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FAMILY-SUPPORTIVE EMPLOYER POLICIES: ARE THEY RELEVANT TO MEN?

Joseph H. Pleck

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It has become commonplace to use the terms "work and family" and "working parents" to refer to a range of issues previously identified as concerns of "working mothers." Many, however, are skeptical of the extent to which men actually experience stress in integrating work and family roles, and of the relevance to men of employer policies designed to reduce these stresses. In this context, this paper reviews trends in men's family participation, evidence concerning men's use of alternative work schedules and child care supports, and the availability, utilization, and consequences of men's parental leave. The present review suggests that family-supportive policies are indeed relevant to men, and are likely to become increasingly so.

Trends in Men's Family Participation and Child Care Responsibility

For family-supportive policies to have a direct impact on men, men have to be significantly involved in family life. Research indicates that men's involvement, while less than women's, is more substantial than is usually thought. Further, among fathers of young children, men's time in family roles, particularly child care, has increased from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s. These specifications to the trend of rising male involvement mean, of course, that the increase is occurring in precisely the subgroup most impacted by work-family policies, and in the family behavior most relevant to these policies.

It is difficult to describe reliably fathers' child care involvement in terms of absolute amount of time spent because child care can be defined in varying ways; studies have generated dramatically divergent results. However, generalizations can be made across studies if one describes fathers' time in child care as a proportion of mothers' time; differences in the definition of child care from one study to the next are thus corrected for. Summarizing the available developmental and survey studies that include both fathers and mothers, and assess parental involvement in terms of time, Lamb, Pleck, Levine, and Charnov (1985) concluded that fathers spend between a quarter and a third as much time as mothers in direct caretaking or interaction with their children as do mothers. When child care is defined more broadly as being available in the household when children are present, fathers spend about half as much time as do mothers. Fathers' proportional involvement is found to be higher when the children are older, and when the mother is employed. Lamb et al. noted several studies with both conditions present in which fathers' time with children actually reached parity or near-parity with mothers'.

Another indicator of men's child care responsibility derives from studies of child care arrangements. According to the Winter 1984-85 federal survey of child care arrangements (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1987), in two-earner families with a child under 5, the father was the primary child care arrangement during the mother's working hours for 19 percent of all employed mothers (13 percent for full-time employed mothers, and 28 percent for part-time). In this group, fathers are the primary care arrangement almost as often as are family day care homes, and more often than group care centers. In about half the cases in which a relative is the primary child care arrangement for a preschool child when the mother works, that relative is the father. In two-earner families with children aged 5-14, excluding the cases in which schools were the primary child care arrangement when mothers worked, fathers were the primary arrangement for 31 percent.
Presser's (1986, 1988, 1989) analyses suggest that the major factor leading fathers to be primary child care providers during wives' working hours is not paternal unemployment, but husbands and wives working different shifts. Presser has documented extremely high rates of paternal child care responsibility among these "two-shift" couples, and argues that one unrecognized factor promoting a rise in father involvement is increasing rates of shift work particularly evident among young and less educated parents. She also finds evidence that father care for children during mothers' working hours has increased between 1965 and 1985 (Presser, 1989).

Two important time use analyses show that fathers who had young children increased their time in child care between the mid-60's and the mid-70's. In a comparison of data from 1965-66 and 1975-76 national samples, Coverman and Sheley (1986) found that for adult males as a whole, time in neither housework nor child care increased. However, among fathers who had at least one child under four years of age, time in child care did increase significantly. Likewise, in a comparison of samples of two-parent, two-child families in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1967-68 and 1977, Sanik (1981) found that men's time in family roles overall did not increase when wives' employment and other demographic variables were controlled. However, in an earlier analysis in which fathers with young children were overrepresented, a significant increase in family time was observed (Sanik, 1979). Taken together, Sanik's analyses suggest that among fathers with young children, time in family roles did increase significantly during this period.

