

The New (And Improved) Mr. Mom

By Maddy Dychtwald
November 28, 2011

When I was neck-deep in research for my new book, [Influence: How Women's Soaring Economic Power Will Transform Our World For The Better](#), I was struck by the fact that of all the shifts created by women's economic independence, the most compelling may prove to be its impact on men—their values, their expectations, and their very definition of manhood. And boomer women--the first generation of women to enter the workforce and stay in the workforce; the first generation to building careers like their husbands and fathers--have paved the way by example, demonstrating that gender doesn't necessarily define our roles in our family and in our life.

“Men are where women were in the 1980's,” Michael Kimmel, a sociology professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and author of *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* told me. Back then, women were adding *career* to their repertoire; today, more and more men are adding *care*— for children, for aging parents, for communities. And while some (okay, many) might call men's engagement on the home front somewhat belated, this overdue participation may, in fact, be setting the stage for the move towards a partnership society.

Don't get me wrong. I'm *not* talking about some revolutionary “feminization” of men, where they simply swap roles with women, putting on aprons while women wear suits. What's happening isn't role reversal: It's role reinvention. It's a full-blown paradigm shift, one that gives both men *and* women more options when it comes to providing for their families and expressing their own talents and strengths. In this new social order, both genders are less shackled by a narrow vision of career success. Men in this new world have more social and workplace support for becoming involved fathers, equal partners in their homes and communities, and more complete people.

This change in the way we live is going on right now, in ways that are so obvious and self-evident that it's easy to miss just how groundbreaking they really are. Men are reimagining their life just as boomer women shifted theirs twenty or thirty years ago, hoping to create lives that include important responsibilities at home as well as at work.

Case in point: When Myra Strober, a labor economist who teaches at Stanford's Graduate School of Business, started teaching her course on “Work and Family” in the early 2000s, only a handful of men signed up. Today, men represent 40 percent of her class. Why? “More and more men are interested in being good dads,” she says of her students. “They also want to be good husbands and be supportive of their wives.”

Let's not forget that boomer women are the mothers of many of these men who are eager to take on new roles and responsibilities. This redefinition of fatherhood is happening in millions of families around the country, where fathers are spending many more hours with their children every week than their fathers spent with them. We see signs of it all around us as the most high-flying, type-A dads who drop their kids off at day care and duck out for soccer games and growing numbers of dads take paternity leaves, telecommute, or use flex-time.

"The solution isn't a broad political movement toward a new fatherhood," Michael Kimmel stressed to me, "It's the day-to-day accommodations that men are making, where they're compromising and adopting new family arrangements that demand more from them at home. And they're finding they're actually enjoying it."

Shifting to this new model of fatherhood can be acutely uncomfortable, even painful. Often, men feel caught between a rock and a hard place, expected to fill the old-time breadwinner role and the new superdad model at the same time. Are they supposed to be the breadwinner? Will their wives think less of them if they step off the fast track? If work/family pressure is taking a toll on the kids or the marriage, who steps back? And how do they support their partner best? Many of them witnessed their own mother struggle with the dual responsibilities of raising a family and building a career, and now they find themselves in a similar conundrum.

While men in general and fathers in particular are going through a time of ambiguity, the shift in roles is already bringing tremendous benefits to both men and women. The more our communities and employers can acknowledge, recognize, and support these changes, already well under way, the more concerns like closing the gender wage gap, making sure families can afford great day care, making good education affordable, enacting child-friendly laws and policies, and advancing work-life balance will become *family* issues, not just women's issues. As the genders work together to redefine womanhood, manhood, and the family, our children will thrive and our society and economy grow stronger.

Maddy Dychtwald is a highly acclaimed author, public speaker, and co-founder of Age Wave. She has spent more than 25 years deeply involved in exploring and forecasting the profound business, lifestyle and cultural implications of population aging. As a public speaker, she has addressed business, government, and community leaders worldwide. She is the author of three books: "INFLUENCE: How Women's Rising Economic Power will Transform Our World for the Better," "Cycles: How We Will Live, Work, and Buy" and an illustrated children's book, "Gideon's Dream: A Tale of New Beginnings" (co-authored with her husband, Ken, and Dave and Grace Zabolski.) Maddy lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with Ken and her two children. This article can be found at <http://www.thirdage.com/blogs/new-and-improved-mr-mom>.