



Men's Lives

Breaking Dad: The Stay-at-Home Life

Think tech jobs are booming? Visit a playground on a weekday afternoon and observe the newest wave of the American workforce: the stay-at-home dad. He's got flexible hours, the freedom to explore his own interests, a pretty relaxed dress code, and a sweet home office. If you can stomach the sleep deprivation and mild feeling of emasculation, what's not to like? **ALEX FRENCH** reports from the front lines

BY **ALEX FRENCH** | PHOTOS: **AORTA**

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I never thought of myself as the type of guy who would be at a playground in the middle of a workday, but there I was, just the moms and their strollers and me: a stay-at-home dad. It was a brisk November Tuesday in Brooklyn, and Jack, my busy little 18-month-old, ran up a short flight of steps, carefully shuffled across a wobbly bridge, and streaked down the slide on his belly, feet first. He was still figuring it out. So was I.

When I quit my job a few years ago, I had precious little template for how to conduct myself as a full-time father—and precious little company. But then our ranks began to swell. First one lone dad showed up with his son on a school day. Then another. Then they started talking together, comparing their strollers, high-fiving by the swing sets. According to the 2010 census, the number of self-described stay-at-home fathers in the United States has more than doubled in the past ten years. (And that number doesn't even account for guys like me, men who play the role of primary caregiver while also working at least part-time.) There are major network sitcoms about us. We've got *Kindling*, a quarterly magazine devoted to “thoughtful dialogue” about dads and all of our creative pursuits.

The official SAHD narrative, which found its clearest articulation in a *New York Times* story last summer, reads like crypto-feminist propaganda: Until recently SAHDs have remained in the shadows, but now they're coming out, loud and proud. The decision to stay home with the kids isn't seen as a failure of their responsibilities

but as a lifestyle choice that makes sense in an era when 40 percent of wives out-earn their husbands and men are beginning to embrace a more fluid interpretation of success that places a premium on fulfillment, not money and status. The *Times* even turned up a hunky San Francisco SAHD who spent his afternoons salvaging flannel from a vintage sports jacket and turning it into a thigh-length skirt for his daughter. “It turned into this nice gray number with some distinguished flair,” he said. “This ain't the 20th century. There are 300 million people in the U.S., so there are 150 million ways to be a man.” Jeremy Adam Smith, a former SAHD and the author of *The Daddy Shift*, calls guys like me “pioneers who are quietly mapping new territory for all fathers.”

Sitting on a park bench, watching those other SAHDs trade gossip like middle managers around a watercooler, I sure didn't feel like a pioneer. I sat apart, alone with my conflicted feelings, pretending not to notice or care. And I wondered: Do they hate this business as much as I do?



When I moved to New York years earlier, I'd intended to become a war correspondent, the sort of writer that people at cocktail parties would describe with superlatives like "moral witness." I'd imagined myself embedding with troops and sneaking over borders under the cover of darkness. And I imagined returning to the States to an airy apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows and a stunning but marginally employed Italian actress whom I happily supported. But I skipped the war and never got around to the windows or the Italian; instead, I fell deeply and abidingly in love with T., the beautiful daughter of a western-Pennsylvania steel-mill worker. Our romance was frenzied, breathless. We married after just eighteen months.

A year after the wedding, we moved from our Williamsburg loft to Park Slope, a little hamlet of upper-middle-class insanity where mothers openly nurse their 3-year-olds in the window of Connecticut Muffin and where the sidewalks are always choked with \$700 strollers and donation-seeking foot soldiers from Planned Parenthood. Jack (not his real name) was born the year after the economy tanked. The Great Recession created thousands of SAHDs—men lost two and a half times as many jobs as women—hitting male-dominated industries like construction, manufacturing, and financial services hardest. I managed to keep my job, in the *GQ* research department, but I had my eye on the door. My plan had always been to write full-time, to piece together various assignments into a series of steady, growing paychecks. T. made good money as an attorney at a big Manhattan firm, but she saw my decision as another obstacle in our endless struggle to get ahead. I couldn't be swayed. I was restless. I needed a new challenge. T. consented, but with one caveat: Until the assignments started rolling in—until my writing career became reliable—I would watch Jack on Tuesdays and Fridays. We'd save the money we'd otherwise be spending on childcare.

