

# Crisis Conversations: Being a Dad in the Time of COVID-19

June 19, 2020

**BRIGID SCHULTE, HOST:** Welcome everyone to another edition of Crisis Conversations Live from the Better Life Lab. In this podcast, we've explored, and we'll continue to explore in upcoming episodes how the pandemic is disproportionately impacting women. Women are carrying more of the child care, housework, and homeschooling load from early surveys although so much is still unfolding that we don't really know.

We also know that women, especially women of color are disproportionately being laid off and furloughed and struggling with unemployment. Now that many businesses are beginning to reopen and yet child care, summer camp, and schools are not, nor is there much talk of a bailout of the child care industry. No one seems to be talking about that. There is a fear that women will again, be forced to step back or step away from work because of caregiving responsibilities. That will only exacerbate existing inequalities in pay advancement, opportunity, and time.

Today, we're going to focus on men and where did the idea come from that men's role, the role that they should play in the family should be the breadwinner, the provider, and that women should be primarily responsible for care. How have those notions, have they changed or evolved, especially as women really entered the workforce in mass in the late 1970s and 1980s? What's changed and what hasn't and particularly looking at what's happening now with the pandemic.

We've got a great panel today, they're experts and fathers. We also hope to hear your stories, your thoughts, and questions. Please do use the chat function and our producer, David Schulman will reach out to you and bring you into the conversation. Before we dive into the pandemic and also the protests for racial justice and how that's changing, how that's changing champ men and fatherhood ideals. I do want to start with a little bit of context.

We're going to start with a story from Glen Henry. He's a musician and a rapper. He's a father who chronicles his life on YouTube, on his YouTube channel called *Beleaf in Fatherhood*. He wasn't able to so join us today because he's busy promoting a new documentary on dads produced by Bryce Dallas Howard, featuring her father and filmmaker, Ron Howard. I spoke with him a few days ago about what a rude awakening he had when child care costs were getting far higher than he and his wife could afford as their family grew. With his wife earning more, he became the children's primary caregiver. Let's listen to Glen.

**GLEN HENRY, PANELIST:** I thought it was going to be boring and there was going to be nothing to do and the children, I'll just be bored. Then one weekend with both children, I cried in the mirror. Where both of my kids were outside of the door, crying in the bathroom and I was inside the bathroom, just looking in the mirror, just tearful, not being able to function. I didn't realize it was going to be so emotionally challenging.

When I stepped into the role as the primary caregiver, it gave me a lot of grace and understanding for women who do fill that role. A lot of times the husband's response or the father's response or whatever, the partner's response is, "You got through the day, but why isn't dinner ready?" Or, "Why isn't this clean?" It's like the goal is that no one died today. We made it through the day and everyone survived.

I started to have conversations with my male friends about them being frustrated with their wives because they're not doing anything. I'm like, "Actually, she's doing way more. She's talking to your mother on the phone. She's having conversations with people in the community so your kids can have a social life. She's doing so much that you don't have to do and she would trade you while you're complaining about traffic, she would trade the amount of time just sitting in traffic just to be alone with her thoughts."

**BRIGID:** With that, let me start with my colleague, Haley Swenson. Haley, she's the deputy director of the Better Life Lab. Also, she's got a PhD when it comes to studying gender and sexuality. She's also been a lead author on some of the work that we've been doing at the Better Life Lab to study men and care. Haley, Glen clearly felt unprepared for his role as a primary caregiver. What can you tell us about how common that is for men?

**HALEY SWENSON, PANELIST:** Thank you, Brigid, for having me. I just was smiling throughout that whole recording because it's a lot of what we've heard from men who

are now at home with the kids. Certainly, it resonated with a lot of the research that we've done and the focus groups that we conducted for this men and care study. One of the things that we found when we talked to men about-- Really, we would ask, "What prepared you to be the dad?" It was two things, either nothing prepared me or it was watching my own dad or my own mom be a caregiver. Then men would from that, figure out what they're doing.

