

DADDY'S HOME!

Paid paternity leave improves corporate culture for women. It makes men better dads. Kate Evans asks why New Zealand is still a long way from here to paternity...

A trio of dads on a park outing in Hamburg, Germany.



A week and a half after giving birth to our second daughter, I stood in the doorway and watched, baby in arms and toddler wrapped around my leg, as my partner sprinted for the bus to work. Nine hours later, I was counting the minutes until he returned – and, for the first time ever, feeling self-conscious about the state of the house.

It's a picture desperately familiar to many new mothers. But for me, it was a new experience. When we had our first baby in 2015, my partner had just finished his degree and hadn't found a full-time job yet. We didn't plan it like that – and were grateful we had a safety net of savings and parental support that meant we could still pay the rent and keep the washing machine running day and night – but those early months at home together with our first-born felt like a relatively smooth initiation into parenthood.

They also laid a foundation for more equal parenting. I did the breastfeeding, but we shared everything else: changing nappies, washing innumerable milk-soaked scraps of material, trying and failing to swaddle and bottle-feed, bits and pieces of paid work, cooking and housework. My partner knew our daughter's routines as well

as I did, and I trusted him to baby-wrangle as much as I trusted myself, which admittedly wasn't that much, as neither of us had any idea what we were doing for those first few annihilating and wondrous weeks.

Our second daughter arrived in October 2017. This time, my partner had a job – and we had a mortgage, too. In New Zealand, partners can take just two weeks of unpaid leave; mine managed to negotiate with his employer for one paid week, and took one week unpaid. We could no longer afford to go without his income.

So he went back to work, and I stayed home, and it felt so soon. I could also feel us sliding towards traditional roles – of breadwinner and homemaker – that neither of us had ever identified with.

Could there be another way? Family policies shape our individual decisions and indicate our nation's values. So

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Above: A father in Sweden, where three-quarters of men take an average of 100 days leave in their child's first two years. Opposite: New Zealand's "first couple" announce Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's pregnancy and their parental leave plans.

what does the current system say about how we value the role of fathers, and what we view as men's and women's work? What benefits might there be in sharing the load – and the pleasures – of childcare more equally?

The current partner's leave entitlement doesn't seem to work for almost anyone. The government doesn't even regularly collect data on it, but the most recent figures they could give me, from a small sample survey in 2006, suggested just 4% of fathers took the two weeks of unpaid partner's leave. The majority used annual or sick leave in the days after their children's birth.

That's what Wellington dad Barnaby Haszard Morris did, taking two weeks of holiday pay when his twin girls were born last November. "We had bills to pay, so we needed money coming in." Those two weeks were essential, he says, as his wife was still recovering from the birth. "She couldn't get out of bed for days. I changed every single nappy for the first week."

A fortnight later, though, Morris was walking out the door. "It was the strangest feeling – like I'd left a bath

running, or a pot of water coming to the boil, but someone else would just have to deal with it now. I really wanted to stay home longer with my wife and be part of that whole life's work we're undertaking, but I'm not being supported to do so, so I can't. I feel like I'm missing so much, and that my wife is unnecessarily burdened with a disproportionate responsibility for raising our children."

Some Kiwi men *are* staying home with their kids; 2017 figures suggest some 13,000 men are out of the workforce looking after a child – compared with 128,000 women. And we will soon have the most high-profile stay-at-home dad imaginable: Clarke Gayford, who plans to take care of the "First Baby" when Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern goes back to work after taking six weeks off. Green MP and Minister for Women Julie Anne Genter will also hand over primary-carer duties to her partner Peter Nunns three months after their baby is born (due in August).

Ardern's government has increased the duration of paid parental leave (PPL) from 18 to 26 weeks. It's available

to "eligible mothers and other primary carers, such as adoptive parents... whāngai, grandparents, and other permanent guardians", according to the IRD.

