

Amid chaos, parents find more time for children

by Tom Martin

I remember as a child returning home from a shopping trip with my sister and my mom. Dad had been left to tend our younger sister, who was still a baby.

Those were the days of cloth diapers, and we found one out in the yard of our farmhouse when we returned that evening. Dad had been forced to change a diaper. Appalled by its contents, he removed it from the child and whipped it out into the yard.

It's not that dad was incapable of taking care of us kids; it's that he wasn't used to it. Usually, he was working. He was a schoolteacher and a farmer, which meant he had to do his farming - 250 acres and some pigs - at nights and on the weekends.

What a difference a generation makes. I've yet to whip a diaper into the yard and I handle them daily. I don't work two jobs, but I do help around the house, mostly dishes and some bathroom cleaning. Actually, I'm in charge of cleaning the kitchen and the bathroom, although the bathrooms generally go weeks, sometimes a month or more, without my rubber glove treatment. I'm not much of a cleaner, but I help.

As it turns out, I'm as representative of today's husband and father as my dad was representative of husbands and fathers 40 years ago.

A study by researchers at the University of Maryland compared parents today to those in 1965. They used thousands of personal diaries to compile the information, which can be found in a book, "Changing Rhythms of American Family Life" (Russell Sage Foundation, \$37.50).

The study, reported October 2006 in The New York Times, found that fathers in 2000 spent more time on household chores and child care than they did 40 years ago. Married fathers spend an average of 9.7 hours per week on housework, compared to 4.4 hours in 1965. And today's dads spend an average of seven hours per week caring for children, compared to three hours in 1965.

Today's dad spends 54 hours per week on paid work, housework and child care, compared to dads in 1965, who spent 49 hours in those three areas.

I certainly don't work any harder than my father did - the type of work is simply different. The bigger generational change, however, is with mothers. In 2000, moms spent, on average, 15 more hours per week

working for pay and 13 fewer hours doing housework than did mothers 40 years ago. And yet they actually spend more time - three more hours per week - with their children than mothers did in 1965. In fact, according to the study, parents today (even single parents) spend more time teaching, caring for and playing with their children than did their counterparts in 1965 - seven more hours per week on average.

How do we do it?

For one thing, we let the house go a little, which has been my not-so-secret goal all along. My wife can attest to this. Our different philosophies on housecleaning and chores sometimes create a rift. And we tumble into debates about who does what around the house on a given day. It's not always pretty.

Besides the house occasionally being a wreck, our lives can feel out of control, like they're moving too fast. There's too much to do: child care, housecleaning, doctor's visits, work, bills, meals, laundry, work, shopping, child care. Somewhere we try to shoehorn in a little sleep. Much is said about the breakdown of the traditional family from the days when dad worked and mom stayed home. Certainly, the changing structure has challenged families and the results have had a varied effect on children.

Yet, despite the pace and chaos of family life today, it's rewarding to see that families are actually more tuned in to what matters most: spending time with the kids. Seven hours per week amounts to 364 hours per year and more than 6,500 hours over 18 years.

Clearly, parents are moving in the right direction. Plus, fewer diapers in the yard has to be a good thing.

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