The truth is, being a primary caregiver to kids is hard for anyone, but one of the differences is that girls grow up babysitting. They grow up thinking of themselves as future caregivers. When I used to teach college classes on this, I would ask my students, "Raise your hand if you've given thought to your future career and how you'll balance it with family life." The women in the class would raise their hands because they knew this was something they were going to have to figure out and think about themselves as caregivers, as well as potential earners, but men in my classes hadn't thought of that.

It's just really a question of preparation in a lot of cases but the men, when we did talk to them often got a lot of joy out of this experience. They would talk about the things that were particularly stressful about their role as dads but they would say, "Where's the support?" One of the comparisons men in the focus group would make is women who've entered professions, especially high-status professions, they form groups, support groups on how to do that, how to enter the industries that haven't been friendly to women. Where are the dad's groups? Where are the men who are getting together and talking to each other about how we can support each other? Certainly, what Glen's saying there, sounds a lot like what I heard in the study.

**BRIGID:** I want to stay with you Haley for just a minute more. You just released a new report this week on engaged dads and some of the findings really surprised me in terms of what men themselves said they valued or what was important to them as fathers. Can you share some of the top-level findings?

**HALEY:** Absolutely. One of the things that really struck me about this is that generally, sociologists have these questions. Folks who study it, they've seen traditionally three Ps when it comes to what men do around the house, providing, protecting, and playmates. These are the three things that have been acceptable for dads to do throughout the years when it comes to engaging with their kids.

We expected because of the state of research, the state of what we know about how much of the care burden falls on women, we expected to find things that would confirm

that that's how men are thinking about these rules. In fact, the two biggest answers to a question we asked, which was what is very important to you when it comes to what a father should do? We gave some options. Financial support, financial providing was actually on the lower end of the list of things that dads said were very important. The highest one was showing love and affection, which I found really moving.

There were other direct caregiving items that came back as well. Giving transportation to kids, making sure they're safe, teaching them about life but this showing love and affection was so emotional and in touch with these intangible aspects of caregiving that women have done and often has been unacknowledged that women have done and it takes up time. More fathers said that that was very important than any other task. I found that actually pretty hopeful as a sign of just how far fatherhood has come in recent decades.

**BRIGID:** Yes, I thought that was so fascinating and that's what struck me the most. We tend to think of men as providers like you say, the three Ps and breadwinners. That was a really astounding finding. Let me turn to Dan Carlson now. Dan, he's a sociologist at the University of Georgia. He's an expert with the research group that council on contemporary families. He has produced some really fascinating research over the years on the gender division of labor. We've written and cited you in many of our work. You've also talked about how will the fair sharing of the work at home leads to better relationships and even better sex.

Dan, you've also been studying how the pandemic is impacting men during this time of global crisis. When we spoke the other day, you said some people are calling the pandemic a disaster for feminism, but you say it could also be an opportunity. Can you talk a little bit more about what you're finding and why this could be an opportunity?

**DAN CARLSON, PANELIST:** Sure Brigid, thanks for having me. People are concerned that the COVID pandemic is going to reverse 60 years' worth of feminist progress because schools are closed and child care centers are closed and people are working from home. There is a sort of elimination of the lines between work and family here. Traditionally, when it comes to domestic labor, this is women's responsibility. If there's more to do, then it seems like this is going to fall on to women's laps, mother's laps. At the same time, and this goes to Haley's findings, we know that men want to be engaged at home. Men overwhelmingly believe in gender equality, as the General Social Survey has showed us for years. They want to be engaged dads. It seems that more or less, it's structural issues, not culture, not attitudes that is preventing this. If we think about--

**BRIGID:** Let me interrupt you for just a second, Dan. What do you mean structural issues? What's getting in the way of men? If so many say they want to be engaged caregivers, then why still are women, when you look at say, some of the studies that you even cite Tanya's research, women are still spending about twice the amount of time doing child care and housework. What are the structural things getting in the way?

**DAN:** It's work-family policy.

**BRIGID:** The lack of it, you mean, in the United States, right?

**DAN:** Right. Indeed. This is at the workplace level and this is also at the state and federal level. It's about lack of access to parental leave for men, paternity leave. It's about workplace culture and this notion of the ideal worker. Men don't want to be just breadwinners, but that's what is expected of them at work. They're fearful of lack of promotion, they're fearful lack of raises if they show an inclination towards being more engaged at home. There's a stigma associated with taking leave and pulling back a bit.

