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## Fatherhood is more visible than ever. But will dads working from home actually step up more?

By **Samantha Schmidt**

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Steve Centrella’s video conference calls from his D.C. home are now held to the sound of shuffling Legos and his 4-year-old son singing “cheetahs speed and lizards glide!” Prithvi Raj, a father of three in Manhattan, leads meetings while bouncing a 2-month-old infant on his lap. Levi Coldiron, in North Carolina, has become used to talking to his boss while his 4-year-old daughter swings from the fireplace mantel and shrieks, “The floor is lava!”

As millions of Americans work from home with their children nearby because of the coronavirus pandemic, parents everywhere have become “the BBC Dad,” the father whose live broadcast interview went viral three years ago when his daughter strutted into the room. Zoom calls now begin with disclaimers about the kids crying in the background. Meetings are scheduled around nap time. The wall between work life and family life has crumbled.

And as a result, fatherhood is more visible than ever before.

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“The fact that men are now plopping their babies in their laps while taking conference calls, showing that men, too, do this work, is really important,” said Caitlyn Collins, a Washington University sociologist focused on gender and families.

The heaviest burden of the pandemic is undoubtedly falling on women, who studies show still spend more of their day than men caring for children, doing the laundry, cleaning the house and preparing meals. But some sociologists have begun to wonder whether men will use this extra time at home to step up and take on more of the child-care and household chores. With fatherhood quite literally on display in the virtual workplace, will dads invest more time in taking care of their children? And will they be applauded by their colleagues for doing the same work that women have been doing forever?

“Maybe this pandemic can help normalize the fact that, yes indeed, men are caregivers,” Collins said. “There’s nothing extraordinary about it.”

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Fathers today are far more involved in their children's lives than the generations before them, said Scott Coltrane, professor emeritus in sociology at the University of Oregon, where he focused on the role of fathers. But women still carry out more of the responsibilities at home. On an average day in 2018, full-time working and married mothers spent 1.2 hours caring for their children, compared to 49 minutes per day for full-time working and married fathers, according to the American Time Use Survey. In households where both spouses were working full time, mothers spent an average of 2.1 hours per day doing household activities such as cleaning, cooking or lawn care, while fathers spent about 1.4 hours.

Studies have shown that women do more of the housework even when they make more money than their husbands, and even when their husbands are unemployed.

“This might be an opportunity for men to own up to how much they're doing,” Coltrane said. “But they have to actually do the work.”

Before the pandemic, Scott Lathrop's employer gave him the option of working from home once a week. But the 37-year-old father of two, a customer service manager for Union Pacific railroad in Omaha, almost never did. It's just too difficult to work remotely, he said, especially with his two young daughters around.

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Now, he has no choice but to answer client phone calls while watching 2-year-old Ella and 5-year-old Samantha playing on the driveway. The other day, Ella ran into his office and spoke right into the microphone of his headphones, asking him to come help her get on her tricycle. He has become used to apologizing to his colleagues for the sound of the nearby garage door opening and closing. “This is the life I live now, sorry guys,” he tells them.

But this is what his colleagues don’t see or hear:

His wife, Jessica Lathrop, gave up the home office where she usually works as a Democratic political consultant. She offered to set up her work station in the kitchen instead, where she could help keep an eye on the girls during the day. Her job is more flexible, she said, and her colleagues are used to seeing her taking care of her kids while working — it’s what she does anytime the girls are home sick.

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“Most of them already know I’m a working mom,” she said. “People are used to seeing more moms juggling it.”

Her husband takes shifts watching the girls in the afternoons and evenings, and tries to keep them distracted while she’s on important calls. To entertain them on a recent afternoon, he staged an Easter egg hunt around the house — four times in a row. He also has offered to trade work stations with her, but they agreed the girls would end up going to her for help, even if she tried escaping to the office.

“I try to help as much as I can, but at the end of the day, the girls want their mom,” Scott Lathrop said.

“I don’t know how to make that switch,” Jessica Lathrop said.

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Instead, Jessica Lathrop ends up doing most of her work in the middle of the night. These times remind her of the sleepless nights she spent pre-scheduling emails when the girls were newborns. “I had been looking forward to not doing that anymore,” she said. “I just need time to stop.”

But she feels lucky that her husband makes an effort to help, and that they’re both getting more time with the girls. She thinks it’s a positive step to see so many parents, especially fathers in leadership roles, allowing their children to interrupt work conference calls.

“Even in the best, equal sharing of parenting relationships; most of this stress for parenting while working from home falls onto the moms,” she recently tweeted. “So dads — do this for your colleagues, your partner and to be an example for your kids.”

She knows she’s carrying a demanding load at home right now. But she has friends whose husbands are far less involved. “They shut the office door and just let their wife handle it,” she said.

Beth Coldiron's husband generally does a lot more of the cleaning and housework than she does. Levi Coldiron, who works for the City of Salisbury, N.C., is the parent that stays home with their 4-year-old daughter, Addison, if she gets sick. But ever since they've both been working from home, Beth has been in charge of setting up activities to keep her busy, such as the paper plates she taped to the walls to teach the 4-year-old phone numbers.

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It makes sense that the mother is in charge of the home schooling — she is a middle school chorus teacher, after all. But Beth also is simply better at multitasking, a skill she learned as a mother pumping breast milk while doing lesson plans, she said. She's able to focus on work even while Addison is jumping all over the living room, where the Play-Doh has started sticking to the carpet.

Levi Coldiron was reminded of a parody of the viral BBC dad video, imagining if a mother had been in the professor's place. When a toddler walks into the room, the mother calmly starts giving her daughter a bottle while she continues to talk about politics in South Korea. As the interview continues, the mom takes out a pan of roast chicken, steams her husband's shirt and defuses a ticking bomb.

"I would get flustered and stop the call," Levi Coldiron said. "My wife would just keep rolling. That's what she does. I think moms are used to that."

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Prithvi Raj, the father of three in Manhattan, has made a point of letting his daughters enter his video conference meetings when they need him. Raj, the chief operative officer at the commercial real estate company SquareFoot, was recently leading a company meeting with 70 people when his daughter came up to him and complained that her younger sister wasn't letting her watch a video about how to paint unicorns.

"Why don't you sit on my lap?" Raj said. He introduced his colleagues to his 4-year-old daughter, Leela, as she waved at the camera.

Raj hopes that moments like these set an example for other fathers and mothers at the company, showing them it's okay to let your home life into your work life, and that it's possible to be productive while working from home and helping take care of the kids.

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Since Steve Centrella started working out of his home in Columbia Heights, some of his colleagues have complimented him for spending so much time with his son. “That’s just great that you’re so involved,” one woman on his team said. “My husband wasn’t really like that.”

But Centrella, who manages a team of real estate agents, doesn’t think he’s doing anything extraordinary.

“If the choice is between work and family, that’s almost an impossible choice right now,” he said.

Before the pandemic, Centrella said he was “one of those people that needed a little reminder” to do certain chores around the house. But with him and his wife working from home, he’s tried to be more proactive, using down time between calls to empty the dishwasher or do a load of laundry.

Before, 4-year-old Oliver was more likely to go up to his mother, Lauren Centrella, to ask for help. But the parents have noticed that Oliver has started calling on his dad more — even at the most inconvenient times.

During a recent work conference call, Oliver shouted out for his father. “I’m in the bathroom!” Oliver said, drawing laughs from Steve Centrella’s colleagues.

With the quick-draw reflexes of all parents now working from home, the father pressed the mute button and rushed to the bathroom to assess the crisis.

Oliver had dropped his book while sitting on the toilet. Could Daddy pick it up for him?

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