

Engaged Dads and the Opportunities for and Barriers to Equal Parenting in the United States



Traditional, and often limiting, narratives around fatherhood suggest that dads should provide for their family primarily through financial support. However, the Better Life Lab’s multi-method study of men and caregiving in the United States suggests a new vision of fatherhood, one focused first and foremost on showing love and affection and teaching children about life. Fathers, like mothers, yearn for more quality time with their children and for more opportunities to be present and involved in their daily care. About one-third of fathers believe there are barriers preventing them from being the dads they want to be. They identify a lack of time, a lack of money, and the demands and expectations of their jobs as factors standing in the way of fatherhood. Though 44 percent of people in the United States believe fathers should primarily focus on breadwinning and mothers on running the household, the vast majority of respondents also believe mothers and fathers should share care responsibilities equally. These contradictory findings may suggest **that while some traditional notions of men’s and women’s roles in child rearing persist, they do not preclude fathers from taking an active role in their children’s daily care or from expressing a desire for even more time and support in caregiving.**

Key Findings

- Just under half of dads (45 percent) think moms and dads do an equally good job of caring for babies. Three-quarters of fathers say moms and dads should share the work of caring for babies equally, and 88 percent say men and women should share all caregiving responsibilities in the home.
- Mothers and fathers overlap in the activities they do to take care of their children. The biggest differences are not in what they say they do but in how frequently they do it, with mothers doing more care activities on a daily basis.
- Significantly more fathers rated “showing love and affection” and “teaching the child about life” as “very important” compared to the more traditional “providing financial support.”
- Just over one-fifth of fathers (21 percent) say they sometimes feel like people don’t trust them to parent because of their gender.
- Mothers and fathers want the same changes. Almost a third of fathers (31 percent) say there are barriers stopping them from being the dads they want to be. When asked what those barriers are, the top responses were a lack of money, their paid jobs, and a general lack of time.

Affordable child care; paid paternity leave for dads of newly born, adopted, or foster babies; paid caregiving leave for both parents throughout their children’s lives; and wages that enable families to have quality time with their children without fearing financial ruin are all essential to allowing dads to take on an even greater caregiving role.