If you ask them, again, men, personally, they wanted to do this. They want to be engaged, but there seems to be barriers. Those barriers are eliminated in some respects by the pandemic. People are forced to work from home or they just lost their jobs. The question is when the rubber meets the road in this instance, to use the analogy, do men actually step up and then engage? Our results say, yes, they are. The proportion of families or couples that are sharing housework has increased over 60%. It's gone from 27% to 41%. The proportion of couples that are sharing in child care equally has also increased from 45% to 56%. There's substantial growth here.

Now, of course, the other side of that coin is that women are still in many families, still doing the majority of work in this environment, but there has been movement towards more sharing. You can come to a more equal division of labor in a couple of pathways. One is that women, maybe, just do less, in others, that men do more, or it could be a combination of the both. What we're finding is that the increase in equality is driven by men doing more. That's the good news of the pandemic.

At the same time, the bad news is that there are a lot of women who are doing more and they tend to be in families and in couples where they were already doing the majority of work, so their burdens have been increased. It's not all utopia. There are some good news, obviously, and that men are doing more and this has resulted in more equality,

but there's also a substantial number of families, women whose burdens have been increased.

**BRIGID:** I want to go to Dan Herman. We've got a father here from the New York City Dads Group. Like Haley said, there are some groups forming for men to have affinity or support for each other. Dan, we're going to come to you in just a minute, but Dan Carlson, if I could stay with you. In the pandemic, one of the things that we've seen with remote work, that it's really become a signifier of class. That if you're a white-collar worker, you're much more likely to be able to work remotely or work from home. There are a lot of essential workers who have to continue going into work. There are a lot of single-parent families, single-mother families where they're bearing the entire burden.

One of the things that Haley and I have just written the piece for The Guardian where we looked a lot at healthcare workers who are majority women, nurses, and other healthcare professionals. If they're partnered with men, their husbands have really had to step up. You're seeing a whole wide variety of different experiences for different families. I'm wondering if that's something that you've been able to take a look at or how these men stepping up more at home, how it might play out differently in different families depending upon your circumstance in the pandemic?

**DAN:** We are starting to tease out how these work characteristics among parents are associated with these changes. We're looking at the impact of unemployment, the impact of reducing hours, taking leave, the impact of telecommuting. The results generally show that the more time of the parents spending at home, the more work that they're doing. For men, 40% of them in our survey our telecommuting. There's a notable increase in the amount of time they're spending doing housework and child care when they're telecommuting, but men who also are losing their jobs or who have pulled back voluntarily are also doing more.

That's an interesting piece because past researchers show that when men are unemployed or they're out-earned by their partners, that they assert their masculinity and refuse to do these feminine tasks. There's a gender display notion to this. We're not finding that. Men have available time and they are using that available time to good use. They are stepping up and doing more child care and housework, but you're right. The economic impact of the pandemic has hit women harder than it has hit men. We're showing that when one of the partner is an essential worker, that men actually are more likely to be doing less at home. That's interesting.

We're finding that the lack of child care that women are more likely to be doing more, but that doesn't impact what men are doing, so child care has disappeared. Who's doing more of it? Women are doing more of it. Also this impact of the lack of schooling option. Not being able to send kids to school. When families are producing e-learning content for their kids, they're responsible for finding it and setting it up, we find that both parents actually are doing more child care in that respect and men are doing more housework too.

That's an interesting piece to this. Yes, definitely, the work situation matters and obviously, the family structure matters. We only looked at couples, but burdens on single parents, God bless them.

**BRIGID:** Yes, absolutely. At this point, let me turn to Dan Herman. Dan, you are with the New York City Dads Group, you are also the primary caregiver from what I understand. Talk a little bit about your situation. What brings true to you? What's your situation been like before the pandemic? How has the pandemic changed what's happening in your family and what you do as a dad and as a caregiver?

