

Home work

Do working fathers really want to spend more time with their children? Matt Seaton is sceptical

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Wednesday January 15, 2003

The Guardian

Well, it is heartening news indeed that the equal opportunities commission has found that we dads are putting in more time as parents. Apparently, fathers of under-fives are spending on average two hours a day with their children, compared with the 15 minutes their forebears spent just a generation ago. Pats on the back all round, chaps. But there's more: according to the EOC report, the new-model, touchy-feely father would be at home even more if only he were less worried that he would be seen as a workshy wimp by his bosses and colleagues for claiming flexible hours and trotting off early to spend some quality time with his kids.

Ah, that "if only". "If only," says the father to the EOC researcher, summoning a misty look to his eye and a plaintive note to his voice. "Of course, I'd like nothing more than to spend more time at home with my little darlings, but look at me - I'm completely a prisoner of the macho long-hours culture in this place." Boxes ticked, the researcher moves on to the next interview; father gets back to the pressing priorities of his working life - visiting eBay to check the status of his bid on that portable beer cooler.

Suspecting, then, that these EOC findings might not be the whole story, we decided to conduct our own research into how working dads spend their long hours. Our exhaustive analysis of working-time management in a typical 10-hour day for our sample (of one) found the following: personal phonecalls, 17%; aimless websurfing, 12%; purposeful websurfing (celebrity), 16%, ("adult material"), 3% [interrupted]; pointless errands, 7%; chatting, 21%; flirting, 2% [rebuffed]; day-dreaming and thumb-twiddling, 6%; energetic show of dedicated hard work, 11%; making tea, 3%; miscellaneous time-wasting, 2%.

Combined with the "quick drink after work" with a colleague (note to partner: if you're reading this, that was actually the important marketing meeting I told you about), this father's unflagging commitment to putting in time at the office ensured that he sadly spent rather less than two hours with his children. To be precise, 11 minutes; of which seven were spent ignoring them, three yelling at them to stop shouting at each other, and one explaining that he really wasn't qualified to give an opinion on who is the best fighter in DragonBall Z and that, frankly, he couldn't give a monkey's.

Of course, we all aspire to be better parents than we are. Even fathers. We would all like to give our families more of our time. But where the EOC research is seriously flawed, I believe, is that it does not take into account what I call the theoretical physics of parenthood. Anyone who has spent time with small children will have experienced quantum mechanics as applied to childcare: according to an unpublished theorem of Albert Einstein - a notable absentee father: he knew something, that guy - the closer you approach a young child, and the younger the child, the more time itself becomes "sticky", as physicists say, and slows down. This is why, for example, it often seems to take hours to get a baby off to sleep, and then their naps appear to last for only a few seconds (known as the "barely-time-to-make-a-coffee effect").

The converse also holds true: put some distance between you and the child, and time speeds up again. The father we spoke to, for instance, was astounded when told that he had spent more than 12 hours absent from the family home; to him, the time had passed in a blur that amounted to just a few minutes of "subjective time".

The paradox of this phenomenon is that it seems to apply mainly to men. Women rarely report the sensation, whereas men regularly notice that the minutes spent supervising their toddlers' activities or helping with their kids' homework or playing family boardgames stretch out as they have not done since they themselves were schoolkids in the first period of a double-maths lesson. Some difference in brain chemistry is suspected that renders men more susceptible to finding the company of small children crushingly dull.

The truth of the matter, of course, is that we men are workshy wimps. That's why we prefer to stay in the office, in the safe and undemanding refuge of the long-hours culture and our breadwinning role. Believe me, we know where the real work goes on - which is why we're shy of it. If you ask me, I'd say that figure of two hours a day is just typically male, macho boasting. "You give your kids breakfast, huh? That's nothing: I give mine their baths and read them a story. Every other night, yup."

Ah, if only.