

More dads at home will change the world

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We live in a time of contradictions. They're everywhere, as ubiquitous as sand and ants and reality television. For example, we want economic growth at all costs, and sustainability.

We want to accommodate our growing population without increasing urban sprawl, or allowing high-rise development.

We live in a world of opportunities on our doorstep and yet we spend more time couch fondling than ever before.

We have one thousand Facebook friends and have never been lonelier.

We insist on respect and equality for all and yet we torture fat people for entertainment on television.

After three generations of the sexual revolution and feminism, young women are now free to wear jundies (jean shorts so small they are like undies) and plaster their cars in Playboy stickers. And we argue that political correctness has gone mad at the same time as bemoaning the demise of manners.

But among all the contradictions of modern life none have a more profound impact on Australian families than this; we are deeply aware of the importance of a loving bond among families and yet parents have never had less time to devote to their children.

The rising cost of living that has seen Perth become the 12th most expensive city in the world is forcing us to spend more time at work.

So how, as a family, do you find time to earn enough to pay your bills and still be there for your kids as much as you so desperately want to be?

One way many families cope during the early years of their children's lives is

for mothers to spend more time at home and for fathers to increase their hours at work to try to cover the financial shortfall, as highlighted in a report in this newspaper yesterday showing that half of Australian men with children under four are working more than 45 hours a week.

So what does this mean for families? For one thing it means that dads are missing out on a lot of time with their kids and coming home to hear their two-year-old say a new word that was learnt in a moment of which they had no part.

It also means mothers are carrying the bulk of the daily marathon of parenthood — a marathon in which the finish-line tape gets shifted every time you try and stumble over it.

Of course, every family finds their own solution. My family have tried a few.

My wife and I have both been full-time and part-time at home and in the workplace.

Being an at-home dad was good for a while, except that it hurt financially, my brain started leaking from my ears and conversations with old friends got awkward.

"I haven't seen you in ages, what have you been up to," they would ask and I would want nothing more than to answer: "Mostly just repairing stranded spacecraft with my bare hands, it's very dangerous but I don't think of myself as a hero."

But instead, I'd swallow and say: "I'm an at-home dad at the moment, you know baking, cleaning the house, picking up the kids and stuff, but I don't really think of myself as a hero."

And they would look at me with a strange combination of envy, suspicion and embarrassment and we'd say goodbye and move on.

After a year I was working full-time once again and trying to find ways to stay part of my girls' lives.

I'd take them to sport at the weekends, get them to help me do the weeding and

I'd try and squeeze as much as I could out of the ride to school in the morning.

"So how's school been lately?"

"All right."

"Anything interesting happen?"

"Not really."

But occasionally one of them would tell me about the funny thing their friend said at lunch time and I'd get to use a car failing to indicate as an excuse to drop a pearl of fatherly wisdom such as: "Did you see that? You know the only thing certainty does is blind you."

These are valuable moments and maybe they are enough.

But maybe family life has changed so much that the time has come to really look at how we, as a society, support parents in doing the job that will have the single biggest impact on our collective future.

Maybe we need to stop looking at the division of labour in families through the prism of trying to get more women in the workforce, and ask instead how we can get more men into the home.

Because if there was a way to give incentives to men to reduce their hours, perhaps through tax and family benefits, in the early years of childrearing, the benefits would be significant.

Less time at work would mean more time with the kids (or at the pub, but I'd like to think with the kids), which would allow women more time to stay engaged in the workforce.

Fathers would be happier and more content, mothers would be happier and more content, kids would have the benefit of both, and maybe, just maybe, we could all avoid going insane, broke or both.

In the meantime we'll all keep finding ways to invent more hours in the day, making do and loving our families however hard we work.

And if you're a busy dad looking for ideas on being a father you might want to try visiting www.thefatheringproject.org.