

What Modern America Expects of Dads

Welcome to This Is America from VOA Learning English. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Bob Doughty. This week on our program, we look at modern changes in the American father.

Moms Are Great. But What About Dads?

Father's Day was observed this year on Sunday, June 16. This special day to honor and celebrate fathers has over a century of history behind it. In 1909 there was a woman named Sonora Dodd. She was in church at a service for Mother's Day, which is celebrated in May.

Her mother had died in childbirth, leaving her father to raise her and her five brothers and sisters. She thought about how difficult it had been for her father to raise six children all by himself. She decided that since there was a day honoring mothers, there should also be one recognizing fathers.

Sonora Dodd campaigned for the idea in her home state of Washington, in the Pacific Northwest. The first Father's Day was celebrated in June of 1910 in the city of Spokane. June was the month her father was born.

At first Sonora Dodd had found little support. But in the years that followed, the idea of Father's Day spread across the country. It gained the approval of President Woodrow Wilson in 1916. Yet he never signed an official proclamation, as he did two years earlier for the first Mother's Day.

President Calvin Coolidge in 1924 added his support to a national observance of Father's Day. Then in 1966 President Lyndon Johnson declared it the third Sunday in June. Finally, in 1972, President Richard Nixon made it permanent.

Other countries also celebrate Father's Day, some on the third Sunday in June, others on a different day.

Dads Are More than a Paycheck

OK, let's be honest. As holidays go, Mother's Day in America is still a bigger deal than Father's Day. But millions of dads receive at least a card or a call or maybe a necktie or some other gift from their family. And much has changed since that first celebration in 1910.

Kevin Roy is an associate professor in the Department of Family Science at the University of Maryland. Professor Roy says fathers today are expected to do more than just provide financially for their families' needs.

"Cultural expectations have changed kind of dramatically, where now we have what's called a package deal. Which means that fathers are now expected to not only be providers but also caregivers for their kids."

The change from providers to caretakers could be seen in the differences between two television fathers from different generations.

In the 1950s and early 60s, Robert Young played Jim Anderson on the family comedy "Father Knows Best." He was an insurance salesman who worked hard to provide for his family. He did not cook or clean much—that was his wife's job—but he was a thoughtful father and husband.

"Well Cathy, I don't want a million dollars, or even a half a million. I only want enough money to have a nice home like we have, and good food, good health...and enough money to help those less fortunate than ourselves from time to time."

"And enough to raise my allowance a little."

"I might even arrange that."

By the time "The Cosby Show" began in 1984, it was common in American society for mothers to work. Bill Cosby played Heathcliff Huxtable, a loving husband and father who was a doctor married to a lawyer.

Heathcliff and Claire Huxtable were partners not only in marriage but in managing the household and parenting their children. Here, Cliff Huxtable tries to teach his son Theo an important life lesson.

"How do you expect to get into college with grades like this?"

"No problem. See, I'm not going to college."

"Damn right."

"I am going to get through high school and then get a job like regular people."

"Regular people?"

"Yeah you know...who work in the gas station, drive a bus, something like that."

"So what you're saying is your mother and I shouldn't care if you get Ds because you don't need good grades to be regular people."

"Right."

He Never Said He Loved Me...Guess He Thought I Knew

In the 1970s, Harry Chapin sang a song about a father who never seems to have time for his son.

When the father gets older and wants to connect with his son, the son is the one who is too busy. The song was called "Cat's in the Cradle."

In the early 1990s, Reba McIntyre described a similar situation between a father and daughter in "The Greatest Man I Never Knew."

When Dads Are in the Delivery Room...

Mike Kaufman is a radio broadcaster based in Washington, D.C. He considers himself a modern dad who got involved in parenting early.

"We both wanted to, you know, take on equal parts of the challenges, equal parts of the joy, equal parts of the burden and equal parts of the preparations."

Like many other couples, the Kaufmans took pregnancy and childbirth classes together. They took another class that taught them life saving skills to use in an emergency.

So how does Mike's experience compare with the way he thinks of fathers when he was growing up?

"You have this vision of dads back then pacing in a waiting room, you know ready to hand out cigars, you know, as a congratulations. 'I just had a boy, just had a girl—whatever, we have a new child!' Now dads, you know they go to all the appointments with their wives, prenatally, all the doctor checkups. They're in the delivery room when the baby is born. I mean, that's definitely something that's new."

...Moms Have to Adjust Too

Today men are often more involved than their fathers were in parenting their children and helping with housework. Still, it is not always smooth sailing.

Julie Shields is the author of "How to Avoid the Mommy Trap: A Road Map for Sharing Parenting and Making It Work." She says creating a balance between partners takes work.

"The problem is, in the old days when people had a traditional division of labor, it was very clear as to who should do what."

Author Julie Shields says couples today often have a hard time trying to decide how to share responsibilities. Women often talk about needing more help from their husbands. Yet, she says some women have a hard time giving up control.

"Once we try to get our husband to do something and he starts to do it, we critique the way he does it. And then a lot of times the men will pull back. So it's very important once you've given up something, to stay out of it and not fix it if it goes wrong."

When it comes to parenting, she says, men may not do things the same way that women do. The "Mommy Trap" author says that does not mean they are doing it wrong, just differently—at least at first.

Is There Anything Dads Can't Do?

According to the Census Bureau, the United States had nearly 200,000 stay-at-home fathers in 2012. These are men who have stayed out of the labor force for at least one year, mainly to raise children while their wives go to work.

The number of stay-at-home dads is up by almost 50,000 in the last four years. And the number of stay-at-home moms has dropped 300,000 in those four years to 5 million.

Mike Stilwell is a stay-at-home dad. He is also the head of a support group in the Washington area known as DC Metro Dads. He says the group has about 600 members. Most of them, including himself, stay at home by choice, he says. But there are times when the decision is simply a question of economics.

Mike Stilwell and his wife decided early that if the cost of child care got to be too much, one of them would quit work. That time came over 12 years ago. Mike has been a stay-at-home-dad ever since. He says most of the dads in his group have the same responsibilities, questions and concerns that stay-at-home moms have.

"The only thing that we always try to stress is that a stay-at-home dad can do the same things that a stay-at-home mom can do. I always like to joke with some of the new dads that come into the group that there's really only two things that a stay-at-home-dad can't do, and that's give birth and breastfeed."

Our program was written by June Simms. Transcripts, MP3s and podcasts of our programs are at learningenglish.voanews.com. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Bob Doughty. Join us again next week for This Is America from VOA Learning English. We leave you with Luther Vandross and his Grammy-winning song of the year from 2003, "Dance with my Father."