**DAN:** Thanks, Brigid. I can resonate with what the three people said prior in almost everything that you've identified. Prior to the pandemic or if you want to rewind to this time last year, I was working as a tech executive for a pretty decent-sized global company, working on really big projects with large global banks. My wife got pregnant March 13th of last year. She gave birth to her daughter, Arya, who is now almost 7 months old.

**BRIGID:** Congratulations.

**DAN:** Thank you. We're first-time parents. She was born on November 24th. I actually lost my job on November 15th. I was pretty much shown the door unceremoniously, but we were excited about having a baby and everything went great. I've certainly developed a new appreciation for women and my wife after having gone through that together, but we had a plan where we were going to stay at home with our daughter for the first three months.

During that time, my wife ran into some issues, nothing major, but she was feeling isolated, and going through breastfeeding is pretty difficult. We looked for solutions together and she found a support group full of moms. It's really been life-changing in that it's helped get her through some of the early parts of being a mother, but it also

helped us connect with people who we really created good relationships with that we spent time together.

I've met a few other dads who have the daughter that are the same age as mine. It's been such a great help for us. Not to [unintelligible 00:19:51] story, but we found a couple who lives close by, we live in Midtown East in New York City, who were in the group, and we decided that we were going to share a nanny together. The first stay back of work for my wife was the last day she went to the office. I think it was March 9th and her office has been closed indefinitely. She works in the travel industry so her industry has been battered and her company had to go through several stages of restructuring which were painful. We didn't know if she was going to have a job, and it was a very stressful time, combined with the fact that we didn't know if we were safe, because people were losing their lives left and right in the city.

**BRIGID:** Frightening.

**DAN:** I had just come back from San Francisco, and I had a job opportunity that fell through because of the pandemic. I hedged my bets and I had another opportunity and that also fell through. My role as someone who's constantly on the road, working with very large companies focused on big problems, has changed to where I really have one responsibility and that's to support my wife and daughter.

I empathize with what the gentleman said earlier in that I didn't identify with the person who is in charge of that responsibility. I think I particularly lacked the patience and the sensitivity to take care of the baby. I never held a baby. I think the closest in age that I've spent time with a child is a two-year-old. I have no experience with kids. I have a very small family. Things have changed and--

**BRIGID:** That sounds like an understatement. [laughs] If you've never held a baby and now you're totally in charge. Tell us about how that's changed.

**DAN:** There was a lot of tension in the house that was caused by me, due to my just frustration and after a while, it just becomes enough. I guess I just turned the corner about a month ago. I think a lot of the progress we've made as a city where things seem to be a little less restrictive now. We've started socializing a little more with our friends and family at a distance, trying to be responsible. I think going back to some of the patterns of behavior before the pandemic has just improved, just our sense of well-being but I didn't want to be the guy who created tension in the house. I wanted to

just enjoy and embrace whatever time I have with my daughter and watch her grow because I know pretty soon I'm going to be back to work, and she's going to be spending time in daycare.

It's funny, it only occurred to me five months after my wife joined a group for me to join. I haven't met with these gentlemen yet, but I'm starting to reach out more and try to speak with people who are sympathetic or even this discussion in itself is very helpful because it's hard to understand or know what you're feeling if it's just me that's creating a problem, or is this frustration that I should be dealing with, or is it common for everyone else? I'm glad that I jumped into this. I've never done a podcast before so I just thought it'd be fun. I'm sorry.

**BRIGID:** No, I'm glad you're here. At this point, what I'd love to do though, is I'd like to bring Glen Henry back in. Dan Herman, I'm going to come back to you to see if some of this rings true. When I spoke with Glen the other day, he was saying that for many men, this pandemic is like a culture shock, because he's home, he's working at home. He said so when the 11 months old pounds on the door, you pick the child up and completely changes how you go about your day. He also talked a little bit about some of the tensions that can occur between men and women and Dan some of what you'd brought up. If we could please play the clip of Glen talking about laundry.

