First Time Expectant Fathers’ Attitudes, Actions and Well-Being in regard to Work & Family Issues

Leslie Stanley-Stevens¹, Tarleton State University
Rudy Ray Seward, University of North Texas

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Expectant fathers' attitudes, decision-making processes, and sense of well-being relating to the challenges of work and family life as well as their conceptualizations of the role of father were explored with a purposive sample. In 2000, twenty-five married first time expectant fathers from central Texas in the U.S.A. completed self-administered questionnaires and fourteen were interviewed. While all fathers placed the highest priority on ‘breadwinning’, the majority believed that childcare and domestic duties should be shared equally when both parents are employed full time. Only two interviewed fathers described truly egalitarian household practices. Seven interviewees were ‘traditional’ in expectations and actions. The remaining five held traditional expectations for fathers but reported increased responsibility as helpers with domestic responsibilities and child rearing. The fathers’ often conflicting expectations with practice suggest that the challenges couples face after the baby is born will impact their well-being and health. Supportive programs and policies would help.

Researchers and policy makers have been giving work and family issues considerable attention in recent years (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti & Crouter, 2000). Most have focused on decision making regarding the balancing of work and family for women (Haas, 1999). Research on fathers’ beliefs and actions regarding work and family tend to be retrospective studies completed after children are born (Tanfer & Mott, 1997). This study responds to the need to assess men’s thought processes about fathering and their consequent thoughts about employment during their partner’s pregnancy.

Roles Associated with Being a Father

The redefining of parenting roles has been going on at least since the mid twentieth century (Tanfer & Mott, 1997). The role of the father emphasized the breadwinner domain during most of the 20th century, but in the last few decades, the domains of playmate and nurturer have been emphasized (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993). However

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most men and women still consider financial provision, financial planning, decisions about work outside the family, and when to initiate lovemaking the man’s responsibility (Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

More women entering the workforce contributed to a trend toward emphasizing more egalitarian ideas regarding gender roles in the family, including housework and childcare (Pleck & Pleck, 1997) but fathers’ contributions in these areas have only increased modestly (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Three critical roles, ranked hierarchically, that shape a man’s identity as a new father are paid worker, husband, and father (Tanfer & Mott, 1997), although not all men evaluate the importance of these roles the same way (Lamb & Lewis, 2004).

The Role of Paid Worker

A significant proportion of men see themselves first as breadwinners and second as helpers with family responsibilities, with no primary responsibilities in the home (Gerson, 1993; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). Fathers who feel that the primary domain of the father role is being the provider do fewer tasks traditionally viewed as feminine (e.g., household tasks) (Perry-Jenkins & Crouter, 1990). Men usually consider childcare a woman’s responsibility and do not show stress when childcare responsibilities clash with work responsibilities (Maume & Mullin, 1993). When fathers add family role domains to their work role domains they tend to experience new stressors, while their wives often experience stress reduction (Berry & Rao, 1997).

Fulfilling the provider domain is paramount for most fathers. The amount and type of employment leave men typically take after they become fathers reflects their primary identification as good providers derived from their paid worker role. Some men view taking time off as being uncommitted to their job, or as un-masculine (Alexander, 1990). In a 1998 study, less than half (45%) of the employed fathers reported taking some time off from work (Seward et al., 2006). Most fathers did not view the days off as parental leave. The most common reasons that fathers gave for either not taking parental leave, or for not taking all the leave available, were a decrease in the family’s income (39%) and possible difficulties at work (39%). Getting paid leave so they would still be a provider was a key determinate of which fathers took leave. None of the fathers’ leave time was paid from a source specifically set aside for parental leave; the vast majority used vacation time (61%), personal days (17%), or sick leave (11%).