The eligibility requirements are some of the strictest in the OECD – many women in precarious work or who are looking after older children haven't done enough paid work to qualify. Those who do qualify have the option to transfer some of their leave entitlement to their partners. But while Gayford and Nunns show it's possible for men to share parental leave, it's still very rare. In 2017, the 30,576 people who took paid parental leave included just 324 men – around 1%. Only 0.6% of the total amount paid out under the scheme went to men, suggesting they generally took much less time than women did.

In some ways, that makes sense. In 2017, before the increase, the payments lasted just over four months. Women need time to recover from pregnancy and birth (trust me), and even 26 weeks of leave only just hits the six months of exclusive breastfeeding recommended by the Ministry of Health. It's possible, of course, to return to work and contin-



ue breastfeeding, but it's a hassle and can be difficult, depending on your work environment. And many birth mothers are also understandably reluctant to cede any of their relatively short leave to their partner.

New Zealand has a persistent gender pay gap and even more pronounced "motherhood penalty" – where, once they have children, women earn 17% less than men. That means many heterosexual couples will be better off financially if the mother stays home.

But that becomes a self-reinforcing cycle. Women's careers suffer because they take time off to have children – or because it's expected they will – while it's seen as so unusual for men that they are implicitly discouraged from taking leave by companies and peers.

"Even though we'd like to think we've progressed, our gender norms haven't changed all that much," says employment relations specialist Dr Katherine Ravenswood, a senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology's Business School. "We still think a serious job has to be done full-time, it has to be stressful, it requires all of your dedication – and men are better at that, and women are better at looking after children."

It's considered normal for a woman's career to slow down when she has children, Ravenswood says, but not that men's careers might stagnate for a while when they become fathers. "We need to start challenging these norms that only women care. If we don't do that, then women are going to be penalised in their careers over and over again."

This past summer, I spent a lot of weekday afternoons having half-finished conversations with my Swedish friend Per as we chased after our toddlers at the local playground. He was on parental leave, too, while his wife worked. Often he was the only dad in the park – and I noticed the other mothers looking at him. They make comments as well, he says.

"It's either, 'Oh, you didn't tie your kid's shoes right, that's so cute, my husband does that, too,' or 'Oh, you're such a good father.' It's sweet, but kind of offensive – because who would ever say anything like that to a woman out with the kids? It feels very old-school here."

When he visits Sweden, it's not like that at all. "Swedes take pride in the fact that men stay home, too. Dads walk around with prams and go to cafes with their kids and pick them up from day-care – it's not weird, it's not something people even notice."

So, why is Sweden so different? It's not that the Scandinavians are innately more egalitarian. Even though Sweden was the first country to replace maternity leave with parental leave, in 1974, the few fathers who took it were disparaged as too-soft "velour-pappas", after the unisex stretchy tracksuits fashionable at the time.

Little changed until the 1990s, when Deputy Prime Minister Bengt Westerberg – who regretted not taking time off when his own son was born – proposed a new system to encourage men to do their share at home. Social and economic pressures meant families wouldn't

choose a more equal division of parental leave by themselves, he realised.

In 1995, a new law reserved one month of the leave for each parent on a "use it or lose it" basis. The bill's language was gender-neutral, but colloquially, it was called the "daddy's month".

The impact was immediate, says Swedish demographer Ann-Zofie Duvander. "There was a dramatic shift in behaviour from the policy. What happened was almost all fathers started to use the leave immediately."

By 2002, a second month had been added, and in 2016, a third (with parents receiving a total of 16 months paid leave). Now, three-quarters of men take an average of 100 days leave in their child's first two years. It's also incredibly flexible – parents can use their 390 days of leave whenever they want, even a day or an hour at a time.

"The common pattern is that fathers take two weeks at the time of the birth, and then start using the rest around month 10. The mother uses the first part while breastfeeding and then the father steps in," Duvander says.

