

network notes

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The Daddy Shift

How Stay-at-Home Dads, Breadwinning Moms, and Shared Parenting Are Transforming the American Family

Book Review

By Melissa Froehle, MFFN Staff

Alternating between research and stories of real dads, Jeremy Adam Smith's *The Daddy Shift* does a good job of shattering myths associated with stay-at-home fathers and putting a true and varied face on the phenomenon.

I humbly admit that I thought (like Smith himself initially thought) that stay-at-dads are a small number, limited mostly to affluent fathers. But in his chapter on "Stay-at-home Economics", Smith points out—with data to back it up—that just like stay-at-home mothers, stay-at-home fathers are more likely to come from poorer families than rich, because that cost of child care is such a great expense. And he goes on to distinguish that staying at home for fathers, just like for mothers, is often a positive and noneconomic decision. More than that, though, the "a-ha" moment for me in his book is exposing how we have created this dichotomy of

"Daddy Shift", continued on page 2. ►

Communities Commit to Father-friendly Services

Brainerd, Fergus Falls, and Grand Rapids Selected for Year-long Leadership Project



The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network has selected three communities as pilot sites to participate in the Greater Minnesota

Fatherhood Leadership Circles throughout 2010. The communities of Brainerd, Fergus Falls, and Grand Rapids were selected due to their strong community-wide partnerships, their commitment to building healthy families, and their interest in strengthening the role that fathers can play in healthy child development.

In Grand Rapids the project is being led through the Itasca Area Early Childhood Coalition. In Brainerd the Crow Wing County Fatherhood Task Force is the primary organizer. The Fergus Falls

"Leadership", continued on page 3. ►

Is it just child's play?

Fathers promote the kind of play that supports child development

The encouragement of child-initiated play can seem like an outdated luxury for family service professionals and educators – especially during these times of tight program budgets and onerous educational guidelines. Nonetheless, Dr. Kyle Pruett, of the Yale University School of Medicine, argues that play is an important educational activity, capable of "stimulating and sustaining human growth in so many areas vital to children's (and adult's) health" (Pruett, 2009).

For fathers, play is an integral component of the parent-child relationship. Pruett states that, "fathers tend to spend a larger percentage of their

time interacting with children through play than do mothers, even when they are serving as primary care-takers to their children."

For the past decade, research has described ways that fathers play with their children – ways that tend to be more interactive, more rough-and-tumble, and more exploratory than mother-child interactions. Through this research, we learned that fathers' play tends to emphasize resilience in children and may be "motivated by the desire and commitment on the father's part to educate his child in gear-shifting [the ability to quickly change moods/activities] and 'roll with the punches' skill building" (Pruett, 2009). These early studies told us what fathers do and why they do it.

"Child's play", continued on page 3. ►

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

A voice for fatherhood

MFFN seeks to provide a voice for Minnesota's fatherhood and family services organizations. If you have a best practice or information you would like to share, please contact MFFN. *Network Notes* is published each February, May, August, and November.

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The Daddy Shift

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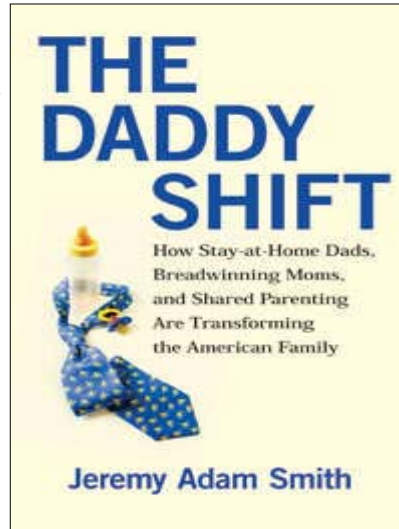
at-home versus working parents. In reality, many parents are “split-shift” parents and doing both. Or, as Smith highlights, many stay-at-home parents are working for pay part-time in addition to full-time or primary caregiving. Men more often fall into these roles, so their “stay-at” factor may be more invisible. And in fact, census data excludes parents who do any paid work, which explains why stay-at-home dads are vastly undercounted.

