

DADDY'S HOME

As the fabric of urban society shifts, more and more fathers are cutting back on their careers and staying at home to spend quality time with their kids.

By Cynthia Lewis

When comedian José Covaco was growing up, his mother pulled the weight of both parents. “My dad was in Dubai; he was our bread and butter.” A generation later, Covaco can barely get as far as the toilet without his toddler’s permission. Covaco, better known by his social media handle Hoezaay, is not quite the traditional dad. While he insists — quite fairly — that his wife is the real soldier, his flexible work hours mean he spends most of his time at home with his daughter, Chloe. (Chloe is all of two years old, and is already famous thanks to regular appearances on her father’s Snapchat account.) “I’m very lucky to be in the position I am [in] with social media because I shoot all my videos at home, I shoot down the road, so I’m always around,” he says. “Sometimes it’s not a good thing also, because now my daughter expects me to be around. Sometimes I can’t even go to the loo. I have to say, ‘Baby, can I go and poop?’ And she’ll say, ‘No dada, no poopoo.’ It’s crazy. She made me keep the door open!” When he talks about his daughter, Covaco’s already expressive face is in peak form: all bright eyes and wide grins. The conversation is peppered with proclamations of insanity (“it’s crazy;” “she’s mad;” “kids are nuts;” “they’re psychopaths”). He makes parenting sound like the perfect nightmare you can’t wait to sign up for.

Like Covaco, there are several other men taking advantage of shifting boundaries, both at home and at work, to renegotiate traditional parenting roles. With women powering through the workforce and the internet reshaping offices, you don’t have to leave your house to have a career, and you definitely don’t need to be a woman to raise a kid right. A quick Google search for

Samar Halarnkar throws up the names of half a dozen leading publications he contributes to, along with his position as editor at *IndiaSpend.com*, a public-interest journalism website. But, all of this takes a back seat at four in the evening, when his daughter comes home from school. Six years ago, he gave up his job as managing editor of *Hindustan Times* and realised there was no need to look for another one when he had a full-time gig looking after his then one-year-old. “I could tell that my wife did not want to give up her job, but we realised that one of us would have to take a back seat, and I am absolutely opposed to any kind of nanny. So, I said, ‘I’m the one who’ll stay at home.’ If you have

a child, then why do you want to outsource [your responsibility]?” A year ago, his wife also decided to make the shift to working from home. Now that their daughter’s older, they take turns staying home and travelling for work. “It’s quite seamless,” he adds. “One of us is always there.”

That seems to be the situation in many homes, with parents not simply exchanging but restructuring their roles. Sid Balachandran, a stay-at-home dad whose adventures

in parenting make fodder for an award-winning blog (*iwrotethose.com*), has a family that defies all traditional bracketing. “I don’t think we can put a number or percentage on the division of responsibility in our household. Yes, the roles are certainly reversed (from a stereotypical social set-up) in that my wife is the primary wage earner and I’m the primary caregiver. However, we prefer not to delegate set tasks to each other, and chip in as and when we can. For instance, I do a lot of the household chores, the regular grocery and vegetable runs, my son’s homework and feeds during the weekdays. My wife also

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Covaco preparing his daughter for the thug life



• FATHERHOOD

chips in by getting his food ready, planning our meals and getting him ready for school. We share our responsibilities and make sure we're working towards the same goal. We're against stereotyping roles or duties on the basis of gender." Balachandran's been a stay-at-home dad for more than five years now, but just because he's against gender stereotypes doesn't mean the rest of the world is. While immediate family and friends soon gathered in support, strangers were only too happy to chip in with criticism. "There was an instance when my son and I were travelling to Dubai (without my wife), and as expected of a four-year-old, he threw a tantrum at the airport. I stood my ground and let him cry it out. An elderly woman walked up to me and asked me 'where the kid's mother was' and [said] that 'young kids shouldn't travel without their mothers.' So, yeah, strangers who know nothing about your life find it easy to judge you." In his case, he has also received hints about how it was time for him to get back to work, among other strange interactions. "[It] was more subtle. For instance, being avoided by fellow men (and fathers) at social gatherings, awkward silence after I told them what I do, and so on. Even at the parks, there was a time when I used to shy away from taking my son to play, due to the fact that almost every other parent at the park was a mother, and there were hardly any [other] dads. All these mothers would be huddled up together, and I'd be left alone, and I could see them look at me quite warily. So, although they never



Breakfast is a sacred time for Halarnkar and his daughter. "She prefers my cooking to anyone else's"

said anything directly to my face, there was this air of uncertainty and [I was] made to feel less welcome."

