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Opinion

Why Fathers Work

By CAMERON STRACHER DEC. 26, 2000

On Saturdays I get the kids. After five years of staying at home, my wife has taken a part-time teaching job, leaving me to play househusband this one day of the week. All week I steel myself: I rent a video. I clip articles on museums. I call my parents, who arrive on the fateful day to take my children to the zoo or meet us for lunch -- anything to give me a break.

My male friends think I'm crazy. Even I feel a combination of self-pity and martyrdom.

Now that I'm in the slim majority of married couples where both parents work outside the home, I wonder why I ever left the minority. Although a second income can lift a family's finances, I suspect for many parents the job is simply a way of staying sane. Working in an office is the only way a parent can make a personal phone call that lasts more than three minutes -- and finish her breakfast.

Being a parent is a wonderful thing, but so is having a second cup of coffee. As men share at-home parenting responsibilities -- leaving work early to pick up the kids, staying in with the sick ones -- it's no surprise that the number of women returning to the work force is climbing. We fathers had a good thing all these years, and the word is out. It's not that we don't love our children; we do. We just love reading the newspaper, too. It turns out, so do our wives.

Mothers have suffered in an under-appreciated and overworked role for too long. Fathers will not. We do not do temper tantrums well -- how can we, when they compete with our own? We will demand extended paid parental leave, better playgrounds, universal day care. Taking care of children is hard work! We will insist on recognition, and if we don't get it, we will sulk. When our wives come home, tired from their day at the office, we will moan about the scuffles and snuffles and baby transgressions. We will not make dinner.

The life of a working mother may be difficult, but there's one thing that's sure to be worse: life for the wife of a parenting father. It just might make women regret the day they ever decided to return to the work force. And, of course, that's our only hope.

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