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BALANCING ACT

Men and Mothering

University policies and academic culture continue to discourage men from being active parents

By MARY ANN MASON

It's no secret that more than 40 years after Title VII guaranteed them equal treatment in the workplace, women with children still go home from work and begin their second shift. Our study of faculty members at the University of California revealed that mothers, on average, worked 95 hours a week, with 43 percent of those hours devoted to child care and housework and the rest to professional activities. Fathers worked 80 hours a week, with only 31 percent devoted to their domestic duties.

Some might dismiss that as a phenomenon of an older generation that is on the wane. But the 8,000 doctoral students we surveyed at the university revealed the same pattern — except they worked longer hours. Graduate students who were mothers, on average, worked 101 hours a week and spent about half of that time on child care and housework. Student fathers worked 89 hours, with 37 percent spent on home duties.

Before we point fingers at fathers, let's acknowledge that they are, in fact, contributing a significant number of hours to child care and housework. Let's also acknowledge the social and institutional barriers that may prevent them from doing more. Consider the following comment from a scientist who responded to my column, ["Do Babies Matter in Science?"](#) (*The Chronicle*, October 17, 2008):

"For our daughter's (a special-needs child) first couple of years," he wrote, "I took her to physical therapy three times a week, losing about seven hours of work time. I was pre-tenure at that point. Everyone assumed that my wife (also a tenure-track scientist) was the primary caregiver, including the male chair and female dean and provost, so she was offered special consideration on scheduling classes and such. She had to tell them that I was the primary caregiver with respect to physical therapy, since our daughter wanted to nurse, not work, when my wife was there. No special scheduling was then offered to me. I think their minds simply couldn't get around the idea of a man being the primary caregiver."

Andrea Doucet, in her thoughtful book, *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care, and Domestic Responsibility*, examines the lives of more than 100 fathers, mostly single ones, who consider themselves the primary parent. Doucet found that men do take over the primary role of protective care when there is no mother, but that their overall style of nurturing tends to emphasize fun, playfulness, and physical activity, while mothers tend toward cuddling, holding, and emotional sympathy.

The book shows it was not easy for those single fathers because, just as in the scientist's case, American society is not always willing to accept them as the primary caregivers. Particularly tricky is being accepted by other parents in social situations and at schools. As one father commented in the book, "There's a lot of networks for moms and there isn't a network for guys, and I think a huge part of that is it isn't easy for a guy. I've been out to the library, and I've seen a guy pushing a baby carriage. But it's just not so easy for a guy to go up to another guy and say, 'Hey, how old is she? Do you want to be friends?'"

Our colleges and universities are not always welcoming to men as active parents, either. Among the members of the Association of American Universities (the 62 top-ranked research institutions), only a handful offer paid parental leave to fathers after their children are born — the majority offer it to mothers — and none offer graduate-student fathers paid parental leave (a few offer it to mothers).

Over the years I have sat around many conference tables arguing with colleagues about whether new fathers should be allowed to stop the tenure clock, or should receive special accommodations in teaching and other work. The opposition is always the same: "Men won't use the time for parenting; they'll use it to write another book or publish more articles." Fathers, for their part, even if they are full participants in parenting, don't often use parental accommodations, because, like many mothers, they fear they will be considered less committed by their institutions.

Father as breadwinner is a deeply held cultural stereotype within the society and the university; despite many instances in which women, particularly professional women, earn salaries larger than their husbands'. In Doucet's study, the married fathers who had chosen to be stay-at-home parents included those whose wives made a much higher salary and those in couples who had decided that the father was the better choice for stay-at-home parent. In virtually all of those cases, the father returned to work within three years. Most of them attributed it to the social stigma they had experienced by not being the breadwinner.

In the university world, we've found that women are more likely than men to marry a fellow student. Bargains are struck about whose career takes precedence and who will earn more money. They may cling to the ideal of equality and agree to take turns when it comes time to move careers — his choice now, hers later. The possibility of starting a family can play an important part in that bargaining process. But our research shows that, ultimately, the woman is likelier to defer to her partner's career — a decision that the culture applauds.

A common explanation for a couple's decision to have the father be the main breadwinner and the mother to work mainly at home is that fathers can't nurse an infant. Ironically, as women have moved into the workplace, breast-feeding has become not just popular but a requirement of good motherhood. In an article in the February 19 issue of *The New Yorker* called "[Baby Food](#)," Jill Lepore chronicles the long, strange story of breast-feeding through history. Over the past two centuries, it has gone in and out of fashion every few generations. As recently as the 1950s in this country — my mother's generation — formula milk was considered far more healthy for an infant. The women who nursed their babies were poor ones who could not afford formula.

Whatever the merits of breast-feeding, it imposes a short leash on mother and infant. An adaptive consequence for modern women in the workplace, according to Lepore, has been an exploding industry of breast pumps: "Today, breast pumps are such a ubiquitous personal accessory that they're more like cellphones than like catheters."

Universities rarely provide on-campus infant-care centers, or lactation rooms for nursing and pumping, as many progressive corporations now do. Such accommodations would benefit both academic parents and would allow fathers to share more equally in the early months, when caretaking patterns are often set.

If we want fathers to become equal participants in child raising, we must encourage them to do so. Family-friendly policies must include fathers as well as mothers. Cultural change occurs with participation; only then will the strongly held gender stereotypes against men as committed caregivers dissipate. In Sweden the government changed its generous 18-month parental-leave policy to insist that fathers take at least six months of the total; otherwise the leave is reduced to 12 months. The intention was not to save money but to make fatherly participation in raising children an accepted norm. And as it becomes the norm, the culture will no longer look upon family-friendly policies as a "mommy trap."

Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Law Center on Health, Economic & Family Security and the author (with her daughter, Eve Ekman), of *Mothers on the Fast Track*. She writes regularly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column and invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues. She will answer your questions in a future column. E-mail your comments to careers@chronicle.com or to mamason@law.berkeley.edu. To read previous Balancing Act columns, see http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/balancing_act.

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