Both men and women often become more traditional in the division of labor after a baby is born. Fathers tend to take on more of the breadwinning responsibilities, while mothers take on more of the household responsibilities (Lamb & Lewis, 2004). Once a child is born, fathers tend to work more and mothers tend to reduce their paid work hours with some stopping paid work completely (Jordan, 1997). Some husbands and wives make decisions for the wife to reduce her working
hours temporarily, but couples often become caught up in the traditional roles causing wives to not return to their pre-maternity work schedule (Lamb & Lewis, 2004). A wife may find her husband verbally supportive of her commitment to employment but often does not find him as supportive when it comes to rethinking household obligations (Deutsch, 1999).

While the domain of being a good provider remains an important component of male identity, couples are moving toward dividing their role responsibilities equally (Pleck, 1997). One explanation for the move to a more egalitarian division of responsibilities is that mothers and fathers are likely to receive similar job satisfaction (Jordan, 1997). Additionally, division of labor prior to parenthood influences post-parental division of labor. As more parents share equally in work inside and outside the home prior to parenthood, the pull toward a gender-traditional division of labor after the child is born is reduced (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997).

**The Role of Husband**

Men’s adjustment to the reduction of the breadwinning domain has resulted in the adoption of many adaptive strategies (Mintz, 1998). While a few men have adopted a truly egalitarian division of labor, others have attempted to reassert patriarchal authority based on religious beliefs. Protestant evangelicals view husbands as being the head of the family and this authority is based in large part on their responsibility for providing material welfare for the family (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002). Even when the husbands were not the breadwinners, they often remained the symbolic heads of their families (Hare-Mustin, Bennett, & Broderick, 1983). Conservative evangelical Protestant wives performed more housework and spent more time doing ‘female-typed’ labor than their non-evangelical peers (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002, p. 950). The differences were traced back to religious variations in spousal and household resources and to a distinctive evangelical gender ideology.

When husbands do participate more fully in household duties, it is contributed in part to gender politics and re-evaluated traditionalism in relationships (Rost, 2002). More frequently husbands’ participation comes out of a growing cultural movement that looks favorably upon non-gender specific family tasks (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Because men still often view themselves as helpers, a more equal division of family responsibilities may depend on the couple’s rethinking traditional expectations (Matta & Knudson-Martin, 2006).

**The Role of Father**

The ultimate responsibility for childcare has been delegated to the woman for a very long time (Coltrane, 1996). While the role of the father has come to encompass more childcare activities and chores, it has not yet included the complete responsibility for arranging or plan-
ning for that child (Seward et al., 2006). When a study in the 1980s asked fathers to show how many childcare activities they were responsible for, such low levels were reported that the issue was not considered further (Leslie, Anderson & Branson, 1991).

Traditional fathers perceived themselves as providers of material resources, shelter and guidance for their children and left the emotive domains to the children’s mothers. Today’s fathers often expand their roles to include involvement in the nurturance and care-taking of their children (Jordan, 1997). Those who promote egalitarian roles in parenting emphasize that fathers should be spending more time with their children (Coltrane, 1996). But men are often torn between the conflicting domains of the father role presented by these newer expectations, which can cause expectant fathers confusion and stress (Seward et al, 2006).

Mothers still report having the specific responsibilities of making childcare arrangements, knowing when the child needs to visit the physician and buying clothes. Maume and Mullin (1993) found that 94% of mothers said that they made all or most of the childcare arrangements. Both mothers and fathers report that women are primarily responsible for the decisions about childcare (Leslie, Anderson & Branson, 1991). Fathers’ involvement in childcare arrangements typically occurs when the care is a non-stressful, non-emergency-type event (Berry & Rao, 1997). But among dual earner couples, fathers often play a big part in the decisions about what kind of childcare the family chooses. They also participate in other decision-making processes related to children, make big adjustments to their work schedules and take on added responsibilities in the home (Hertz, 1997).

