

Conversations with the Experts

The Daddy Shift: Stay-at-Home Fathers



Jeremy Adam Smith

Bio: [Jeremy Adam Smith](#) is the author of *The Daddy Shift*, now available from Beacon Press; co-editor of *The Compassionate Instinct*, forthcoming from W.W. Norton & Co. in January 2010; and co-editor of *Are We Born Racist?*, which Beacon Press will publish in Spring 2010. He is senior editor of *Greater Good* magazine, published by the U.C. Berkeley Greater Good Science Center.

Jeremy is also the founder of [Daddy Dialectic](#), a group blog that explores the experiences of twenty-first-century dads, which has earned praise from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and many corners of the blogosphere.

His essays, short stories, and articles on parenting, popular culture, urban life, and politics have appeared in *The Nation*, *BusinessWeek.com*, *Mothering*, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Utne Reader*, *Wired*, and numerous other periodicals and books.

An Interview with Jeremy Adam Smith

by Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: What do you mean by the term “the daddy shift”?

Smith: That’s the gradual movement of fatherhood from being defined as pure breadwinning to encompassing capacities for both breadwinning and caregiving.

Casey: Are you thinking in terms of shared care, or less about a couples’ relationship and more about men’s roles?

Smith: My concern is with men’s roles, but those roles aren’t formed in isolation. Women are making more money; as a result, we’re seeing men spend more time with children and more time doing housework. Many different kinds of domestic arrangements flow from these changes, including reverse-traditional relationships; diversity, negotiation, and a certain amount of conflict become the order of the day.

Casey: How have notions of fatherhood changed over the course of history?

Smith: As Stephanie Coontz describes so well in her history of marriage, for thousands of years, families were mainly business enterprises and marriages were mainly business decisions. The patriarchal father was considered the natural CEO of the home economy, but he still had an intimate bond with his children. Before the Industrial Revolution, most parents, mothers and fathers, were always home; they worked there, and their children worked with them. Fathers were often responsible for transmitting cultural heritage and for children’s religious and formal education.

Then during the Industrial Revolution, patriarchs became breadwinners. Fathers were gone from the home for very long periods of time; they were expected to support their families financially, but the emotional bonds became difficult to cultivate.

In the early 20th century, women started taking on more paid work as well, and their workforce participation climbed in almost every decade of the 20th century. This, along with the rising importance of love in marriage

and the family, put many new demands on fathers. Starting in a fitful way in the early 20th century and then taking off in the 50s, a tug-of-war pattern emerged. Economic forces pushed fathers out of their homes even as at the same time expectations for involvement increased.

Behavioral changes at home came very slowly, at first. Then, during the past quarter century, men's involvement in housework and childcare has incrementally but steadily increased, according to many time-use studies. Today, men spend more time with their children than they have at any time since researchers started collecting longitudinally comparable data. There's now a small group of stay-at-home dads, which is something fairly new.

Casey: What do stay-at-home dads tell us about how fatherhood in general has changed?

Smith: Stay-at-home dads are just the leading edge of the daddy shift; the evolution of fathering affects all dads. The argument in my book is that when a man becomes a father today, he is expected to play both breadwinning and caretaking roles. This can create stress in trying to balance work and home, but, with labor markets increasingly unstable, it can also be advantageous.

Look what's happening right now: most of the people being laid off are men, and so many dads being thrown into new roles at home. In the past, men would be totally destroyed by unemployment, with terrible consequences for their families. That's still true for many people.

However, in many cases female partners are working and have the ability to support families, and the guys are expected by society, their wives, and themselves to take on more domestic responsibilities. And many men are, in fact, emotionally and intellectually equipped to deal with a stretch of unemployment and still make a contribution at home; it's a strength today's guys have in the face of this economic catastrophe. They can use the time to learn how to take care of kids and develop bonds that might not exist otherwise.

Casey: What are some of the unique challenges faced by fathers today?

Smith: I think the first and most important challenge is that workplace and public policy don't support their caregiving roles. Policies are designed for ideal workers—men who are unencumbered by the demands of family life. The vast majority of guys get no paternity leave. They have less access to flextime or days they can use to take care of sick kids; there are several surveys that show that corporate managers still do not believe that men should take advantage of these policies even when they are available. That needs to change.

