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GOOD OLD DAD



By Joanne Y. Cleaver. Published on June 01, 1999.

He's 50, and he has two adult children, ages 28 and 24, who are on their own. Finally, he's getting to travel. He's at the peak of his career. He no longer aspires to a bigger house and a fancier car. He's satisfied with the ones he's got.

Two decades ago, Sonnenschein figured he'd be coasting toward retirement right about now. But just as the finish line came into view, it moved. In fact, Sonnenschein himself moved it when he and his second wife, Ericka Lutz, 38, decided to have a child. Now, instead of indulging himself with custom-made golf clubs and other accoutrements of middle age,

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Sonnenschein is helping 6-year-old Annie learn to ride her bike.

"If you'd asked me 20 years ago, I'd have told you that I wanted to retire at 50. But having another child, there's no doubt that I won't retire until she's through college," he says. "Finance is the key issue that determines whether you bring children into the world. I didn't really think about finances ahead of time, perhaps as much as I should have." He sighs. "I love teaching and I have no desire to retire. On the other hand, sometimes I think, God, those hippie days were nice."

Parenting's a long haul for everyone, but some men have considerably lengthened their course. Men who raise one family, then remarry and go on to raise another with a new set of biological children, are starting over in more ways than one. They have to adjust to their new wife's expectations for how they'll share the parenting load. They have to explain to their older kids that they're not being abandoned, even if it looks as though that's precisely what's happening. And, as Sonnenschein knows all too well, they

start coming to grips with the fact that they've just taken on a 21-year commitment that completely alters their future.

Celebrities like singer Julio Iglesias—who, at 55 and the father of three twentysomethings, has just welcomed his second child by current wife Miranda Rijnsburger, 33—can afford to have proof of their virility running around the living room in diapers. Reality is a little more sobering for most older, second-time dads, say sociologists who've studied relationships among divorced fathers and their children. After all, they've got not one, but two very diverse sets of children, who have dramatically different financial and emotional needs. It's a touchy balancing act.

It's difficult to pin down exactly how many men are taking on this particular version of mid-life crisis. For sure, the total pool of second-generation dads isn't all that big, yet. By definition, a man's second marriage that produces biological children must be to a woman of childbearing age. Excepting the occasional petri-dish mix of

donated ovum and mechanically added sperm, that means those fertile second wives are most likely ages 25 to 44.

According to the March 1998 Census Bureau tally of married couples, 25.6 percent of white men ages 45 to 59 are married to women ages 25 to 44; 33.2 percent of black men are in the same situation, and 31.7 percent of Hispanic men. But does this mean there are a lot of old guys hooking up with the younger gals? Again, not yet. Only 1.8 percent of all men aged 45 to 59 are married to women between 25 and 34.

However, the Census Bureau doesn't report on how many of those are second marriages, and then how many children those married men have by their first and second wives. Ascertaining those numbers would mean surveying a population not only about their current family situations but also about preexisting biological children and prior wives.

There is evidence, however, based on other federal statistics, that the population of older, second-generation dads is growing. The percentage of

marriages, for example, between never-married women and divorced men increased between 1970 and 1990, the latest data available from the National Center for Health Statistics, up from 6.9 percent to 10.9 percent. At the same time, the number of men remarrying in their 40s and 50s also edged upward: In 1990, 10.5 percent of men aged 45 to 49 and 6.5 percent of men aged 50 to 54 had returned to the altar, up from 7.4 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively, in 1980. Not surprisingly, birth rates tracked by the age of the father indicate that the ranks of older dads doing diaper duty are also growing.

WHOSE DAD ARE YOU, ANYWAY? While numerous reports have examined the emotional complications of stepparenting, few researchers have zeroed in on the equally convoluted relationships between fathers and two separate biological families. One who has is Elizabeth Cooksey, associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University, in Columbus, who has discovered some intriguing clues about who these dads are. In "Parenting

From a Distance: Effects of Paternal Characteristics on Contact Between Nonresidential Fathers and Their Children," published in the May 1998 issue of Demography, Cooksey and her coauthor, Harvard researcher Patricia Craig, analyzed data gathered between 1992 and 1994 by the National Survey of Families and Households. They report that of the 474 fathers who were no longer living with their children, 39.5 percent had more than a high school education, 41.9 percent completed high school, 34.5 percent were currently married, and 25.7 percent had a (new) biological child currently residing in the household. Cooksey and Craig also report that fathers who have one biological family (children between the ages of 0 and 17), then remarry and have another set of kids, are actually far less likely to spend time with their first biological children.