Fathers’ socialization and their parents’ role-modeling influence their conception and practice of fatherhood (Beaton, Doherty, & Rueter, 2003). For most men this includes a lack of preparation for their roles as fathers, as their socialization as young boys did not focus on parenting skills (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). So when men become fathers, they tend to look to early role models for guidance. In the past this usually was a traditional father who focused on breadwinning responsibilities (LaRoss, 1986). This type of role model diminishes chances of involvement in their children’s upbringing (Jordan, 1997). Men’s family of origin experiences are also supplemented by later relationships and life events that all contribute to an anticipatory or ‘working model’ for roles as fathers (Bretherton, 1993).

As the definition of fatherhood has encompassed more child-centered activities, a greater amount of involvement in housework has followed (Coltrane, 2000). When wives are employed full-time and have very young children at home, their husbands contribute the most to housework and childcare (Peterson & Gerson, 1992). Overall, fathers spend more time today with their children than fathers did in the early
part of the 20th century (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). Yet, fathers today on average are responsible for a small percentage of the work in the home compared to women (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Even when both parents are working full time, mothers are responsible for the majority of the household duties and fathers just ‘help out’ (Seward et al., 1993). But some fathers, besides helping more, are taking initiative and organizing some household and childcare activities (Palkovitz, 2002).

**Work & Family Issues**

Almost all early studies of the decision making process to balance work and family demands excluded men (Coltrane, 1996), especially expectant fathers (Beaton et al., 2003). Most information on men’s beliefs and actions concerning work and family demands come from studies of men who were already fathers (Plantin, Manson & Kearney, 2003).

The current study focuses on men’s decision making and thought processes about childrearing while they are experiencing their partner’s pregnancy. The research questions are how do expectant fathers view their role responsibilities in the childrearing process and how do they intend to balance their paid work with the father role? Men’s attitudes, decision-making processes, actions and sense of well-being were assessed in relation to the challenges of work and family life. Also explored was the impact of social contexts on fathers’ decision-making processes in relation to work and family life.

**METHODS**

**Data Collection**

Building upon an earlier study of mothers, the first author along with six female and two male student research assistants adapted questions from Gerson (1993) and related sources to develop a survey instrument and an interview instrument in the spring of 2000. The instruments addressed topics including the meaning of fatherhood, job satisfaction, parental leave, fatherhood expectations, childcare and household responsibilities and the influence of family, friends and employers on work and family decisions. The questions were reviewed to ensure that they adequately reflected the concepts’ meanings and dimensions, that is, face and content validity.

A non-probability purposive sampling procedure was used to ensure participants were first-time expectant fathers. Questionnaires were distributed to clinics, doctor’s offices and childbirth classes, which served expectant parents in central Texas. Contacts were also made through word of mouth (snowballing) and casual relationships. Twenty-five expectant fathers volunteered to complete the self-administrated questionnaire. Fourteen of the fathers also volunteered to participate in a
**Table 1: Characteristics of First-Time Expectant Fathers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Values**
- Family well-being index
- Job well-being index
- With me when growing up
- Work
- Home
- Child suffers without full-time stay
- Fathershood negatively affects job
- Job serves important purpose
- Family income
- Education completed

**Variables**
- N
- SD
- *p < .10.
- **p < .05.
- ***p < .01 (1-tailed).
semi-structured follow-up interview to provide in-depth qualitative data on the issues covered in the questionnaire (Rost, 2002).

The interviews usually lasted between thirty and forty minutes and responses were recorded in written notes and video taped for use in interpreting the data. Only pseudonyms identified the participants to maintain confidentiality. The interviewers displayed neutral body language and non-judgmental attitudes to encourage fathers to freely express their attitudes and report actions. Like Matta and Knudson-Martin (2006), the researchers acknowledged that what they listened for and heard was influenced by their experiences as children, spouses and/or parents, plus feminist theoretical perspectives and an ideology supporting gender equality.

