



**SLOAN WORK AND FAMILY  
RESEARCH NETWORK**  
BOSTON COLLEGE

March 2007 • Volume 9(3)

*THE NETWORK NEWS*  
A WORK-FAMILY NEWS  
PUBLICATION

## *Conversations with the Experts*

### Fathers and Work and Family



**Roland C. Warren**

**Bio:** Roland C. Warren leads the National Fatherhood Initiative's efforts to rebuild a culture of responsible fatherhood in America and beyond. He has become a much sought after commentator on fatherhood, marriage, relationships, and family in the national media, including multiple appearances on The Oprah Winfrey Show and interviews with CNN, FoxNews Channel, and Black Entertainment Television.

He has given keynote addresses for many charitable, philanthropic, and educational organizations including: Working Mother Media, The First Lady's Helping America's Youth Initiative, CareNet, The Congressional Black Caucus, and many more.

Roland received his MBA from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He and his wife Yvette have two sons: Jamin, a recent graduate of Harvard University and a writer with the Wall Street Journal; and Justin, a senior at the University of North Carolina.

### **An Interview with Roland C. Warren**

By Judi Casey and Karen Corday

**Casey:** Why focus on working fathers?

**Warren:** Firstly, working fathers are a big part of the equation in terms of what happens at the home. Historically, men have been focused on providing, and that means working, for most of them. The balancing of work and family is a subject that's very important to our organization. Our mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of kids who grow up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers. The workplace contributes to this mission because in order to be committed, a father must be present, and how he balances work and family has an impact on his ability to be a responsible father.

Secondly, workplaces have done very little to intentionally target fathers. Most work-family supports have been focused on helping mothers. I believe this is a short-sighted way to approach the issue. If a woman is having difficulty balancing work and family, I suspect that the way in which her husband or father of her children balances work and family has an enormous effect on these challenges. If he sees his role as just one who provides for his children, as opposed to one who also nurtures and guides them, when there are issues with the children's health care, education, or any other issue outside of fiscal ones, then those issues are seen as the mother's responsibility. The pressure that she feels is tied directly to how he views work-family balance. Our perspective is that progressive companies that want women to not just survive in the workplace, but thrive there, should include specific and unique programming designed for fathers.

The last reason is that men are different from women. They approach work differently, and as a result, when one encourages men to balance work and family, from a social-marketing perspective, you need to engage them differently than women. In the surveys that we've done and in the corporations where we've worked, on average, women are more likely to take advantage of work-family benefits. In particular, when companies offer parenting classes, men tend not to attend. If you look at the general American culture, "parenting" is a code word for "mothering." Pick up any parenting magazine; there's very little to nothing in there for men. We think that if you want men to be more engaged, you must refer to "fathering." When this is done, men show up and are engaged.

**Casey:** How do these unique supports help fathers and their families?

**Warren:** We just finished a national survey on attitudes about fatherhood. It's called Pop Culture, and it's available on our web site. One of the questions that we asked was, "To what degree did you feel prepared to be a father when you became one?" A little more than fifty percent said that they were prepared to be fathers. One hundred percent of them are fathers, so obviously there's an issue here! When you look at the way the question is structured, there's a high level of social desirability in the response, so we can assume that some of the fifty percent aren't being completely honest. We think that the notion of helping fathers with skill-building is particularly important. Right now in the United States, one out of three kids is growing up without a father; in the Black community, it's two out of three. Historically, men learn how to be fathers by watching their own dads, so if there are more and more absent fathers, this impacts how boys grow up to be fathers themselves and whether they value the institution and want to engage in it. Coupled with that is the fathers that are physically present but emotionally absent from the home. Our first course of action is to help men to develop skills; if you have the skills you need to be a good father, you're more likely to be engaged in the parenting process, and you're a better support to the children's mother as well. The workplace is an excellent place to deliver these kinds of messages and resources because that's where the men are.

**Casey:** Just as an aside, do you know how many mothers report that they felt prepared to be mothers?

**Warren:** That would be an interesting survey for another group. We're doing some work with Working Mother Media right now, and that's something they might want to do. I would say that more women feel prepared to be mothers than men feel prepared to be fathers. This is not because women are intuitively better parents than men, but because women start to do things to build their portfolio of parenting skills before most men; they're more thoughtful about the parenting process. When I was in college, all of the women that I knew, when talking about their career plans, would discuss when they were going to have children. What effect will my career have on my ability to raise children? None of the men I knew who were thinking about careers considered the impact of their work plans on their future parenting. If you talk to little girls about what they want to be when they grow up, many of them mention, along with future career plans, they want to be mommies, too. Very few little boys will mention that they will be fathers. Finally, women have an automatic support system available to them when they decide to become mothers—they can talk to friends and family about the pregnancy, the delivery process, and parenting, not to mention the huge number of books and other types of resources available for women. This is not true for men. So, why would men feel prepared to be parents? We don't intentionally teach men and boys how to be fathers and help them develop the skills they need to carry out this role successfully.

