Stay At Home Fathers: A Growing Trend

Updated on March 22, 2012

**Cleaver v Tanner: The Daddy Argument**

Riding a bike, playing baseball, reading a child to sleep, and playing board games are all common daddy activities. What is your favorite memory with your father? In recent decades, the image of the traditional household has been challenged by the dads of American society. In this century, the role of fathers has changed. Today we see fathers that are not taking on the role of the stereotypical breadwinner; instead, we see fathers immersing themselves more in their children’s lives. The idea of the breadwinner dad has filled the pages of books and screens of television and film; however, the rare idea of stay-at-home fathers is slowly becoming a popular trend. Moreover, fathers that simply feel compelled to stay at home with their children are doing so. A concept once unheard of, is now coming into society. On the flip side of both of these daddy classifications, we have the involved father. This is what I call the “businessman during the day, soccer coach in the evening” father, a parent who knows how important child development is and cares to make a difference. A man constantly trying to make an effort to become involved with his children. With this being said: what is the best role for dads in families? Breadwinner, stay-at-home, or involved?

In today’s society, it is common to see the breadwinner father in many American families. The issue has become more prevalent as many fathers are trying to become more involved with their children. Some take it to the extreme and become stay-at-home, where others simply make an effort to balance their work and play. In the past, it was never a topic of discussion as to what the father should do. Their sole goal was to provide for the family. Nowadays, with women being more encouraged to further their education, there is a challenge to the idea that men should be the sole working partner. Through research, I have seen where society is very accepting of this issue, but there are those skeptics that feel that these stay-at-home dads are lazy. Since this is a growing topic in society, a constraint lies in pinpointing certain arguments regarding it. Society is full of people that do not to take to new ideas unless they see them publicized as the new societal trend that “everyone is doing.” By boosting the popularity of the trend, society will gravitate towards accepting it more.

The quintessential poster family of American society: Ward, June, Wally, and Beaver Cleaver of “Leave it to Beaver.” The “Cleaver Family view,” as I nicknamed it, is what society has held for decades. After all, they were the perfect television family. In a time where no one really knew of divorce, and when women were limited to what they were allowed to do, this family served to show the normality of the household, bringing me to the first position on the daddy argument: the father should be the primary breadwinner for the household, only being involved in solving family disputes. In the Cleaver situation, we see the heavily defined roles of Ward and June. He works during the day, providing for the household, and she stays at home, providing for the kids. Men are biologically programmed to assume power in relationships, whereas women take more to the domestic qualities. In our genetic backgrounds, we have certain traits that prepare us for parenthood, but in very specific aspects of it. Steven Rhoads, professor of government at the University of Virginia, looks into the nature of men and women, and says that it is “remarkable that men marry at all” (Rhoads 3). Men tend to want their own space at times, since they typically work all day. When they come home from work, they aren’t expecting to always have to play with their children, but they are expected to keep food on the table and toys in the toy room. In addition, Rhoads gives us the idea that women are more appealed to the power of men when seeking a spouse, and that women are more into the marital ideal than men. This being the case, when entering into marriage, women expect the man to take the responsibility of chief financial beneficiary, automatically assuming they will enter into the domesticated wife role. Society views the breadwinner family structure as a sense of normality that is vital for children. When children grow up in the “Cleaver Family” fashion, they tend to see what a normal, stable marriage looks like, and are likely to emulate the structure in their marriages.

A movie everyone thinks of when they picture stay-at-home fathers: “Daddy Day Care.” Eddie Murphy does an excellent job in this movie of being a father that runs a day care center from his home after getting laid off from his job. In society, men are simply getting the urge to stay at home with their children. Some are faced with uncontrollable circumstances, such as loss of a job, but others are simply working less in order to spend more quality time with their children. This view of fatherhood is more than helpful in child development. Patrick Tucker writes in his article, “Stay-at-home dads: at-home dads can benefit children and mothers,” that dads were able to form “more-lasting bonds” with their children, and women were still able to “form stronger connections” with their children even while working more hours (Tucker 1). In this family structure, a child is presented with the strongest mother and father influences possible. In many typical families, Tucker tells us that the at-home mother family has a “strong mother influence but little influence from the father” (Tucker 2). This structure will move society past its stereotypes of what a family should be like, and the roles parents play, showing men that take a backseat to their wives. The idea of the stay-at-home fathers is slowly making its way as a staple in society, through blogs like At-Home Dad, men are able to support each other as they face the discrimination of those in society. Through this blog, men share what they do with their children, ranging from meals to cook, to arts and crafts. There are friends of men that stay-at-home that secretly envy the lives of those dads that constantly play with their children on a daily basis. Wives of these men are incredibly blessed because it makes their lives easier, giving them more time to pursue broader career paths that they might not have been able to with children. With women becoming more apt to working, men are really starting to see the importance of family care, and having a spouse at-home with the children. Stay-at-home dads are advancing not only the fathers of society past societal norms, but women and children as well. Women are able to make a bigger change in society by being allowed time to do more activities, and children receive the most optimal development possible.

Danny Tanner is the all-star dad of the hit television show “Full House.” He balances a career in conjunction with caring for his three daughters, with the help of his brother-in-law and best friend. Tanner is the involved father, which brings me to the third viewpoint. The involved father is needed in any family structure. In the ideal household, you have the father that is the primary caregiver, but is still as involved and nurturing as the mother is. We talked earlier about how the breadwinner father promotes stability and normality in the relationship, but with the involved father, the structure is guaranteed even more stability. Garrett D. Evans and Kate Fogarty tell us in, “The Hidden Benefits of Being an Involved Father,” that fathers help children become smarter in schools and provide “a greater sense of commitment” to their families (Evans 1). Evans and Fogarty also mention that father involvement helps develop positive characteristics within children, such as, “empathy, self-esteem, self-control, psychological well being, social competence, and life skills” (Evans 2). This view has had time to prove its beneficial worth in society. Along with helping the children, it also aids fathers and mothers. They can experience more stable relationships with their children, more confidence, and become more proficient in both job and parenting skills. This view produces both well rounded children and parents.

We are all about change in society in other aspects, but many cannot take the time to accept the simple change of fathers becoming more involved with their children. Through the endless debate of what fathers should and should not do, we are overlooking those that we are trying to gain the benefit for. The main reason society strives for stable households is for child development. With involved fathers, the debate is over how the father is “defying” masculinity instead of how they are “defying” norms and heavily impacting their children’s lives in positive ways.