The arrival of a new baby may signal the beginning of the cooling of the relationship with the dad's first set of kids, Cooksey says. In sociologist-speak, "The biological children they fathered at an

earlier time tend to be displaced.”

Curiously, the presence of stepchildren doesn't seem to alter the picture much. When a man's new household includes only stepchildren, he is just as inclined to spend time with his own biological children as if were no children present in his new marriage. And when both new biological and stepchildren are present in the new household, the father's commitment to maintaining a relationship with his first set of kids falls somewhere in between the two scenarios.

Other factors play into a dad's tendency to stay in close contact with his first-generation family. The closer the kids live to him, for example, the more likely they are to see him. And the higher the father's education level, the more likely he is to maintain close relationships with these children. (Cooksey didn't track the impact of court-mandated visitation arrangements, which obviously dictate terms of the relationship for many dads.)

So, when the first kids complain that they were shoved aside when Junior II arrived on the scene, well, they're probably right.

"It's when [a father] settles down in the relationship and has new children with the new partner that the crowding out happens," says Cooksey. "We don't know why he's not seeing the first kids—we don't know how old the kids were when the relationship split or the nature of the relationship with the first partner."

Whew! It's hard enough sorting out the relationships on paper, never mind in real life. One thing's for sure: dads with two bio families are stretched in two different directions.

Stanford University economics professor Martin Carnoy, who remarried when he was 52 and now has a 7-year-old daughter, was taken aback when his adult son David had decidedly mixed feelings about the arrival of his new sister. "It takes a lot of money to raise a kid, and he's generous with us, but it can evoke a lot of jealousy," says David, a 34-year-old editor for etown.com, a consumer electronics Web site. "Usually the older parents, when they were raising the first kids, they were working hard, and now they have more money. She certainly has more stuffed

animals than I ever had." (David Carnoy was 14 when his parents divorced and 22 when his father remarried.)

The Carnoys know as much as anyone about the "re-fathers," as they call them, because they coauthored what may be the only book on the topic: *Fathers of a Certain Age* (Fairview Press). "Most men do this because they love their wives," says Martin Carnoy, who interviewed 30 men who were at least 40 when they had biological children. "Most men aren't choosing to do this because they discovered late in life a need to father." Nevertheless, he adds, "Most of them find this experience really great and have more time to spend with the kids than they had before. I just met a guy who's 67 and on his third marriage, and the father of a 4-month-old."

As well, the dads' younger wives usually have quite different expectations for their family life than did the first wives. For one thing, they are usually working mothers, sociologists say, and fully expect their husbands to share equally with childrearing tasks. In addition, these

working moms have their own money to indulge their craving for cute baby clothes, European strollers, and educational toys.

So in a very real sense, these re-fathers are often learning how to parent all over again. North Carolina State University sociology professor Barbara J. Risman, who has researched the changing patterns in American families, speculates that there's a "generational difference between the husbands and wives. The husbands may have to learn the new way of raising children," she says.

"Second-time dads feel that they used to be part of the old male model-you work, you support, you're the disciplinarian," says Rachel Geller, chief strategic officer for The Geppetto Group, a New York City marketing firm that specializes in children and teens. "They bonded with their sons more than their daughters. Now, they're grateful that they have a second chance, and that's not the same as the first. They're really patterning themselves after current models of fatherhood."

Meanwhile, the first brood observes this

largesse with a jaundiced eye. "One major source of conflict with the older kids is that all of a sudden, they're having to share what they thought was theirs," says Martin Carnoy. "The older children were expecting to get this and that, and it's getting divided yet another way."

Therein lies the prime irony of the two-family dads: the unexpected blessing of the second family is inevitably accompanied by reduced expectations on the part of the first. Dad may have more money to spend because his career is in full bloom, but unless he's got a lot of money to burn, the younger set gets first dibs. Older kids may have assumed they'd get help with college or the down payment on a house, but now learn that they're on their own. Talk about stretched resources.

