

# Work Balancing and

by Joseph H. Pleck

# Family

**S**tories in the media often portray contemporary men balancing an active family role with the breadwinning responsibilities of a career. At the same time, commonly held wisdom suggests that yesterday's men—even those from just a few decades ago—often failed at that juggling act, serving primarily as full-time workers and participating in few, if any, family activities. These images of present and past men, however, might arise more from folklore than fact. By studying exactly what activities American men do now, and have done in the past, social scientists find an interrelated web of trends that are changing men's roles.

In 1956 Swedish sociologist Alva Myrdal and British historian Viola Klein published *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work*. Their title introduced what became the leading understanding of the change in adult women's lives in industrial societies over the first half of the 20th century. In addition to their traditional child-rearing and homemaking role within the family, women were increasingly engaging in a second role: paid employment outside the family. In the decades subsequent to *Women's Two Roles*, Myrdal and other sociologists have tentatively suggested that in the long run, women could not succeed at both roles unless men also took on more family responsibilities. Our society is still just beginning to recognize that men, too, face the challenge of dual roles.

## Are Men Doing More in the Family?

**S**ince the mid-1970s other social scientists and I have systematically studied the changing ways in which contemporary American men combine and prioritize their work and family responsibilities. In attempting to analyze these changes, many people—especially students, journalists and scholars—often ask: Are men doing more in the family now than they did in the past? That question can be examined on many levels. For example, beyond simply knowing how much time men spend with their families, one might examine what men

do during their family time and what it means to them. This changing role for men also leads to larger social implications.

Today's American men spend less of their lives working than their predecessors did. In comparison to men of the early 20th century, they now enter the labor force later and retire earlier. In addition, the average number of hours that men work each week also decreased substantially during the first half of this century, but there is some controversy about whether such decreases have continued. Even more interest—and controversy—surrounds a related question: Do today's men spend more time taking care of children and doing housework?

One long-term comparison came from the so-called Middletown project, in which sociologists Robert and Helen Merrill Lynd studied Muncie, Ind., in the 1920s. In 1924 about 10 percent of Muncie's working-class wives reported that their husbands spent no time with their children, and 68 percent said that their husbands spent more than an hour a day. In 1978 Theodore Caplow of the University of Virginia and Bruce A. Chadwick of Brigham Young University repeated most of the Lynds' interview procedures with a similar sample in Muncie. In their study, only 2 percent of working-class wives reported that their husbands spent no time with their children, and 77 percent reported that their husbands spent more than an hour a day. In both studies, the figures were similar for what the Lynds called "business-class" families, in which the husbands held white-collar jobs.

Many more comparisons can be made with data collected since 1965. Some of the most important of these studies have used so-called time diaries. Home economists developed this technique in the 1920s, but it fell into disuse until

*Fathers who live with their families are spending more time with their children. At the same time, more fathers are not living with their families*

*WORKING FATHERS* are now struggling with the same dilemma that has bedeviled working mothers: how to balance the needs of family with the demands of a career.



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its reinvention in the 1960s. With this method, respondents report—in their own words—what they were doing at each moment of the previous day, starting at 12 A.M. The respondents list each activity, when that activity stopped, what they did next, when that stopped, what they did after that and so on, until reaching the following midnight. They might also be asked other questions about each activity, such as whether a television was on or who was with them. Responses are then coded into specific categories, such as baby care and indoor playing, which can be combined into broader categories, such as child care.

In the studies that do not use time diaries, fathers are often asked to simply estimate how much time they spend with their children each day. To make sense of the more recent data collected with time diaries as well as with other methods for estimating time-use patterns, Michael Lamb of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, James Levine of the Families and Work Institute and I proposed two categories: paternal engagement and paternal availability. Paternal engagement consists of direct interaction with a child, which is described by the father in language indicating that he thought of the activity as taking care of the child. Paternal availability adds to this the amount of time the father and child are in the same vicinity but engaging in different activities.

Lamb, Levine and I discovered that different time-diary studies often interpret the same behavior differently. For example, “talking with children” might be considered part of child care in some studies but not in others. To identify trends across studies, we converted the data about fathers’ time with children in each study from an absolute amount, such as 76 minutes a day, to a percentage of the mothers’ interactions, such as 43 percent. Consequently, results of the

different studies could be converted to a common standard of measurement—fathers’ time as a proportion of mothers’.