Even though I see stay-at-home fathers and split shift families among people I know, sometimes we have a hard time contextualizing our experience to a bigger picture. This is another attribute of Smith’s book. For example, he highlights that *one-third* of working class families split work and care equally. Furthermore, in 2008 one in four preschool children spent more time in a father’s care than any other arrangement while the mother was working, though most of the fathers worked at least part-time and probably did not call themselves “stay-at-home” dads.

Whether the numbers of stay-at-home dads seems large or small in your own opinion, reading *The Daddy Shift* leaves no doubt that we have entered new territory. Smith’s conversation with his own father highlights this fact. The debate was whether his mother would work at all, not who would take primary responsibility for childrearing.

Smith also does a nice job of reviewing research on gender differences and father involvement in his chapter, “The Astonishing Science of Fatherhood, or Three More Myths about Male Caregiving.” I sometimes have to remind myself that it really wasn’t that long ago that men were thought to be biologically unfit to care for children. Smith takes us through research on brain science, debunking the “men are from Mars, women are from Venus myth” along the way. (Men and women are much more alike than different, with far greater variability within genders than between them.) Smith’s interviews with fathers, interwoven throughout the book, tie in nicely with the “systems view” of father involvement that he reviews in this chapter—the idea from researcher Ross Parke and others that describes how different systems impact father involvement (cultural beliefs, the father’s relationship with the mother and other family etc.).

Does Smith convince me that stay-at-home dads, breadwinning moms, and shared parenting are, in fact, transforming the American family? I personally feel caught in the midst of a tendency to both overstate and understate the transformative power of these historically relatively new arrangements. But ultimately I do agree with Smith. As he states it, “The stay-at-home dad is important because he sweeps aside myths and stereotypes about what men can and can’t do for their families, tears down the walls that divide men from their children, and fulfills the promise of feminism, which has always been as much about transforming gender roles as fighting inequity.”



He reminds us that stay-at-home dads help expose the false dichotomy between work and home. In the fatherhood field, we see the “daddy shift”—his term for the movement of fatherhood from solely breadwinning to both breadwinning and caregiving—daily in our work, and stay-at-home dads exemplify it.

But take note. *The Daddy Shift* isn’t just about stay-at-home dads, it is ultimately about the path towards gender convergence, an ever-increasing similarity in how men and women live and what they want from their lives, as well as a loosening of strict gender roles. This is illustrated most convincingly in the stories of the fathers he interviews. In one exchange, a young girl at the park asked one of the stay-at-home dads if he took care of his three-year-old son all the time. When he replied yes, she thought that was weird. When the dad pointed out there were other dads at the park with their children, the girl asked: “Aren’t moms supposed to take care of babies?” To which the dad pointed out that dads can do it too, and moms can go to work. “I didn’t know that,” she said, “huh.”

Huh, indeed. *The Daddy Shift* is an easy read, with the right amount of research and data in easily digestible form, along with great stories of stay-at-home dads of all kinds from across the country. In writing his book, Smith wrote the book he said he wished he could have read before heading down his path as a stay-at-home dad. It is one we all should read.

Recent funders

MFFN thanks the following entities for their support in 2009:

- Bush Foundation
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Fathers support child's play

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Now, research is taking us to a higher level of understanding about father-child interactions. Two new studies are demonstrating how positive father-child relationships create benefits for kids and families. Both studies examine California-based father-engagement projects that are encouraging direct paternal play engagement in at-risk populations.

The Supporting Father Involvement study (described by Cowan, et al, 2009) is one source of this new data. The study shows that families benefit from parenting groups for new dads – and that they benefit even more from co-ed parenting groups that combine moms with dads. The project demonstrates the important role that mothers can play in encouraging healthy father-child engagement. Family outcomes from the co-ed parenting groups include positive associations with children's

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Leadership Circles support father-friendly communities

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Early Childhood Initiative is leading the charge in their community. Each community will receive coaching and training through the Minnesota Fathers & Families Network (MFFN) as a result of funding from the Mardag Foundation, the Bush Foundation and the McKnight Foundation.