**GLEN:** With moms, they want us to be around but sometimes it's like I want you to do it this way, you know what I'm saying and sound like, "No I'm going to do it like a dad does it because I'm a dad." Do you know what I mean? Just because it's not your way that doesn't mean it's not right. My wife and I have had plenty of conversations about that because sometimes, I would wake up early and just do laundry, and then she'd be like, "Thanks but all the clothes are folded not how they're supposed to be folded." I'm like, "I did the laundry."

Sometimes my wife wishes she had the capacity to do it herself, she wishes she didn't have to ask me for help. I've been trying to help her understand like, "Listen, I am here to help you. That is what I'm here for. Let me help. It's not going to be done correctly like you want it done as if you were doing it, but it would still be done so that you can put your energy elsewhere."

**BRIGID:** Dan Herman, does that ring true to you, that sense of different standards and do it my way?

**DAN:** I've read a book about something like this, it's called *The narcissism of small differences*. My wife and I have always been good at splitting up the work, the division of labor in the house. I don't mind doing things myself, but I think with the baby, it was definitely like that. I think it was more so in a sense that my wife's mothering instincts were kicking in and for her, nothing was good enough, she wanted to be a perfectionist. There were some tensions around that, especially in the first two months when the baby wasn't sleeping through the night.

I think once the baby started sleeping and we started sleeping, we had a lot more patience and talking through our parenting philosophies. It took almost six months but now it's a tag team effort, where whatever the baby needs, one of us is going to do it. Since we're in this tiny apartment, I know exactly when she's going to be on an important conference call which means it's my turn to take care of the baby. She's pretty much the ambassador for the baby, she takes care of the clothing, the feeding, introducing solids, maintaining milestones, and I just fill in when she's working. We have a good, I'd say chemistry around that, and it took about five, six months to build.

**BRIGID:** At this point, I want to turn to Haley. Haley, one of the things that struck me when Glen was talking about doing the laundry, he said that he wants to be a helper, he wants to help around the house. Even Dan, just now you've talked about, you do the fill-in, so to speak, but that your wife is still figuring out what good clothes are and the sizes of things. You've written a lot about mental labor, that invisible load that sometimes it's not measurable but can make the person doing that invisible labor feel even more burdened like it's even more work. Can you tell us a little bit more about some of the invisible mental load?

**HALEY:** Sure. One of the best ways to explain this to people I think is to think about the paid workforce, where the job of strategy, of vision, and then finding out a way to execute that vision, make sure it was followed up with, not only is that a full job but it usually comes with a raise or a promotion. That's management, and that has to happen in the house too. It's really important that when we think about the work that it takes to make a household run and function and hopefully be a happy and healthy place, that somebody is making sure it gets done, that pickups are scheduled as they need to be, that meals are planned, that you've got the groceries on hand to make the nutritious meals that you want.

We know that it's overwhelmingly women who do this and that sometimes the mental load is the last piece of the puzzle before it's solved. That it's one thing to redistribute

the tangible concrete tasks in a household, and another to redistribute, well, who's going to think about this work. One of the reasons for that is it's invisible and very often if you're not the one doing that work, thinking through those problems, and doing that problem-solving, you're not aware it's happening because it's happening so well, things are happening in such a seamless way.

One of the pieces of advice that we've been giving couples and that marriage therapists give couples, is to make that work tangible by writing it down. Make it a thing. Who plans pick up and drop off? Who plans getting the kids homeschooling done with them? Who plans the playdate? Actually lists these things as tasks, these are planning development tasks but they're really important. It's important that you don't overlook those and you make sure that when a couple wants to divide up that work, that's on the total list of things that you're going to split up.

**BRIGID:** That's great advice. That was something that early on I wish I had known [laughs] when my kids were little. We're coming down on time. Dan Carlson. I want to give you the last word about what could last and where do we go from here if we want to really lean into creating opportunities for couples to have gender equality or gender equity if that's what they choose. You know you want to be able to form your family in whatever way it is that you want to form it. Let me go back to Dan Herman for just really briefly.

Dan, I'm really curious, you talked about you're spending all this time with your daughter now because of the pandemic and you're all on top of each other in your apartment. You do talk about at some point you're going to go back to work and your daughter is going to go off to child care. I wonder if you think because of the experience through the pandemic or being unemployed, do you think that will change the way that you're engaged or will that change the way that you do or think about yourself as a father even when you do go back to work?

