

Neal McKenna

PO Box 6505, Cresta Postal Station, 2118
Johannesburg, South Africa

Telephone 011-782-2869
Cell: 072-554-3561
e-mail: neal.mckenna@gmail.com



Dad @ Home

– *The Taming of Homo Domesticus* © 1999 - by Neal McKenna

Summer is almost here and very soon, it will be Father's Day. Though not as much a "Hallmark Moment" as Mother's Day, Father's Day is still a significant event. Until cloning or binary fission become practical means of human reproduction, there will always be a job for Dad. But, contrary to the opinions of some, fathers have always been much more than walking sperm banks. Being a father comes with much responsibility and is a job any guy can take on with absolutely no training at all.

Chances are, if the full job description were disclosed beforehand, fewer would rise to the call.

In the 1990s, parenting is not so much a tradition, but rather, a philosophy. This shift in mind-set is really a backlash to where parenting has been since about 1945. Today, male / female roles are not so clearly defined. There are stay at home dads, who are the primary care givers to their children, while the wife is the one brings home the bacon from the outside world. But to get from the traditional nuclear family – which actually self-destructed around 1955 – to House Dads at the verge of the 21st century, we have to engage in a bit of a history lesson.

To be blunt, the post World War II era spawned a severe decline in parenting as a priority. Social pressures of those boom years were immense. The most horrific war in recorded history had just ended. Everybody wanted life to get back to normal. Of course, back then, just as today, nobody knew what “normal” actually was. Instead, there was a vision. Possessions were supposed to buy happiness and they were an easy measure of success – and everyone wanted to be successful.

The “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality was in full bloom. It was everywhere. TV families lived in large perfectly, maintained homes; drove longer, lower, and wider cars; and there was never a shortage of money. An abundance of money was the new currency for happiness. Everybody also wanted to be “happy,” – very happy. Ultimately, the dream was achieved – prosperity thrived. There was exodus from the country and the city to a new state of being: suburbia!

More people than ever before lived in homes they actually owned. But it didn’t take very long until the ill-defined dream began to take on nightmarish aspects. In the ‘burbs, housewives discovered they weren’t getting orgasmic thrills from their “Radar Ranges” or the fact that their laundry was “spring-time fresh.” Faced with unattainable ideals, they led lives of quiet desperation trying to emulate TV moms like June Cleaver and Harriet Nelson.

Desperate or not, everyone knew their roles – those, at least, were very well defined. Wives stayed home and raised the kids while husbands spent more time on the job than in their respective castles. They had to – there was a whole heck of a lot to support – the ranch style bungalow, the pool, the picket fence, the two chrome cars, the country club membership, not to mention the “little woman” and the obligatory 1.8 children. The experiment continued through the 60s and Vallium sales reached all-time high records.

Then, came the 1970s and the women’s movement. Western culture took a ninety degree turn. Women were striving for equality. – And why shouldn’t they? Unfortunately, the desire for emancipation took and kept more and more women out of the home. Of course, by then, a second income was absolutely necessary to support the family lifestyle. The 70s were known as the “Me First” decade, which adopted an “anything goes” philosophy of life – and that included child rearing. “Latch-key” kids, largely grew up on their own.

With the arrival of the 80s, yet another shift occurred. “Yuppies” – young, upwardly-mobile persons; “Muppies” – married upwardly-mobile persons; and “Dinks” – double incomes, no kids, were the people to be. Greed was good and the older boomers

continued to scoop up the lion's share of good jobs and resulting prosperity. This, unfortunately, was also the coming of age era for Generation X. Arriving on planet Earth at the tail-end of the baby boom was, to say the least, unfortunate. But, because "Gen-Xers" were many, and therefore powerful, they would make their presence and displeasure known. Change would soon be in the air.

