



Fatherhood: Supporting Healthy, Resilient, and Thriving Family Ecosystems

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When the Republican Vice Presidential candidate stated that people who do not have children should have less political capital because they have less commitment to this country, he may have been specifically focused on those he termed “childless cat ladies”, but the political discussions that followed highlighted the need for inclusive family policies. Notably absent in the conversation were fathers and father figures. Issues of fatherhood have never taken center stage in any major political race, but maybe this is about to change.

In 2024, fatherhood in the United States looks very different from what it looked like for our fathers and grandfathers. Reflecting broader social, economic, and cultural trends men are describing their fatherhood role as critical to their sense of purpose. As a fatherhood researcher and award-winning podcaster, I explore the challenges and benefits of father involvement, especially for Black fathers. In a recent study coauthored with Dr. Tova Walsh and conducted in partnership with the African American Breastfeeding Network, new and expectant Black fathers highlighted the lack of support as a major concern. Another concern was that policy and practice in prenatal spaces obstructed father engagement. Addressing these challenges is critical not just for fathers, but for the well-being of families and society. This critical political time in the United States is excellent for emphasizing the top four concerns shaping fatherhood today - with suggested solutions.

Work-Life Balance and Parental Leave: A Critical Puzzle Piece

The conversation about work-life balance does not often focus on fathers although this has long-reaching implications. For instance, [in a previous study](#) I found that mental health providers identified fathers' work schedule as a major barrier against engaging them in family-and-child-based health services. Despite increased awareness of the importance of father involvement for child development and family well-being, paternity leave policies and rigid work schedules mean that fathers are expected to choose between the career that financially supports the family, and their reliable presence that supports child and family well-being. This dilemma not only affects the father's well-being but also strains family dynamics, limiting the quality time fathers can spend with their children.

The solution lies in reimagining our workplace policies. More robust and family-focused paternity leave policies would bring the United States on par with many first world economies. Work culture during the COVID-19 pandemic proved that we could promote flexible work arrangements while maintaining productivity. Our institutions must reflect a recognition that facilitating family-friendly work environments benefits employees, but this is also an investment in a more stable and productive workforce. A father who can take time off to bond with his newborn or can readily adjust his schedule to attend school events or healthcare appointments is likely to be a more satisfied employee and a more engaged parent.

Mental Health and Well-being: Breaking the Silence

The societal expectation of men is that they be strong providers and protectors, but this can lead to significant mental health challenges including stress, anxiety, even depression. According to the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics **more than 15% of men report mild, moderate, or severe depression**. Additionally, about 10% of new fathers experience depression in the first few months after the birth of their child period, and overall men's experiences with depression during the first 5 years of fatherhood increase by about 68%. These challenges are further complicated by stigma against mental health, and a limited emotional range that does not permit men's emotional vulnerability, often preventing fathers from seeking help.

Normalizing discussion about mental health and psychological wellness will spark the kind of cultural shift necessary to prioritize the health of men, particularly fathers. Making the necessary health resources available in community settings will help ensure that healthcare providers, employers, and communities are able to support fathers and by extension, families. Sacred male spaces like barbershops, may be key to creating environments that allow fathers to feel safe to express their struggles and tap into the support they need to thrive both personally and as parents. The **Perry Family Clinic**, in Madison Wisconsin, stands as an exemplar of this, as the first nationally recognized health clinic located in a barbershop. Aaron Perry started the clinic to "Disrupt unhealthy life cycles for Black men by establishing trust and improving their health and the quality of life".

Expanding the Role of Fathers Beyond Traditional Breadwinners

Traditional gender roles where fathers are breadwinners and mothers are relegated to the domestic sphere have become increasingly outdated. These roles have become more fluid as fathers widen the range of their paternal responsibilities to include eager engagement in all aspects of child-rearing, from diaper changing to bedtime stories. Still, some societal messaging stigmatizes involvement, leading to fathers missing crucial opportunities for bonding with their children and contributing to their development. Messages such as fathers should not show vulnerability, fathers are disciplinarians, not caregivers, and fathers should teach their sons to be tough.

Urgently needed are, national and local campaigns that challenge these outdated norms. Public educational programs that promote positive representations of active fatherhood in media and culture and highlight the diverse roles fathers play in children's lives are also important. These will create opportunities for practical resources and supports for father engagement in all caregiving activities.

Building a Strong Foundation

According to the Milwaukee fathers we spoke with, a major gap in building strong families is the need for robust and early support systems tailored to fathers. While most men are excited at the prospect of fatherhood the lack of access to resources that could help them navigate the complexities of parenthood can lead to feelings of isolation, insecurity, and inadequacy.

At every level, from community organizations to healthcare providers, and policymakers we must prioritize creating and promoting fatherhood resources informed by the stories and needs of fathers. Through strong support networks, like the impending October 2024 **Fathers in Focus Conference**, we can ensure that all

fathers have the tools and knowledge necessary for successfully navigate the parenting experience.

Empowering Fathers

The landscape in 2024, and beyond demands a comprehensive approach to support fathers in their crucial roles within families and society. By addressing four key areas, work-life balance, mental health, expanding paternal roles, and early support systems - an environment can be created where fathers thrive, benefiting not only themselves but their children, families, and communities at large.

To achieve this the following policy actions must be taken:

1. Implementation of robust paternity leave policies.
2. Development of workplace flexibility programs that allow fathers to actively participate in their children's lives without compromising their careers.
3. National mental health campaign specifically focused on fathers.
4. Creation of public education initiatives that challenge outdated gender norms and promote diverse representations of active fatherhood.
5. Establishment of a national network of father support centers, offering resources, education, and community for new and expectant fathers.

As the respective presidential campaigns actively craft their policy agendas, non-biological parents remain keenly interested in the future of the United States. Fathers are no less interested, and therefore deserve support as they engage their paternal roles. Whether this political cycle is one in which the voices of men and fathers receive the necessary attention remains to be seen. But what we do know is that when fathers are empowered to participate fully in parenting, it benefits children, strengthens family bonds, and promotes gender equality. Fathers are critical to the creation of healthy, resilient, and thriving family ecosystems, but fathers can contribute more successfully if they are supported.