

Engaged fatherhood: a winning proposition

Does fatherhood get the institutional, organizational and social support it deserves? Facilitating men's presence in their children's lives not only improves their personal and family wellbeing, it also contributes to creating a more inclusive world.



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- **The extent to which supervisors support family life affects the number of hours that working fathers, in particular, spend with their children.**
- **Barely 1 in 5 millennial fathers believes that a high commitment to their personal or family life makes them less committed to their work.**
- **A corporate culture is needed that allows dads, like moms, to tailor their**

career paths to their family-specific needs.

In talking about how to help more women make it in the workplace, it has been suggested they may need more help at home, where the division of labor, whether domestic chores or childcaring responsibilities, still falls inordinately on women's shoulders. But for those men wanting to step up and take on more family responsibilities, institutional, organizational and social support is often woefully lacking.

Most everyone recognizes that the old model — of men being the breadwinners while women tend to the home — has all but disappeared. Yet, there is still a lot of catching up to do to make it easier for men to fully assume their roles as fathers, earning the recognition and support they deserve.

Aware of this gap, Marc Grau Grau, [Mireia Las Heras](#) and Hannah Riley Bowles have edited the volume [Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality](#), which compiles the insights of experts in healthcare, social policy, work and organizations from Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Norway, Romania, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

As the book highlights, whether workers achieve a healthy work-life balance often depends on the behavior of their supervisors and the tone set at the top. And in some cases, it seems this relationship is stronger for fathers than for mothers at work.

Specifically, Las Heras and Maria Jose Bosch studied the impact of supervisor behavior on employees participating in positive engagement activities (family dinners, playing and reading) with their children in Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico). There, they found that the family-friendly behaviors of the manager were not only positively related to the time parents spent with their children, but this effect was stronger in fathers than in mothers. This indicates the important signaling effect of management in letting fathers feel it's okay for them to dedicate more time to family. As such, it is imperative that managers recognize their role as both a gatekeeper and a role model in influencing fathers' decisions over how they spend their time, and that they facilitate and promote family-friendly behaviors in the organization.

The more family support, the less work-family conflict, burnout and leaving intentions, and the greater job satisfaction and work-family balance for employees.

Family-supportive policies influence talent attraction, too. In another study, two-thirds of fathers surveyed saw their role as providing emotional/physical care for their children in

addition to providing financial support, with only 5% being content with the latter being their only role. Among millennial fathers, very few (barely 1 in 5) believed that a high commitment to their personal or family life made them less committed to their work. As such, companies, in their recruitment efforts, should be aware of, and sensitive to, how today's working fathers think and feel about their roles and responsibilities as dads.

Supporting dads

To support engaged fatherhood, the following suggestions were presented in the book:

Model behavior. Leaders who freely and openly talk about their own experiences of managing work and family demands — and who encourage others to do the same — can help to change the culture. If there are family-friendly policies, leaders need to use them so that others see it as the norm and follow suit. Leaders can provide coaching, giving fathers a space to discuss their needs.

Customize career paths. As with working mothers, men may worry that asking for work flexibility for family needs might jeopardize their future career paths. That is why family-friendly policies should be offered not as special favors but as universal entitlements, and fathers incentivized to use them. Career paths should be tailored to individual needs, allowing meaningful time off without penalizing anyone's prospects.

Provide paternity leave. In countries where paternity leave is still not a statutory requirement, companies could still opt to provide their own. However, it's worth noting how uptake is sometimes conditioned by economic factors, so companies need to remove any obstacles that might disincentivize lower-income employees from taking it up, such as if the leave were unpaid or only partly paid. Also, evidence shows that branding matters: Time off labeled as "daddy days" or "father's quota" is more attractive to men than, say, the blanket option of "parental leave."

As the editors write: "The objective of this volume is not to 'win more' for fathers (versus mothers), but rather to reap the mutual gains from engaged fatherhood, which are not limited to children's and mothers' wellbeing; there is growing evidence documenting the benefits of fatherhood involvement for men themselves, and society more broadly."

As such, companies should examine and challenge their gendered cultural practices around fatherhood and heed the demands of a new generation of dads, adopting policies and a culture of work that facilitates, rather than constrains, men's capacity to integrate their breadwinning and caregiving roles and identities.

As Las Heras concludes: "The old 'ideal' worker — the man who had a person at home who would care for the family — died long ago. The new 'ideal' worker has yet to emerge. To achieve a fairer, more inclusive world, everyone's interests, needs and personal situations should be welcomed and facilitated. And one notable responsibility is fatherhood. It's time to restore its value."

MORE INFO

"[How can we achieve balanced lives?](#)" (find it at the end of the report) Mireia Las Heras shares her research on how wellbeing in work and home domains trickles down from supervisors to subordinates, underscoring the importance of role-modeling in creating organizational cultures that favor work-life balance.

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