I'll never forget my first day of SAHDness: calling T. repeatedly to inquire about when she might get home; how I never managed to change out of my pajamas; struggling to keep up with Jack and then at 4 P.M. surrendering and turning on *Serpico* while the baby sat in a rancid diaper. When T. turned up, our apartment was in complete disarray—toys scattered about like the shrapnel I once imagined myself dodging, dishes piled in the sink, the tattered scraps of a grilled cheese littering the kitchen floor, the pail in Jack's room overflowing with rotten nappies. Those first months were disastrous. I didn't think I was cut out to be a full-time parent. I was ill-tempered and self-absorbed. When I was supposed to be parenting, I was really thinking about work. These flaws manifested themselves in the worst possible ways—like on that day Jack and I went to the microfilm room at the public library to do some research. I was so preoccupied I forgot to feed him lunch and then discovered him trying to drink from a container of antibacterial wipes.

Meanwhile, my new career was off to a slow start, and I'd spend my days at home marooned in my own head, feeling bad about spending money because it wasn't money I'd earned. Feeling guilty about eating because it was food T. had paid for. But I was becoming a competent dad, and after ten months, T. pushed me to become a full-time SAHD—a cost-cutting move disguised as a vote of confidence. I resisted, instead electing to take on Jack for an additional one or sometimes two days per week. I had faith in my abilities, and working less wasn't the answer. So I pressed on, working late into the night and during Jack's naps. I kept a tight house and had dinner ready when T. arrived home from work. Jack and I took adventures all over the city. We spent hours on the subway, riding the F train from end to end, screaming "Choo! Choo!" at the top of our lungs. I taught him to dress himself and blow his nose and brush his teeth and piss in the pot. We spent hours at the playground—playing chase, blowing bubbles, perfecting a tandem skateboarding routine that made the moms double-take.



A year and a half later, we found out my wife was pregnant again, and by then I was ready for a second charge. Jack started preschool just as my daughter, Jill, (also not a real name) was born. I'd drop him off every morning and regret that he wasn't staying home with me. When T. asked if I wanted to watch Jill a few days a week, I didn't hesitate. She was just too perfect to share with strangers. So I kept her three days a week and grudgingly dropped her at day care the other two. The shame I'd once felt as a SAHD was morphing into a kind of pride.

But it's one thing to take pride in your job and another thing altogether to love it. Maybe I was conquering Everest-sized mountains of laundry, but I wasn't discovering anything or taking risks. I wasn't embracing a more fluid interpretation of success or sewing dresses from reclaimed flannel shirts. I had learned to accept that T. made a lot more money than I did; I was proud of her. But I wanted to chip in. And not just financially. I wanted desperately to be contributing something of value to the world. Instead I was boring friends with anecdotes of Jack's daily misadventures. I'd heard the argument that

raising your kids is the most important job there is, but while Jack and Jill were the best part of my life, I'd never wanted my kids to be the most interesting thing about me.

Curious how other SAHDs felt about these issues, I posted an ad on a local parenting website so I could meet a few of them. I wanted to step outside myself and see what my life might look like as a full-time stay-at-home dad. I received dozens of responses from guys who were eager to talk. I wanted to know about their hang-ups, their marriages, their insecurities. I wanted to cherry-pick their best qualities.



Michael Ring, a father of 12-year-old twins, was ceaselessly creative. When his kids are home from school on summer break, he plots out their days, taking them to playgrounds and museums all over the five boroughs. "We treat New York like we're tourists," he said. I met Pat Foley, an anthropologist who wanted to raise his 5-month-old son, Milo, to be fearless and adaptable: "If he has his eleven-thirty nap time, he doesn't have to be in the bedroom with the shades closed. An eleven-thirty nap time might be on the train or in the carrier. I want him to have grace under pressure. The other day I changed his diaper on the sidewalk on Canal Street."

The dads I spoke with all battled insecurities. "They freaked out," Michael Ring told me while describing his parents' reaction to his decision. "They thought it was a phase. My mother thought I'd never be happy. My father tells people I'm retired." My own dad,

who'd worked full-time as a civil engineer, had politely treated my staying home with the kids as a consolation prize for struggling professionally. To him, my writing career was a dream deferred, something that hadn't quite worked out yet but would. Meanwhile, getting to watch my kids grow up, hey, that wasn't bad. And he'd had his own experience with that kind of career hiccup. He'd founded an engineering firm in Boston in the '80s, but when the 1990 recession hit, my dad was forced to shutter the place. But he dealt with it. He put on a shirt and tie every day and went out into the world looking for his next job and was back up on his feet at another firm before too long. It was easy to understand how he might see my staying home in the same light.