It's easy to roll your eyes at the Nordic nations and their famously expensive social policies. But most OECD countries now offer some form of paid, partner-specific leave. Australians get two weeks "dad and partner pay" at the minimum wage. Singapore's government pays two weeks of a father's full salary (but only if he's married to the mother). Iceland gives three months for each parent, and another three months that can be shared.

British social scientist Margaret O'Brien from University College London has studied paternity leave policies around the world. The research is relatively sparse, she says, but some patterns are emerging. Partner's leave can act as a sort of trigger, she thinks – even a relatively short period can spur lasting changes in behaviour.

Some research has linked it to greater male involvement in everyday childcare activities, such as bathing and feeding. An Australian study showed taking two to four weeks off increased the likelihood of fathers looking after the kids alone at weekends once they were school-age; another found British dads who took time off at birth were, years later, almost a third more likely to read books with their toddlers.



A father in Quebec, Canada. After five weeks of “daddy only” paternity leave was introduced in 2006, men spent 23% more time on laundry, cooking and dishwashing, long after the leave had ended.

“Childcare can be a burden, but it’s also a joy. We’ve split these roles for too long – both men and women should have the benefits of caring for children as well as the benefits of work.”

It could help, too, with the “second shift” – the unpaid labour couples do in the home in addition to paid work. In Quebec, after five weeks of “daddy only” paternity leave was introduced in 2006, men spent 23% more time on laundry, cooking and dishwashing, long after the leave had ended – though other studies have shown a weaker or less lasting effect.

In Sweden, Duvander has found families that share leave more equally tend to have more children, while another Swedish study found a mother’s future earnings rose 7% on average for each month of parental leave her husband took. However, he cautions that cause and effect is not always easy to disentangle in this kind of social research – and context is important.

“It’s not certain that if you introduced paid partner leave in New Zealand, and fathers were taking it, that it would affect fertility rates.”

What is clear is policies need to be well designed, says O’Brien. Those that

work offer well-paid leave – at least 50% of the father’s income – and are a “use it or lose it” individual entitlement, where mothers are also well supported to recover from birth and breastfeeding. Recent research from Germany suggests at least four weeks leave is needed to have any long-term impact on the amount of time fathers spend with their children.

The policies need to be actively promoted and normalised, too. “In Iceland it has become part of what’s expected a ‘good dad’ does: if he doesn’t take those three months, it’s like not being present at the birth – it’s not normal male behaviour.”

Even in the countries with quotas, women still use the majority of the leave – and perhaps that will always be the case. But there’s more of a balance, she says. “Childcare can be a burden, but it’s also a joy. We’ve split these roles for too long – both men and women should have the benefits of caring for children as well as the benefits of work.”

With a new government and a pregnant prime minister, now could be the moment for a serious national discussion about paternity leave. Perhaps surprisingly, the idea’s biggest proponent in the Beehive doesn’t come from Labour or the Greens, but from New Zealand First.

When Tracey Martin was elected in 2011 as a list MP for the party, her husband quit his job as a winemaker and became a stay-at-home dad to their three kids. “But he took quite a lot of flak for that,” Martin says. “Some of the women I was on Boards of Trustees with would make hand symbols indicating that he was under my thumb, simply because we were doing what worked for our family.”

Encouraging more men to take paternity leave could kill two birds with one stone, she thought. “I’ve spent years trying to make women equal in the workforce, and it hasn’t worked, so I thought, ‘How about I have a go at making men equal at home?’”

The policy she convinced her party to adopt piggy-backed off the now widely supported increase in PPL to 26 weeks: she proposed “tagging” four weeks of that for each parent, with the remaining 18 weeks able to be shared – essentially a “partner’s month” that could be used either alongside the mother or alone.

NZ First took the policy to the election, but it did not survive the negotiations with Labour. Martin says she’ll keep trying – and ideally the four weeks for partners would be in addition to the current 26 weeks.

Throughout, Martin’s policy received virtually no media attention, and no one noticed when it was axed. Which does beg the question – where are all the Kiwi men clamouring for more time with their babies?

