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Fatherhood 2.0

By LISA TAKEUCHI CULLEN, LEV GROSSMAN

Thursday, Oct. 04, 2007



ENLARGE PHOTO

Jason Sperber playing with his daughter Lucy in their swimming pool.

CHRIS MUELLER / REDUX FOR TIME

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Does being more of a father make you less of a man? To a group of committed dads assembled one night in a New Jersey diner, the answer is obvious. Sort of. Paul Haley, 38, a father of two, says women look at him when he walks down the street with his kids. "I think it's admiration," he says. Adam Wolff, also 38--with two kids and one on the way--ponders what it means to be a man. "Is my man-ness about being the breadwinner or being a good father to my kids or something else?" Michael Gerber, 36, father of a 7-month-old, asks, "Do you mean, Do we feel whipped?"

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VIDEO



Video: The Evolution of Dad
Watch New Yorker Dallas Hayes discuss his life and role as a stay-at-home dad

"I'm probably a little whipped," shrugs Lee Roberts, 45. He's a part-time copy editor, married to a full-time journalist, who has stayed home for nine years to raise their two children. "There are definitely some guys who look at me and think, 'What's up with him?' Do I care? Well, I guess I do a little because I just mentioned it," he says. Haley speaks up to reassure him: "Kids remember, man. All that matters is that you're there. Being there is being a man."

Viewpoint: Bring On The Daddy Wars

It was interesting to watch the message boards light up over at Good Morning America last week when ...

The Missing-Father Myth

They are the forgotten partners. It is obvious but often overlooked: for every

But what does it mean, exactly, to be a man these days? Once upon a Darwinian time, a man was the one spearing the woolly mammoth. And it wasn't so long ago that a man was that strong and silent fellow over there at the bar with the dry martini or a cold can of beer--a hardworking guy in a gray flannel suit or blue-collar work shirt. He sired children, yes, but he drew the line at diapering them. He didn't know what

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to expect when his wife was expecting, he didn't review bottle warmers on his daddy blog, and he most certainly didn't participate in little-girl tea parties. Today's dads plead guilty to all of the above--so what does that make them?

As we fuss and fight over the trials and dilemmas of American mothers, a quiet revolution is occurring in fatherhood. "Men today are far more involved with their families than they have been at virtually any other time in the last century," says Michael Kimmel, author of Manhood in America: A Cultural History. In the late 1970s, sociologists at the University of Michigan found that the average dad spent about a third as much time with his kids as the average mom did. By 2000, that was up to three-fourths. The number of stay-at-home fathers has tripled in the past 10 years. The Census counts less than 200,000, but those studying the phenomenon say it's probably 10 times that number. Fathers' style of parenting has changed too. Men hug their kids more, help with homework more, tell kids they love them more. Or,

as sociologist Scott Coltrane of the University of California, Riverside, says, "Fathers are beginning to look more like mothers."

Many dads are challenging old definitions of manliness. "Masculinity has traditionally been associated with work and work-related success, with competition, power, prestige, dominance over women, restrictive emotionality--that's a big one," says Aaron Rochlen, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas who studies fatherhood and masculinity. "But a good parent needs to be expressive, patient, emotional, not money oriented." Though many fathers still cleave to the old archetype, Rochlen's study finds that those who don't are happier. Other research shows that fathers who stop being men of the old mold have better-adjusted children, better marriages and better work lives--better physical and mental health, even. "Basically," says Rochlen, "masculinity is bad for you."

So are sugar doughnuts and beer bong, and men hate to let go of those too. Women forced the revolution by staging one of their own: in the 1970s they began storming into the workforce, making it harder for men to shirk child care. What's more, they showed their sons that it's possible to both work and parent. Economic forces were at work as well: for the entire 20th century, every successive generation of American men could expect to do better financially than their dads--that is, until Generation X. According to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts, the median income for a man in his 30s in 2004 was 12% lower than it was in 1974, once adjusted for inflation. Men were forced to relinquish sole-breadwinner status for their households to stay afloat.

But how to forge a new idea of manhood for this brave new two-income world? Hollywood hasn't been much help. From Michael Keaton in the 1983 movie Mr. Mom to Adam Sandler in Big Daddy (1999) to Eddie Murphy in Daddy Day Care (2003), the sight of a man caught in the act of parenting has been a reliable laugh getter--always a good indicator of what the culture considers uncomfortable material. For every Pursuit of Happyness, there's a movie like this summer's Knocked Up, which plays not so much as a tribute to fatherhood as an effort by men to convince themselves that fatherhood is all right--and the movie's happy ending is the least plausible thing about it. One show at least managed to capture the tension: What were those

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seven seasons of *The Sopranos* about if not a man fighting to reconcile the tender pangs of a caring, new-style father with the old-school masculine ideals of violence and stoicism--not to mention the psychological damage wreaked on him by his own old-school father?

Society hasn't made it easy for newly evolved dads to feel manly either. In Rochlen's study of stay-at-home dads, those who scored low on measures of traditional masculinity professed higher degrees of happiness in their roles--as well as in their marriages, with their children and with their health. But even they worried about how the rest of the world viewed their choice--with some reason. "There's definitely a stigma out there," says Rochlen. "The dads tell stories about mothers on the playground looking at them like they're child molesters or losers."

Ironically, dads who take on parenting roles once considered emasculating may simply be responding to nature. Studies have shown that men experience hormonal shifts during their female partner's pregnancy. A man's testosterone level drops after settling down to marriage and family, perhaps in preparation for parenthood, as the male hormone is thought to be incompatible with nurturing behavior. In one study, for example, men with lower amounts of testosterone were willing to hold baby dolls for a longer period of time than those with a higher count. In another, the very act of holding dolls lowered testosterone.

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