According to Melissa Froehle, MFFN's policy and program director and the project's manager, "the Greater Minnesota Fatherhood Leadership Circles will change the way communities think about providing supports to dads. Rather than creating new programs that may be expensive to run and

behaviors, parenting stress, and couples' relationships. These outcomes, in turn, are associated with lower risk for child abuse and neglect.

The second project is using Sesame Street DVDs to "role-play and model positive parent-child play interactions, communication, use of praise, labeling of emotion and intent, and support for exploration" (Pruett, 2009). The project – designed around an innovative intervention model and conducted with young fathers at juvenile detention centers – is revealing positive outcomes. For example, fathers are showing increased attention to their babies' needs for attention and play. At the same time, the project is having "profoundly positive effects on the staff, policies, and procedures" of the detention centers.

Both of these studies show that father-involvement in child's play can produce positive outcomes for families and practitioners involved in social service programs. The message of these studies: when dad is around...play works.

Details

Cowan, Philip, et al. "Promoting Fathers' Engagement With Children: Preventive Interventions for Low-Income Families". Journal of Marriage and Family, August 2009. www.supportingfatherinvolvement.org.

Pruett, Kyle. "Strengthening Play Through Father Involvement." Zero to Three, September 2009.

manage, we're asking local government agencies and nonprofits to explore innovative ways to involve fathers in existing program structures." Froehle continues, "during these lean economic times, it makes sense to think about fatherhood programming in a sustainable way – in a way that doesn't create new financial burdens on tight public budgets."

Fatherhood Leadership Circles are groups of local professionals committed to expanding father engagement in social services, education, health, and related fields. The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network will provide technical assistance, coaching, and training, over the course of 12 months, to guide each community group. Learn more at www.mnfathers.org/leadershipcircles.html.

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Paving the way for fathers & families Minnesota is awarded two child support grants

This fall the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement awarded two competitive demonstration grants to projects in Minnesota.

The **Co-Parent Court** will start operating in Hennepin County Family Court as a pilot “problem solving court” for families and children. The mission of the court is “to create a model for paternity establishment that supports co-parenting to improve the social, emotional, and financial outcomes for children, families and communities.” The project will serve unwed parents in the paternity system using family court facilitators to make individual assessments and tailor social services to the needs of parent and child through partnering community agencies, conflict resolution, and co-parent education. The project will use random assignment and a rigorous evaluation to evaluate outcomes on parenting skills, parenting relationships, father involvement, child support, and outcomes for children. Partners include the Minnesota Child Support Enforcement Division (project oversight), Hennepin County Family Court and Child Support, Northpoint Health and Wellness Center, Gateway Project and the Goodwill/Easter Seals FATHER Project (providing social services, with co-parenting education at Gateway), the University of Minnesota (training on co-parenting curriculum and evaluation), the Domestic Abuse Project (co-

parent education), the Legal Rights Center (mediation/assistance in developing parenting plans), and consultants Christa Anders and Paul Legler (project coordination).

The **Mind the Gap** project is a unique partnership of programs and activities to address barriers that fathers leaving prison must overcome to become employed and consistent payors of child support, and to improve child support policies and collaborative practices to bridge that gap. This gap will be mended through building of a collaborative and sustainable partnership between corrections and child support, improving information sharing, delivering training and education, and providing specialized case management services to offenders and families that include a case manager from a fatherhood program. The project includes state and local (Hennepin and Ramsey County) child support staff, state and local corrections staff, the Goodwill/Easter Seals FATHER Project, African American Family Services (domestic violence protocol and training) and MFFN (leading the steering committee and providing evaluation).



Look for more details on these exciting projects soon.