**Casey:** What resources do you provide to prepare fathers for parenthood?

**Warren:** A lot of our programming focuses on what to expect as a new father. We have a resource called 24/7 Dad, which is an interactive resource that helps build fatherhood skills. One of the huge pieces of 24/7 Dad is the stages of children's growth and development. If there's frustration around a two-year-old's behavior, you need to know what two-year-olds are capable of doing and to be aware of the normal stages of their development. If men don't feel confident around a certain issue, they tend not to engage. In the parenting process, you're in it and there's little you can do to get out of it once a baby arrives. If a father isn't competent he'll be less engaged, and if he's less engaged, the mother will figure that out pretty quickly and create a dynamic in which she's providing all of the parenting support. Many women also have a full-time job outside the home, and then they feel they have a full-time job in the home as well. This leads to lots of frustration. Furthermore, the unengaged father is really missing out. Our surveys show that men really do value the parenting process. Ninety-nine percent of the fathers we surveyed said that they thought fatherhood was very important and an important part of their identity. We know that men want to be good fathers, so how do we take this inspiration and focus it and mold it into implementation? Our skill-building resources are designed to do this.

**Casey:** What are the benefits to businesses?

**Warren:** When you look at the data that's out there, it shows that workers who are able to balance work and family are more loyal to the company that provides those benefits, and are certainly more productive. Surveys have shown that the same skills that it takes to be an effective father are the kinds of skills that work well in the workplace—the ability to communicate effectively, show empathy, and be "others-centered." There's a lot of cross-pollination there. In a competitive environment where there's a war for talent, workplaces need to offer the best benefits in order to attract the best workers. Increasingly, when you get beyond the Baby Boomers to Generations X and Y, these men are much more engaged in the parenting process. Companies that understand this commitment are going to do a better job of retaining these workers.

Finally, if you're trying to keep women in the workforce and you provide support via the father of her children, that's a win for her as well.

**Casey:** The mission of the National Fatherhood Initiative is accomplished through a three-prong approach. Can you talk about the three elements?

**Warren:** We focus on the "three E strategy": educating, equipping, and engaging. "Educating" refers to inspiring all Americans, particularly fathers, through public awareness campaigns, research, and other resources. "Equipping" refers to developing leaders at the state, local, community and business levels through curricula, training programs, and technical assistance. The final element is "engaging" every sector of society through strategic alliances and partnerships. The strategy works at a macro level by educating the culture at large, equipping organizations, and engaging them with fathers to help them improve their parenting skills. It also works at a micro level with fathers; we educate and inspire them about their involvement and its effect on the well-being of their families, we equip them with the fathering skills they need to be effective dads, and we engage them with their children in programming that creates opportunities for this engagement to take place.

This is the strategy, but how do we go about implementing it in the public square? We've decided on six lines of business. These include the business community, churches, community-based organizations, corrections, health care, such as hospitals, pregnancy centers, and birthing centers, and the military. The common thread between these six lines of business is that these are places where men are connected into culture for good or for ill. So, we're "going where the guys are" to engage organizations that are at the nexus of children and family in order to reach fathers. We call it the Willie Sutton Approach. He was a bank robber in the 1930's, and when someone asked him why he robbed banks, he replied "That's where the money is!" We go where the guys are.

**Casey:** Could you talk a little more about your focus on military dads and incarcerated dads?

**Warren:** Each one of these groups represents certain demographics. In the corrections area, obviously we reach a lot of low-income fathers. Corrections and corrections culture has a huge impact on fathers. Kids who have a parent who's incarcerated, which is often the father, are more likely to become incarcerated themselves. Our mission is to improve the lives of children, so we also look at where kids are more at risk and how can we work with this population of fathers to reduce the risk.

