 20 minutes.

Another StatsCan analysis (also using 1992 data) looked specifically at fathers' involvement in child care. Analyst Leroy Stone found that young dads (aged 20 to 34) with preschoolers and wives who were employed full-time were spending, on average, 4.1 child-oriented hours a day. More than half of that was in recreational activities, which fathers did slightly more of than mothers. Mind you, they did half as much basic child care and less housework as well. But again, if you add up all time spent with children, all time spent on unpaid work and all time at work, the total is 13.5 hours a day for women and 13.2 for men - another 20-minute difference.

So it's still not equal, but it's getting better. And it's safe to say that, if mothers work a second shift, fathers (particularly younger ones) work a longer first shift and they work some of the second shift as well. Mickie says, "Nowadays we should look at mothers and fathers as one package rather than the mother and the father doing separate things. When we're both home, I think it's both our jobs to do whatever it takes to keep the house going, whether it's vacuuming or changing diapers."

### **3. Mothers have work-family conflicts. Fathers don't.**

#### **Not true.**

Mothers still rule when it comes to work-family conflict. Statistics Canada data show that employed mothers are twice as likely as fathers to rate themselves as "highly time-stressed." Women are also more likely to work part-time or at unusual hours because of family responsibilities.

However, fathers are feeling the crunch, too. In a 1992 American survey, men identified work-family conflict as the issue they struggle with most, way ahead of "finding time to relax" and "succeeding in their careers." Another U.S. study revealed that fathers felt as much (and in some cases more) anxiety as mothers about separating from their preschoolers in daycare.

Janet Fast, a family economist at the University of Alberta, found in a 1994 survey that fathers and mothers scored about the same when asked to comment on their commitment to paid work, spousal roles, parental roles and domestic duties. (Fathers actually professed a little higher commitment to parental roles.) So, at least in terms of attitude, the stage seems to be set for fathers to do more on the family front. "Right now,

it appears that men and women are equally committed to their various roles in life. It's not clear why that hasn't translated into a change in behaviour."

Ross Parke, a psychologist at the University of California at Riverside, thinks workplace culture has something to do with it. "It's more difficult for fathers to get paternity leave or time off to look after a sick child," he points out. "And until the workplace develops policies that are more supportive of fathers, it's probably going to fall mostly to the mother to pick up the slack when children are sick or there are other child-care responsibilities."

One way many Canadian families balance work and home duties is by having one parent work non-standard hours. In one-quarter of dual-earner couples with children, the man works full-time and the woman part-time. The reverse is true two percent of the time. In about two out of every five employed couples with children, one of the parents is working shift hours. Fathers usually do this because it's a requirement of the job, but 23 percent of Canadian women with preschoolers gave child care or other family responsibilities as the reason for their irregular work schedule. Almost no men gave this reason.

As Janet Fast sees it, men and women both have conflicts, it's just that when something has to give for women it tends to be work, whereas with men it tends to be family. For example, now with two more daughters, Drew and Valerie Ellis work more conventional schedules and Drew acknowledges that when it comes to sickness, child-care breakdown or doctor's appointments, Valerie does more. "Logistically, it's usually easier for Valerie," he says. "Her job is five minutes from home, and I'm an hour away in downtown Toronto." However, Drew contributes when he can. "When we have to make a call on what's going to be done, we get together and figure out who has the most important things on that day."

#### **4. Fathers are more playful than mothers and their style of play is more boisterous and physical.**

##### **Partly true.**

When Benoit Methot plays with one-year-old Ariane, there's usually lots of crashing and laughter. He builds big towers with blocks, cups, plastic animals and whatever else is at hand and she gleefully knocks them down. His wife, Sharon, says there are other differences in the way she and her husband play with their daughter. "Benoit does more teasing kinds of play. He'll walk a cookie across Ariane's high-chair tray, daring her to get it. When she reaches for it, he pulls it away and she squeals with excitement. We both do active stuff, but I probably do more things where Ariane and I imitate each other. I put one of the nesting cups in, then she puts the next one in. Benoit would rather make a tower."

This represents a typical difference in play styles that has often been observed by researchers. Another common finding is that fathers play more. Says Parke, "Yes, the

research shows that mothers tend to manage children and care for them, and fathers play." He cautions, though, that most of those studies looked at families where the father worked outside the home and the mother didn't. "In studies of families where both parents are employed, they found that mothers tended to spend more time playing with their babies in the evening than the fathers. Fathers were still more physical and mothers were more verbal in their play."