Martin thinks they want it, but have been socially conditioned to believe they shouldn’t get it. “It might seem really simple, but this is quite a cultural shift for our country. I believe lots of men would like to stay at home with their children, but I need to give them something they can justify to their peers. It needs to be on a ‘use it or lose it’ basis, so they can say, ‘I’d be stupid not to take it mate, it’s free money.’”

There are some hints that it would be popular. The Growing Up in New

Zealand study found mothers and fathers across all ethnicities and socio-economic groups said they wanted to take more leave around the time of their child’s birth than they were able to – and on average, fathers said they’d like to take three months.

In 2013, a nationwide poll of 1000 people commissioned by the conservative Christian lobby group Family First New Zealand found roughly two-thirds supported the idea of two weeks paid leave for fathers, at an estimated cost of \$20 million a year – though it was slightly more popular among women than men.

Family First has been one of the few voices actively calling for paternity leave, suggesting the idea might achieve support from across the political spectrum. For the group’s director, Bob McCoskrie, it’s about recognising the importance of fathers. “They’re not just second adults in the home – dad involvement has a measurable and positive impact on children.

“The government’s always said we can’t afford it, but we’re pouring billions into early childhood education, and hardly anything into parents being able to be at home. At the moment, families are feeling like they have no choice.”

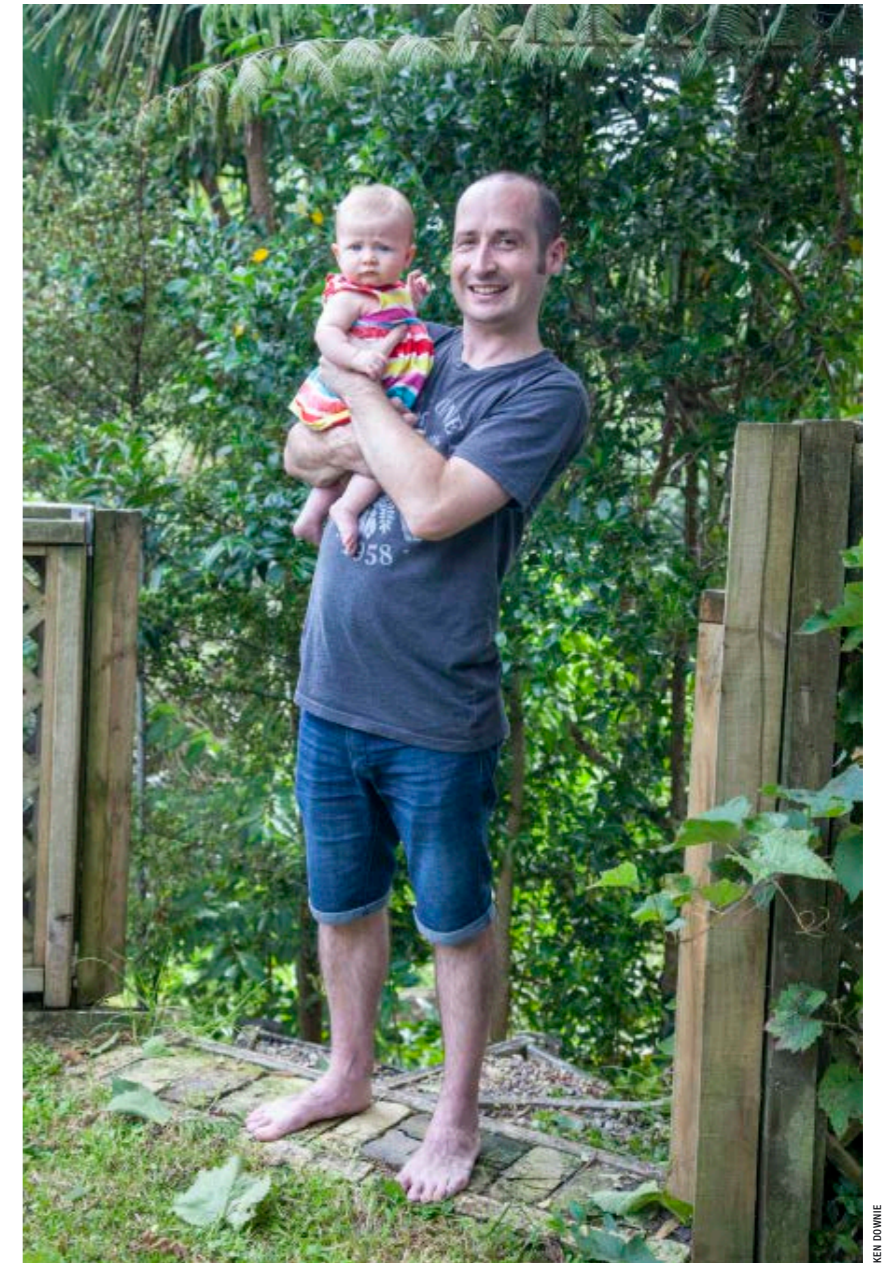
In the absence of government policy, some employers are making their own efforts to change workplace culture.