**DAN:** That's a great question. I'm not sure I spent that much time thinking about that. I know I definitely will experience some separation anxiety because my daughter is deeply integrated to all of my routines now and I have such a strong bond with her now that it hurts just to think about sending her off to childhood. I think the other point you're referring to is maybe just the guilt factor of focusing on myself now that I'm not taking care of her all the time.

I think it's just something I have to do because we live in Manhattan and it's expensive to live here. We're living in austerity now where our income is about 50% of what it was last year and costs are only going up so it's important for me to get back in the workforce. I'm sure I'll appreciate my time with her much more now. I'm very grateful for this experience. I wouldn't change it for anything not for a million dollars.

**BRIGID:** Okay. Great. We'll see what happens in the future. Dan Carlson, let me turn to you talking about the future. You're saying, again, through some of the research you're showing that while it's not utopia, it's not nirvana, we're not at parity, there is movement toward more gender equality. What I wonder is once things open up, we have a vaccine, will things snap back or could this be lasting? If it's going to be lasting what will it take?

**DAN:** It's a good question. Obviously, that the future is yet to be written, but what we know about men who take leave and who stay at home, that research shows that even after they go back to work, they still remain engaged and do more housework and child care than before leave. That suggests that even if we stamp back into similar work patterns as before, that the amount of housework we talk about the men are doing now, that increase, that level will be maintained, and that levels of equality will stay high-end, and it'll be a new normal.

At the same time, getting back to the structural issues, we don't know what's going to happen with child care, we don't know what's going to happen with schools, but we do know people are going to go back to work. That's really where the rubber hits the road, is okay, we're all going back to our jobs, many of us will leave telecommuting and go back to offices, but will child care and schools also open, and will we have those same supports that we used to have?

There's also still the possibility that we'll have more supports than before the pandemic. Some jobs will never go back to the office. I have a neighbor who works at Young Living here in Salt Lake City. They do essential oils and things like this. He told me the other day that he's never going to back to the office, they've gave them money to create remote offices, and they have no intentions of letting those workers come back.

**BRIGID:** Wow.

**DAN:** Will that happen for a lot of other companies? Who knows, but it's a possibility that we'll have more flexibility in our jobs than we used to, and that molds well. Some signs are positive and some might be negative. We'll just have to see.

**BRIGID:** All right, we'll have to see. Haley, we're going to give you the last word, and then we'll wrap up.

**HALEY:** I just want to echo what Professor Carlson was saying there. I think that is really significant. The truth is from this study, I found these calls for men to do more, to care more, the idea that we want involved dads in the United States, people's hearts and minds are there. For the vast majority of American parents, they say we want equal parenting, we want shared responsibility, but they're doing this under duress, trying to find these solutions.

Like Dan Herman is talking about on 50% of their regular income, this is a struggle. This is a country that doesn't even guarantee paid maternity leave, let alone paternity leave to fathers. This is a country where child care is falling apart right before our eyes and it was already a pretty tattered and broken system. Only about half of child care centers have reopened and child care has been given \$3.5 billion of support where Delta Airlines alone has been given \$5 billion.

If as a country, we really want to allow parents to be able to be conscientious and deliberate about sharing the load, we need to provide them the policy and economic support that they need to be able to do that.

**BRIGID:** Absolutely. I want to thank all of the panelists for being here today, for sharing your stories and your perspectives. I want to thank the participants, we had some lively chat. Thank you so much for sharing those resources and stories as well. I want to thank the New America events team, the Better Life Lab. I want to give a shout-out to Jahdziah St. Julien who works for our program.

She's the one who connected us with Glen Henry and *Beleaf In Fatherhood*, which is a fantastic YouTube channel. If you haven't seen it, do check it out. The videos are really fun and great. I also want to thank David Schulman, our producer. Thank all of you for being here. Next week, we're going to be looking at telemedicine equity in the future of medicine and how that will impact work in care systems. I hope all of you stay safe, wash your hands, and we'll see you next week.