## **5. Dad's role is discipline. Mom's is care and nurturing.**

### **Not quite true.**

This stereotype goes hand in hand with "Wait till your father gets home!" and is just as outdated. In fact, it was probably never true. Historically, fathers may have handled some of the major transgressions but, overall, moms usually did - and still do - more disciplining. "Research shows that there's much more conflict between mothers and children than between fathers and children," says University of Guelph psychology professor Leon Kuczynski. "That's probably because mothers spend more time as the primary caregiver, are responsible for more things and will intervene in more situations."

Kuczynski adds that fathers and mothers appear to be thinking about different things when it comes to discipline. "Fathers tend to focus on the here and now, and it appears that they just want to put an end to the conflict." He adds that dads generally bring more power to bear in disciplinary encounters. And perhaps as a result, they're more interested, and usually more successful, in getting compliance. Fathers argue less, negotiate less and compromise less with their kids, and also appear to be less worried than mothers about the possibility of damaging the relationship.

## **6. There is a big problem with fatherlessness in our culture.**

### **Hard to answer.**

In 1995 a book called *Fatherless America* made headlines. American author David Blankenhorn argued that fatherlessness was the biggest single source of social problems in our time - greater even than poverty. The U.S. National Fatherhood Initiative, in which Blankenhorn is a key player, said in 1994 that four out of ten American children go to sleep each night in a house where their father does not live.

Of course, not living with your father cannot be equated with fatherlessness in all cases, and Blankenhorn himself admitted that American figures cannot be transplanted to Canada. So what do we know about fatherlessness in Canada? Statistics Canada can tell us a lot, but not how many Canadian fathers don't live with their children. A rough calculation suggests it has to be at least 300,000; one survey reported that 15.2 percent of Canadian children (that's a little over a million kids) don't live with their dad.

About one in three marriages ends in divorce, and children usually live with their mother afterwards. We also know that more children are being born out of wedlock - 36 percent

in 1995, up from nine percent in 1971. However, because common-law relationships are common, we can't assume that all of these children are fatherless. Likewise, many divorced dads remain involved in their children's lives and a fair number of divorced mothers remarry. In the end, all we really know is that our society is having increasing trouble keeping families intact. Only further study will determine if this translates into a true fatherlessness problem.

## **7. Fathers don't wake up when the baby cries.**

### **Not necessarily true, but they are slower to rouse.**

Ever had this conversation at 7 a.m.?

Dad: Good morning, honey. Hey, isn't it great that Sarah slept through the night?

Mom: Umm, what house did you sleep in last night? I was up with her for an hour and a half.

Our small sample of fathers all say they do wake up when their baby cries at night. Many mothers maintain an air of quiet (or not-so-quiet) skepticism or at least say, "Maybe he wakes up, but he doesn't exactly spring into action the way I do."

This may be partly biological. When a nursing mother hears her baby cry, she feels it physically. The blood flow to her breasts increases as they prepare to let down milk. Researchers have found that playing tapes of crying babies will often cause lactating mothers' breasts to leak. That physiological difference might lead to increased awareness, which results in moms rousing more quickly when their baby cries at night. After a while it becomes a habit.

When he's not at the firehall, Colin Mickie has been bucking the trend lately. The Mickies are trying to cut down on nighttime feedings and if Andrea goes in, seven-month-old Olivia wants to be nursed. Colin, on the other hand, being lactationally challenged, can usually get her back to sleep with a little comforting.

Notice how much time is spent comparing fathers and mothers? What does it say about our view of fathers when we decide how good they are by assessing how much they are like mothers? That viewpoint is understandable, since we're examining the way men are entering what has traditionally been female territory. But surely it's time to move beyond that. When a woman is doing what used to be a male job, we shouldn't evaluate her in terms of how much like a man she is.

As we continue through this period where gender roles are being rewritten, the social programming of the last five or six generations is still hanging around. Change will come gradually, but it may happen quicker as more men have Mickie's experience. He positively glows when he talks about his time with Olivia. "This has been very good for me," he says. "I really don't think about 'wife roles' and 'husband roles' so much as I

think about Olivia and me together and how great that is. I think spending time with Olivia helps me to secure my future with her."