

# Trends

## The Balancing Act

By Claire Curry

I feel guilty when I'm at work because I wish I could be there more for my child.

I have to plan carefully and prioritize my time to balance everything out.

Honestly, I don't know how I do it.

These sound like the sentiments of any working mother. But, in fact, they are the words of Jose Suarez (GSB '15), a 29-year-old dad who is successfully juggling a full-time position as an account executive at Xerox Corporation, part-time studies toward his undergraduate degree at Fordham's Gabelli School of Business and his roles as a husband and a father to his toddler, Alexander.

Suarez is among an increasing number of working fathers who are experiencing the challenges of balancing work and family life—an issue that women have grappled with for decades. Today, achieving work/life balance is something that both genders are negotiating.

Though dads are doing more housework and child care and more moms work outside the home, neither has overtaken the other in their “traditional” roles. But they are converging, a new Pew Research Center study suggested. Working mothers and fathers reported feeling stressed about juggling work and family life in roughly equal proportion: 56 percent of working moms and 50 percent of working dads said they found it very difficult or somewhat difficult to balance these responsibilities.

“It's a struggle for millions of American households every day,” said Matthew Weinshenker, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at Fordham.

“When men were primarily responsible for earning income, and women were primarily assigned by society to stay home and raise children, that was very constraining, but it was clear who was going to do what,” he said. “Now, more options are available, particularly to women, but workplaces still expect workers to put the job first.”

### The new American family

American families are devising their own solutions, and long-stable patterns are beginning to change. Women in most households still do more in terms of child care and housework, Weinshenker observed, but now “there's a real spectrum. Some couples share the responsibilities 50/50, and there are more stay-at-home dads.”

To manage their household and care for their two daughters, Fordham philosophy professor John Davenport, Ph.D., and his wife took turns being their family's primary breadwinner and caretaker. When Davenport was finishing his graduate school dissertation, he doubled as a stay-at-home dad, while his wife worked full time. Since he joined Fordham in 1998, a flexible academic schedule has allowed him to continue to remain involved with his family responsibilities.

"It was rewarding for me to be involved with the children in their day-to-day life, and I think it's brought about a close relationship," he said. "It's been good in many respects, but it's definitely taken a toll on my research productivity."

Since the 1960s, massive, long-term economic change has led more women and mothers into the wage labor force, transforming the American family, explained Kirsten Swinth, Ph.D., associate professor of history at Fordham, who is working on a book that analyzes the ways this shift changes our culture, family relations and workplaces.

"The economy changed, and the notion that one single male breadwinner could support a family became no longer economically viable," she said. "So you get this confluence of social change and economic change, and a crisis."

Swinth said that the "working family" is a "work in progress."

"We haven't quite figured out as a society how to create the policies necessary to sustain caring for children and others in our communities, and wage earning," she added.

Though more men are taking on responsibilities at home, women still do more in paid and unpaid work combined, on average. "Mothers' overall hours of labor increased across the last quarter of the 20th century as they took on more paid labor and didn't reduce their unpaid labor," Swinth said.

These circumstances gradually are shifting. In 2011, mothers spent an average of 21 hours per week on paid work, up from only eight hours per week in 1965, according to the Pew Research Center. During the same period, the amount of time moms spent on non-paid work decreased. Meanwhile, fathers spent more time on housework and labor, and slightly less time on paid work.

While mothers still surpass fathers in terms of time spent caring for children and running the household, in dual-income families, both mothers and fathers are carrying an almost equal workload today.

## The 21st-century workplace

All working parents and caretakers need flexibility and accommodation at work. While some workplaces offer flexible schedules, work-at-home options and other family-friendly benefits, the extent of the change is not enough to help working families sustain family life in a way that is meaningful and satisfying.

"The workplaces that have incentive to change have changed as much as they are going to change," Weinshenker said. "These companies have gone about as far as they'll go voluntarily. More has to come from public policy."

Swinth agreed, noting that the United States is far behind much of the developed world in terms of policies to help parents. "We are one of three countries in the world that does not have paid maternity leave."

Policies that ease the lives of working parents could maximize the productivity of the female workforce in particular, Swinth suggested. "Women comprise about half of the labor force," she said, "yet without policies to help them better manage work and family responsibilities, companies are not using these workers as efficiently as they can."

Some believe such policies should be discretionary rather than government-mandated. However, Swinth believes that policies create a level playing field. "Many European countries have mandatory requirements that employers offer job flexibility and family-accommodation schedules for people with family needs," she added. "There is a positive correlation between family policies and bottom lines."

"We need to align workplaces and government with the realities of the 21st century."

*Claire Curry is managing editor of Fordham Business.*

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