**Casey:** How do you track whether you've achieved your mission?

**Warren:** We have programming for each area. On the educating side, we conduct public awareness campaigns, partnerships with the Ad Council, and tracking surveys to see about attitudes and behavioral changes related to our campaigns. On the equipping side, all of our programs have built-in evaluation instruments, so we can determine if fathers who participate in our programs improve their parenting skills across a variety of different metrics. It's an enormous challenge, just like the parenting process. We've been working for over a decade, and we've seen some improvement, such as in the fatherhood absence issue; when we first started, four out of ten kids were growing up without fathers. There's a growing awareness in our nation that we need to do something about dads; it's not sustainable to have men disconnected from families. Bipartisan support has helped a lot; we've had Newt Gingrich and Al Gore at the same conference, Rick Santorum and Ted Kennedy at another. It's a universal issue. Senator Barak Obama is on board with the issue—he's written two books in which he discusses how his father's absence shaped him and the importance of the issue. There's a growing awareness that men need to be more engaged in the parenting process.

**Casey:** Do you get any pushback from people who think you should focus on families as a whole instead of just fathers?

**Warren:** Not really; we are the National Fatherhood Initiative, after all. When you look at families that are at risk, the reason they're at risk is often because the father is not there. We don't have a mass exodus of mothers from homes. If you're going to focus on "families" and there's no father there, it's as if he gets a free pass. Our social marketing approach is specifically designed for fathers; they respond to different messages than mothers do. Every marketer on the planet will tell you that. Advertising firms don't pitch their products to people in general; they use psychographics and demographics to narrow in on their target whose behavior they want to change and motivate. The better focused you are on your target, the more successful you will be at changing the target's attitude and getting them to purchase your product. What we're selling is responsible fatherhood; we're trying to bottle it, package it, and move it out the door. We don't want to muddy up the message; if you try to be everything to everybody you'll be nothing to everybody.

**Casey:** What suggestions do you have for employers who want to be more "father friendly?"

**Warren:** The first thing to do is to look at the Father Friendly Check-Up on our web site and assess your organization across four key areas: leadership and business philosophy, management training, human resource practices and policy, and community/marketplace perception of your business. The checklist will tell you how father-friendly you are in these areas, and then we'll give you some specific advice for actions to take across the four areas. Our program is granular; you can do something all-encompassing, or you can start small. We offer something called Daddy Packs that employers can give to all their employees that become fathers. We worked with FedEx to design FedEx Daddy Packs that look like little

FedEx packages. Our model is a consulting model, and we'll sit down and talk about your corporate culture and what fits and customize our resources to suit your company's needs.

**Casey:** What additional research on fathers is needed? How could this research help you move forward in your work?

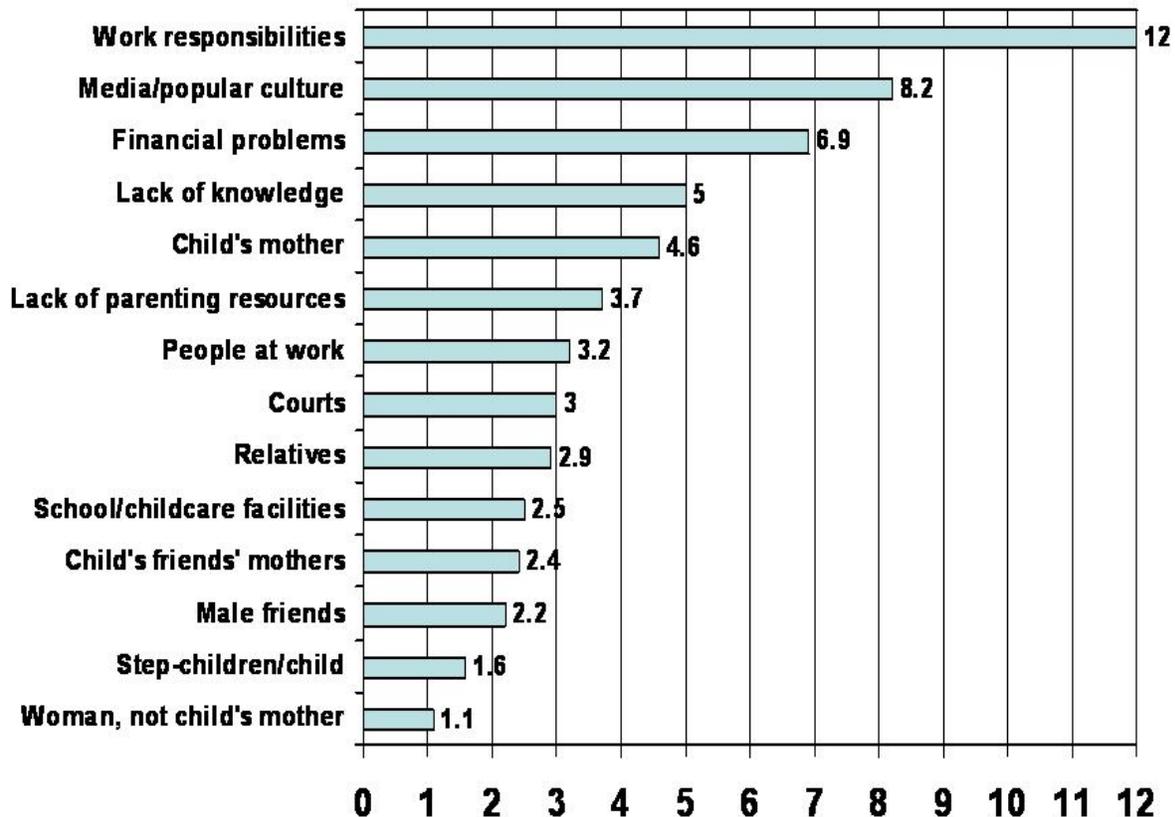
**Warren:** There needs to be more research that is father-specific, focused on how fathers balance work and family and asking fathers what they need to improve their situations. When we offer parenting classes, even when fathers come to the classes, they often don't say anything. Part of the reason is that mothers are considered the de facto expert parent. There's still work to be done to understand how to engage working men, how we can structure programs to best suit them, to encourage them to take paternity leave and be vocal about their needs in balancing work and family. More research might make CEOs and other upper management more receptive to the idea of fathers balancing work and family; they can be hard to get on board. Many of them sacrificed family time in order to have successful careers, and may not be willing to let the new workers "get away with" something they could not do.

