

Dads Crack Under Pressure

Professor Matt Sanders

Not so long ago I saw a television advertisement where two young boys were comparing notes about their fathers. One child told another that while he didn't know exactly what sort of job his dad had, it was definitely a really 'cool' and important one because his dad was always busy and away a lot of the time. His young mate looked on in obvious awe. It was clear to him that his own dad was pretty much a 'looser' — he came home from work at a reasonable time and spent weekends off work.

What's really worrying about the above scenario is while no doubt the copy writer's essential message had nothing to do with parenting (but instead was trying to sell me some everyday household produce that immediately slipped my mind the moment the advertisement went off air), it is nonetheless a sad comment on today's working family life.

More than forty percent of men report that work stress affects their home life. Long hours, increased use of contract employment, greater job insecurity, and the challenge of adjusting to changing work

practices, can strongly affect a person's ability to evenly balance home and work. And when that home includes children, the question needs to be asked: just what are the spillover effects of all this extra work stress on children?

“Being a parent and a worker is a busy and demanding life and it is normal for both mothers and fathers to feel stressed at times.”

The advertisement referred to above is an example of one possible result — sons who learn that this is the way a man's working life should be, growing up as yet another disengaged non-involved dad who defines his very self-existence solely on his ability to provide for his family. The cycle starts again. Fathers place extra work burdens on themselves and increase the family burdens on mothers.

This cycle is a very real factor in many people's lives, young and old. It's not something you can easily fix either. You can't blame men for learning off their parents, and you can't blame fathers for wanting to look after their family financially. What is required is a substantial shift of attitude for males toward a more complete definition of what their masculinity represents.

I'm not talking here of some weekend bush retreat to 'get in touch with the inner-man' by sitting around a fire howling, but rather practical considerations about the importance both to children and to men of the role fathers play in parenting. Rather than judging their self-worth only in terms of their ability to cope with their work life and leave most parenting to their partners, men need to feel confident in their own parenting skills and aware of the importance of these skills.

With this changed attitude will come the inevitable desire to be both a better parent and the commitment to seriously explore ways to reduce stress that may be interfering with family life.



for every parent



Healthy Child Manitoba
Putting children and families first

Manitoba 

That's not to say we can remove stress or never be affected by it. Being a parent and a worker is a busy and demanding life and it is normal for both mothers and fathers to feel stressed at times. However, if parents often have high levels of stress, it can be hard for them to deal with their children's behaviour calmly, and they may be less likely to spend time with their children.

Parents under stress may have explosive outbursts over little things their children do that normally would not worry them. If they get angry, they may be more likely to criticise their child and the risk is that they may lose control and harm them.

We know from history and research that children are likely to grow up happy and learn what is expected of them when their parents are calm and consistently use positive parenting strategies with them. Although it is not possible to be perfectly calm and consistent all of the time, stress is something that can be handled in a number of ways, some more helpful than others.

For busy, career-oriented fathers an important point to remember is that the stress they feel that motivates them to push a little bit harder and succeed at work also has the capacity to unknowingly build into constant pressure that will eventually overload them bringing feelings such as anger, frustration, irritability, anxiety, tiredness, hopelessness and depression.

The challenge for stressed fathers is notice tension in themselves that is symptomatic of stress and do something about it such as using relaxation techniques, encouraging self-talk ("I can do this if I remain calm."), seeking help, and making necessary lifestyle and/or work changes if possible. Just how easy or hard that is to do depends on a lot of factors.

Here at the University of Queensland we are endeavouring to help stressed fathers by finding out more about the effects of their stress on the family through a new research project. Exploring the relationship between daily life hassles

and home life, we are seeking fathers with children aged between two and ten who would be prepared to keep a home and work stress diary for one week. Our aim is to develop tailored parenting programs that will be directly applicable to stressed fathers and give them practical tips to find the right balance between home and work. If you interested in participating in this study please contact Carly at the Parenting and Family Support Centre on 33657290.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.