Just for the record, Gen-Xers, people born between 1961 and '66, collectively can be described as a darker, more cynical, reincarnation of the 60s counter-culture. However, their peckishness is justified. Historically speaking, they were at the ticket booth as the gravy train chugged out of the station, on its way to Easy Street. So, now, the circle is complete. Today, many Gen-Xers are parents, and a lot of them were latch-key kids, to boot. Those who were, have vowed to raise their children much differently. These "new wave" parents have changed the rules, and in growing instances, it is the man who has become the primary care giver. In fact, the Housedad is one of the fastest growing segments of our society. According to Stats. Can., one out of every five stay-at-home parents, is a man.

There is good reason for the emergence of the sub-species known as Homo-Domesticus, the Housedad. Remember corporate down-sizing in the late 80s and early 90s? Layoffs became one of the more common reasons why fathers returned to the nest to care for their children. Today, a man staying home to raise his children is an entirely viable alternative. Women have made great strides in the work place and are finally beginning to earn equal wages for equal work. Statistically, women have a better shot than men at successfully advancing in the work place. As we launch into the 21st century, women occupy almost half of all upper-management positions. At least 50% of married women earn half or more of their family's income, and many wives are earning a good deal more than their husbands. If women can – and do – earn enough to support a household, men no longer have to be the only choice to play the role of bread-winner.

That brings us to the present and the occupation of House-dading. First of all, it takes courage and a great deal of intestinal fortitude to take on the job. Moms have known that truth for the last several millennia. Parenting, especially on a day in, day out basis, is difficult and often thankless work. So, let's be honest, how many of us would respond to a job opportunity if it read like this?

HELP WANTED :

M/F Willing to work full time days & part time nights, weekends included. Duties include, but not limited to: all aspects of child-care, house cleaning and general maintenance, cooking, baking, serving, bussing and other assorted kitchen and household tasks. No experience needed. No training given. WE OFFER: No advancement. No taxable benefits. No vacation and NO salary.

Yes-siree, it's the opportunity of a lifetime and that's just about how much time it takes! But think of it – no more commuting, no traffic, no bus schedules. Now, when you roll out of bed, you're on the job. Although, even when your sleeping, you're still on the job. You have escaped the nine to five grind for a nine to nine marathon. You are on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year – and on leap years, you get to do it an extra day! You've replaced those three martini lunches with formula

bottles, Alpha-getti, and Barney. You have given up power meetings for powdered bottoms.

Can it get any better?

Well, there's always that half century old societal predisposition to believing parenting is a lesser pursuit than "really working" for a living. It gets much larger if it's the man doing the child rearing. As a matter of fact, at the start, when it came to researching this article, it was difficult to locate any men who were willing to be publicly identified as Mister Moms. There were plenty of leads but one by one, they shied away from being outed as stay at home, full-time parents. Perhaps using the term "Homo-Domesticus" scared them off. Whatever the cause, it was startling to discover an unspoken sense of shame. It seems for most men, what they do for a living defines them as people as well as their value in the greater society.

Eventually, a scant few of the intrepid, the resolute, and the secure did come forward. Two were from Peachland, of all places, and the third, from Kelowna. One is a true representative of the new order, a stay at home Dad with a wife firmly ensconced in the workforce. The second is also a stay at home father but he is a divorced single parent. Not only does he remain close to hearth and at homestead, he operates no less than three home based businesses. Finally, parent number three is a guy who works outside the home but still is the full time Dad of a fourteen year-old.

"When we first moved to Peachland," says David Ross, "we did the traditional thing but we always had it in mind that I would be the parent at home. We wanted to get away from having two full time jobs but spending one salary to pay someone else to raise our kids." David and Linda Ross have three children ranging in age from almost two to ten years old. Once Linda signed a full time teaching contract, David quit his job as an automotive parts man and took over duties at home. "David is much better at raising the kids on a day to day basis." insists Linda. "He's a great cook – except for his pitiful bag lunches, so I make those out of self preservation for us all. ...As for housekeeping, he's better at that, than I am, too. I'll concede that point anytime."

"I guess I am a bit fanatical about keeping a clean house," he admits. "It may have something to do with wanting to do a job right from the get-go, but more likely, it's a quirk in my personality. I like the house to be clean and tidy. Having small kids on the run is no excuse for a sloppy house." In this instance, David Ross, even among house-husbands, could well be an anomaly.

