

SINGLE DADS & TAG TEAM PARENTS:

More Men Struggle to Balance Work and Family

BY JENYA CASSIDY

Men play a larger role in caring for their children than ever before. Since 1965, the time men spent doing child care has more than tripled. Right now, one of the fastest growing family types in the United States is the single-father household. And the majority of two couple households are also dual-career households where parents often ‘tag team’ or take turns spending time with kids while the other parent works. As more men become the primary caregivers for their children all or part of the time, they experience the same struggles balancing work and family as working mothers. But, because of their gender, men caregivers often face even tougher obstacles at work.

MEN CAREGIVERS “COME IN UNDER THE RADAR”

When Joan C. Williams of Work Life Law, a Center of UC Hastings College of the Law, studied 99 trade union arbitrations in which workers were disciplined for meeting family responsibilities, she discovered that two-thirds of the cases involved men taking care of children, elders, or sick spouses. According to her report *One Sick Child Away from Being Fired: When Opting Out is Not an Option*, men are often less willing to bring up family needs with employers when they need flexible schedules or time off to care for a sick child. “Instead, they may suffer in silence or try to ‘come in under the radar screen’ – often with unhappy results.”



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One obstacle men face in taking parental leave is the perception, still strong in many workplaces, that bonding with infants and caring for sick children is primarily the woman’s role. “People are used to women taking time off to care for children,” said Marc Watson, Staff Representative of CWA Local 1034 in New Jersey. “Men have a harder time taking leave to care for kids in this culture. I have seen men being open about taking time off to arrange care for elderly parents, but they have a harder time admitting they need bonding leave or have child care issues.”

According to Professor Williams, some of the increased time men spend with their kids is inspired by financial necessity: in working and middle class homes, parents often take turns or ‘tag team’ parent in order to avoid the high costs of child care. “In a unionized context, this is often how men become the primary caregivers for their children,” she explains. She also points out that while among higher income dads it is popular to claim that they do 50 percent of the child care, working class and middle class men are more likely to be in this situation. “I always say that upper income dads ‘talk the talk but don’t walk the walk’ while for lower and middle income dads it is the opposite,” she says.

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Work-at-home dad and member of the National Writers’ Guild, Dana Glazer (above) writes a blog about his experience raising his sons. Dana says, “The societal message is ‘fatherhood is important,’ but if you scratch the surface, it’s **‘back to work dads!’** I think that’s ingrained in most of us. But there is incredible value in being an active father. Imagine what a better world we’d be living in if the majority of kids had involved dads?” Dana is currently working on a documentary film, “Evolution of Dad” which focuses on the importance of involved fathers.

Photo by Deborah Glazer

Even though working women rely on men to co-parent now more than ever, paternity leave remains far less common than maternity leave. According to James A. Levine, author of *New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family*, many men don't even take the leave they are entitled to. Instead, they take an 'underground leave' by combining sick time, vacation and discretionary days. Many fear that taking formal leave will damage their careers by making them seem less committed to the job. "It's important for unions to educate both management and members on the important role fathers play and also that they have the same rights as women to care for their children," affirms Marc Watson.

MEN MORE LIKELY TO TAKE LEAVE IF PAID

Since the Family Medical Leave Act was passed in 1993, more men have the right to take unpaid, job-protected leave to bond with a newborn baby or care for a seriously ill family member but they continue to take this leave in smaller numbers than women. Many still perceive caregiving as primarily women's work and families may not be able to afford to do without the father's salary for long. Researchers in Canada found that when Quebec dramatically raised the benefit rates for fathers taking leave to bond with newborn children, the amount of men taking that leave jumped as well – from 32 percent to 56 percent in one year. One researcher from Statistics Canada commented that the increase in fathers taking leave was clearly tied to the benefit going up but that having the program has created an "overall cultural shift that promotes fatherhood."

YOUNGER WORKERS DEMAND PAID LEAVE

While older workers may be reticent to claim their rights as caregivers, there has been a shift in the US in understanding how important early bonding and taking leave is for

both men and women. Jeff Johnson of the Labor Federation of Washington State says, "Men were very involved in the statewide campaign for paid family leave. For example, we had a lot of support from the Building Trades even though they would have a harder time using it (due to seasonal nature of work). Men really get the importance of this benefit."

As attitudes toward male caregiving change, more men are willing to fight for the right to care for their children. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the number of complaints filed by fathers is increasing. The EEOC says that some employers have wrongly denied male employees' requests for leave for child care purposes while granting similar requests to female employees.

The increase in complaints about being denied leave for child care may be due to younger workers who, according to a recent report in USA Today, are more likely to demand leave to care for children. Even though it is modest, there is an upsurge in companies offering family-friendly benefits to men through union contract negotiations or to attract new employees.

As a result, companies, large and small, are offering family-leave benefits to men. "A few years ago, I would have told you that paternity leave wasn't that beneficial in terms of recruiting and retaining," Burke Stinson, a spokesperson for AT&T tells HR Magazine. "But today, I would say these 20-something men are far less burdened by the macho stereotypes and more comfortable taking time off to be fathers."

UNIONS CAN HELP WORKING FATHERS

What are some of the things that unions can do to encourage this trend? Professor Williams recommends framing the issue as the right to put family first: "No job or employer should ever prevent a father from doing right by his family. He has the right to put those obligations first."

Unions can also engage working

BARGAIN FOR FAMILY FRIENDLY POLICIES

Flexible Schedules:

- Many working parents prefer to be able to flex their time in order to be there for their kids' school events or take them to doctor's appointments.
- Make sure that the worker has control over when to flex their time.

Limits on Mandatory Overtime:

- Bargain for limits on mandatory overtime.
- Bargain for the requirement of advance notice for overtime, giving parents control over their daily work schedules.

Bargain for Paid Paternity Leave:

- Get the message out that family friendly policies are not 'for women only' and apply to working fathers too.
- Research shows that men are more likely to take leave if it is paid. Bargain for both paid maternity and paternity leave.

Educate Members about Their Rights

- Educate around the importance of bonding and fathers' rights to bonding leave under FMLA and any state laws.
- Providing educational seminars is an effective way to help working fathers realize they are not alone and that there are solutions.

Support the Family Friendly Workplace for All

- Get involved and support statewide national campaigns for paid family leave, paid sick days and other benefits that working families need.
- Be sure that any new laws support fathers as well as mothers.

dads in the broader state and national campaigns for paid sick days and paid family leave. Marc Watson reminds us that besides fighting for these rights, we have to make sure that workers feel empowered to use them. "Union leaders can encourage fathers to take leave to be with their children by pointing to positive examples in the workplace. And we need to continually educate management about our rights – the best way to do this is to demand them and support each other in doing so."

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