

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find an article about Canadian stay-at-home dads.



Stay-at-home Dads

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Research Analyst, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

"It's almost like being a CEO of a company. You have limited time and you're trying to figure out where you should selectively spend that time." [1] Lance Mason isn't talking about the fast paced corporate life. In fact, he hasn't been to the office in five years. Lance is speaking about his job as a full-time stay-at-home dad. It may seem novel to some, but Lance and his wife decided he would stay home to maintain a stable, nurturing and dependable environment for the couple's two children.

Lance is part of a small developing trend of men choosing to stay home with the kids. Just how many dads are staying home with kids is difficult to gauge. Statistics Canada suggests ten percent of fathers who take leave after the birth or adoption of a child do not return to work, but this does not account for men who return to work part-time or who quit paid labour without first taking a leave. [2]

Theorising family

Academics have considered this development in different ways. Some scholars believe men choosing to stay home may point to growing equality in the labour market. Still other scholars suggest that stay-at-home dads signal the deconstruction of gender roles. And some academics even argue that stay-at-home dads are actually mothering. [3] All this theorizing, however, is irrelevant to parents--it seems inconsequential when considering the busy daily routines of the Mason household, for example. When Lance was laid-off for a second time from a job in the volatile Hi-tech sector, they decided he would take on the stay-at-home role.

When it comes down to it, Canadian parents are thinking about their kids, not contemplating gender deconstruction or feminist theory. A GPC Research poll commissioned by the IMFC in the spring of 2006 found that over 80% of Canadians prefer to have a parent at home. [4] Financial pressures often challenge this desire. Statistics Canada reports that 81 percent of parents who return to work after parental leave would stay off longer if doing so were more affordable. [5]

Even if fathers are not staying home, an increasing number of Canadian men are taking advantage of benefits under the Federal Parental Benefits Program that increased shared paid benefit weeks from 10 to 35 weeks in 2001. There was a 17 percent increase in the use of paid benefits by fathers between 2000 and 2006. A majority of fathers take time off around the birth of a child, and some even take unpaid leave or use vacation time. [6] The federal program has also waived an unpaid two week waiting period before benefits begin and lowered the number of accumulated working hours needed to be eligible for the benefit. [7]

The use of leave has significantly increased in Quebec where federal funds have been used to aggressively increase benefits under the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan. The province offers a non-transferable paternity leave among other short-term provisions used by 56 percent of eligible fathers in 2006. [8]

The beneficiaries: It's for the kids

The real benefactors of stay-at-home dads are children. Research indicates that moms and dads have significant and unique roles in their children's development. [9] Unfortunately children and parents in Canada are spending less time together as adults are working longer hours than twenty years ago. [10] A number of studies have demonstrated what might seem self evident – that children want to spend more time with their parents. [11] Time with fathers contributes to cognitive development and social competence through physical play. [12] A study of children whose fathers accounted for 40 percent or more of their care found that these children scored higher in cognitive development, possessed a greater mastery of environments and demonstrated more empathy. [13]

Longer work days for mom and dad mean longer hours in non-parental care. Researchers have learned that time in daycare can predict a small increase in vocabulary and memory skills, but can also predict a small increase in behavioural problems. [14] A 2003 study in the journal *Child Development* discovered increased production of the stress-sensitive hormone cortisol throughout the day in children at daycare compared to when they spend the day at home. [15] Its not just parents who find long days stressful.

Reflecting on why he chose to stay home with his children Lance pauses, "I don't know at the end of day how this will come out in my kids lives, but I feel like they are growing up in a stable environment where they can come home from school or during the summer time, that there is always someone – a member of the family there." [16] And being there is not a bad way for a mom or a dad to invest time.

Endnotes:

1. L. Mason, personal communication, August 10, 2008.
2. Beaupré, P., Cloutier, E. (2007) Navigating family transitions: Evidence from the General Social Survey 2006. Statistics Canada. p. 13. Retrieved August 12, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/89-625-XIE/89-625-XIE2007002.pdf>
3. For a summary of these themes and further discussion see Doucet, A. (2006) *Do Men Mother?* Toronto: U of T Press.
4. Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (2006, April1) Canadians make choices on child care. *Canadian Family Views*, no.1. p.2. Retrieved August 12, 2008 from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/CanadiansMakeChoicesAboutChildcare.pdf
5. Beaupré and Cloutier, p.15.
6. Marshall, K. (2008, June) Fathers' use of paid parental leave. *Perspectives*. Statistics Canada. p. 8. Retrieved July 7, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/75-001-XIE/2008106/pdf/10639-en.pdf>
7. Ibid., pp. 5-6.
8. Ibid., pp. 8.
9. Le Menestrel, S. (1999) What do fathers contribute to children's well-being? *Research Brief*. Child Trends. p.1 Retrieved August 11, 2008 from <http://www.childtrends.org/files/dadchild.pdf>
10. Turcotte, M. (2007, February) Time spent with family during the typical workday, 1986 – 2005. *Canadian Social Trends*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved August 11, 2008 from <http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-008-XIE/2006007/pdf/11-008-XIE20060079574.pdf>
11. Polatnick, M.R. (2002, April) Do children want more time with their full-time employed parents? *Working Paper No. 37*. Centre for Working Families, University of California Berkeley. Retrieved August 11, 2008 from <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/berkeley/papers/37.pdf>
12. Quist, D. (2007) Who's play around now? *IMFC Review*. Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Available from http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/Who's_Playing_Around_Now.pdf
13. Le Menestrel, p. 1.
14. Ibid.,
15. Belsky, J. et al. (2007). Are There Long-Term Effects of Early Child Care? *Child Development*, Vol. 78, No. 2, p.681-701. Loeb, S., Bridges, M., Bassok, D., Fuller, B., Rumberger, R. (2007). How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children's social and cognitive development. *Economics of Education Review*, Vol. 26, No. 1, p. 52-66.
16. Watamura, S., Donzella, B., Alwin, J., Gunnar, M. (2003). Morning-to-Afternoon Increases in Cortisol Concentrations for Infants and Toddlers at Child Care: Age Differences and Behavioral Correlates. *Child Development*, Vol 74, No. 4, p. 1006-1020.
17. L. Mason, personal communication, August 10, 2008.