Juster (1985) presented summary data from time diaries completed by a panel of married couples in a national sample interviewed in 1975-76 who were interviewed again in 1981. Because fathers' and children's ages are different in the two time periods, this longitudinal comparison does not provide as good an indication of general trends over time as the cross-sectional data just discussed. However, these data are still of interest, especially since LaRossa (1988) has argued that they show little meaningful increase in father's involvement. In Juster's time diary data, husbands' total time in domestic work, and time in child care specifically, increased. Wives' time in all domestic work decreased; while wives increased their child care, they did so to a much smaller degree (7.3%) than did husbands (25.7%), in analyses of adults in the prime child-rearing years, age 18-44. In Shelton's (1989) further analyses of these data, controlling for age of children, husbands' increase in overall domestic time was found to be statistically significant, but the decrease among wives was significant only for those employed. Shelton also found that the increase in domestic work was greater among younger husbands and those with egalitarian sex role attitudes.

Examining the period from 1965 to 1981, Pleck's (1985) comparison of data reported by Juster (1985) for adult men's time in housework and child care taken as a proportion of the total performed by adult women and men indicates that men's share increased from 20 percent to 30 percent of this total during this period. While adult men's 30 percent share of total domestic work in 1981 is still far from the 50 percent that would denote equality, such an increase in national data from 1965 to 1981 is nonetheless substantial.
Flexitime and Child Care Supports

Thus, men’s child care responsibility is both greater than is usually thought and increasing, suggesting that family-supportive policies offered by employers ought to have an impact on men. Is there corresponding evidence that men take advantage of these policies when available? Information is available for flexitime and child care supports, and for parental leave.

Winett and Neale (1980) interviewed parents of children under age 13 working in the Washington, DC, headquarters of two federal agencies before and after the introduction of flexitime, a policy under which workers have some control over their starting and ending times. The study found that 16 of 34 fathers (47 percent), compared with 18 of 37 mothers (49 percent), changed their schedule. In all cases workers chose to start work earlier so that they could leave work earlier.

Even more important, those who changed their schedules when flexitime was introduced spent more time with their spouse and children. While Winett and Neale do not report data on this point for fathers and mothers separately, they suggest that the two sexes showed the same patterns. In the first agency, parents who changed their schedule increased their family time by over an hour a day (most of the increase was in time with children), while those who kept the same schedule reported no change. In the second agency, averaging over the 28 weeks for which data were collected following the introduction of flexitime, schedule changers increased their family time by 37 minutes a day, compared with a 5-minute increase in the non-changers. The increment in the schedule changers’ family time was slightly less by the end of the period studied, but it was still substantial (31 minutes per day greater than it was prior to flexitime), and the increase specifically in child care showed no diminution. In both agencies, parents who altered their schedules also reported that it was easier for them to spend time with their children. Another study focussed specifically on men before and after the implementation of flexitime (Lee, 1983). In a sample of British scientific workers, among those with employed wives, flexitime was associated with an increase in men’s time in child care and child socialization activities. It should be noted that since flexitime parents left work earlier, their increased child care occurs in the afternoon period in which "after school care" is needed by working families with school-age children.

Recent surveys (e.g., Hayghe, 1988) document the proportions of companies offering various kinds of policies aiding child care, such as employer-sponsored day care, assistance with child care expenses, and information and referral services. There are, unfortunately, few data concerning male vs. female utilization of these policies, although anecdotal data occasionally appear, such as the report that eight percent of the clients of the child care information and referral service at Hallmark Cards are fathers (Wall Street Journal, 1988) For another benefit, parent education programs and counseling services, the available information on their use by fathers is also largely impressionistic (see review in Pleck, 1986).
For the major remaining category of child care benefits, sick child and dependent care leave, better data exist, primarily concerning absences and lateness for work associated with child and dependent care needs. In one analysis of several large-scale surveys of employees, Emlen (1987) found that in two-earner couples, fathers miss one-third fewer days from work than do mothers. Nonetheless, men do miss work more often because of being fathers, and fathers’ missed work varies according to type of child care arrangement. Fathers with children in out-of-home care miss 1.5 more days of work per year than do male employees without children, and fathers with children who are caring for themselves miss six more days of work. In other data (Regional Research Institute for Human Services, 1987), Emlen also found fathers were less often late for work and interrupted at work than mothers, and less often left work early. At the same time, fathers had these problems more frequently than did male employees in general. Shinn et al. (1987) found that although men were less likely to miss work when child care arrangements broke down, missing work for this reason was more strongly associated with stress, poor health, and diminished well-being among men than among women.