Halarnkar, on the other hand, prefers the company of mothers to other stay-at-home-dads. "My wife put me onto this group of stay-at-home dads. I'm part of the group, but frankly speaking, I have more in common with the mothers from school. They're looking after their kids, and many of them are working as well: they bear the whole load. Women are much easier about it, and have a better sense of humour also. My one advantage is that I'm older and I think that helps. These other fathers are much younger, and I think they have bigger jobs and bigger ambitions, but I don't have all that much. I'd rather do what I want to do. I have no corporate ladder to climb. That gives you a lot more confidence, time and makes you more patient." Halarnkar and his wife became parents in their mid-forties, a move that definitely affects the way they parent. With the early career rush behind them and improved financial stability, a single-income house isn't such a scary thought. Age has other perks, too. "All our friends have kids who are 18 and 20; this is the only straggler who's seven years old. I laugh at the way they're treating their kids, and they all say, 'Wait until she grows up.' I say, 'Listen, when she's 18, I'll be sixty-something and too old to care.'"

For Covaco, his daughter's 18th birthday is something he's been preparing for since she was born. "The whole idea of doing the Snapchat thing was [that] I'll shoot us, just fun moments, and when she's 18, I'll give her all of this. I don't have any memories [of my own childhood] except for a few black-and-white pictures. So, I thought I must document these first four or five years because she's going to forget all of this. We had a lot of discussions about sharing it. But, she's with us all the time, so we're not worried about something bad or untoward happening. If anything crazy happens, we have the power to stop it all." On his part, Covaco has discovered a sudden gratitude towards his parents now, seeing things from the other side of the cradle bars. "When [someone comes over], I'm like, 'Baby, dance, dance for Uncle,'" says Covaco. "I used to make fun of this, and now, I'm just like *mera bachcha*. You realise more and more that you're becoming your parents. I'm constantly telling my daughter: don't stand so close to the TV, blink your eyes, chew your food, don't sleep like that. I hear myself saying it, and, at the same time, I hear my parents saying it."

Spending more time with your children, whether you work from home or not, is something all three recommend highly, sleepless nights in the early years notwithstanding. "The whole first year I can't remember anything," says Covaco. "I've blocked it out of my memory. I was so tired. Nobody ever slept; it was terrible. But, I think, these first four or five years are crucial. All kids will have issues with their parents, but if you spend these first few years with them, hopefully in the later years, it'll be better." Halarnkar echoes this sentiment in his matter-of-fact way. "I've spent the wonder years with my child, and that experience is very hard to compare with anything else. I was there when she first walked; I was there when she took her first cycle ride: the delight it gives you is unparalleled. I wouldn't have known it if I wasn't there when it happened."

Being a father helped Balachandran discover his hidden creativity



While they admit that they come from positions of privilege, in both their social and work lives, they're a reminder that every father can do more. "Being a stay-at-home parent is not for everyone," says Balachandran, who has a telecommunications engineering degree, but became a father before he discovered he could write. "Not everyone's circumstances and financial situations offer that option of being a single-income family. However, if you do have the option, take it. At least for a few years: the formative ones for your kids. Yes, it involves a lot of changes to your lifestyle — from [losing] sleep to [missing time] with your friends. You will probably need to sacrifice a lot of your me-time, too. And, you will feel ostracised by society, and, perhaps, even made fun of occasionally. But, it's totally worth it. That slightly overwhelming feeling of happiness that makes you go a little teary-eyed every time your kid says something new: it's a feeling unlike anything else. However, it's not necessary that you need to be a full-time caregiver just to feel this. You just need to be an involved father." Covaco sums

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it up nicely. "If you're thinking of doing it, it means you realise that they need it. The beauty of today is you can do so much off your cell phone and off the internet, so if you're in that position,

do it. It might take time to adjust, but you'll get used to it. You'll have to prioritise your life, and just be a little more harsh and say, 'No, I'm washing my kid's bum now.'"

Most importantly, they recognise that it's simply time for men to step up. "The reason so many women are dropping out of the workplace and only 27 per cent of Indian women are working, which is an all-time low from 35 per cent 20 years ago, even at a time when many more

women are educated and out in the job market, is because their families and husbands especially are not leaning in," says Halarnkar. (A seasoned journalist, his statistics are on point.) "Support your wife, especially if she has a better job than you or is more talented. Do it because you want to do it, and have fun while doing it. Don't look at it as an ordeal or a mountain to climb. Once you learn to clean out a diaper, [you're fine]." ☺