



On Parenting

Why this is the end of the dumb dad era

By Chad Prevost

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Just a few years ago, when I was less embroiled in the throes of dad-dom, I had no idea about the pervasive characterization of the dumb dad. But it is everywhere. You can find dumb dads in young-reader books like “The Berenstain Bears,” sitcoms from “Leave It To Beaver” to “All in the Family” to “Married...with Children” to “Everybody Loves Raymond” and an enduring legacy of commercials since the 1950s. As Homer Simpson — perhaps the most enduring of his ilk — quips, “Marriage is like a coffin, and each kid is another nail.”

For generations, those bumbling oafs set a subconscious example for the rest of us, giving us implicit permission to leave household duties to our wives because — obviously — we just weren’t that good at them, anyway. But now the disconnected father who exits stage left for the better part of the week and washes his hands at the door of competence or emotional engagement is starting to fade into pop-culture history. Ed O’Neill’s character in “Modern Family” may be the best example: Jay Pritchett has come a long way from the goon-dad stereotype of Al Bundy. Or look at what happened to Huggies when the diaper company [tried to traffic in dumb-dad stereotypes](#) for a 2012 commercial — dads and moms alike protested the ad’s conceit, which was that dads were so oblivious to their children that they’d leave diapers on well past the point that other brands would fail. Clorox tried something similar the following year, then [meekly withdrew its ad](#), too.

By last year, Cheerios had learned the lesson: Its two-minute “how to dad” ad showed a [cool, calm father doing it all](#), with mom nowhere in sight, and it racked up 1.6 million YouTube views (though it [only ran in the U.S. after a trial in Canada](#)). And Nyquil put out an ad showing a dad [begging for a sick day](#) from his kid, not his boss, with the tag line “dads don’t take sick days” — it was virtually identical to a similar ad targeting moms.

Why the change in attitude? Advertisers and TV writers are just catching up to demographic trends. Married couples [haven’t been in the majority for the past five years](#), a decline from 78 percent in the 1950s to 48 percent by 2010 (which means the old standard of a mom who ran the home and a dad who didn’t know what to do once he was back from the office no longer makes much sense). In most two-parent families, [Pew research shows](#), both parents are working outside the home at least part-time. And in a growing number of them, dads are the ones taking care of the domestic end: Between 1995 and 2011, the number of [stay-at-home-dads in the U.S.](#) nearly tripled from 64,000 to 176,000.

It was about time all this changed. A generation of women had been spending eight hours (at least) at the office, followed by a “[second shift](#)” of housework that amounts to an estimated extra month of work per year. When Mom finally did manage to collapse in front of the tube, the networks gave her a parade of hapless dimwits stumbling around ordinary household chores, seemingly incapable of lifting a spatula, running a dishwasher or tying a bow.

But as I’ve learned in the five years I’ve been a part-time writer and full-time stay-at-home dad while my wife builds a technology company, that image is neither accurate (except when it comes to wrapping gifts, where I’m still hopeless) nor particularly satisfying. No, the domestic hemisphere is not for the faint of heart. Not just because it’s hard. It is definitely another job, but it’s also often humble work, tending to others and scheduling your life around their schedules, while remaining engaged enough to be emotionally present for your kids. There’s little external reward, and for many smart and driven people, even when you do it well, it’s not enough.

For me, the chance to quit my teaching job and try my hand at writing, while raising our kids, sounded like a dream. I can say now that both novel writing and domestic duties have proven to be far more challenging than anything I could have imagined—and yet I wouldn’t trade what I’m experiencing, and what we as a family have grown into.

There are, though, intangible benefits of discovering that domestic involvement is not merely “helping” your spouse — like feeling good about yourself. After all, dads report [higher levels of happiness, positive emotion, and life meaning](#) than men who aren’t dads. And the countries that rank the highest in [annual lists of the happiest countries](#) are — no surprise in my household — also the countries near the top of the World Economic Forum’s ranking of those doing the best at [closing the gender gap](#) between men and women in a range of areas.

Historically speaking, the competent domestic dude may not be such a wild, progressive concept, anyway. Roman Krznaric, an anxious father-to-be, [did some research into the roles of fathers](#) throughout the world and in other eras. His startling discovery? Men have historically participated closely in domestic life. Take this small linguistic fact: “hus” is the old spelling for house, and “band” is the bond to the house he rented or owned. A man primarily farmed to take care of his home, a meaning still in use today in “husbandry.” With the Industrial Revolution, though, many of men’s skills became increasingly obsolete in the western world, as machines took over most chores men used to do so they could go work outside the house. Alas, as Krznaric notes, “there were no clever gadgets invented to nurse a sick child.”

The dumb dad may be turning into an endangered species, but he’s not likely to go extinct any time soon. For one, dumb people will always be with us, and unfortunately, some of them will always be dads. For another, many men feel dislocated when they aren’t clear on how they’re contributing. Better to “sacrifice,” get out of the house and earn some dough. Which, despite the rise in stay-at-home dads, men

still do far more of: women make only [78 cents on the dollar](#) that men make, and men still dominate the ranks of CEOs and politicians (#ReadyforHillary notwithstanding).

But in my house, my manhood is not called into question because I am the one who kisses my spouse when she gets home, and asks, “How was work?” Nor because I’m the one cooking dinner and (usually) cleaning up after. When I sit down to catch a few innings of the Braves before bedtime, I’m likely to be interrupted — only I know where the iPad chargers are, how much homework’s been done and where the stray shoe was last seen.

Dads, this is just to say, whatever you think you believe about domestic politics, it’s time to sharpen more than your lawnmower blades or even the kitchen knives. This thing is called the 21st century, and we’re all in it. If we all accept responsibility for being present at work and home, we’ll find we’ve become a happier nation. One evolving domicile at a time.

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