Consideration of fathers’ use of flextime and child care supports suggests two conclusions. First, data show that while the need to care for a child due to illness or other breakdowns in child care arrangements has less impact on fathers’ work than on mothers’, it nonetheless does have a measurable impact on fathers. It is probable that the provision of sick child or dependent care leave will be used less often by fathers than by mothers, but some fathers will both use it and benefit from it in terms of reduced stress.

Second, it is noteworthy that fathers’ use of both alternative work schedules and child care supports in response to working parent issues tends not to be recognized as such, perhaps largely because of stereotypes about parental involvement. When fathers change their schedules under a flextime policy or take personal leave days to meet a child care responsibility, co-workers and supervisors find it easy not to be aware of the real reason, and no doubt the fathers themselves often do not disabuse them. Likewise, employers appear to have little interest in documenting or monitoring the extent of fathers’ use of these policies to justify their availability to parents of both sexes.

Fathers and Parental Leave

Including fathers in parental leave policies, unlike flextime and child care support policies, does require both employers and fathers to more explicitly acknowledge men’s fathering role. Previous U.S. research, based on surveys of employers, suggests that while parental or personal leave following the birth of a child is available to fathers on the same basis as mothers in a surprisingly large number of large employers, very few fathers actually use it, though there is some evidence that fathers’ utilization may be increasing.

In the most recent national survey of parental leave policies, Christensen’s (1989) study of 502 large manufacturing and services firms in 1988, 44 percent reported they offer parental leave for fathers, with an average maximum of 18 days per year allowed. Six percent of those offering parental leave to fathers provided at least some paid leave. In an earlier survey of 384 large companies in 1984, 37% (119) of those responding to the
question said they offered unpaid leaves to fathers, with the lengths of time offered comparable to those provided mothers (Catalyst, 1986). These leaves were not usually called paternity or parental leave, but instead were covered under the company's personal leave or leave of absence policy. In some cases, companies had extended unpaid parental leave to both parents (rather than to mothers only) to avoid the appearance of sex discrimination. Since 1988, a number of states have mandated employers to offer unpaid parental leave on a gender-neutral basis, so that the percentage of employers making leave available to fathers has no doubt increased.

On the crucial question of utilization, only nine companies in the 1984 Catalyst survey (of the 119 offering leave to fathers) reported that a father had actually taken such unpaid leave under these policies. More recent data suggest that fathers' use of these policies may be becoming somewhat more common. Southern New England Telephone reported that seven fathers (compared to 352 mothers) took unpaid parental leave in the last three years (Wall Street Journal, 1988). At Commonwealth Edison (Chicago), site of the highest-level legal settlement establishing fathers' rights to unpaid parental leave on the same basis as mothers, 25 fathers (compared to 300 mothers) applied for child care leave since 1985 (Trost, 1988).

Fathers' rarely use formal birth leave because it is unpaid, and because employers have negative attitudes about it. In the Catalyst (1986) study, for example, 63 percent of all companies indicated, when asked how long a leave would be reasonable for a father to take, that no amount of time was reasonable. Even within the subgroup of companies offering leave (37 percent), 41 percent reported that they considered no paternity leave time was reasonable. Catalyst also observed that companies often do not notify men that they have a parental leave entitlement. As noted earlier, many companies had apparently extended parental leave to both parents only to avoid the appearance of sex discrimination, not because they wanted or expected fathers to use paternity leave.

