Fathers speak up to reclaim their place in children’s lives

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SINGLE Father Charles Areni was shopping alone in a city department store between Monday meetings, when he realised he was being watched.

His three-year-old daughter Jaqueline was running low on underwear and he had stopped in to buy her a few more pairs.

Areni looked over his shoulder as the security guard approached to question what he was doing in the child’s section.

“Are you a drop-in for the kid?” and I said, ‘Yes, I do. Is there a problem?’” somewhat angrily as I became aware what was happening.”

Professor Areni says the security guard could not imagine that a father would shop for his child’s clothes; instead, he saw a pervert.

“Men in general are assumed to be depraved or likely to be foul in some way,” the University of Sydney academic says. “Being a good father, demonstrating the ability to love and nurture children, doesn’t allow an escape from this sinister suspicion.”

Areni and fellow PhD scholar in behavioural sciences, Stephen Holden, are single fathers writing a book about their experiences.

Their website, The Other Glass Ceiling, explores gender inequalities within families, arguing that it is not only women who face discrimination.

Fathers who want to be involved in child rearing are often relegated to the status of secondary parent by dominant mothers who want to make all the decisions.

Societal stereotypes assume men are likely to be incompetent parents at best and potentially dangerous at worst, it argues.

The book advocates for fathers to step up and take on more of the domestic workload, and for mothers to let go of their need to be in charge at home.

Holden, father to 10-year-old Zachary, says that research shows there are unique benefits for children who spend a lot of time with their fathers and men have their own parenting styles that are different from women.

However, fathers are portrayed as “bumbling idiots” in popular culture, including TV shows like The Simpsons, Two and a Half Men and House Husband.

Pressure on modern fathers is the subject of some other research coming out of the University of Ballarat in Victoria.

The School of Health Sciences is surveying fathers with children under six years old to determine how fatigue contributes to parenting stress, irritability at home, and reduced confidence and satisfaction in fatherhood.

Researcher Melissa Dunning says studies into fatigued parents have previously focused on mothers, particularly post-natal depression, but fathers had largely been ignored.

Fathers can become fatigued by a combination of interrupted sleep, long work hours and domestic responsibilities.

“Fatigue is different to tiredness because tiredness is easily relieved by sleep,” she said. “Fatigue is the feeling of persistent exhaustion ... and is associated with impaired physical functioning.”

She is also researching the social support available to fathers and their attitudes about getting help, so that services can better aid fathers’ wellbeing.

Stay-at-home dad Ben Hillier, of North Fitzroy, Melbourne, says connecting with dads in the same situation helped with the challenge of being the primary carer of nine-month-old son Archer.

Hillier attends a new parents group of mostly mothers which is also helpful, but can feel awkward when women’s issues are discussed. He recently joined a group of fathers with children under five who meet once a week in each other’s homes and parks in Melbourne.

A boilermaker, he has been unable to work because of a shoulder injury. He says the older generation are sometimes surprised by the role reversal.

“When I first started pushing the pram around I would feel a bit self-conscious passing a construction site with guys looking at me, but not any more,” he says. “Just to be there and see every little development – not many dads get that opportunity.”

Further information about the survey can be found at http://tinyurl.com/fathers-wellbeing.

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