There are also social, emotional, and cultural challenges. We don't have a good appreciation for the unique ways that fathers take care of children; caregiving dads are judged by maternal standards, instead of on their own terms. Lots of moms are not on board with the daddy shift and do not support fathers' involvement with children. That's a new kind of problem, and couples don't have a good way of talking about that; fathers don't have good ways to go to their wives and let them know that it's important to them to be involved with their children.

And, of course, dads also have old tapes running in their heads. Fathers who voluntarily cut back on work to be more involved with their children often feel guilty about the decision, even when moms support it. The dad may actually think he is being a bad father by bringing in less money. Stay-at-home fathers can also feel isolated; the numbers are sometimes too small to form their own neighborhood groups, and they're often not welcome in the moms' groups. There can be disapproval from their extended families, which creates terrible strain in the marriage.

Casey: What factors influence fathers' decisions about working and child care?

Smith: The most important is how much money mom makes. Today, a third of wives make more than their husbands, so in many families, it's sensible to consider the father as the best person to leave the workforce to care for young children.

Both dads and moms now consider what mom wants out of life; this did not used to be a factor. I interviewed my grandfather for my book, and I learned that it never would have occurred to him to go to his wife and say,

“We’re becoming parents. What do you want out of life?” It was just assumed that he would stay at work and she would stay at home, and any career ambitions or emotions about motherhood were beside the point. Today, many couples have that conversation.

Another consideration is the cost of childcare—and the personality of one’s child. In my particular case, we felt pretty strongly that paid care would not be the best choice for our son. We had imagined my wife going back to work after 6 months off; we ended up taking turns staying home with our son, and there’s no doubt in my mind that that was the best plan for him. Not all kids are like that; many children thrive at day care. It’s different for every family.

Casey: What is the biggest myth about stay-at-home dads?

Smith: The biggest myth about male caregiving is that it’s done by white, middle- and upper-class men and that non-white, non-educated men don’t do it at all. But if you look at the data, you see that male caregiving happens in every racial and social group, and reverse-traditional families are very diverse. There are some differences across groups, but they’re not huge.

Another, related myth is that stay-at-home fatherhood is a luxury of the affluent. In fact, the lower a family’s income, the more likely they are to have a stay-at-home parent, mostly, I’d argue, because of the high cost of child care. And reverse-traditional families have lower incomes than their traditional counterparts, as on the whole, women still have lower incomes than men. I think some people look at reverse traditional families and say, “Look, we’ve transcended sexism!” In reality, if you look at the families, you see evidence of the persistence of sexism. Women’s economic power has increased, but when you compare incomes of male breadwinners and female breadwinners, there are some pretty stark differences that are hard to explain unless you look at them through the lens of discrimination. In this way, progress co-exists with inequality.

Another myth worth highlighting says that the domestic division of labor is biologically determined. There’s a myth that women are biologically and evolutionary better adapted to activities that demand care and compassion, while men are adapted to better compete in hierarchal social groups. As I argue in the book, this fails to take into account that people are adaptable, that our life experiences shape our brains right down to a cellular level, and that male caregiving has deep evolutionary roots. Many male primates take care of children; marmoset daddies hold their babies 70 percent of the time. Many human cultures have embraced male caregiving, from contemporary Sweden to the Aka pygmies of central Africa to the Na people of China.

Casey: Can you describe how Sweden’s family policies have impacted fathers’ choices and involvement in their children’s lives?

Smith: In 1974, Sweden invented paternity leave and developed a whole suite of policies designed to encourage paternal involvement and maternal participation in the workforce. This catalyzed a lot of profound, long-term changes in the structure of parenthood in Sweden. Parents don’t appear to be trapped into one role; both parents are likely to be caregivers *and* in the workforce. I’ve never researched this, but I find it hard to believe that they have any equivalent to the “mommy wars” in Sweden, as so many mothers have stayed at home at some point, as have so many fathers. Sweden is not utopia, but public policy has certainly worked to support involved fatherhood.

Another interesting point about social democratic family policy: a recent study by sociologist Jennifer Hook suggests that the widespread availability of subsidized day care and early childhood education is correlated with lots of father involvement. Contrary to what one might expect, it seems that day care and father care are not antagonistic categories. According to this and other studies, and lots of anecdotal evidence, fathers’ time with their children actually goes *up* when these systems are in place.

