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# Embracing the Role of Stay-at-Home Dads

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# Embracing the Role of Stay-at-Home Dads

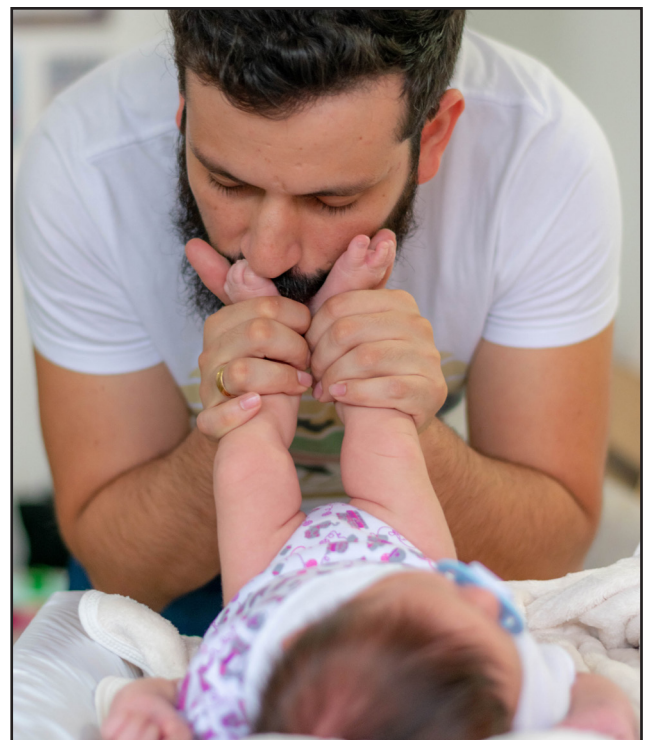
By Kade Cope

“By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children.” This line, from *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*,<sup>1</sup> has adorned the walls of many Latter-day Saint homes since its publication in 1995. These words are familiar and often quoted, but how often do we consider the next line? “In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. . . . Other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation” (see Footnote 1). Here, the Family Proclamation acknowledges that the way parental responsibilities are fulfilled may look different from family to family.

Faithful families confidently adapt their roles to the myriad of individual circumstances in which they find themselves. Successfully adapting requires understanding a truth outlined in the Family Proclamation: that families have both emotional and physical needs that must be prioritized. While there are many different ways that parents might adapt to fulfill these roles, some families faithfully fulfill these responsibilities by having a stay-at-home dad and a working mom! Because this type of family stands out against the norm in Church culture, this family structure can be more difficult for some to understand and accept.

However, such a setup may be exactly what the Family Proclamation could be referring to when it mentions these “other circumstances” that may require some flexibility. There are many reasons why a stay-at-home dad and working mother setup might be a necessary adaptation for some families, including better financial opportunities,<sup>2</sup> differing education levels of parents,<sup>3</sup> and even the personality styles of the parents.<sup>4</sup> When stay-at-home dads lean into their role, they are often able to develop a greater capacity for emotional connection with others,<sup>5</sup> which can be a tremendous benefit to fathers’ individual well-being as well as the well-being of their families.

Despite this, there remains an almost universal misun-



derstanding about the diverse ways that fathers and mothers can work together as equals to meet the needs of their families. This lack of understanding results in a deeply-rooted stigmatization that can negatively affect stay-at-home dads as well as their families. Indeed, negative perceptions can supplant what would otherwise be a unique and beautiful experience for these families.

Each of us has the ability to change these misunderstandings and create a better experience for stay-at-home dads. Here, I will list three of the top reasons why stay-at-home dads need and deserve more support, as well as what we can do to show our love toward these fathers and their families.

## 1. Changing the Stigmas Associated with Being a Stay-at-Home Dad

One drawback that stay-at-home dads experience is a stigma around their identity that is often inaccurate, and even brutal and unfair. With a common stereotype of a “true man” being a John Wayne-esque type who spends his day working, sweating, and getting his hands dirty, it is no wonder that stay-at-home dads struggle to measure up to this rough-and-tough ideal of masculinity.



With this stereotypical image of manhood, men who spend their days at home playing with, feeding, and rocking children to sleep are less likely to be respected in terms of their manhood. Studies have shown that stay-at-home dads are more likely to be perceived as lazy, unmasculine, or—more alarmingly—predatory for taking on the role of caregiver (see Footnote 3)

Consequently, we all have a responsibility to expand our view and discussion of fatherhood. By placing more value on caregiving (which is, in fact, undoubtedly hard work), stay-at-home fathers will become more respected, and these damaging stigmas can become a thing of the past.

## 2. Improving the Mental Health of Stay-at-Home Dads

In light of these alarming stereotypes, it is no surprise that these stay-at-home dads are more likely to suffer from mental health challenges. Dads often receive the message that their value to their family is measured by the amount of money they make. These messages are often communicated both explicitly and

implicitly from others and the result is that dads who spend their time as the primary caregiver often experience shame, emotional instability, anxiety, depression, and negative self-perception (see Footnotes 3 and 6). Regardless of the impact this internalized stigma has on their mental health, many men feel a pressure to hold up a strong front and avoid seeking help from therapists and mental health professionals.<sup>6</sup> Unfairly, the same stereotypes that can make stay-at-home dads feel undervalued also make them believe that taking care of themselves is highly unmasculine.

So what if, as family members and friends of stay-at-home dads, we repainted help-seeking as a valuable trait for both men and women? What if seeing mental health professionals, and loosening the grasp of shame, depression, and anxiety were championed as a way for parents (both male and female) to cope with the stress associated with the responsibilities of meeting the emotional and physical needs of their children?

Fathers who take care of themselves and their own well-being are better able to love and support their spouses and children. Not to mention that when kids see their dads getting mental and emotional help, they can learn that even heroes need a little bit of saving sometimes. By encouraging, supporting, and not shaming stay-at-home dads for the help they need, we can help transform these fathers' experiences of caregiving.

### **3. Increasing the Value We Place on Gender Equality**

Last but not least, stay-at-home dads are, in many ways, making unprecedented strides toward gender equality. These dads reportedly have a more open-minded perspective toward gender roles,<sup>7</sup> and many develop the capacity to meet their children's emotional needs through traits of gentleness, warmth, and nurturing. These traits of caregiving are typically associated with mothers, but research shows that children benefit in almost every way when at least one and ideally both parents are able to exhibit such traits.

In addition to extending the possibilities for what fatherhood and masculinity can look like, stay-at-home dads are also allowing women and mothers to open new doors and have opportunities to develop and use skills that they otherwise may not. In this way, these husbands and wives truly follow the Lord's admonition to "help one another as equal partners" (see Footnote 1).

## **Conclusion**

When we remember the words of The Family Proclamation, that "other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation" (see Footnote 1), embracing and including stay-at-home dads seems only natural. As

our minds and hearts begin to open to these fathers, we start to form a positive image of stay-at-home dads, encourage better mental health and self-perception, and create better opportunities for gender equality in fulfilling the responsibilities outlined in the Family Proclamation. These fathers, who give so much to supporting and loving their families, deserve to feel loved and supported in return. This support will encourage these fathers in the unique roles they hold, allowing them to be both fulfilled and effective in the important work they do in their families.

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