

The invisible man: how culture has forced fathers into the background

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My son, Peter, was ready for the SAK heater performance on October 24. Remembering their spray of Tootsie Rolls into the audience to sweeten up the crowd, he had a bag full of candy ready to toss back to them. The show started, and the Tootsies flew—and sure enough Peter threw some of his candy onto the stage. Maybe that was the only bribe they needed, since they lose him when they asked for volunteers for one of their first skits.

Peter's five minutes of fame catapulted him onto the front page of the *Reporter*, in a nice photograph that captured his ambivalence about being on stage. His only disappointment was that the caption didn't mention his name. What could I say, it "Come to think of it, the caption says you are 'Ann Jerome Croce's son' but not mine." I looked at him with a smirk, and said, "Do you think it's anti-boyism?" In his seven-year-old wisdom, he didn't know what to make of that, but he still didn't like it being mentioned.

I'm not very bothered by not being mentioned, but the caption's gotten me thinking about the perceptions men in childcare and about the role of men in contemporary society.

The Reporter is not alone in paying more attention to mothers than fathers on the childcare front. There is a lot of social fact to back that up. Not only is there the tradition before the last two generations that women could be the exclusive and totally committed parents, but even today, women do most of the childcare in American households.

That legacy creates more problems than the issue of persuading men to be more

goal—and as a goal it is publicly uncontroversial, being advocated by people ranging from feminists to child psychologists to Promise Keepers. And it is a goal that is yet to be achieved across the board.

Another problem, however, is in the implementation of that goal. If a man does become involved in the raising of his children, there are countless forces that react to that social role with surprise or even resistance.

The Reporter caption is a small indication of public expectation that women are the prime parents.

Wives surely want and deserve more help in the home—especially in situations where both spouses work—but very often they set conditions on the way that work should be done.

Ron Taffel, author of *Parenting by Heart*, notes that when fathers do pitch into the household work—that's-never-done, their "single biggest complaint is that mothers find fault when fathers take over an 'Endless List' task."

A final and crucial constituency committed to the traditional model is children themselves. Although they are being raised in a modern technological world, they ain't no feminists.

Even if the parents present themselves as equal caretakers, most children ask for—or ... how to say this politely ... demand—Mommy, especially when it comes to comforting, feeding, and nurturing in general.

Now maybe these parents, including us, are reinforcing stereotypes in the kids. But it just seems deeper than that. Mothers are, after all, the first food source, and that's a pretty primal bond.

American Studies, where thinking about gender roles is part of our jobs, can't persuade children to be gender neutral, then what hope do other households have?

I have been barraged with my children saying to me, "No, I want Mommy..." to do all kinds of things that I am perfectly willing to do.

Believe me, Ms. Mommy doesn't want this any more than I do; it's a burden on both of us.

In my lighter moments on this subject, I'll tell the defiant little charmers, "OK, just call me 'dishrag.'" And in fact, they and their friends sometimes greet me with this delightful nickname in unknowing homage to my gender-equity confusion.

When our daughter, Elizabeth, was born, Peter was two and a half, and I decided to give him extra attention to compensate for his shock at having an invading baby in the household.

For a month we did everything together, I thought it would be a good chance for us to build up our relationship. But after a few weeks, it sank in that, to paraphrase Senator Lloyd Bentsen's comment to Dan Quayle, I was no Mommy unit. At one particularly harried moment, he pulled out his trump card. Glaring at me, he said: "Go to work!" So much for bonding as a gender-neutral sensitive dad. As a short-term fix, we got more outside childcare.

So, what's a father to do? Go back to the distant patriarch model? I don't think so. But the current difficulties are an indication of the challenges of long-term social change.

Even before we get to the nettlesome question of biological versus cultural sources of sexual identity, we have to deal with the legacy of tradition and the way it lingers in women's expectations, in children's behavior, and in society as a whole.

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