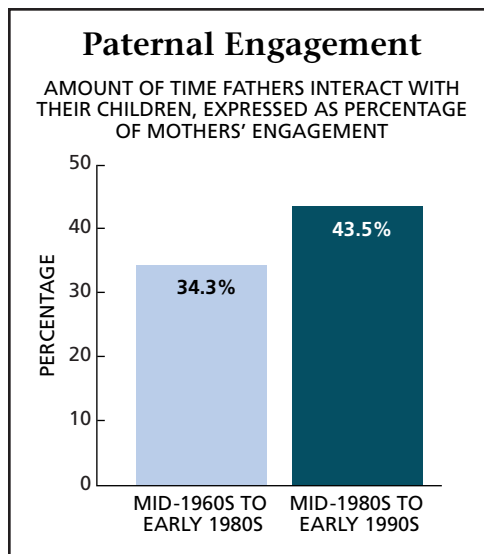
Using this approach to review 11 national or local studies that collected data between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, Lamb, Levine and I found that fathers’ engagement was on average about one third of mothers’ and their availability was about half of mothers’. When I recently examined 13 similar studies that reported data collected between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, fathers’ engagement had risen to 43.5 percent of mothers’, and paternal availability had risen to 65.6 percent. In addition, many studies have shown that when fathers are more involved with their children because they want to be, the fathers’ involvement benefits the children’s cognitive and social development.

Although men still perform less child care than women, good evidence indicates that the participation of men in family activities is increasing. Nevertheless, most of the data come from studies of married fathers, which overlook a substantial part of the adult male population.

### More Diverse Family Roles

Even though some data show that U.S. men’s involvement with the family has risen, other indicators suggest the contrary. For example, the increase in divorce rates since the 1950s has weakened many men’s family ties. Most divorced fathers’ contact with their children drops off rapidly after divorce. Almost half of all divorced fathers have not seen their children in the past year, and high proportions of them do not pay child support. (More than 80 percent of court-ordered child-support money is never actually paid.) What is more, the recent increase in the proportion of men who never marry also indi-

## Although men still perform less child care than women, good evidence



**PATERNAL ENGAGEMENT** is the category of activities in which fathers interact with their children. Examples include playing with children (right), reading to them and helping with their homework. Paternal engagement is increasing, but mothers still spend more than twice as much time interacting with their children (above).



cates decreasing family involvement. Most unmarried fathers—teen and adult—refuse to accept any responsibility for their children.

These phenomena, however, are more complex than they first appear. For example, although the increase in divorce during the 1960s and 1970s appeared dramatic compared with the unusually stable divorce rate during the 1950s, rates of divorce have actually been relatively stable at about 50 percent for nearly two decades. In addition, divorced fathers' loss of interest in their children is not the only possible source of the rapid decrease in contact. For instance, many divorced mothers do not want continuing contact between their ex-spouses and their children.

In their 1991 book *New Families, No Families?*, Frances K. Goldscheider of Brown University and Linda J. Waite of the University of Chicago perceptively argue that American family life is now changing in two contradictory directions. In two-parent families, fathers' involvement with children and overall gender equality are increasing; however, two-parent families have become a smaller proportion of all families. Families headed by single mothers are becoming more common, and thus,

**PATERNAL AVAILABILITY** is a measurement of the amount of time fathers spend in the vicinity of their children, either interacting with them or not. The category covers activities such as working on the computer while the children play video games (below). In recent years, paternal availability has risen to nearly two thirds of maternal availability (bottom).



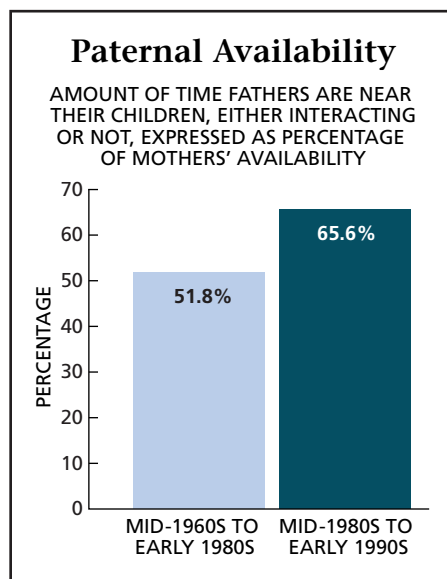
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more children overall do not have a resident father.

Goldscheider and Waite's analysis helps to make sense of the perhaps surprising finding that ethnicity and socioeconomic status show little if any consistent association with the amount of child care performed by married fathers. These variables primarily influence fathers' behavior by determining whether fathers get and remain married, not by affecting how fathers act when they are married.

How might these demographic and behavioral trends play out in the future? The downside trend—more children in single-parent families—has leveled off, because the divorce rate has been stable for nearly two decades and the out-of-wedlock birth rate has also leveled off in recent years. The upside trend—greater father involvement in married two-parent families—appears to be continuing. This produces a positive overall trend toward greater paternal involvement. Nevertheless, the disparity between the experiences of children growing up in married two-parent families and those of children in single-parent families will continue to grow.



