

Dads seek work-family balance after second child

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Credit: University of Michigan

There's a tug-of-war in many households after the second child is born, but don't blame the siblings.

The struggle involves [dads](#), who feel increased pressure to balance work and family in the new two-child home. In fact, work-family conflict inhibits men from being involved in infant care after the birth of a second child in both dual and single-earner families, according to a new University of Michigan study.

Dads initially are minimally involved with the [infants](#) as they spend more time with the firstborns.

"Over time, involvement between children starts to even out as dads increase their time with infants and decrease their involvement with firstborns," said Patty Kuo, the study's lead author.

Differences between dual- and single-earner families

Published in the current issue of *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, the study evaluated [fathers](#)' involvement in two-child Midwestern homes and analyzed gender role beliefs and work-family conflict. Kuo and U-M colleagues collected data from the Family Transitions Study, which assessed changes in the [firstborn](#) children's adjustment and family relationship.

The sample consisted of 222 families—mainly middle to upper-middle class. Dual-earner families were defined as the father working full time and the mother working at least 20 hours per week. Single-earner families had the father work full time but the mother working less than

20 hours.

Couples reported on father involvement with firstborns and infants when the infants were one, four, eight and 12 months old. They also disclosed gender role beliefs, rating statements such as "a wife should have equal authority with her husband in making family decisions" and "the husband should be the head of the family."

Dual-earner fathers were more involved in the care of the firstborn at one month when they held beliefs that both individuals in the relationship are equal. Gender role beliefs were not a significant predictor for single-earner fathers with firstborns at one month.

Study participants also provided information on work-family conflict, such as if job responsibilities made it difficult to get family chores and errands done. It was negatively associated for both fathers in both groups. Kuo said the reason wasn't the amount of time fathers spent at work, but the conflict in managing the stress between family and work that predicted their involvement in infant care.

"The work-family conflict is not only a problem in dual-earner families, but also single-earner families—challenging the perception that dads who are breadwinners do not have work-family conflict or experience repercussions from work-family conflict," said co-author Brenda Volling, U-M professor of psychology and director of the Center for Human Growth and Development and Research.

Given that men are increasingly valuing work-life balance and using that as a criteria for employer selection, employers will need to adopt father-friendly policies to retain and recruit the best talent, the researchers said.

"These results suggest that inflexible workplace policies, rather than long work hours, may prevent fathers from being actively involved in the

family life following an infant's birth," said Kuo, a University of Notre Dame postdoctoral research associate who collaborated on the study while a student at U-M.

Fathers devote "hands-on care" with firstborn child

Researchers say the transition to second-time parenthood may shed light on why fathers were more involved with the older child. Perhaps, as Kuo said, it's in response to the mothers' greater involvement with the newborn that allowed her to bond with the infant in the early months.

In addition, the fathers may need to devote more "intense hands-on care" for the first born (around 2.5 years) when mothers may have been busy with the feeding and caregiving demands of the infant.

Finally, firstborn children were older in dual-earner households than single-earner families when the second child was born. This indicates families with two working parents were spacing their children farther apart, in part, to meet the demands of the workplace and demands of small children, the researchers said.

Being involved with firstborn important for family dynamics

Society tends to focus exclusively on the challenges of caring for a new baby and judge dads based on their involvement with the baby. Fathers involved with the firstborn is an important part of helping the rest of the [family](#) (mom and firstborn) adjust to the birth of a new baby, Kuo said.

"Our work mirrors a lot of other research showing that dads are not very involved in [infant care](#)," she said. "However, being involved in the physical care of infants is a very important part of relationship-building."

When dads are less involved, they are less able to accurately read their baby's signals. This means they can't respond sensitively, which is a crucial predictor of secure attachment (which develops during infancy and has long-term consequences in children's social and emotional development), Kuo said.

More information: Patty X. Kuo et al. Gender Role Beliefs, Work–Family Conflict, and Father Involvement After the Birth of a Second Child., *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/men0000101](https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000101)

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