Usually, when it comes to standards of cleanliness, there is little or no agreement between the sexes. Women are from Venus; obviously quite a pristine place. Men are from a far dustier environment, like maybe, the asteroid belt. For most guys, dust bunnies are considered friendly fauna. If someday, you find yourself employed in domestic engineering, don't let this become a serious bone of contention. If your wife wants the house cleaner, let

her do touch-ups that will bring it up to snuff, or better yet, hire someone who will clean to professional standards. That way, everybody will be happy.

However, don't take this next word of caution lightly, it contains great truth. Just because you do the cooking, the cleaning, and the diaper changing, it does not necessarily mean your wife will mow the lawn, shovel snow, or change light bulbs.

Though, you are “the man about the house,” you will always be the man of the house. Some gender roles are slower at evaporating than others. Until they do, you, the husband, will have to double up on certain household tasks ...But let’s get back to Peachland.

Aside from being a full time Dad, David Ross is also a member of Peachland Fire and Rescue. “At the beginning, I took a lot of ribbing from the guys at the Fire Hall. You know, the kept man thing – staying home, eating bon-bons, watching the soaps and talk shows. But after a while, it died down. They found out I was just a regular guy whose job was at home and involved full time parenting.”

During the course of their days, stay at home Dads do different things than stay at home Moms. By virtue of the fact that David’s job was in the home, he was able to complete the dry-walling and painting in their house himself, as a regular part of his work week. This is something Linda would not have done, had she been the parent at home. And because indoor and outdoor chores are done throughout the week, the family has more free time for recreation on weekends and school breaks.

In most ways, the Rosses are a typical family. “We have one house rule around meal times,” explains David. “There must be at least one meal of the day where there is family conversation and discussion. It’s a little forced when you have an eight and a ten year old but it’s coming along now. Lot’s of times, we’re just talking about the things that went on in our days. But we’re together and sharing as a family. It’s a good habit to get into and our kids are used to it. Family conversations over dinner are going to be a part of our lives as long as any of our kids remain at home.” David Ross leans back in his dining room chair and grins a satisfied grin. “So, in the end it doesn’t matter what I do to make my living. As long as I believe I am the best parent I know how to be, then, I’ll be satisfied I’ve done a good job.”

David Doyle, another Peachland resident, puts a slightly different spin on the scenario. He is a divorced single father with a ten year old daughter. Oddly enough, failed marriages and high divorce rates have actually helped to promote a revival in responsible parenting – especially fathering. Children of divorced parents, perhaps learning from their parents’ mistakes, have a genuine desire to do things better. Divorced fathers – most of whom have not been dipped into the “deadbeat pool”– now have had more of a hand being involved with their children. Men who start a second family are usually more aware of what they missed the first time, and are confidently trying the hands-on approach the second time around. They also make up a significant portion of the new breed of parent.

In his old work life, David Doyle lived by his day book. Today, as an at home parent, he still sticks to a schedule. “In order to get everything done, we have to live by the book. My kid is only ten and she uses a daybook too,” he continues. “Living on an acreage also means I do a lot of gardening and we both have a lot of outdoorsy activities. We live more simply than they did before, but I think that’s a positive.” Five years ago, at the beginning of this grand experiment, was he prepared for taking on an active five year old? Well, yes and no. “I was a teacher and I taught Special Ed.,” laughs Doyle. “I thought I had a most of the answers, and I did. But real life proved to be a far cry from the educational model. But once we got things underway, it was me who did a lot of learning about parenting.”

But what about Mad Housewife Syndrome? Don't you ever crave the company of other adults? "Oh, yes," David Doyle quickly agrees, "you quickly come to understand how difficult it is for a person to do everything from the home. Interaction with other grown-up people is really important. A single stay at home parent can easily go from one week to the next without seeing another breathing adult. Home PCs and communication technologies are great tools, especially for those of us conducting business at home, but they can be extremely isolating."

