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It's a Mom's World

Steve Colbert once said that stay-at-home dads are "against nature's laws." Your grandmother probably thinks that, too.

By Glen Herbert

The world that we know today is, of course, different than that of yesteryear. People don't smoke in hospitals, and the moon is no longer a very interesting destination; it's illegal to strike a dog, or a child, or a match on an airplane, and you can't buy beer at gas stations. In all, we don't live in Mayberry anymore, and we can chalk that up to social change, mostly of the good kind.

Still, as long as there are Hooters restaurants and bowling leagues, there will be pockets of our culture that remain relatively untouched by the advances of the day. Parenting is one of them. Step out with an infant and you step into a lost world where old stereotypes and habits die hard, where gender roles retain a good whiff of the 1950s. At the play groups, mommies groups, in the parks and the libraries, by and large the women are still doing it for themselves. Whether out of fear, or peer pressure, or just having other things to do, men aren't.

Of course, we all think this isn't the case. We think Involved Dad (we don't say "Mr. Mom" anymore, don't get me started) is as common as ticks at a deer convention. After all, statistics show that the rate of paternity leave has jumped 60% since just 2004, right? Well, they do, but here it is again not quite so tarted up: "A mere 5 percent of the fathers are not working while the mother is employed, the data show. The statistics are silent on which of these fathers are jobless by choice."

Apparently 60% of not very many is still not very many. Which means that if you are Involved Dad, you're on your own. You're also likely unemployed.

Dads Out and About

When I recently took time off to care for my son, James, I didn't know any of that and neither did my neighbour, Brad. Like me, he decided (read: wife runs own business and makes more money than he does) to take time off to care for his newborn (read: we were doing what we were told).

It was coming spring and we strapped our respective infants on our respective backs and set off for lunch downtown. We were feeling pretty good about things, and why shouldn't we? Out and about with the fruit of our loins and all that. "Look at us" we thought "we're Involved Dads, just like the guy on the cover of *Porn for New Moms!*"

No sooner were we in the door of the restaurant when the snickering and the following glances began. The hostess wasn't much help either. "Where are your wives?!" she asked, roughly with the force of a sneeze. Her reaction, mixed parts confusion and hilarity, took a bit of wind out of the sails, if you get my meaning.

We're here! Get used to us!

The reality is that guys with babies in the middle of the week, no women in sight, isn't quite enough to stop traffic, but it's getting there. At the legion we got a round of applause, which was maybe surprising, given whatever you might otherwise think of the legion. At a restaurant we were swarmed by middle aged women. "You guys are awesome!" one said. "My husband didn't even change a diaper!" said another to a round of knowing, beleaguered nods. There, and everywhere else we went, people seemed to have something to say, much of the comments falling within some predictable categories. The unsupported, bitter moms: "It's about time!" The

doubters: “You don’t do this everyday, do you?” Those who vote conservative: “Now I think I’ve seen it all!” The retired school teachers: “I think this is great!”

You think I’m exaggerating, but I’m not. This is the world you and I both live in. People notice and remark because you are noticeable and remarkable. And there’s a reason: women don’t think you are capable of doing this; men wonder why you would try.

The bottom line

Ultimately, being Involved Dad is like going off on a peacekeeping mission or installing a ceiling fan: it takes courage and fortitude, but that’s no excuse for not doing it. In time, and probably sooner than you think, people will look back—I’m utterly convinced of this—and wonder why men didn’t do it more. When they do you’ll be able to gloat a little, noting that you were ahead of the pack. That’s something. And, by pitching in, you’re also taking time with your child that you will cherish—I’m convinced of this, too—for the rest of your life, especially when you hit the teen years. That’s something, too.

Of course, some days you’ll think that maybe you really should be somewhere else, and that perhaps there *is* something you could be doing that is better suited to your skill set. But there’s a conventional wisdom here that’s worth repeating: When your chips are ready to be counted, you won’t wish that you had worked more, or made more money, or impressed more strangers. You’ll wish you had spent more time with your child, more time feeling his breath on your cheek, and that there were more giggles for you to coax with tickles or smiles. Sadly, it isn’t forever, so you’re right to grab the opportunity while you have the chance. You’re a dad and, at end of the day, this is what you do. You were made for this.

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So you’re going to be staying home ...

I think it’s safe to say that men aren’t generally mentally prepared for round-the-clock, day-after-day child care. Therefore, some pointers:

Be realistic: Pat leave isn’t a holiday. You can plan to learn guitar or while away the hours shooting paint balls at the compostor, but the fact is you probably won’t even have time to pee. The goal is caring for your child and keeping your sanity at the same time. If you can do that, congratulate yourself.

Find a friend: Mommies’ groups are great if you like being, literally, the odd man out: no one wants to sit next to you, eye contact is avoided, the conversation is halting. It’s awkward, and play dates are, too. Your wife doesn’t really want you spending the day with other women. Their husbands don’t want that either. Instead, find some other guys who are in the same boat as you.

Get a new diaper bag: You’ll feel much better with a diaper bag that doesn’t shout “mom!” Dadgear.com has diaper bags with Camaro flames, camouflage, and skulls. Diaper Dude makes bags that look like tool belts. Which seems a bit desperate, but does make a point: ditch the pink and the flowers.

Walk Tall!: By spending the time together, you are doing something of value that will remain longer than the dismay at finding, on returning to the office, that your desk has been moved next to the photocopier.

Accept that it isn’t easy ... : It’s hard, lonely, and for many people, the stay-at-home dad is confusing ...

... but remember that it's not rocket science: It's hard, lonely, but when your wife comes home, she's had a busy day, too, and didn't get to go out for lunch with the other dads. She'll remind you of this. The correct response is "yes, of course you're right."

Know that "You're Amazing!": I heard this from strangers. Older women, sure, but that's something. For the first time in my life, I was amazing. You are too. Treasure it.

Take a compliment where you find it: An Involved Dad I know got a Happy Mothers' Day email from the children's clothing store where he shops. This could happen to you. If it does, remember that there's a compliment in there somewhere and that it's worth your while to look for it.

Show them you can!: Women think you can't. 'Nuff said.
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