The Economist

Parenting and work

A father's place

Men have long been discouraged from playing an equal role at home. That is at last starting to change

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AT A "boot camp" for parents-to-be in New York, course leaders guide their students through baby maintenance for beginners: what goes in, what comes out, and how to keep them warm and clean. The students have the same questions and worries as expectant parents the world over. But there is one difference: at this particular boot camp, they are all men.

The City Dads Group, which offers the course to new and expectant fathers, was founded when Matt Schneider and Lance Somerfeld became fathers and discovered that society saw their place as firmly outside the home. New York was full of parents' support groups, but nearly all were aimed at mothers. Parenting classes focused on birth and breastfeeding, not child-rearing; general-interest groups were needlessly gendered, such as a music class called "Mommy and Me". Frustrated, the friends set up their own group, which has spread to 17 cities in America, helping dads who want to get involved from day one. "Fatherhood doesn't start when they join the Little League," says Mr Schneider.

Around the world, legal and financial support for new parents is better than it has ever been. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 85% of countries now provide at least 12 weeks' maternity leave. In all but two of the 185 countries it surveys mothers are entitled to some leave paid for by the state, employers or some combination of the two. (The hold-outs are Papua New Guinea and America, although a few states offer basic support.) Though only a third of countries meet the ILO's recommended minimum of at least 14 weeks off for new mothers, paid at two-thirds their salary and funded publicly, the picture in the rich world is broadly good, and in the poor world improving.

But how many countries meet the ILO's guidelines on paternity leave? None, because no such guidelines exist. Though it publishes detailed advice on such matters as breastfeeding

breaks for female employees, the organisation has drawn up no formal recommendations on fathers' rights and duties. Until recently, national governments have been similarly uninterested: less than half of countries offer paternity leave of any sort. Only around half a dozen offer new fathers more than a fortnight. Employers, not the state, usually foot the bill. In the eyes of most of the world, responsibility for bringing up baby still falls squarely on the mother.

It takes two

That view is slowly changing. Growing evidence suggests that children benefit from seeing more of their dads (see article (http://www.economist.com/news/international/21651202-children-whose-fathers-take-even-short-spells-paternity-leave-do-better-dad-dividend)). But much of the demand for a shift in attitudes towards parenting has come from women, who have started to conclude that they are victims as well as beneficiaries of generous maternity-leave policies.

Most countries have found that when they offer decent maternity leave, they increase female employment. If women have no right to take time off, or are entitled only to short or poorly paid spells of absence, many have little choice but to leave the workforce when their baby is born. If they can take a few months of paid leave before returning to their old job, they are more likely to continue working. American states that introduced a right to family leave found that women were 5% more likely to go back to work within nine months of giving birth. Canadian provinces experienced a similar effect when they began to introduce maternity leave a generation ago. A review examining 40 years of evidence across 30 members of the OECD, a club of mainly rich countries, found that female employment rises until the maternity leave allowance reaches two years. Only then does it start to ebb, as women decide not to return to work.

But it turns out that even shorter maternity breaks have unintended consequences. Time away from the labour market reduces women's earning power, as their skills degrade and they miss chances to gain experience and win promotion. Moving into senior management becomes particularly hard, partly because of discrimination by bosses and hiring committees, who reject candidates they think may be away a lot, and partly because many high-level jobs are hard to combine with serial leave-taking. In Germany studies have found that each year of maternity leave a woman takes lowers her earnings upon resuming work by 6-20%. In France each year of absence is estimated to lower earnings by 7-17%.

The effect is magnified when lengthy maternity leave is combined with policies to encourage part-time work, which tempt more women back into the labour force but help keep them in junior positions. Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn of Cornell University found that in America, where miserly maternity policies mean relatively few women work outside the home, those who do are more likely to work full-time and twice as likely to hold managerial

positions as women in other rich countries.

