

# DADDY COOL

Home-dads are tired of being labelled lazy and work-shy. **REAL** asks if it's time for the tide to turn on the question of who stays home?

The church hall in Wimbledon, South London, is filled with cute toddlers riding on miniature bicycles, playing with brightly coloured train sets and strumming songs on toy banjos. Over by the kitchen, parents brew coffee while keeping a close eye on the kids. Their conversation is frequently interrupted by little Chloe's bathroom visits or by having to stop Tommy from driving his toy truck into the wall, but the children are allowed to play freely without fuss or structure. Those watching over them aren't yakking on about stretchmarks, potty training and the price of nappies, nor are they comparing notes on Tumbletots or the best preschool violin lessons.

They're talking about football – to be precise, yesterday's kickoff between Chelsea and Arsenal. Oh, and about the weekly playgroup pub outing, and how hungover they feel this morning. Not the typical mother and toddler group, then.

That's because there are no mummies here. Only daddies and their little ones – hence the name of the playgroup, *Dads and Littl'uns*. It's one of the UK's few playgroups for fathers, and is a heartwarming scene. The many male homemakers here say that this is one of the only places they feel accepted. Here, they don't feel labelled as lazy or not real men.

Cullen, a 41-year-old full-time dad of two, says he was elated to discover this group after uncomfortable experiences as a lone male at 'standoffish' mother and toddler groups. 'When people see me with the children they assume I'm on holiday, and say "well done" to me, which feels very patronising. My wife, an accountant, is paid vastly more than I was as an assistant photographer and I was pleased to have the opportunity to begin a job

that is much more rewarding. It's not easy, but the tide is turning slowly. In some cafés, when you want to change a nappy you have to go into the Ladies, which is a bit odd.'

Humphrey, 42, who has two children and left his 'boring' IT job to work part-time and care for them, adds, 'There's a lot of prejudice against fathers looking after children. Mothers look straight through me, clearly thinking "where's the mummy?" It's like daddies don't exist!'

## “ WE DON'T HAVE TO TURN INTO WOMEN

It's clear that home-dads are not pinny-wearing, feather duster-brandishing imitations of women. The dads at this playgroup play football and go to the pub instead of having coffee mornings. One dad, Ross, explains, 'This is much more laid back and less structured than a mothers' playgroup.' Humphrey continues, 'Only a daddy can do the rough and tumble. Children, and boys especially like to be loved but not reined in.'

Jack O'Sullivan, spokesperson for fathers' rights campaign group Fathers Direct, agrees that home-dads do things their own masculine way – and insists they are just as good as stay-at-home mums at creating domestic bliss. 'We need to live in a world where men and women have the opportunity to work and to care for their children. Men do a third of childcare for under-fives, so it's a bit stupid to have schools that don't educate boys about how to look after children.' Can the average male ever be as nurturing and able to multitask as a female and do they really possess biological domestic ability? Jack stresses, 'Men can be just as good as women at caring for children. ▶



Cullen (LEFT) hates the term 'house-husband'. Karstein, 38, from Norway (RIGHT) went from a high-powered banking career to caring for 11-month-old Sophie four and a half days per week



Dads and Littl'uns is a haven for home-dads

Research shows that men are very sensitive to babies. When living with a pregnant woman, men produce more of the hormone prolactin, which encourages caring behaviour. And a man's testosterone crashes around the birth of a child.

Recent statistics from the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) show that just as women have stormed the workplace, men are getting cosy with the vacuum cleaner. 'We've found evidence of a social revolution taking place in homes,' says EOC spokesperson Claire Hibbitt of recent research. 'Eight in ten working fathers are happy to stay at home and look after their baby and three quarters of mothers feel that their partner is as competent as they are in caring. Three in five new mothers reject the idea that the dad's main role is being the breadwinner.'

Even the Government's new paternity leave laws offer fathers six months off work to care for their newborn child. And this is only the beginning. Jack explains, 'The general trend is veering towards men becoming skilled in tasks traditionally associated with women and vice versa. Schools, nurseries, maternity services and workplaces all need to recognise that fathers, as well as mothers, have caring responsibilities.'