A critical limitation of the research considered so far is that it is based on surveys of companies. To complement these data, I decided instead to interview samples of fathers to ask them what they did when their last child was born. When families rather than personnel offices are interviewed, a quite different impression emerges of what constitutes parental leave for men, and how often men take it. In a 1988 survey I conducted of 41 fathers (70.6% of those eligible for the study) of 3-5 year olds attending a Southeastern Massachusetts college-sponsored laboratory nursery school, 92.7 percent reported they took at least some days off from work after the birth of their nursery school child. These fathers took an average of 5.6 days off. In a second, 1990 study I conducted with 49 fathers who had a child under 6 (one-third were drawn from the birth records of a predominantly working class Southeastern Massachusetts town, and two-thirds came from the hometown or family networks of students attending a Southeastern Massachusetts college), 73.9 percent took time off, averaging 5.1 days (66.7% in the birth record sample, and 78.6% in the student network sample). Two other studies conducted since I first collected these data confirm fathers' high rates of leave taking. The Four State Parental Leave Study found that 75% of a sample of 1395 fathers in Minnesota, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin took at least some leave from work (Bond et al., 1991), and Essex and Klein (1990) also found that 75% of a sample of 55 Wisconsin fathers took some leave.
What the majority of fathers do can be termed "informal" paternity leave. While only a tiny handful of fathers use formal parental leave policies, the large majority do take informal parental leave, by arranging to take a small number of days off from work, without loss of pay, in other ways. My data show that although some informal paternity leave consists of vacation and sick days, it also seems to include other discretionary paid days off. After a birth, supervisors and co-workers often appear to allow a father to take a few extra days off without loss of pay, as long as he does not abuse this flexibility. It is also noteworthy that fathers generally do not define their informal parental leave as "paternity leave"; 81.6 percent of the fathers who took days off work in my 1988 survey reported that they did not think of their days off in this way.

Some may question the meaningfulness of taking vacation and sick days off after a birth, as well as be skeptical of the value of leaves averaging five to six days. Use of vacation and sick days may seem trivial, until one realizes that many workers' vacations are scheduled by the employer, not the worker, and that many employers require medical certification, often from a company doctor, to take paid sick days. Another indicator that use of vacation or sick days for parental leave is not to be taken for granted is that several company surveys show that substantial proportions of employers have explicit policies regarding such use (see review in Pleck, 1989). On the issue of leave length, while longer leaves would no doubt have greater value, one should not minimize the benefits to mother and family of even this few days. Put another way, if you think five work days off makes no difference, ask the new mother whose husband took no days off!

My 1988 and 1990 father surveys permitted limited analysis of the consequences of informal paternity leave. In both samples, greater number of days taken off from work was associated at the bivariate level with greater involvement with the child currently on several individual self-report items. However, these relationships did not attain statistical significance, either at the bivariate level or in regression analyses controlling for the child's age and sex, mother's employment status, and father's work hours. However, in the 1990 survey number of days off work was significantly associated with a four-item father involvement index with these same variables controlled (beta = .347, t = 2.256, p < .05). This relationship may have attained significance in the 1990 but not the 1988 data because in the earlier survey, fathers were unusually high in both number of leave days taken and self-reports of involvement. Because the 1990 sample was more diverse, it showed more typical ranges in both sets of variables, in which covariation between the two could be more evident. Two of three available Swedish studies also suggest modest positive effects of paternity leave time on later involvement with the child (see review in Pleck, 1989).

