

## Whether by choice or because of the recession, more dads are staying at home with the kids

BY Tripp Whetsell

Monday, July 26th 2010, 4:00 AM

Like Ed Drossman and 78 others like this.

Despite the heat, the line of strollers inside the Union Square Park playground at 11:30 a.m. on a recent Wednesday was already parade length.

The scene was typical - except that all the adults around the swings and seesaws were men who had traded in careers for diaper duty.

One of them, 37-year-old Lance Somerfeld of the Upper East Side, had arranged the gathering. Two years ago, he gave up his job as a Bronx elementary schoolteacher after his son, Jake, was born. His wife, Jessica, commutes daily to her job as an insurance actuary in Connecticut.

Since Jake was born, Lance has become a full-time dad, doing everything from arranging play dates to preparing meals and handling the family finances.

He also runs the NYC Dads Group, which hosts regular activities and outings for other stay-at-home fathers in the metro area.

The Somerfelds said the experience has been mostly positive, although both admit there was a period of adjustment.

"The hardest part initially was getting our parents, who are older and from another generation, to accept that we were going to do this," Lance said.

"For me, it just made the transition to being a working mother much easier," Jessica added. "I do a fair amount of business travel and, if I'm on the road, I know I don't have to worry about whether our son is being properly looked after."

But while such arrangements may cause disagreements and raise eyebrows, they're also part of a fast-growing trend among men - mostly in their 30s and 40s - who are quitting or rethinking their careers while their wives bring home a big enough paycheck to support the family.

It's very hard to pin down exactly how many men are adopting these lifestyles in the city or nationwide. According to the Census Bureau, there are about 158,000 stay-at-home fathers in the U.S., nearly double the number of a decade ago. But that total does not include at least two large groups: dads who were laid-off or ones who work even one-day a week part-time.

Some child-rearing experts, sociologists and economists say the unofficial total is much higher because more men lost their jobs in the Great Recession than women.

Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute in Manhattan, added: "What I'm seeing is that men in general are much more involved in the lives of their children even when they're working. The recession may have boosted a trend that was happening already. But for men who have lost their jobs when their wives haven't, I think their reaction has been to take some time to be at home with their kids while they reevaluate things.

"I think it's a newer role for men, and newer roles where you don't have examples of how you should act are always a little stressful, especially when you're used to being the breadwinner," she said.

Stress aside, however, many dads are embracing their new roles.

For Patrick Spillman, 41, of the Upper West Side - who unexpectedly became a stay-at-home dad to his 2-year-old daughter, Grace, after losing his job at Fresh Direct - it has been a "blessing in disguise."

[nydailynews.com/.../2010-07-26\\_wheth...](http://nydailynews.com/.../2010-07-26_wheth...)

"I've been doing this since she was born and, initially, there's definitely a feeling of 'I'm not working anymore,' but after a while you get used to it and it becomes second nature," Spillman said.

"You also have to look at it in the grand scheme of things and what it really means to the well-being and nurturing of a child over the course of a lifetime. Even though I'm missing out on professional development, it's nothing compared to seeing my daughter grow. If you can extrapolate that out, then the pluses far outweigh the minuses," Spillman said.

One of those pluses is living in New York, where several men said there's more support available because so many moms work. The NYC Dads Group, which was created in 2008, has more than 200 members, while Web sites like AtHomeDad.org and AManAmongMommies.com have been cropping up in increasing numbers in the past several years.

Meanwhile, more fathers are showing up at PTA groups and gymnastics classes, and changing tables in men's restrooms are now hardly an unusual site.

For a lot of stay-at-home dads, it's also a matter of dollars and cents - because they've been laid off or their wives have more lucrative careers and the cost of a baby-sitter or nanny is too costly compared to their salaries. Still other dads pursue part-time employment either from home or on the weekends.

That's what Adam Gertsacov and his wife, Stephanie Schwab, 41, of Yonkers, Westchester, decided to do shortly before their son, Aaron, was born. By day, Gertsacov takes care of Aaron while Schwab works as a social media director for a Manhattan public relations firm. On weekends, however, Gertsacov moonlights as a clown and children's performer.

"For us, it just made good financial sense," said Gertsacov, 45. "I'm a self-employed performer and my wife has a great job that she didn't want to give up, and this has given us the best of both worlds.

"I'm probably happier than I've ever been, too, even though I'm not able to audition as much," he said.

"But that part is nothing compared to being able to spend quality time with my kid, because jobs will always be there after he grows up."

Upper West Sider Edward Drossman, 38, is another stay-at-home dad. He cares for his 1-year-old son, Zachary, while his wife, Vanessa, 40, works in marketing at Every Day with Rachael Ray magazine.

"I've never had any trouble doing this, and so far I'm having a great time," said Drossman, who's pursuing a freelance PR writing career. "The other thing that was a big factor for us was that I just couldn't justify giving away half of my salary to a stranger and having them raise my kid."

Of course, not all stay-at-home dads are as upbeat. Many men report feeling isolated and depressed, while others said they've been ostracized by family members and friends who don't understand or respect their choice.

"It's especially hard when you don't know anyone else who's doing it and you're from a different culture or another country where it's less accepted," said Jovi Alejandro, 35, of Kensington, Brooklyn. A former furniture manufacturer, he and his family moved to New York two years ago from the Philippines so that his wife, Anne, could pursue a career as an occupational therapist. She works at the Shorefront Jewish Geriatric Center in Coney Island, Brooklyn.

For now, Alejandro stays at home with their two children, which he said can be very challenging.

"It's gotten slightly better over time, but when I first got here I felt so alone and angry about my situation that I barely left my apartment at all," Alejandro said. He added that he hopes to return to the Philippines someday with his family.

Experts said that depression and isolation are only some of the potential obstacles dads face. Arguments over money and discipline are a common flashpoint.

There's also the issue of how to present yourself when a child reaches school age and a stay-at-home dad decides to go back to work.

Career coaches like Susan Ireland, author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Perfect Résumé," said it's essential for stay-at-home fathers to remain current in their fields so they remain professionally marketable.

"If you're a stay-at-home dad or you want to become one, the risks are that your field could move ahead and you don't move up," Ireland said.

"That means that you have to actively incorporate a plan into your day that you spend so much time networking, whether that's on the phone, online or taking a class. And you need to be able to negotiate that with your spouse ahead of time," she added.

Several members of NYC Dads Group said their spouses have been fully supportive - including Somerfeld's, who plans to return to work next year when his son starts preschool.

For now, though, "Being at home with my son everyday is the most touching, gratifying and rewarding experience of my entire life," he said. "I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Share

0

0 tweet

Email

Print