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Double Duty

'Dadpreneurs' face many of the same issues as 'mompreneurs'—and then some

By Daisy Maxey

SHANE WILKINSON had his infant daughter, Jessica, in a baby carrier on his chest and was walking through a mall, when a woman approached him with some advice: "Your baby is crying because she's in that baby carrier. You need to get her out of there."

Mr. Wilkinson, who was taking Jessica to the restroom for a change, recalls replying to the woman: "First of all, how do you know? What gives you the right to tell me just because you're a mother? I'm with her 24/7, and I know, maybe, what's wrong with her."

Mr. Wilkinson, who takes care of Jessica full time at their home in Dallas while managing two properties and doing construction jobs on the side, is just one of an increasing number of fathers juggling the challenging dual roles of entrepreneur and primary caregiver to his children. The road can be rocky, but these dads say attitudes toward them are changing. And all say they find support and acceptance growing.

No one tracks the number of "dadpreneurs" who are out there, but one thing is certain: They're still a minority. A Census Bureau survey last year found 142,000 married fathers with children under 15 who have remained out of the labor force for more than one year to care for their children. In contrast, there were about 5.6 million such mothers.

A Word Is Born

"Things are changing, but it's still unusual," says Sherry Sullivan, an author and professor of management at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Ten years ago, a book titled "Mompreneurs" helped usher that term into the popular lexicon, Ms. Sullivan says. But people began talking about dadpreneurs only recently. A recent search on Google bears this out: The term mompreneur turned up in about 86,800 results; dadpreneur, 21.

Working dads who shun the 9-to-5 world in order to take care of their kids do so for a variety of reasons, says Ms. Sullivan. Some saw their own fathers slog loyally away at major corporations for years only to lose their jobs in the 1980s. Others don't want to leave their children in the care of strangers, or realize it might be less expensive just to stay at home. Technology and the rise of women in the workplace also have made it possible for men to lead more flexible family and work lives.

"When I go to the park during the day, I'm often the only dad out there," says dadpreneur Paul Mann, founder and chief executive of Fetch! Pet Care Inc., a pet-sitting and dog-walking franchiser in Berkeley, Calif. For Mr. Mann, who runs his business from home and cares for his year-and-a-half-old son, Aiden, while his wife works part time, the decision to beome a dadpreneur was like "completing a missing piece in my life." Mr. Mann feels his son gets better care for having a parent with him all day, "and I get a lot of pride just seeing him smile and laugh...and when I tell him that I love him and he tries to say it back—I don't know that a lot of guys get to experience that."

Justin Powell, a Web designer and Internet marketing consultant in Randolph, N.J., says he never feels like an outcast when he drops off his 4-year-old twins, Connor and Ethan, at karate or preschool. Each time the boys start a new program, "people are thinking [about him], 'OK, what's his story?' But when they start seeing you every day, you're just one of the group." Mr. Powell says that when he and his wife, who is a human-resources vice president and has to travel, learned they were having twins, they decided that his work skills translated better to working at home. "It works out very well for us," he says.

Dads who work at home and take care of the kids do find themselves in the minority, says Jeanne Hurlbert, a professor of sociology at Louisiana State University. Many don't know other stay-at-home dads and may "feel somewhat shut out by the moms, even though those moms probably respect tremendously the role these dads have assumed," she says. Dads can overcome such hurdles by building relationships based on the children, says Ms. Hurlbert, who is also head of Optinet Resources LLC, a Baton Rouge, La., firm that helps entrepreneurs build social networks.

Social and cultural expectations are very slow to change, says Ms. Hurlbert, "but these guys are helping to change them. The more we see guys with pink diaper bags, the less strange it seems."

In the work world, Ms. Hurlbert says dadpreneurs may find they're even more accepted than women who work from home because of the prevailing gender roles and stereotypes in our society. Even when men stay home and care for children, "we still tend to think of them as 'businessmen' very easily," she says.

That doesn't mean dadpreneurs don't face obstacles. They may find, for example, that many colleagues and clients—particularly younger ones—envy their ability to spend more time with their children. Dads should be upfront with both colleagues and clients about working at home and taking care of their children, says Ms. Hurlbert, who also recommends setting up a designated workspace and a separate phone line that the child doesn't answer. Some interruptions are bound to happen, she adds, but if "Barney" is suddenly heard in the background or a child is brought on an appointment, clients are more likely to be understanding if they know the situation ahead of time. "You have to approach these situations with great care, though," she says, "even with clients you know well, and ensure that they are not put off by having a small child with you."