When asked for his take on why some men may be reticent in declaring their status as parents at home, David Doyle made an interesting observation. "I think it's the way men have been trained," he concluded. "In a market driven economy, you have to hide who you are on the job, and perhaps now, in order to save face, people have to do the same thing at home. On the other hand, being that I am a full time parent myself, I think they should be celebrated. There is absolutely nothing that's given me greater personal development than raising my child on my own. I actually hear her when she talks to me now. Before I thought I was listening but really, I was only hearing what I wanted to hear. The bond between us is much stronger now because we see each other as people as well as father and daughter. It's been a big step forward."

Definitely, it is agreed, being a single parent, no matter what your gender is a tough job. This person gets to be both Mom and Dad all the time. Naturally, the outside world still makes the assumption that if there isn't a second parent, there's got to be lots of support coming from somewhere. Well, nine times out of ten, it just isn't so. The truth is: nine to five workdays and thirty-five hour work weeks are only memories from days of yore. After work, commuting can easily eat up several more hours of the day. School holidays easily outnumber work holidays ten to one – Winter Recess, Spring Breaks, Teacher Evaluation Daze, and let's not forget those lazy, hazy, crazy days of Summer! Then, just to sweeten the pot, you've got to factor in days lost to inclement weather, and childhood illness. Let's face it, the best place, other than a hospital, to catch anything viral is a school! And, don't you just know it? Your kid will bring the bug home to share with you!

So, what of another mythical beast – the one called affordable Child Care? To be truthful, Kelowna and area is blessed with a good number of useful parenting resources. Community Child Care Societies, for instance, provides much in the way of "hands-on" information — like what to look for when seeking out the services of a child caregiver. Nursery school, preschool, and play school, are meant for children 30 months old to school age, who attend morning or afternoon two to five times a week. Family day care provides an in-home environment for infants right on up to pre-teens. Group day care is a more structured setting which offers up to thirteen hours of care and activities five days a week. In turn, group daycare providers aim their services at three specific age groups – Infant / Toddler, up to 36 months; Preschool, 2^{1/2} years to school age; and Out of School, 6 to 12 years old. Great as all this may be, no one yet, in either the private or public sectors, has come up with a system that really meets all the needs of single parents in the real world. – And when push comes to shove, it's still someone else who is raising your kids.

Fortunately Doug Pumphrey, our third brave parent, doesn't have to contend with the rigors of Day Care. He is a single father of two boys, a pre-teen and a fourteen year old.

However, he works at a full time job outside the home. Full time single parenting is very new to him since his oldest son came to live with him just this past November. “I was a bit of a struggle at the beginning,” Doug admits. “My housekeeping skills have certainly improved in the last little while. I don’t think I was ever really messy, but I run a little tighter ship now. It’s the example thing, I can’t expect my son to be a certain way if I’m not setting a good example. This way, he has to take on some responsibility for keeping things up around the house. If he doesn’t, there’s no allowance. – If I don’t do my job, I don’t get paid, if he doesn’t do his, it’s the same deal.”

Living the single life since 1991, Doug now has daily responsibilities.” I can’t just take off any time I feel like it, like I did before,” he admits. “But the benefits are great. We are good company for each other in the evenings. I feel really fortunate that I have such a good relationship with my son,” Doug confides. “Weekends are filled with motorcycling, boating, camping, hunting and fishing but he spends time with his friends too. We spend a lot of time together. Shared activity is the key. My parents spent a lot of time with me as a kid, so I know how important that is so, I do the same.”

Of course, single parenting a teenager is fraught with its own peccadilloes. Boys especially need to assert their independence and often do in the most creative of ways. “The last thing I want him to be doing at sixteen is hanging around outside some 7-11,” says Doug. “It’s also a priority that my older son maintains a close relationship with his mother and brother. Kids need both parents, especially after a divorce. I think he’s getting that balance.”

So, as we enter this new era, it is reasonable to conclude that a woman may not necessarily be the best person to raise the children. Fathers are proving to be just as capable of nurturing and care giving – if they have the desire and are given the opportunity. Could the best person to play Mom be dear old Dad? Yes, it just might be. So, with that said, here’s to you, Dad. Whatever role you play in raising your children, we salute you because from now on, you’ll likely be doing a lot more of it!