

What dads are doing these days

Valuing homemakers for what they're really worth

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This time a year ago, like so many others, I was rising at 5:30 in the morning, battling the traffic to get to work, doing my best at the job, coming home exhausted and trying to provide a nurturing environment for my family.

My wife was doing the same thing. Yet, to our dismay, our child was growing up without us. We were working like slaves to provide a home for our son and were unable to enjoy it with him. It was that realization that caused me to leave my job this past year and join the ever expanding ranks of "Mr. Moms."

We represent a growing minority, caring for about 20 percent of all preschool aged children in America. But with the changing political climate in Washington, I doubt there will be a Mr. Mom caucus forming anytime soon. Still, I think there needs to be a radical attitude shift toward us as well as toward the more traditional moms who stay home with America's children.

To show you how we have been perceived, let me start with the lady at the grocery check out counter:

"Ah, taking care of the baby today?" she politely asked.

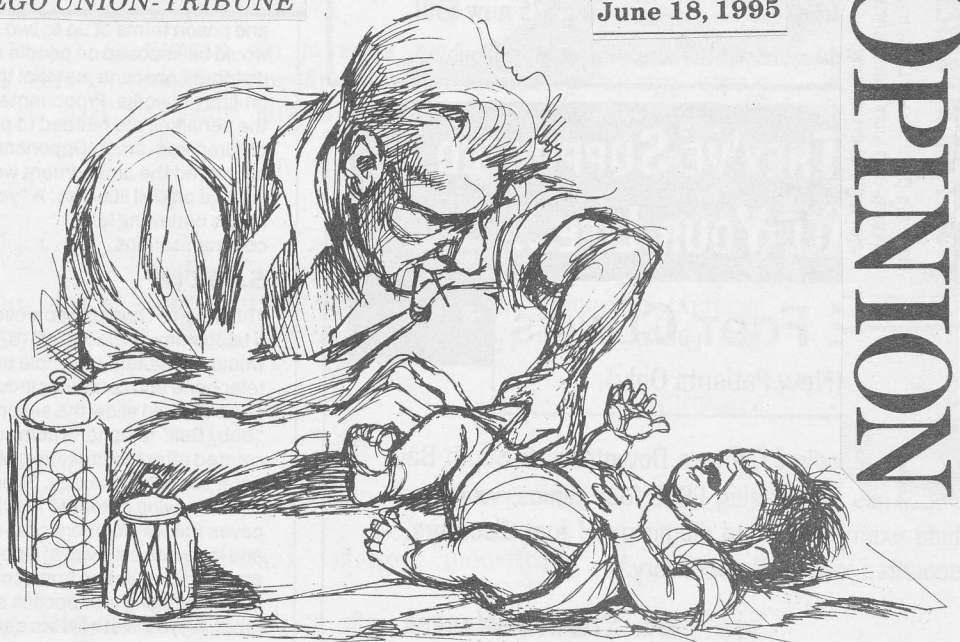
"Yes, and everyday," I responded. She gives me this "sorry you have sole custody" look.

Then there were the guys at work. They asked me if I were really serious about leaving my job to take care of a kid. I answered yes, and a few looked at me in bewilderment. Over time it became obvious that desirable answers to cocktail party questions about what I did for a living did not include raising a family. People wanted to know what I "really" did in terms of economics. Rhetoric aside, the message was families don't count.

It wasn't long before I began responding to discussions such as these by saying that I was going to take a year off to get a needed break and do some writing. I offered that it would be tight financially, but "overall" it would be worth it. Raising my child would be supplemental icing on the cake.

Such intellectual and economic reasoning solicited responses much more pleasing from my working colleagues and to my own ego. The fact that I eventually obtained a fellowship to help pay for and justify the time off, made my decision completely acceptable to everyone — myself

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included.

The first few months at home were difficult. I justified spending energy reading the newspaper, manipulating what few investments we had and working on the house as things I needed to do in order to maintain my sanity. At the same time, I rationalized that our son would develop some independence.

It didn't take long to discover this strategy would not work. Three-year-olds demand gobs of attention. They drink it by the gallon. They want you every available minute. You are the center of their universe. With time, if you know what's good for you and them, they become the center of yours.

The black-and-white, "make-a-decision-and-stick-to-it" world we want to believe exists does not work at home. Putting on my son's sneakers entails much more than tying laces. He wants to wear a black shoe on his right foot and a white one on his left. The brown kangaroo sock goes with the white shoe and the yellow spaceman sock goes with the other. Of course half way to the car, these decisions are subject to change.

Then there is lunch time, shopping time, time to do laundry, time to cook dinner, time with his friends and the logistics of maintaining order with six neighborhood kids spinning through the house every afternoon. It may sound trite, but to survive, you must be flexible.

Within the current debate about Aid to Families with Dependent Children and welfare reform, there is a constant harangue about unemployed mothers on the

government dole. It may come as a shock to those who have made a name for themselves exposing such views, but these mothers already have a job. A full-time job with no economic benefits. It is of no small consequence that the loudest voices on this issue are male.

It would be enlightening for some of these guys to stay home for a year and raise a few kids — without a nanny. The debate would change overnight.

It has taken time, but I have finally grown into my new job. I still hold on to a few of my adult interests, but they have become secondary to the work of being a father.

The neighborhood has become my home instead of just a place I drive through. The local moms say hello and mean it. We talk about kids and laundry, politics and life. The grocery clerk allows my son to sit on the counter and seems to accept my new job. The accomplishments at the office in which I took pride last year pale in comparison to the little joys my son and I now share.

I know I am lucky to be able to live this experience while so many others do not have a choice. Yet it seems to me that as a society, we need to change our priorities to allow more of us to stay home and raise our kids and to consider family life as a respectable career choice for either a man or a woman.

Meanwhile my son and I will do our best to savor every second together. There can be no greater investment strategy than to excel in my recent career promotion as Mr. Mom.

OPINION