

Research punctures 'modern' fathers myth -- except for nappies, that is

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'Modern' fathers have been around for far longer than we think, but they have only recently started to change nappies according to research from the University of Warwick.

In a new paper published on the History & Policy website today, Dr Laura King from the University of Warwick's Centre for the History of Medicine said the assumption that [fathers](#) have only become more involved in looking after their children over the past 20 years is not true. However, statistics show it has taken longer for dads to get to grips with dirty nappies.

Figures from a 1982 study showed 43% of fathers never changed a nappy. By 2000 another study showed this figure had fallen to 3%. A 2010 study by the National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit reported that 65% of men helped 'a great deal' with nappy changing.

Dr King has looked at archive material including newspapers, social research and interviews with fathers. She said: "We must reject suggestions that close father-child relationships have only developed since the 1970s or even 1990s. The stereotype of the distant and tyrannical Victorian patriarch conceals substantial evidence of fathers who cared greatly for their children and played with them, educated them, and even nursed them."

The study suggests that in the post Second World War era, fathers were more determined to cultivate much closer relationships with their

children than they had experienced with their own fathers.

This was reinforced by important social trends, the reduction in average family size meant that many parents could devote more time to each of their children. A decrease in working hours and increased holiday time also meant that men had more time available to spend with their families.

Dr King said there was an emphasis on the nuclear family after 1945 caused by the expansion of state welfare and psychological thinking about the family.

She said: "We have to rethink this idea that 'modern' fathers are a recent phenomenon. Such stereotypes affect policy-making and the way legislation is used; fathers are still subject to harmful stereotyping. There is a great deal of historical evidence showing that fathers have played a caring and nurturing role with their children for centuries, including taking informal paternity leave to support their partners around the time of childbirth. However, it does seem to have taken a while for the majority of fathers to take their turn in changing dirty nappies.

"By 1982 there were still 43% of fathers who never changed a nappy. This figure has dropped to 3% by 2000. We can see from the 2010 figures that more men are changing nappies on a regular basis. Whilst we can point to clear practical changes such as nappy-changing, men's participation in childbirth, policy changes introducing official paternity leave and changes in child custody laws, the change in active fatherhood has been less sudden than is often assumed."

More information: Laura King's H&P paper, Supporting Active Fatherhood in Britain, is published today and available at: [www.historyandpolicy.org/paper ... olicy-paper-132.html](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/paper...olicy-paper-132.html)

Provided by University of Warwick

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