When I described my insecurities about money to Matt Schneider, a SAHD living in Lower Manhattan, he related. "I don't think about it as her money, though," he said. "She couldn't do her job as well without me. When [my son] is sick at school or when she goes on a work trip, she knows I'm there." The most evangelical SAHD I met was Lance Somerfeld, a former corporate-finance guy, who co-founded NYC Dads Group, a social and support network of more than 850 dudes. Lance invited me to join his group for a minor league baseball game on Staten Island. The group had rented a luxury suite.

All the SAHDs took the ferry out to the game together. Upon arriving at the ballpark, a handful of dads sat outside with

their boys, attempting to explain the rudiments of baseball; the others stood around inside, shirts marked by sweat stains in the shape of Baby Bjorn straps, slamming bottles of spring water. Some of the dads sat cross-legged on the floor, playing with infants. I perched on a high barstool in the corner. Bits of conversation from the SAHDs in the suite swirled around me—I was afraid to bring avocado, because I thought it might go brown.... How do you like that stroller? One of my mom friends has a City Micro, too, and she loves it.... Listen, buddy, we don't push.... Use your words. It was like listening to T. talk on the phone with her mother, the way she breathlessly recapped the minutiae of our children's lives. Lance sat on the couch, holding court, telling the other SAHDs that the group had co-sponsored a petition against Procter & Gamble's "Proud Sponsor of Moms" advertising campaign that had been in heavy rotation on television. Lance was pissed about the "Thank you, Moms" tagline. He felt excluded; he wanted the world to know about the good work he was doing with his son. "We're asking them to change it to 'Thank you, Mom and Dad,'" Lance was saying.

And then I met Scott Moy. He was strapped to his 13-month-old, Dashiell, in a late-model Bjorn. It was feeding time and he was readying a bottle. "He only takes breast milk," Scott volunteered by way of introduction. "His brother, Byron, is 4 and unhappy because my wife stopped breast-feeding him." We conversed for a few minutes more, covering co-sleeping and diaper bags ("Check this out—mine has a cooler right down here at the bottom!") and Byron's recent attempt at vegetarianism. Scott was a virtuoso parent, a truly nurturing soul—when a kid fell while his dad was in the men's room, Scott was right there to comfort him. As soon as Dashiell fell asleep, Scott grabbed a hot dog and a cheeseburger from the buffet tins. He pulled the top bun from the burger, cut the hot dog into quarters, placed the pieces on top of the burger patty, and put the whole thing away with a few desperate bites. It seemed like a form of self-mutilation. When I asked him why he would do such a thing, he told me he didn't want to take the time to eat while Dashiell was awake. Then I watched him shovel more food into his mouth, and I wondered if Scott Moy hated himself.

That's probably not fair—Scott seemed perfectly content. But watching him sure made me feel bad about me. With a deep internal shudder, I saw in him my possible future: too absorbed in my kids to properly feed myself, unable to make conversation that doesn't revolve around them. The whole scene was deeply unsettling. I had to get out of there.



Later, when I told Lance that Scott Moy had freaked me out, Lance told me that Scott is a hell of a guy, a damn good father, and worthy of a follow-up. So one morning I went with Scott and Dashiell to a Hell's Kitchen playground a few blocks from their apartment. Dashiell crawled from one end of the jungle gym to the next and then backed down the slide feet first, the way my son used to. Scott picked the boy up and brought him back to where he'd started. After his elder son, Byron, was born, Scott took a three-month leave of absence from his job at a Midtown ad agency. When he returned to work, he thought only about the baby; he even set up a Skype account on his home computer and left it on all day so he could see what was going on. He took a leave of absence. That was four years ago. He planned on returning to work after Byron started preschool. Then Dashiell was born, and Scott decided to delay a bit longer.

When Dashiell starts preschool in six or seven months, Scott said, he'll go back to work. He's thinking about a career change, though—he wants to paint portraits of kids and families. He trained at the School of Visual Arts in New York. What he wants is a flexible schedule that will allow him to be involved with his kids' education.