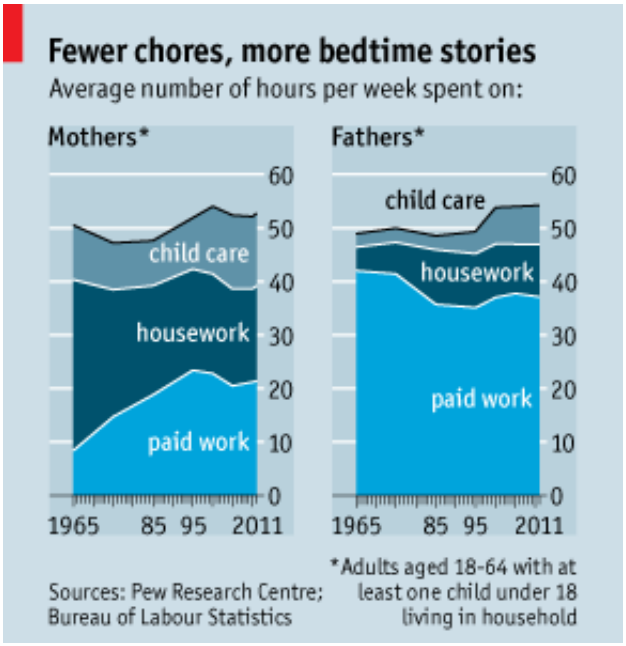
Rather than simply cutting maternity leave in response to such findings, a growing number of governments are trying to spread the child-rearing burden (or joy, depending on how one looks at it). Last month Britain became the latest country to combine maternity and paternity leave into a single chunk of parental leave, to be split between mother and father however they see fit. Several European countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand, already have such a system. The extreme in gender-blindness was reached in Sweden's 1995 Parental Leave Act, which was so right-on that it contrived not even to use the words "mother" and "father".

The problem is that dads tend not to take up the offer. In Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland, where all parental leave is transferable, only about 3% of dads make use of it. Swedish mothers complain that their partners always seem to book their leave during the elk-hunting season. In Britain the government has billed its shared-leave reform as a step

forward from the previous, "Edwardian" system, under which mothers got 52 weeks off and dads got two. But its own estimate is that only 2-8% of dads will take more than their existing fortnight. The reform will make "barely a ripple", predicts Rebecca Asher, whose book, "Shattered: Modern Motherhood and the Illusion of Equality", laments the "time machine" of parenthood which transports women back to the sexist 1950s.

One reason for low take-up by fathers is financial: even pre-childbirth, women are paid less than men, meaning that their salaries are easier to forgo during a period of unpaid or low-paid leave. But cultural pressures also weigh heavily. A rise in adoptions by gay couples—who in most countries are entitled to the same parental leave as everyone else—has helped make clear that time off is about bringing up the baby, not just recovering from childbirth, says Mr Schneider. But society still tends to see mothers as the main carers, with dads as blundering sidekicks. An advert for Huggies nappies a few years ago showed them being put to "the toughest test imaginable: dads", who were portrayed as well-meaning buffoons. Fathers who ask for more than a minimal time must prepare to be "trailblazers" in their workplaces, Mr Schneider tells the City Dads.

To overcome these obstacles, some countries are giving fathers a firm nudge. In a few, including Chile, Italy and Portugal, paternity leave is compulsory. Others offer incentives that are hard to turn down. Sweden has relaxed its gender-neutral approach and now grants a bonus to parents who share leave more equally. Swedish dads now account for more than a fifth of all parental leave taken, compared with almost none when shared leave was introduced. Germany introduced a similar system and saw the share of fathers taking time off rise from 3% in 2006 to 32% in 2013. In Norway, which has ring-fenced leave for dads, seven out of ten now take more than five weeks off. Poland has switched from shared leave to gender-specific quotas; France gives bonus payments to couples that split child care between them.



Bores, chores and bedtime stories: How parenting has changed in half a century (http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2014/07/daily-chart-19)

Where leave is well-paid and not seen as "belonging" to the mother, dads seem willing to request it. A little bribery, in the form of extra money or time off, accelerates the take-up. State meddling in what has historically been regarded as a natural division of labour may irk some. But traditional maternity leave, which channels men into breadwinning and women into child-rearing, is hardly neutral. And shared parenting stands to improve women's careers, children's development and perhaps even dads' life satisfaction.

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