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This discussion usually contrasts two groups—resident, married fathers versus nonresident, never-married or divorced fathers—but my research suggests that there is a surprisingly large and unrecognized third group: resident, unmarried fathers. Jeffrey L. Stueve of the University of Illinois and I analyzed a nationally representative sample of fathers between the ages of 22 and 26 who live with their children. Nearly 60 percent were the children's biological father, residing with and married to the children's biological mother, but more than 40 percent were not. Resident, unmarried fathers have several subtypes: cohabiting biological fathers (13 percent of the total number of resident fathers), cohabiting stepfathers (8 percent) and fathers raising biological or unrelated children alone (6 percent). Married stepfathers have been studied more than any of these subgroups but are less frequent (5 percent). Fathers in "blended" families—in which they are living with children *and* stepchildren—make up 8 percent of the total. Men were defined as "cohabiting" if they were living with a female partner at

the time of the study; there was no minimum length of time for the relationship. This wide variety of family types suggests that researchers need to broaden their studies to include all kinds of fathers.

For a long time, social scientists assumed that men's and women's experiences must be opposite in all respects. For example, past researchers often thought that if family is more central than work for women's identities, work must be more central than family for men's identities. Nevertheless, research has never borne out this expectation. My research in the 1970s, using self-report questionnaires, showed that family is far more psychologically central to men than work, just as is true for women. Other recent studies concur.

Someone might say that men merely report the socially desirable response. To sidestep that potential criticism, one could compare how strongly men's overall psychological well-being is linked to their satisfaction with either family life or work life. Using two mid-1970s surveys, I found that men's levels of family satisfaction explained twice as much variance in their psychological well-being as their levels of work satisfaction did—just like women. Rosalind C. Barnett of Brandeis University replicated my findings with more recent samples.

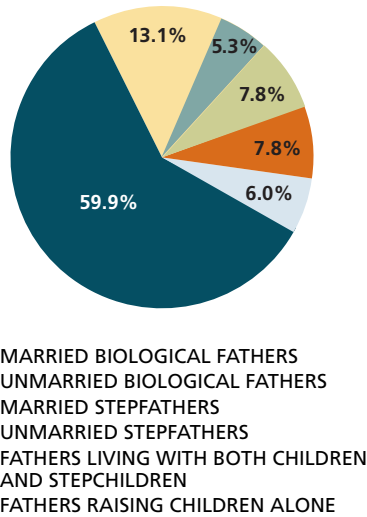
Of course, more subtle differences might exist between the family identities of men and women. In studies of so-called emotional transmission from work to family, for example, Reed W. Larson of the University of Illinois showed that a father's mood at the end of a workday influences a mother's mood when they're together at home far more than her prior mood affects him. In fact, a father's mood at work more strongly influences a mother's mood at home than her own mood at work affects her mood at home. Larson's findings suggest an important difference in the place of work and family in fathers' and mothers' personalities: fathers carry their workplace emotions home with them, but mothers keep their family experience insulated from workplace pressures.

Other research, however, suggests unexpected similarities. For example, Ellen Hock and Wilma Lutz of Ohio State University found that fathers and mothers experienced similar levels of anxiety over separation from their children during the first two years of parenthood. Research today is just beginning to flesh out a full understanding of the differences and similarities in men's and women's family identities.

## Actions and Expectations

Less evidence exists about how the character of men's behavior in the family has changed. What is available continues to find gross differences between fathers' and mothers' behavior with children. With infants, mothers' behavior is more soothing and predictable, and fathers' is more stimu-

## Types of Fathers Living with Their Families



Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

**UNCONVENTIONAL FATHERS make up about 40 percent of all fathers who live with their children. Studies show that cohabiting fathers and stepfathers are particularly common, at 13.1 and 7.8 percent, respectively.**

lating and unpredictable. With older children, mothers provide more caregiving, and fathers engage in more play.

Some conservatives suggest that a new social pressure encourages fathers to “act like mothers.” For instance, David Blankenhorn of the Institute for American Values says that a new cultural “script” pushes dad toward androgyny under the label of “Mr. Mom.” I see little evidence, though, of this alleged new ideal. Other researchers and I recognize the importance of fathers' providing children with financial support and developmental guidance as well as supporting the mother in her relationship with the children. Moreover, we have not claimed that greater paternal involvement necessarily has positive effects, and we have not recommended that fathers should act like mothers. Indeed, several of my colleagues and I contend that fathers' play with children might have more positive consequences for their children's development than fathers' caretaking time, because play interaction is more socially and cognitively stimulating. In

any event, no recent evidence finds fathers actually acting more like mothers in terms of their specific activities or behavioral style, so conservatives need not be so concerned.