Casey: How might fathers advocate for policies that could support their personal choices at home and in the workplace?

Smith: The biggest problem here is that dads aren’t conscious of themselves as a group with its own interests, so they haven’t formed a group that advocates on their behalf.

One of the best things dads can start doing is raising consciousness among themselves, just by sharing

stories. It's very powerful when dads talk about experiences like bonding with their baby during paternity leave, something fathers these days talk about among themselves way more than many women suppose. We're also seeing more dads speak out in public forums like blogs, helping to create new images of what a good father does for his family.

New dads should take advantage of whatever policies are available and think consciously about where care fits into your life. That's especially important for new fathers who are in supervisory roles at work. It sets the tone and encourages others to take advantage of these policies, when they're available.

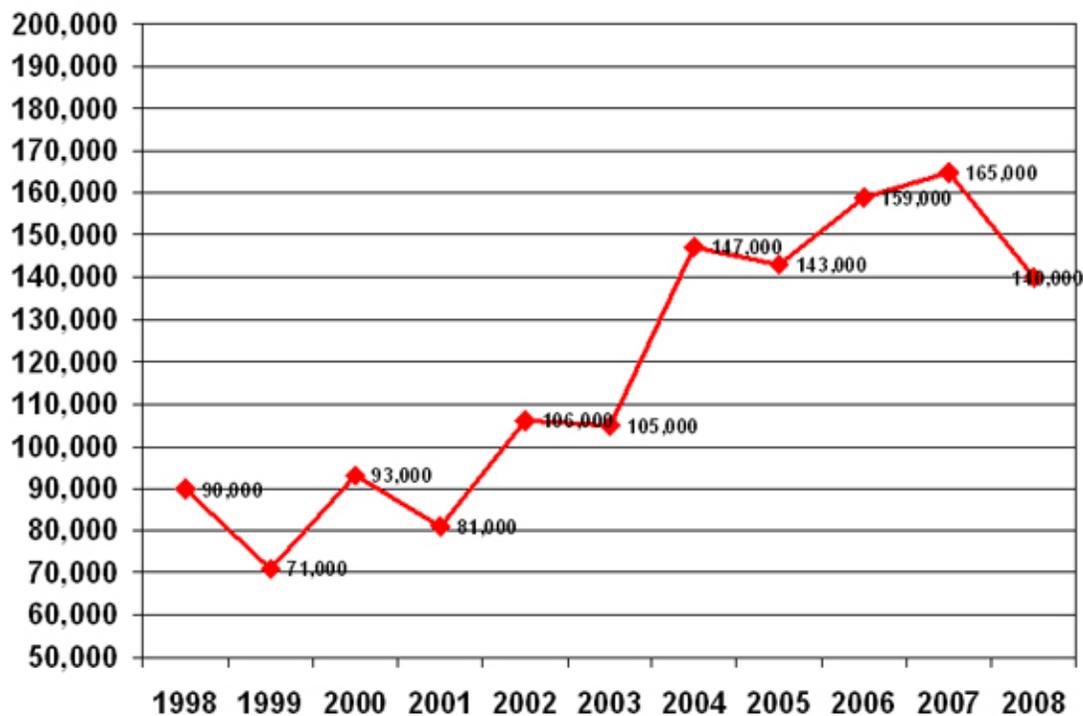
Casey: How could workplaces be more supportive of fathers?

Smith: We need a shift in understanding that caregiving is a necessary part of every person's life. Taking care of children is a responsibility for both parents, not just mothers. Many parents already have this understanding. Now workplaces need to make that shift, and so does public policy.

Casey: What additional research would be useful?

Smith: The big missing piece has to do with breadwinning moms; there's not much about stay-at-home dads, but there's almost no research at all about breadwinning moms. What social conditions and interventions can help breadwinning moms to thrive? How are they affected by changes at work? What ideals and hopes inform their choices and reactions? I'd love to see a counterpart to *The Daddy Shift* that focuses more on the mom side of the equation.

Stay-at-Home Fathers in the United States, 1998-2008



Source: Reid, B. (2009, March 2). *It's stat time again! (At home dad numbers drop)*. Message posted to <http://www.rebeldad.com/labels/stats.html>

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