"Do you have any outside interests?" I asked. He laid Dashiell down on the slide and tenderly wiped the boy down with a wetnap before sliding him in the Bjorn.

"I don't have time for outside interests," he said. "I'm working day and night. I've gotta have dinner ready. I've gotta have the kids ready for bed. I've gotta have the apartment clean. The more I do, the less my wife has to. I used to do karate, but I gave that up years ago. I'm putting everything else off."

Silence. I was trying to figure out how to ask my next question. I told him that my biggest reservation about becoming a SAHD was going soft, feeling neutered. Becoming a stay-at-home dad who acts like a '50s-era housewife. Did he feel that way? Had that happened to him?

"I'm constantly walking up to people at the playground who are smoking pot and telling them to leave. I'm fighting to have the beer-and-wine license of the hookah bar under our apartment taken away because the smoke goes into our

Five Pieces of Kids' Pop Culture That Do Not Suck

Drew Magary's guide to keeping the tots entertained without losing your mind

1. Recess Monkey

A lot of kiddie music is unbearable (especially when the singers are kids). If your little one isn't into High on Fire, go with Recess Monkey, who write songs that both parents and children can mildly tolerate.

2. 'Peppa Pig'

She's a piglet! A British piglet! She's even cuter than Prince George, I tell you. Bonus fact! All the characters' heads on this show look like giant penis drawings. You can't unsee it.



3. The Olivia Books

More pigs! If you stock your home with these books by Ian Falconer—and Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss—you have everything you need. No, you don't need the junior novelization of *Turbo*.

4. 'Little Einsteins'

You may quibble with a show that features a kangaroo hopping all the way to Jupiter (the kangaroo would probably die!), but this show does teach kids about art and famed composers. SO CLASSY.

5. 'Sesame Street'/The Muppets

Just prepare to have your heart stomped on when your kids tell you they don't give a shit about Jim Henson's masterworks.

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apartment and now Byron needs an inhaler. Does that sound like something somebody mild would do?"

Scott was riled up now, ranting, looking me dead in the eye. "Raising kids isn't for soft people," he said. "I know this isn't looked on as manly. I've got the cashier in the supermarket asking me where his mother is. And I've met reporters like you before—you come to the dads' group citing research about declining testosterone in men who are always around children. Your opinion doesn't matter. My wife doesn't look at me any differently than she did when we first met and I was the one with the money and the apartment." He paused and took a few moments to cool down. "My wife and I realize how lucky we are," he said. "She's lucky because I quit my job so she could pursue her career. And I'm lucky because she lets me do this." Dashiell had finally fallen asleep and hung there limp, like a little rag doll.



As I left Scott that afternoon in Tribeca, I knew clearly that being a stay-at-home dad wasn't for me. I had convinced myself of something I didn't believe. T. and I had gotten it right: Three days a week with Jill was a blessing. But it was also enough.

A few weeks later, T. landed her dream job and we moved to a house in rural New Jersey with a yard for the kids to run around in, and I left behind my life as a SAHD. On my last day looking after Jill, I was scared, stressed, giddy about this fresh start with my career. Every so often, though, I'd panic at the thought that I was surrendering something precious. Not every guy has this opportunity; I'm glad that I did.

Now, every morning, T. takes Jack and Jill to preschool, and two days a week I hop on a commuter train into New York City for an adjunct job teaching at NYU. The other three days, I'm left alone at the house to chase down my writing career. We function like some version of a typical suburban family now—I have dinner ready every night when T. arrives home with the kids. I mow the lawn on Thursday mornings and take Jill with me to do the grocery shopping on Sunday afternoons. It's both stereotypical and not, a patchwork of traditional parenting and real-life, whatever-works improv.

All of that time I'd taken getting this new career off the ground, I was worried about my kids not seeing me as the type of solidly successful parent they could look up to as a role model, the way I had with my own father. The thing is, they'd always had one: my rock-star wife. While I was chasing my ambitions, she was forever heading off to her nine-to-five, forever striving to earn them a better future. Kids need that figure, just like they need dinner on the table and clean clothes. As for me, I didn't need to choose just one role. Being a SAHD doesn't mean letting go of your ambition. Just like being ambitious no longer means leaving your kids with a sitter every day. Even with fading gender norms, we're still putting ourselves in boxes. It's time to have it all.

ALEX FRENCH is a freelance writer.

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