

Mr. Mom Redux

Stay-at-home dads

Beth Ford Roth

Today's stay-at-home dads have more in common with their great-grandfathers than you might think. Although he's probably the only stay-at-home dad on his block, Randy Dykstra doesn't view himself as particularly modern or innovative. In fact, he thinks he's downright old-fashioned.

"We're going back to the future," the La Mesa father says when describing his family. "We're going back to the way things used to be."

On a recent afternoon, Dykstra sits at the kitchen table as his three sons—9-year-old John, 12-year-old Aaron and 14-year-old Peter—do their homework in the family room. He leafs through three thick binders that contain the boys' schedules. There's time set aside for everything from almanac history and bible study to cello lessons and choir practice. That's because in addition to being a stay-at-home dad, Dykstra is also his kids' teacher, educating the boys at home instead of sending them to public or private school. His wife Carol



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is the breadwinner, working as a labor and delivery nurse at Kaiser Permanente hospital. Dykstra says the family's arrangement allows Carol "to pursue a career she's completely suited to."

Dykstra was once a classroom teacher in the public schools, and still holds his teaching credential. Randy and Carol first came upon their current arrangement after a prolonged trip to Michigan to care for extended family, and Randy became the stay-at-home parent.

"We decided it worked pretty well," says Dykstra, and he remained a stay-at-home dad when they returned to La Mesa. He says the reaction from other family and friends about their arrangement has been "100 percent positive." He smiles before amending his statement. "OK, maybe 99.9 percent positive."

Dykstra sees his considerable involvement in his sons' lives as homage to the farming families that dominated American life in the 18th and 19th centuries, before the Industrial Revolution took fathers off the farms and into the factories. When parents and children worked together to keep the family farm going, fathers were a constant presence in the lives of their offspring. Dykstra says fathers in centuries past used to be very involved in the moral and educational development of their children, something he takes pride in doing today.

"I help them see their world, develop a world view, as they grow up into young men, they become leaders in their community." That means the education of John, Aaron and Peter doesn't just involve the three Rs, but also figuring out the basics of plumbing if a pipe in the house bursts, or learning how to mow the lawn. "These guys are growing up with a sense of family life and the responsibilities of taking care of the household."

University of California, Riverside sociology professor Scott Coltrane says it wasn't until the 1950s that the ideal of the father as distant breadwinner and mother as all-encompassing child-raiser came into favor. Before then, Coltrane says, "Fathers were very involved in teaching and training their children."

U.S. Census figures show there are sandiegofamily.com

roughly 159,000 stay-at-home dads in the United States. Coltrane expects this number to keep growing, especially if economic analysts' prediction of a recession is correct. Coltrane says during the recessions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the number of fathers taking care of preschool-aged children while their mothers were at work skyrocketed. Those numbers fell when the country's economic condition improved. "When recessions happen, it affords men the opportunity to get involved in taking care of their kids," he says.

Coltrane says most stay-at-home dads aren't trying to make a political statement, but rather just trying to come up with a strategy that will keep the family afloat. When traditionally male-dominated jobs like construction and manufacturing take a hit from a recession, men who've lost their jobs might become stay-at-home parents to save money on daycare costs.

"The behavior helps adjust ideals," explains Coltrane.

Right now, Randy and Carol Dykstra feel it's in their family's best interest for Randy to remain at home as teacher and primary caregiver for their boys, while Carol works outside the home as a nurse. Randy calls his family's situation a blessing, and realizes it's not financially or otherwise feasible for all families.

"I don't want to compare myself because different families have different needs," he says. But at the same time, he feels strongly that his sons reap the benefits of his being a stay-at-home dad. "You have to choose someone to mentor your children. You can outsource that to a public or private school. But we're choosing someone who knows the kids best—their parent."

The tradition might continue into the next generation.

Fourteen-year-old Peter Dykstra says he really likes his family's arrangement because "it does give us a lot of time with our Dad." He also believes it's something he would consider as an option for his family when he gets married one day and has children of his own. "I would definitely love to do it. I think it would work out really well." ♦

Beth Ford Roth is a freelance writer.


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