

FATHERS MORE ACTIVE, AND MORE ABSENT

By Lisa Belkin • June 17, 2011

It's the time of year when everyone seems to be taking the measure of Dad.

From Cozi, the online calendar and organization service, we learn that men are busy (and, 'natch, in need of online calendars):

- ▶ **54 percent** of dads said the biggest changes they observed involved shifts in parents' roles: More moms are working, and parents are splitting household tasks more evenly, so dads are more involved in their children's lives.
- ▶ **22 percent** of dads said one of the biggest changes in this generation is that families are busier than before.
- ▶ **25 percent** say they are the main organizers in their families, and 85 percent said they are somewhat or very involved in managing the family's schedule.

The Goddard School for Early Childhood Development, meanwhile, surveyed 1,000 fathers and found that dads are more involved in making decisions in their children's lives — particularly when it comes to, wait for it ... childcare and preschool.

No, that was not first on the list of things fathers said were important to their children's welfare. It was fourth out of 10, after "basic needs (food, clothing, shelter)," "a safe home environment," and "financial support." The survey found that three-quarters of fathers visit preschools before enrolling their child, a sign, the researchers conclude, of a growing commitment.

Yahoo has been studying Dad, too, and has found that:

- ▶ **51 percent** of dads are responsible for grocery shopping
- ▶ **41 percent** do the laundry
- ▶ **46 percent** feel their families are doing better (financially) than last year, compared with
- ▶ **30 percent** of men with no kids

And Workplace Options, a North Carolina-based provider of work-life programs and employee benefits, finds that Dad is under a lot of pressure, what with all that preschool shopping and laundry sorting. A company-sponsored poll of 459 respondents found:

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- ▶ **68 percent** have clashed with their employer due to work/life conflicts
 - ▶ **48 percent** say they spend only six hours a day or less with their kids (compared with the 31 percent of mothers who said the same)
 - ▶ **56 percent** of fathers report taking time off from work to deal with family illness and issues (compared with **40 percent** of mothers, a number that just doesn't ring true to me)
 - ▶ **39 percent** said work demands mean they are not there as often as they should be
 - ▶ **70 percent** of employed fathers considered their current employer to be understanding of their family responsibilities, but **43 percent** also said that "more tools, programs or assistance to help them balance their roles at work with those at home" — exactly the sort of product that Workplace Options sells — would be helpful.

There is also data from groups not trying to sell something, and the results seem, at first, very similar to the commercially sponsored surveys.

Boston College's Center for Work and Family, for instance, has just released a report titled "The New Dad: Caring, Committed and Conflicted," which polls a national sample of nearly 1,000 professional fathers from Fortune 500 companies in four different industries.

"Today's dads associate being a good father just as much with the role of effective caregiver as the traditional role of 'breadwinner'," researchers conclude. "These men want to be engaged parents and successful professionals, yet find conflicts as they try to achieve both objectives."

More specifically:

- ▶ Job security and flexible work options are more important than high income and good opportunity to advance.
- ▶ Most fathers surveyed said they want to share equally in caregiving but fall short of that goal.
- ▶ **20 percent** of fathers took more than two weeks off after their most recent child was born, and 1 in 100 took five weeks or more off.
- ▶ Fathers are much more likely to use informal flexible work arrangements at a much higher rate than formal ones.
- ▶ **53 percent** of fathers would consider not working outside the home if they could afford to.

But once you move away from the high socio-economic layer polled by all of the above, you find that the "involved and conflicted father" seems a function of income, ethnicity and education. In a report this week titled "A Tale of Two Fathers: More Are Active, but More Are Absent" the Pew Research Center found that 46 percent of respondents say fathers play a greater role in their children's lives now than 20 or 30 years ago, nearly the same percent (45 percent) say they play less of a role now. According to the Center, both perceptions are correct:

- ▶ The role of fathers in the modern American family is changing in important and countervailing ways. Fathers who live with their children have become more intensely involved in their lives, spending more time with them and taking part in a greater variety of activities. However, the share of fathers who are residing with their children has fallen significantly in the past half century.
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- ▶ Fathers' living arrangements are strongly correlated with race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status as measured by educational attainment. Black fathers are more than twice as likely as white fathers to live apart from their children (44% vs. 21%), while Hispanic fathers fall in the middle (35%). Among fathers who never completed high school, 40% live apart from their children. This compares with only 7% of fathers who graduated from college.

Other data points from Pew:

- ▶ **63 percent** say being a dad is harder today than it was a generation ago.
- ▶ **26 percent** think today's dads are doing a better job of parenting than their own fathers did; **34 percent** think they are doing a worse job; 40 percent rate themselves "about the same."
- ▶ **87 percent** of males who are now between the ages of 15 and 44 who have no children say that they would like to, eventually.

How would you rate yourself compared with your own father? Is the job harder today? Are the fathers you know more determined to be more than just the breadwinner?