I also question whether the current cultural script about fathering really has shifted in favor of greater involvement with children. Within the general belief that it is desirable for fathers to be more involved lurks a hidden qualification: not if it negatively impacts their jobs. For example, a recent survey of large companies showed that fathers are usually entitled to parental leave on the same basis as mothers—but when company employees were asked how many days a father should be entitled to take, 90 percent said none.

## Social Implications

Although men's changing work-family balance affects their children, their spouses and the men themselves, we must also consider broader effects: the consequences of these changes on social institutions. The two different directions in which men's work-family patterns have changed—an increase in paternal involvement among married men and a simultaneous increase in divorce and fatherhood outside marriage—must be considered separately.

Men's decreasing tendency to be married fathers forces more children to face significant risks in their development. In recent years, our society has developed better strategies to increase the number of child-support court orders directed at absent fathers and to encourage their compliance with the orders. Nevertheless, even with the highest feasible child-support payments and maximum paternal compliance, many children in these families will live in poverty, and most of them will need some form of public assistance.

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AP PHOTO

**KEVIN KNUSSMAN, a helicopter paramedic with the Maryland State Police, won a \$375,000 jury award in January 1999 after proving that he was denied parental leave.**

Robert E. Emery of the University of Virginia found that court data over the past two decades indicate a large rise in the proportion of fathers who share legal custody but only a small increase in the proportion sharing physical custody—in other words, actually living with their children. Emery's studies, however, point to a possible intervention effort: divorce mediation, in which the couple negotiates a settlement instead of fighting it out in court. Emery found that divorce mediation leads to more contact between fathers and children 12 years after divorce than the standard divorce process does.

Other intervention efforts can effectively promote parental responsibility among teenage fathers and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock births, especially among teenage women. Unfortunately, our government's recent approach—eliminating increases in benefits to mothers who have additional children while on welfare—is not one of them. This approach has not resulted in lower rates of out-of-wedlock births in the states that have passed such laws. Recently attention has turned to possible ways of reducing the incidence of divorce by making it more difficult to obtain or by creating a class of marriage in which divorce is not permitted. These latter efforts are, at best, controversial in their feasibility and desirability.

Married fathers' increasing involvement with their children also has social ramifications for the workplace. In a

1977 national survey that I co-directed for the U.S. Department of Labor, I developed the first measures of the extent to which employed married men and women experience conflict between their work and family roles. In that survey, and in much of the research conducted subsequently by other investigators, the married mothers and fathers reported similar levels of conflict. Other studies show that parenthood is associated with increased absences or lateness at work to a similar degree for men and women and that work-family disruptions, such as a breakdown in child-care arrangements, affect men's well-being at least as much as women's.

## Impetus for Change

Men's conflicts between their work and family responsibilities create pressure to change the workplace, which adds to the impetus for change already created by the rising numbers of employed mothers. Over the past two decades, for example, enough men fought for parental leave on the same basis as women—generally unpaid—to generate a well-established body of case and administrative law affirming this right. In fact, fathers initiate a significant proportion of the grievances regarding denial of parental leave filed with the U.S. Department of Labor under the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act. In January 1999 one father—Kevin Knussman, a helicopter paramedic with the Maryland State Police—received a \$375,000 jury award for denial of leave. Knussman's award was the largest ever granted to a father in a parental leave case.

Although men's changing work-family patterns are triggering demands for more flexible workplace policies, the changes are sure to be contested. In fact, considerable resistance to greater workplace flexibility exists today, despite the social attitudes favoring more involvement of fathers in family life. The resistance stems from the hidden qualification mentioned earlier: the belief that fathers' family involvement should not affect their job performance in any way.

As a result, the shifting pattern of work-family commitments for men will most likely mirror the pattern experienced by women. Policy changes in the workplace have been important, but we should remember that employed mothers have nonetheless needed to work out accommodations between their work and family lives largely on an individual basis, relatively invisible from public view. And the widespread resistance to paternity leave suggests that companies are even less sympathetic to their male employees' work-family problems. So it is likely that the accommodations that most employed fathers create to balance their work and family responsibilities will, to an even greater degree, be largely private and thereby socially unrecognized and unsupported. SA

## The Author

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## Further Reading

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WORKING FATHERS: NEW STRATEGIES FOR BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY. James A. Levine and Todd L. Pittinsky. Harvest Books, 1998.