**Analysis**

The quantitative data were entered into an SPSS data file for analyses. The Grounded Theory Method (GTM) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was applied to the qualitative data by the principal investigator along with groups of three researchers. Following GTM principles, it was assumed that no external truth existed independent of the research and inductive analyses were used to derive themes when viewing the video-tapes of the interviews (Charmaz, 2000). Many common experiences and themes emerged from the data. Inter-observer reliability on the themes was over 90% due to the lack of ambiguity in the responses. However, when discrepancies occurred additional reviews were carried out to resolve them. Responses to related questions on the same aspect (e.g., jobs) were used to check for consistency or reliability, while responses to probe questions helped establish validity. Once agreed on, the themes were used to review the tapes again to delineate concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The concepts were used to categorize the responses and respondents. The goal was to either confirm existing theory or to find new patterns outside existing theory, which might lead to alternative explanations for understanding the attitudes and actions of expectant fathers.

**Sample**

Although not a requirement for being in the study, all 25 respondents were married. The fathers were on average 27 years of age and most (52%) had completed at least some college with over a third (36%) having earned a Bachelor’s degree. According to 2000 census, the expectant fathers on average were more educated than adults in the county where most sampled fathers resided (United States Census Bureau, 2000). Most sampled fathers reported being white (91%) compared with 90% of county residents. The rest of the sample reported being Hispanic (9%) compared to 15% of county residents. While being white and
Hispanic were mutually exclusive categories in the sample, in the U.S. Census (2000) Hispanics can be of any race including white. The lack of other ethnic groups in the sample reflects the county’s residents of which less that 1% reported being Black or American Indian or Asian or Pacific Islander. Median family income was $33,700, which is lower than the median average reported for the county ($39,491). All the fathers were employed, 96% averaged 30 hours or more of work per week and two thirds (68%) reported working 41 hours or more per week.

Quantitative Findings on Expectations after the Baby Arrives

The fathers did not believe that having a child would affect their jobs very much. All but two indicated they would be working the same amount of hours six months after the baby was born. The remaining two fathers expected to increase their work week by 10 or more hours. Less than half of the fathers (11 of 25 or 43%) reported working for companies that offered family-supportive programs. Among these fathers, most (71%) planned to take advantage of the benefits offered (e.g., flexible work schedules and access to personal or sick paid leave days). All fathers planned to take off at least three days from paid work after the birth of their children. The average was 9.3 days off. Interviews of the 14 expectant fathers revealed that rather than taking unpaid paternity or parental leave, most of these fathers like those in earlier studies (Seward et al., 2006) were planning to take this time as vacation, sick, personal, or other paid days.

Most expectant fathers reported positive attitudes about their jobs on nine separate items.\(^2\) The majority of fathers (13 out of 25 or 52%) strongly agreed with the statement that "I feel that my job serves an important purpose" (Table I, Variable 3). Over three-fourths (76%) of the fathers either strongly agreed (20%) or agreed (56%) that they enjoyed going to work. Almost half (46%) of the fathers, either strongly agreed (13%) or agreed (33%) that their jobs were emotionally satisfying. Complementing these two attitudes, almost two-thirds (64%) of the fathers, either strongly disagreed (20%) or disagreed (44%) that their jobs were boring. The last three items were the basis for a job well-being index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$; details in Table I). Most fathers had high positive scores, averaging almost 12 within a possible range of values from 3 to 15. The fathers were the most likely to strongly disagree (52%) that "being a father will have a negative effect on my job security" (Table I, Variable 4).

Most fathers expressed equalitarian attitudes about childcare and housework among employed parents. Nineteen out of 25 fathers or 76% felt that childcare and housework should be shared equally when both parents work full time. Responses to other childcare items consistent with the equalitarian attitudes included 72% of fathers agreed that they had discussed with their wives how they would share childcare

\(^2\) Detailed tables on all items dealing with employment, childcare, housework, gender and impact of mothers’ employment on children are available by request from the first author.
and 64\% of the fathers were concerned about finding dependable child-
care. These four items were the basis for a family well-being index
(Cronbach’s $\alpha = .72$; details in Table I). Most fathers had high positive
scores, averaging almost 15 within a possible range of values from 4 to
20. Responses inconsistent with the equalitarian attitudes included 13 of
25 of fathers either strongly disagreed (20\%) or disagreed (32\%) with the
statement that “I would prefer my wife to work” after the child is born
(See Table I, Variable 6). Only 5 fathers agreed with this statement.
Fathers’ responses on the item that “children suffer from not having a
full-time, stay at home mom” were almost equally divided between
agreeing ($n=9$), disagreeing ($n=9$), or being neutral ($n=7$) (Table I,
Variable 5).