Thus, most U.S. fathers today are taking short-term, informal paternity leaves, if the data cited here are representative. What makes this possible is that informal paternity leave involves no loss of pay, and little or no formal application procedure. By contrast, taking a formal parental leave almost always leads to loss of pay (a particularly important factor if the mother is already taking unpaid job leave), besides requiring formal application. Utilization of formal leave is thus much lower.
As already noted, many companies today offer parental leave on a gender-neutral basis, and many states currently require employers to do so. More states are considering such legislation, and similar federal legislation has come increasingly closer to passage over the last five years. While most fathers will take informal leave instead of the formal paternity leave provided by such policies and legislation, guaranteeing formal leave to fathers is nonetheless important and worthwhile. A few fathers have a strong enough desire to take more time off, or have medical or other special family circumstances motivating them to spend more time at home, that they are willing to give up some pay to do so. Gender-neutral parental leave policies make it possible for this small subgroup of fathers to take longer-term unpaid leaves, at extremely low cost to the employer.

Conclusions

Available data suggest that men's family involvement, while less than women's, is greater than is often thought, and is increasing. Men do or would use flexitime, child care supports, and parental leave, and their doing so benefits their families, to a greater degree than is usually recognized. Thus, family-supportive employer policies do have a positive impact on men, and are likely to do so even more in the future.

Interestingly, the extension of these policies to men has not been a central issue in their evolution. Policies concerning alternative work schedules and child care benefits were initially developed on a gender-neutral basis, and there has been surprisingly little interest in monitoring the degree of male as compared to female utilization. It seems unlikely that anyone would interpret data showing lower male use as a rationale for limiting them only to women. The extension of formal parental leave benefits to men has required more of an explicit cognitive shift by employers, and there has been more interest in the extent to which men use these benefits when they are available. But even here few data have been collected, and the unions and employers who currently have formal policies providing gender-neutral leave appear to have little desire to monitor male usage. The existing data suggesting minimal use of formal leave policies by fathers have not led to proposals to restrict them only to women.

While men do use and benefit from these family-supportive policies, there is nonetheless no question that their effects are generally less for fathers than for mothers. Fathers' and mothers' utilization of family-supportive policies occurs in the context of a marital division of labor in which women still bear the major share of family responsibility. Some have expressed concern that family-supportive policies in effect reinforce the traditional family division of labor (Bohen, 1984), in the sense that these policies cause wives' employment to exert less pressure for men to increase their family role than would otherwise be the case. However, since these policies also have been demonstrated to increase male family involvement, probably their net effect on the family division of labor is negligible.

Although the direct effects of family-supportive policies on men may be more limited than they are for women, the inclusion of men may have an important indirect effect. At a narrow level, the inclusion of men in these policies avoids the potential charge of sex
discrimination. In a broader sense, the inclusion of men also serves a political purpose. It makes family-supportive policies and programs more acceptable to management by reducing the perception that they are a special benefit for women. In addition, managers are more often male than female, and therefore feel more included. Thus, the inclusion of men in family-supportive policies may, besides benefitting men directly, increase their acceptance by employers, helping to create greater leverage for expansion of these benefits for women.
NOTES

1Some earlier analyses of changes in men's family time comparing these two surveys find a decrease; however, Pleck (1985: 143-146) provides a detailed examination of several puzzling inconsistencies among these analyses.

2Gershuny and Robinson (1988, Figure 1) report preliminary results from a 1986 national time use survey that suggests that men's child care time has decreased since 1981. This initial analysis, however, does not control for marital or parental status.

3A third study (Bohen and Viveros-Long, 1981) found that fathers working at a federal agency on flexitime spent no more time in child care than fathers in a federal agency on standard scheduling, though they did spend more time in housework. However, the Bohen and Viveros-Long study is methodologically weaker than the other two since it does not compare fathers before and after flexitime was introduced, or compare those who did versus did not change their schedules after the introduction of flexitime.

4The index was comprised of self-rating of time spent doing things with or playing with the child (a lot of time, some, not too much), of having regular times each week taking care of the child, of directly expressing affection to the child (very often, sometimes, not too often) and calming the child down when upset or crying (more often than wife, equally often, less often).
REFERENCES