Mr. Wilkinson says he has Jessica with him whenever he goes to the hardware store or to one of his rental properties. Most of his clients, he says, are parents themselves, "so they also play with her and entertain her."

"With me raising her, it seems to make her a little more robust," Mr. Wilkinson says, adding that he hopes Jessica's experiences with him will help her grow up to be a handy and self-reliant woman. On the other hand, he says, "she's also growing up in an environment where her mother's a business professional, so she has that option."

Mr. Mann, the pet-care franchiser, says his business is established enough that his duties mainly involve strategic planning—early-morning staff meetings and conferences with partner companies—and one-on-one training of new franchisees. These responsibilities, he says, require a lot of telephone and Internet time.

He's up before Aiden to start answering emails and making phone calls. Then, when his wife, a store merchandiser, heads off to work, he shifts into full-time parenting mode. When Aiden takes an early-afternoon nap, Mr. Mann fits in more phoning and emailing. "If I'm calling a very important person that I have a partnership with, I wouldn't call them when it's about time for Aiden to wake up," he adds.

Juggling Act

For Mr. Powell, the Web designer, the bulk of his work is designing sites for local businesses, which leads him to work a lot at the computer when his sons are at preschool—from 12:30 to 3 p.m. When the boys are home, sometimes he'll cart his laptop out onto the deck and work with one eye on his sons. "You find your place, whether it's in the kitchen, on the deck or out on the lawn," he says.

While dadpreneurs feel increasingly accepted by their peers and professional contacts, plugging into social networks connected with child-rearing can be another story. Moms may acknowledge stay-at-home dads at the playground, for example, but are far less likely to share parenting tips and other information with a dad, partly for fear of making their husbands jealous, says Ms. Hurlbert. And some may not even want their children to go on play dates to houses where only the father is home, she says.

A handful of Web sites address the needs of stay-at-home dads and dadpreneurs alike. **AtHomeDad.com**, based in North Andover, Mass., offers advice and contacts for joining playgroups led by other at-home dads. **EntrepreneurDad.com**, started by Mr. Powell, the Web designer, features articles with information on e-commerce and small business.

Bad Call

Jeff Zbar, an author and consultant in Coral Springs, Fla., who cares for his three children, ages 9, 12 and 15, still remembers a phone interview he had with the founder of a major fast-food chain when his daughter was an infant in 1991.

Mr. Zbar's daughter started crying, and the executive asked if he was working from home.

"You could hear the distance in his voice," Mr. Zbar says. "The chemistry went south."

Attitudes have evolved, Mr. Zbar says, to where now when someone hears his children clamoring in the background after school, "They don't say, 'What do I hear? Is that SpongeBob?' You don't get that these days."

Then there's 74-year-old Walter Zweifler, who was a dadpreneur before the word existed. In the mid-1980s, he started running his own financial-advisory firm from his home in Morristown, N.J., where he and his wife cared for their two sons. Today, Mr. Zweifler still enjoys domestic duties, regularly taking his 1-year-old granddaughter in New York, Ella Frances, to a Gymboree and to a city park for lunch afterward.

"Am I embarrassed by the fact that I'm pushing this baby carriage down the street?" he says. "Hell, no. If anything, I'm proud of it.

"Are there other grandfathers at Gymboree?" he continues. "No. But sometimes a father shows up. That is very admirable because these guys are at a different stage in their careers." ▦

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Balancing Act

Tips for "dadpreneurs"...

TRY WORKING FROM HOME with the children for at least a short period before you commit to becoming a dadpreneur full time; it's not for everyone.

DO THE MATH; sit down (with your partner, if you have one) and consider carefully whether you can afford to be a dadpreneur before you quit a job or otherwise commit.

BE SURE TO ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES between your work and home life; otherwise, you may find yourself working 24/7, or playing with the children and never getting any work done.

MAKE A SPECIFIC SPACE for your home office, even if only a corner of one room.

TO AVOID BURNOUT, set aside "me" time for things like playing instruments, fishing or just watching football, with your friends or on your own.

...And selected online resources

AtHomeDad.com
A grass-roots network for primary-care dads who want to start or join activities to help connect at-home dads.

DadStaysHome.com
Connects at-home dads who may feel isolated; has forums, blogs and links.

EntrepreneurDad.com
A network for solo entrepreneurs; offers discussion forums.

RebelDad.com
Pitches at-home dads as "the leading edge of a social revolution"; catalogs news about them.

Slowlane.com
Searchable reference, resource and network for stay-at-home dads; hosts discussion forums.

Source: WSJ reporting