

We need policies to help fathers stay at parenting coalface

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I grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, in a home structure as conventional as the cardboard stage set of a cornflakes ad. Mother, father, 2.5 children, suburban cul-de-sac. All that was missing was the Labrador.

This ostensibly idyllic vision of regular family life was illusory — as they always are. But at the very least, it can be said there was little, if any, confusion over the division of labour in our house.

On weekday mornings my dad would head into the city to his office job, briefcase in hand, while my mother was on hair-plaiting, face-wiping and packed lunches.

She worked outside the home, on and off throughout her life, in a number of different jobs. But in this nuclear unit the roles were clearly defined — the domestic sphere, and its burdens, largely belonged to her, while my father, it was accepted, was the one who brought home the bacon.

On a Saturday morning — a time I now understand to be one when both parental engagement and decibel levels tend to peak in any household with small children — it was not unusual for him to quietly disappear from view for extended periods, only to eventually be found sitting in the car reading a newspaper.

Those were the days long before iPhones, and the modern-day version of this endures, of course. Who could forget the scene in the warts-and-all depiction of family life in the film *This is 40* in which the father character played by Paul Rudd spends so much time seeking refuge in the smallest room of the house that he develops a haemorrhoid.

But on the whole, family structures and values have shifted. Spending Saturday mornings blithely disengaged from the family while your spouse labours away in the parenting trenches indoors is these days frowned upon, to say the least.

But perhaps we haven't come as far as we would like to think. Less than half of Irish men are currently taking up their entitlements for paternity leave, according to a new report from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the ESRI.

Introduced in 2016, and representing a pretty measly two weeks, paternity leave in Ireland is already shorter than the OECD average. Parental leave, an extra provision that entitles men or women to 26 weeks of unpaid leave, is taken up by less than a quarter of fathers, but two-thirds of mothers.

The reasons for this imbalance are probably complex. The study was carried out during Covid, which may have skewed the results.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has weighed in, saying the flat rate of payment for the leave is a lose-lose for families and “few fathers can vindicate their right to time off work to care for their babies at one of the most expensive times for a young family”.

But if families are losing out here, it's likely that society is too.

Masculinity is under the microscope, again, after the release of the Netflix series *Adolescence*.

In the tsunami of commentary that followed the show, amid concerns for a so-called lost generation of young men, one of the common themes repeatedly cited has been the role of fathers, or more specifically the current “epidemic of fatherlessness”.

One memorable study, now a decade old, but enjoying revived prominence recently thanks to *Adolescence*, found the average 15-year-old boy in the UK is “more likely to have a smartphone than be living with their father”.

These trends — the on-screen nature of childhood and the growing “liquidity” of children's social and familial structures — have only hastened in the decade since that study was carried out.

But in that time, while much emphasis has been placed on the breakdown of marriage, precious little attention has been given to efforts and policies that might increase committed fatherhood — whether within or outside a nuclear family structure.

One of the few people talking about this issue is the evolutionary anthropologist Anna Machin, who in her 2018 book *Life of Dad* laid out the vital importance of committed fatherhood to human evolution.

Sunday Independent *Ireland Thinks.*

Q Should children be banned from having smartphones until the age of 16?

67% Yes
24% No
9% Don't know

In almost all other mammalian species, fathers play almost no role in rearing their young. Human dads are outliers because our evolution has determined that the paternal bond plays a critical developmental role for children.

Machin has also drawn attention to the biological, (especially hormonal) changes a father who spends time actively caring for an infant and child goes through — which significantly and permanently reshape his brain, priming him for the empathy, problem-solving and planning necessary for successful parenthood.

In other words, fathers, just like mothers, are forged at the coalface of parental duty. And, like mothers, this process happens through early, consistent, connected exposure to their children, from the earliest stages.

The more opportunity they have to be present with their children, the greater the benefit.

In Sweden, where fathers get three months of paternity leave, one study from 2008 found that longer paternal leave was linked with increased father-child contact later in life, even if the men studied separated from the child's mother.

At a time when there is a crisis of loneliness, any measure that helps reinforce a lasting, father-child bond seems like an easy win-win.