Bi-variate analyses were preformed to assess the association
between the characteristics, beliefs and actions of fathers to their level of
job and family well-being. Table I includes correlation coefficients for
those variables that had at least one statistically significant correlation
with one of the well-being indexes. For the job well-being index, the
more fathers agreed that their jobs served an important purpose ($r = .59$)
and the more education they have completed ($r = .32$) the higher their
well-being score. On the other hand, fathers who agreed that they
wished their own fathers had spent more time with them when they
were growing up ($- .27$) had lower job well-being scores. For the family
well-being index, the more fathers agreed that children suffer without a
full-time stay at home mom ($r = .58$) the higher their well-being score.
Conversely, fathers who agreed that being a father will have a negative
effect on job security ($- .52$), preferred that mothers work after the child is
born ($- .43$), and reported a higher family income ($- .37$) had lower family
well being scores.

Qualitative Findings: Key Themes

Key themes which emerged from the analysis of the qualitative
data gathered from the 14 interviewees included the father role domains
emphasized, paid work activities and long-term childcare and household
division of labor.\(^3\)

Father role domains emphasized: The expectant fathers’ responses empha-
sized one of three different role types: (1) traditional, (2) a combination
of traditional and egalitarian and (3) egalitarian. Respondents who gave
the highest priority to the breadwinner domain were categorized as tra-
ditional. They anticipated little change or an increase in paid work hours
once the baby was born and planned to take few days off when the child
was born. The traditional men typically performed little domestic work,
usually limited to yard and automotive care and only helped out with
other domestic tasks and childcare. Seven or 50\% of the men advocated
and emphasized this approach.

\(^3\) A more complete discussion of these and related themes including illustrative quotes are
available from the first author.
An unanticipated category was the combination type, where men emphasized traditional values but in practice were much more involved in family work. This is the reverse of a common pattern among men who espouse egalitarian views but practice a traditional division of labor (Gerson, 1993). Combination fathers prioritized their work over the work of their spouses and identified themselves primarily as breadwinners. But they contributed a good deal to household labor, planned to take four or more days off work when the child is born and recognized that they would need to do even more domestic work once the baby is born, including being involved in childcare. All agreed childcare and domestic duties should be shared equally when both parents work full time. Five of the men fell in this category.

The egalitarian type emphasized equally shared decision-making, career opportunities, domestic responsibilities and childcare. Egalitarians did not prioritize their paid work over their spouse’s, performed at least half of the domestic work and talked in detail about their expected involvement with their children. They were planning to take extensive leaves from work and be heavily involved with the care of their infants. As many other researchers have noted, these two fathers were exceptional (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

Consistent references to the type of family structure the interviewees grew up in indicate that their circumstances were a major influence on their attitudes and actions. The interviewees own fathers’ influences were extremely important in how they defined the role of fatherhood, either by providing a negative example (i.e., compensation) or, as with the majority, providing a positive role model (cf., Beaton et al, 2003).

Of the seven interviewees who fell into the traditional category, all were raised in similar family structures. Most of their mothers stayed at home until the interviewees were at least school age. The fathers of these interviewees were the primary breadwinners of the family. These roles appear to have been internalized by the interviewees. But despite the traditional gender expectations of these men, only two of the seven had wives who planned to stay home full time. Although 4 of the 7 traditional interviewees said on the survey that they believed that childcare and domestic duties should be shared equally when both parents work full-time, they did not share housework equally before the baby arrived even when their wives were employed fulltime. They stated the current socially desired view but appear not to be practicing it.