Dad and his second wife are probably both working, so they're expecting to spend like a typical two-earner household: eating out more frequently, indulging in a few more personal luxuries, lining up a cleaning service. But what doesn't show up on most research radar screens is that dad may well have significant financial obligations

to his first children, points out Robert Klopfer, director of Stepping Stones Counseling Center, a Ridgewood, New Jersey-based therapy center for stepfamilies. Klopfer, a social worker, frequently sees second-time-around families that don't have nearly as much money as they "should have" because the father is paying child support for his other children, who are probably living with their biological mother.

AM I MADE OF MONEY? Of course, the combination of a prime-of-life father with a younger, working mom does mean that the dad probably has more resources at his immediate disposal than he did when he started his first family, particularly if he was then in his 20s. But wait a minute, says Klopfer. Things aren't as rich as they seem. Not only is dad paying child support for his older kids, but they may be moving into the most expensive years of their lives: college. And most states allow colleges to count the income of the biological parents and their mates-up to four wage earners-toward payment of tuition. (California has recently passed a

law that allows stepmothers to exempt their income from the familial pool, for college tuition purposes-a campaign led by second wives' advocacy groups.)

Even in families with plenty of material resources and amicable relations among all the parents and stepparents, the first family can feel disenfranchised.

New Jersey executive recruiter Richard Barkauskas first wed at age 21 and has two sons, ages 29 and 26-and a grandson, 2, from that marriage. He's also dad to a second family-a son, 16, and a daughter, 15. Though Barkauskas and his second wife have made their Vermont home constantly available to the two older children, invite them along on overseas vacations, and recently gave one a substantial sum toward a house down payment, the issue of Barkauskas' will is still a sore point. Currently, his affairs are arranged so that, if he and his wife die, the two younger children will each get more than the two older ones, who also stand to inherit from their biological mother. "As the [younger] kids move on toward grad school, then the plan changes. But right now, the younger

ones are in a much more vulnerable position. The older boys aren't thrilled about it," admits Barkauskas, adding that he is sticking to what he believes is a fair division of assets.

Tensions erupt over how dads divide their time among the two families, as well. "If the father is in his mid-40s or older, frequently he has made it already [careerwise]," observes Klopfer. "He has more time for all the kids, where he can go to the ball games or dance recitals...and the first-family kids can benefit from that, if they're local. If they're a long ways off, there's frequently jealousy." The sentiment of the first children, he says, is, "He's giving a lot more to those kids than he gave to us."

With the paternal resources so picked over, what's left for marketers? Financial and estate planning and legal work are logical categories; given the knotty relationships they're locked into, it's hard to imagine how older second-time dads couldn't use some expert help in sorting out their wills and investments. Life insurance, too-lots and lots of life

insurance.

Because they straddle two life stages that are usually mutually exclusive-parenting young children and nearing retirement-these dads are likely to choose a bit from both. Berkeley professor Sonnenschein says he's not willing to give up his aspiration to travel frequently-he just brings his wife and young daughter along. Martin Carnoy is teaching his daughter how to ski, though he also notes that a common complaint among his circle of older dads is that they don't have many relatives up to the task of babysitting. "My adult kids? No way. They're into their own things," he says.

Even if they defined themselves as a distinct market-and there's little evidence that they do-second-time dads are still, well, dads. If one thing hasn't changed from their first-time-around days, it's that the moms still make the vast majority of consumer decisions for the family. So if the dads are to be addressed by advertisers, it's likely to be done obliquely, as part of a big, happy family with a whole spectrum of kids of different ages. After

all, the man in that picture could be a new dad as well as a granddad. Still, says advertising consultant David Basch, marketers have all kinds of erroneous assumptions about men and older men. "They have no idea who they are," says Basch, who lives in Accord, New York. He should know: Now 56, Basch has five children, two by his first marriage and three by his second. The oldest? Thirty-five. The youngest? Five.

Fortunately, as the older kids mature, the big blended family does get a bit happier. After all, says David Carnoy, "It's hard not to like the kids. It's not their fault."

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