Of course, many men and women retain a stubborn belief in traditional male-female roles. Man's man Jeremy Clarkson recently stormed in response to men's new paternity leave rights, 'The only input men should have with babies is making 'em. We're being governed by lunatics.' The reality is however, that regardless of principles and suitability, in most cases, the person to stay at home with the baby is the parent who earns less.

**USEFUL CONTACTS**

- **Fathers Direct.** Call 0845 634 1328. [www.fathersdirect.com](http://www.fathersdirect.com)
- **Homedad.** Call 0775 254 9085. [www.homedad.org.uk](http://www.homedad.org.uk)
- **Dads and Littl'uns playgroup.** [www.dadsandlittluns.co.uk](http://www.dadsandlittluns.co.uk)
- **Equal Opportunities Commission.** [www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)
- **Professional Family Women's Network.** Call 020 8591 9964. [www.pfwn.org.uk](http://www.pfwn.org.uk)

**MY HUBBY WENT FROM CEMENT MIXING TO SEWING ON BUTTONS – AND HE LOVES IT!**

**The Forsters live in Sittingbourne, Kent, where Gina, 49, works full-time as a school secretary. Dean, 47, was a full-time homemaker and carer for their three children for two years. He now works part time but is still the homemaker**



**Gina says** When we got together I was earning really good money. It made sense for me to stay at work, as Dean wouldn't have been able to earn the money I could. So he spent two years at home with our teenage children. He's still the homemaker and it's great because I don't have to do any housework! Dean does all the cooking, cleaning, washing and gardening. He sews on buttons, bakes birthday cakes, hangs the washing out, buys feminine products without batting an eyelid, even puts darts in clothes to take them in. When I get home I can put my feet up – my dinner's there on the table, the housework is done, and Dean and I can be together longer. But there's nothing feminine about him. He does all the manly things like plumbing and woodwork. I'm a lucky woman! A man can be as good at childcare and housework as a woman.

**Dean says** I would describe my role as slave! Only joking. Men tell me they wish they were in my position. It's relaxing being at home. I learnt how to put darts into clothes from watching TV and I take pride in it because a lot of people can't do it.

**I HATE HAVING A HOUSE HUSBAND**

**Celia Dodds\*, 37, from Essex, confesses having a stay-at-home man isn't all it's cracked up to be**

**She says** My husband is a stay-at-home dad and we're both jealous of each other. He wants to go to work and I want to stay at home with the kids, but I earn more so I have to work. He's a brilliant dad but the housework never gets done so I spend my whole weekend cleaning when I should be spending my precious time with my kids. I get frustrated at not being able to do all the jobs that need doing. Plus, I also have to sort all the bills, paperwork, and so on. I also feel like there are two mums in the house. He can't switch off from being a 'mum' and likes to be in charge of looking after the kids even when I'm at home, which is very annoying. But I do get my dinner cooked for me when I get home from work, which can't be bad!

■ **Name has been changed**



**HE TOOK TO HOMEMAKING LIKE A DUCK TO WATER**

**The Modrates, both 37, have 5-year-old twins and live in South Wales. During the years before the children started nursery school, Lee gave up his job as a chef to look after the children while Lucy, a food technology teacher, was the breadwinner**

**Lee says** When the babies were born, we changed our minds about childcare – we decided we didn't want anyone else to look after them. It was simpler for me to stop work – Lucy's salary was higher than mine. It was an easy decision, especially because if I had carried on working where I was, I would have had no time at all with the children. I ended up giving up work for just over 18 months. I did all the housework, of course. I loved being at home – it gave me a completely different outlook.

**Lucy says** At the time I gave birth Lee wasn't happy in his job. Him being the one at home was hard for me initially, due to my maternal instinct and guilt complex that I should be with the children. But due to Lee's patient and understanding personality, he took to the homemaking role like a duck to water, so there were no concerns for me about leaving the twins with him. I don't think men ever do housework in such a detailed way as women, but everything that needed to be done was done. I would have liked to have been at home, but our arrangement made financial sense.

FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS Corbis/News International