Paid work activities: Employment was the major part of the traditional males’ identities. When asked if they would stay home if it were financially feasible, many of the interviewees needed prompting on the question. They appeared to struggle with the concept of fathers staying at home with their children due to practical or economic concerns. Two of the traditionalists felt that they would work outside the home even if
they could afford not to.

Fathers in the combination category still had the breadwinner domain at the top of their hierarchy, but placed more emphasis on involvement in family interaction, including childcare, domestic duties and shared decision-making with their spouses. They all expressed a preference for spending more time with their families than their own fathers had with them, as well as an awareness of the difficulties of childcare. Two fathers described in detail how they would take over and give their wives a break on their days off.

The two egalitarian interviewees came from families where their father exhibited a negative father role model. One was a child of divorce and the other’s father abandoned the family when he was young. Both had mothers who worked outside the home and fathers who were not involved in their home lives or extracurricular activities. Both of these men took the role of father very seriously and were determined to provide a good male role model for their children by being actively involved in their care, trying to compensate for what they had missed. Unexpectedly, both of these fathers were evangelical Christians, which is at odds with tendencies found in previous studies (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002).

Long-term childcare & household division of labor: The majority of the interviewees (11 of 14 or 79%) expected to have to do more domestic work once the baby is born, but most of their responses fell into a ‘helper’ category. They intended to rely on spouses to direct what duties to perform. All of the traditionalists fell into the ‘helper’ category and, in fact, every traditional interviewee either used the phrase ‘help her’ or ‘help out’ with respect to domestic duties and childcare issues. The combination and egalitarian fathers already share domestic duties much more than the traditionalists and they expect to pick up even more responsibility after the birth of the baby. Although most of the interviewees expect to have to do more domestic chores, the available evidence suggests they will continue their existing domestic duty arrangements (Haas & Hwang, 2000).

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Gender strategies help explain how fathers and mothers negotiate their behavior and emotions which results, in most cases, in women’s doing most of the housework and childcare (Hochschild, 1989). Individuals’ strategies are based on childhood conceptualizations about gender, combined with teenage experiences and finally rectified with current feelings about societal norms and how one’s own attitudes and behavior compare to those norms. Often framing these strategies is a gender contract where mothers’ greater family orientation and fathers’ greater employment orientation are taken for granted (Haas & Hwang, 2000). Hendrix (2001) stresses how the attitudes, structures and actions
people evaluate positively from their childhoods are the ones they seek out as adults to get the love they want. In general, attitudes, structures and actions that led to negative reactions in childhood are avoided as adults while those leading to positive reactions are embraced. However, role modeling is a powerful socializer, which often contributes to parents following patterns they disdained in their own parents and they state they will never do themselves.

The interviewed fathers often referred to structures and actions that made them happy or made them feel like they had good families. Most then extracted these characteristics from their childhoods and applied them in their families of procreation. Many men wanted to be like their fathers whom they defined as good role models even when they worked away from home a lot. Two of the fathers, who came from divorced parents, were clearly responding to negative reactions from childhood. They wanted to be very different from their fathers or compensate for their inappropriate behavior, saying they wanted to be there for their children and provide stability. Yet, often fathers, despite their protestations, follow the same patterns they abhorred in their own father (Fox, 2001; LaRossa, 1986).

For example, many of the interviewed fathers said they wanted and expected to be more involved with their children than their own fathers had been with them. However, they were not planning to reduce paid work hours or take more than a few days parental leave after the birth, even when the mothers were employed. A couple of the fathers even planned on spending more hours on the job. These men’s notions of fathering will probably not allow for actual increases in time with the child, especially the baby. Only seven men mentioned anticipated actual involvement with their child, with most describing sport activities—like going to games and fishing—rather than infant childcare. The fathers’ strong affinity for breadwinning ironically can be interpreted as expressing how separated they feel from their families. What makes them feel most like a good father is what they are doing away from their family, as involvement in paid work reduces the opportunities for family interaction.