**Casey:** How could government and public policy makers support your efforts?

**Warren:** The Senate just formed a caucus of Children, Work, and Family, co-chaired by Democratic Senator Christopher Dodd and Republican Senator Arlen Specter. Congress is looking at ways to make work-family balance programs more economically attractive to employers. That type of federal awareness and perspective is key. At the state level, California has been very progressive with its Paid Family Leave program that encourages mothers and fathers to take time off to care for children and family members. Other states should look into following suit. I also think that the bully pulpit is a very powerful tool in setting the tone. Listening to the State of the Union address recently, I was thinking about how powerful it is and how so many groups lobby to get one sentence in about their initiative. In the world of politics, saying something is often perceived as being the same as doing something. I've never heard a President talk about this issue and say that we need to look at the work week of the average American family and the impact it has on our children and our nation. We need to look into ways to help moms and dads balance work and family and support companies that do so. Why isn't there a federal award for companies that are progressive about helping employees balance work and family? The government should recognize leaders in this arena.

The National Fatherhood Initiative: <http://www.fatherhood.org/>.

### Mean Obstacles to Good Fathering Index, By Source, All Fathers



**Source:** National Fatherhood Initiative. (2006). *Pop's culture: A national survey of dads' attitudes on fathering*. Retrieved April 20, 2007, from the National Fatherhood Initiative web site: [http://www.fatherhood.org/downloadable\\_files/PopsCulture\\_FatherAttitude.pdf](http://www.fatherhood.org/downloadable_files/PopsCulture_FatherAttitude.pdf).

### Additional Resources Related to Fatherhood and Work and Family

**Dad at Work:** Jeffrey Levine is an executive coach who blogs about fathers and the work/family divide at Dad at Work. He also hosts an online radio program of the same title: <http://www.bigmediausa.com/show.asp?sid=407>.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.dadatwork.com>.

**Fathers Direct:** "Fathers Direct is the UK's national information centre on fatherhood. It [was] founded in 1999 by professionals with expertise in social work, family policy, business development and communications."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.fathersdirect.com/index.php>.

**Slowlane.com:** "Slowlane.com is the searchable online reference, resource and network for Stay At Home Dads (SAHD) and their families. The Slowlane.com site provides dads with a searchable collection of articles and media clips written by, for, and about primary care-giving fathers."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.slowlane.com>.

**Working Dads 2006:** "The CareerBuilder.com survey, "Working Dads 2006," was conducted from February 21 to March 6 and included more than 225 men, employed full-time, with children under the age of 18 living at home. Struggling to balance work and home, 44 percent of working dads say they are willing to take a pay cut to spend more time with their children."

- To access the press release, click here:

<http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?id=pr310&ed=6/13/2099&sd=6/13/2006>.

**Working Families: Fathers' Rights:** This Fact Sheet details paternity leave for British fathers of new babies.

- To access the fact sheet, click here:  
[http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/asp/family\\_zone/fs\\_pr2\\_fathers.asp](http://www.workingfamilies.org.uk/asp/family_zone/fs_pr2_fathers.asp).

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



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*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*