

Work and Family

Not all of us are in a position to choose outright between work and family, but must somehow reconcile these often-opposing forces. You want to do your best at home and at work. Providing for your family is a significant part of being a good father, and you can't deny that much of your identity and sense of accomplishment come from your career. Surely you've faced the questions: Do I put in more time at work to pursue career advancement? Do I drop what I'm doing and head home to be with the family? Should I begin looking for a more father-friendly job?

A Hard Look at Priorities

Picture a tent, which is held up by guy wires. One rope pulls one way to a stake in the ground, while another pulls the other way. Unless there is just the right amount of tension, the roof of the tent can't do its job. Similarly, the tension that fathers feel between work and home can be productive. If struggles cause a critical review of priorities, that's a healthy exercise for fathers. Often, it is simply a question of priorities.

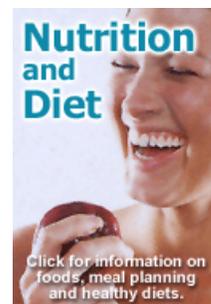
Many working dads are very adept at deciding between work projects that are important as opposed to those that are simply urgent. Unfortunately, they don't often apply the same principles when it comes to family. If you were asked, "Which is more important-this project at work, or your relationship with your daughter?" your answer would be easy. But life is rarely that cut-and-dried. Many men excuse themselves from fathering because they must fulfill expectations on the job, but too often it isn't so much a case of must as it is want. In our culture, it's easier for men to seek their identity in the workplace rather than the home. We're under pressure to perform regardless of the hours or number of business trips it takes to prove ourselves.

When we do our jobs well, there are fairly quick and tangible rewards: bonuses, raises, new titles, congratulatory memos. These rewards feed our desires for recognition and power, offering fast food for a starving ego.

In comparison, the rewards of fathering are much less immediate and obvious. Who praises you for going to soccer games? Did you get a bonus last winter for staying up with your son when he had the flu? Does your teenage daughter give you a big "Thank you" hug for spending an hour with her on geometry or taking her shopping for something she needs? No matter how important something may be, it's difficult to invest yourself in it when you aren't likely to see a "pay off" for months, or years, or not at all-especially when there are pressing deadlines today at work.

Several recent studies have concluded that success at home and at work is far from an "either-or" situation.

John Snarey of Emory University found that, in the long run, involved fathers "went just as far in their work as comparable



men did who were less involved with their kids."

A New Perspective

One key to resolving this tension is integration. Instead of seeing fast-track and daddy-track diverging in different directions, try viewing your career and your family as separate rails that make up one set of tracks. Normally, a man begins his career with little reference to anyone else. He was likely unmarried when he chose his college major and career direction, thinking only of what would best fulfill him. Now that he's been joined by a wife and children, a career is a means to an end: supplying for the physical and emotional well-being of his family.

Consequently, he is able to make decisions about promotions, transfers, and work schedules based on how it will affect his family. Furthermore, he views his work as one more aspect of his fathering, providing opportunities to model a healthy work ethic and demonstrate leadership skills for his children.

Rick spent 15 years pursuing success in the corporate world. He moved his wife and two children eight times as his career continued to take off. Soon his long hours at the office were accompanied by business trips that lasted days and sometimes weeks at a time. One day, upon returning from an extended trip, he saw his daughter in the back yard with another child. He asked his wife, "Who's that Amanda's playing with?" She replied, "That's your son." Rick quickly realized that his children were growing up without him. Two years ago, he left the corporate world and started a small company. Now, missing his kids' school events is an exception, not the rule.

Making Daily Choices

What actions can you take?

- Try asking your wife and children, "Is my work consuming me?"
- Put birthdays, recitals, soccer games, plays, etc. on your work calendar.
- Tell co-workers that you wouldn't miss those events for the world and ask them to help remind you.
- Look over your career goals for the next few years. Can you realistically accomplish all of them?
- Is your family's budget based on realistic needs, or on some culture-driven idea about earning power, upward mobility, and keeping up social appearances?
- Can you afford to make some changes in your work schedule for the sake of your family?

Short of making drastic changes, there are other daily steps dads can take to balance work and family, such as those suggested by Jim Levine in his book *Working Fathers*.

- Discuss your priorities with your boss. Be candid with him or her about times when you need to flex your schedule for family events.
- Make it clear that you are dedicated to doing your best at work, but that family is also very important to you.
- Suggest your own "win-win" solutions or ask for his ideas to help reach a workable balance.
- If it's feasible in your situation, learn to turn down or delay extra projects that you can't handle without compromising your family's needs.
- Proactively strengthen your relationship with your spouse. You'll be better prepared to handle the stresses of work confidently and as a team. Have her keep you informed of your kids' day, so you can ask them specific questions and let them know you're thinking about them.
- Create regular rituals to connect with your wife and kids—phone calls from the office, special "daddy" time when you walk in the door, or other

weekly events that keep you in touch.

- Block out time for your own rejuvenation, whether you use the time to exercise, take a walk, or wind down a little before going home.

What's Your "Vocation"?

In 1996, Congressman J.C. Watts made an important statement in front of millions of Americans. He said, "There is one title I cherish a whole lot more than the title Congressman, and that's the title ... Dad." When we talk about our "title" or our "vocation," we usually think about what we do for a living. We say we're accountants, engineers, telephone repairmen, school counselors, and so on. Even if we're not especially happy with the job, it's still our vocation.

But what if we thought of our vocation more as a calling-beyond what we do to support our families financially? Our calling as fathers includes working to provide for the needs of our wives and children. Our occupation is only part of our vocation.

**Our true vocation is to be faithful husbands and fathers.
That's our life's calling, our job, our focus, our greatest
achievement, our heart's desire.**

A Father-Friendly Workplace

The workplace doesn't have to be an enemy of good fathers-or employers. A growing number of employers are acknowledging the importance of family and encouraging men in their fathering.

Many organizations have found that "father-friendly" benefits and training provide significant benefits, such as greater company loyalty, reduced absenteeism, increased retention, and recruiting advantages.

What does "father-friendly" mean? It's so much more than paternity leave. Here are some ideas from James Levine in his book *Working Fathers: Communication*, with emphasis on open dialogue to find out the employees' needs and concerns.

- Flexible scheduling. Employees are given more control over when and where they get the job done. Flex time options make for happier workers and thus better, more dedicated workers.
- Support from the top. The leaders of a company need to give vocal and visible support to family-friendly issues.
- Reward workers for performance, not clock time.
- Childcare options that are as appealing and user-friendly to dads as they are to moms.
- Education for dads such as fathering seminars, distribution of father-equipping materials, regular e-mail with tips and advice, etc.
- Sensitivity to family emergencies, school events, etc.

Your company may already have lots of father-friendly policies, or they may be open to some positive changes. Or, it may take some time. The important thing is that we start adjusting our thinking to recognize the importance of a dad's role even when he's at work.

Take Action!

- Catch up with your children before you leave, so you'll know what they're up to while you're gone.
- Put notes of affirmation and "I miss you" in your kids' schoolbooks or lunch boxes.
- Tell your kids where you're going and what you'll be doing. Give them a sense of what you'll be accomplishing on this trip.

- Call home every day. Ask questions about the spelling test, basketball tryout or strained relationship.
- Give your kids a calendar and trip itinerary so they know exactly where you are.
- Take care of the lawn, leaky faucet, car problem, etc. before you leave.
- Have someone videotape the game or performance that you miss, then make a big event out of watching the tape.
- Agree with your wife that, when you return, you save daily details and problems until later. Spend time just enjoying your kids.

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