The idea that fathers are the primary breadwinner puts extra pressure on men to succeed, especially to make more money. Comparisons to men with greater success and the desire to earn more money make fathers continually feel like they need to do more. Some men consider this a license to selfishly pursue their careers at the expense of time with their families. Mothers, then, are the ones who are forced to shoulder more of the family responsibilities to take up the slack. Most of the fathers still think that children miss out on something important if their mothers are not stay-at-home moms, but they underestimate the importance of fathers’ involvement with their children. In fact, the respondents feel it is okay if fathers not only work full-time but also work many extra hours. None of these men said, iMy dad had to
work but it would have been nice if he’d stayed home, though they did make similar statements about their mothers and wives.

Most of the sampled fathers demonstrated the often documented chasm between words and actions. They are excellent recruits for the army of fathers who claim to do more housework and childcare than they actually perform (Deutsch, 1999; Fox, 2001; Hochschild, 1989, 2001). If Lupri (1991) is correct they will reduce their involvement over time and with additional children.

**Health & Policy Implications**

Almost all of the fathers believed that their work and activities will not be affected by the birth of their child and none expected conflict with their wives over parenting. They are assuming that their sense of job well-being and family well-being will not be changed by the baby’s arrival. But the transition to parenthood typically involves a combination of confronting new challenges, differing gendered expectations, disequilibrium and fatigue (Pasley, Kerpelman & Guilbert, 2001). The result is often negative interactions that require negotiation or renegotiation to resolve contentions, otherwise relationships tend to become distant and unstable, the sense of well-being is often reduced and even one’s health can be at risk.

At the same time, pregnancy, birth and infancy can be considered teachable moments for expectant and new fathers. The couple, their social networks and social contexts, especially the work place, can ease or hamper transitions. The learning opportunities are great and these fathers exhibit less health risks and have higher levels of well-being than most (Everett et al., 2006). Supportive kin, friends, programs (e.g., paid parental leave) and policies (e.g., support for responsible fathering) can contribute to the learning of many valuable lessons. Despite a plethora of family coping strategies on balancing paid employment and domestic labor, most lack support or implementation (Haas & Hwang, 2000; Luxton, 2001). Failure to address the health and well-being risks of expectant and new fathers represents missed opportunities to improve paternal health and in turn, maternal, childhood and family health.

Recent research suggests that changes in fathers’ attitudes and actions that will reduce some of the health and well-being risks are possible. Doherty, Erickson and La Rossa (2006) found among a diverse sample of first time parent couples that intervention training, starting during pregnancy, can have a positive impact on fathers’ skills and involvement with their babies. Mazza (2002) found among urban African-American adolescent first time fathers that attending parenting classes and working with an assigned social worker on life needs brought about greater involvement with their children. Goldberg, Clarke-Stewart, Rice and Dellis’ (2002) fathers’ from middle class families with six month old infants; who lacked job stress, had positive coping skills and wanted to be like their own fathers; were more sensitive to
and involved with their infants. Increasing mothers’ paid work income relative to fathers should also increase father involvement with their children (Rost, 2002). Finally, providing fathers paternity and parental leaves with pay will also promote more involvement with children (Seward et al., 2006). Feldman, Sussman and Zigler (2004, p. 459) found that fathers who took longer leaves had higher paternal preoccupation with infant[s], more marital support and higher family salience than those fathers who took short or no leaves.

Although fathers will continue to be affected by their reactions to their own upbringing, these studies and others suggest that attitudes and actions by fathers can be directed toward more sharing of domestic responsibilities with mothers and greater involvement with children. One obvious question to ask is: how did the studied expectant fathers’ attitudes and actions change after the birth of their child? Dealing only with expectations limits the value of this study. To answer the question follow-up interviews have been scheduled with the fathers in order to investigate how expectations and earlier actions influenced the reality of childrearing. The new fathers’ responses will help identify similarities and differences between expectations and reality over time as well as provide ways to assess their impact on health and well-being.
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