



Events that Shaped Fatherhood in America

Families have changed as our culture and society have evolved. Parental roles can be traced along a timeline to give insight to today's families... Explore the paradigm shift.

Over the past 300 years, the dominant cultural ideals of fatherhood and motherhood have varied along and across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and religion; however men's and women's roles and status within the home have been closely connected to work and productivity.

Historically, men's authority within the family was rooted in their ownership of property, their control of craft skills, or their role as the family's chief wage earner. In recent years, as increasing numbers of mothers have entered the paid work force, breadwinning – the central component of paternal identity for a century and a critical factor defining men's time commitment to their family – has become a responsibility shared by women and men.

The Industrial Revolution brought the differentiation of working class and middle class families – few men could support a working class family on their own wages; the kinds of work available produced high rates of geographic mobility – many fathers were away from home for long periods of time.

World War I increased wages, allowed more working-class men to support their families on their own. The New Deal prohibited child labor, expanded workmen's compensation, and targeted jobs programs at male workers.

The Great Depression was a critical turning point that drastically reduced men's involvement with their families. With no wages to punctuate their authority, large numbers of men lost self-respect, became immobilized, and stopped looking for work, while others turned to alcohol and became self-destructive or abusive to their families. The mother-child axis began to stand at the heart of family relationships.

World War II brought a new focus on children who grew up without fathers. Social analysts argued that fathers had a critically important role to play in children's personality development, not as nurturers or caretakers, but as sex role models and disciplinarians. Fathers were encouraged to be buddies with their sons and to teach masculinity. (Think about the lessons Ward Cleaver imparted to his sons.)

During the late 1960s and 1970s, development of birth control, the Sexual Revolution and the Women's Rights Movement brought drastic changes to the role of fathers in the family. More women entered the workforce, insisted on equal rights, and took the lead in family planning. This coincided with a rapid rise in the divorce rate which coincided with a loss of men's economic, psychological, and emotional contributions to the family. Rising delinquency rates, declining academic achievement, and persistent poverty were blamed on single and especially teenage mothers.

Shifts in social policy that began in the early 90s have placed a new focus on responsible fathering. More current belief is that it's not as simple as irresponsible men creating a crisis of family values. There's been a paradigm shift to look at the complexity of families and social norms.

Vice President Al Gore's Fatherhood Summit brought together leaders from social services to discuss issues around fatherhood and community well-being. Many of today's leaders in the field of father engagement were part of that convening.

President Barack Obama's Responsible Fatherhood Campaign provided federal funding allocated to promote healthy marriages and responsible fatherhood.