My old friend from school, Emma Wackrow, had her second baby a few weeks after I did. Olivia dashed into the world early, and with so little preamble that she was born in the public toilets at Britomart railway station, with her big brother and a few concerned members of the public looking on.

Both mother and baby were fine, and the shock arrival was made easier by the fact Emma’s husband, Martin, who works in HR at the Auckland University of Technology, was able to take nine weeks partner’s leave on full pay.

“It was supposed to start the following week, but I just called up my boss the next day and said, ‘I’m not coming in for nine weeks,’” he says.

He ended up spending a lot of time with their toddler, Luke, allowing Emma to focus on the baby. “All four of us have benefited from it,” she says. “It’s made it easier for me, it’s changed Martin’s



Martin Wackrow with daughter Olivia. “I just called up my boss [the day after the birth] and said, ‘I’m not coming in for nine weeks,’” he says.

relationship with both the kids, and it’s made us less stressed as parents.”

Martin says it’s now taken for granted at AUT that partners will take the time off. “Everyone that’s entitled to it takes it – because why wouldn’t you take nine weeks leave? Not for the leave itself, but to spend the time with your child.”

Last year, engineering company

Aurecon went even further, and began offering its employees 14 weeks fully paid partner’s leave if they take over as primary carer once their other half goes back to work – plus an additional week off at the time of the birth.

“We want to make sure we encourage choice in caring for a child in the first year, and help reduce the stigma around dads taking care of babies,” says



A four-year-old boy in a kindergarten class, France.

One Swedish study found a mother's future earnings rose 7% on average for each month of parental leave her husband took.

Eva Murray, a people consultant at Aurecon, “because there is still a bit of that in workplaces. It’s inclusive of all types of families – same-sex parents, adoptive, and foster families, too.”

The policy’s about attracting talent in a highly competitive industry, she says, but also an attempt to boost the number of female engineers and make it easier for them to get back to work after having children.

Large engineering companies and universities might be able to afford such generosity, but what about everyone else? Even if the government picks up the tab, bosses would still have to cope with losing an employee for a month.

For a small business, that can be a big deal, says BusinessNZ chief executive Kirk Hope. “Think of a seasonal business with, say, five employees, in the horticultural industry, for example – if you had a manager off on leave for a month during the picking season, where are you going to get a replacement from? That’s 20% of your workforce gone, and it’s not that easy for a small business in a provincial town to fill a spot.”

Hope is not against the idea, but says employees wanting to take leave would need to give plenty of notice. “If it helps support families, that’s got to be a good thing. But businesses would need a good heads-up that it’s going to happen so they’re not caught out.” A system as flexible as Sweden’s would likely cause even more headaches.

There are other considerations. Any new leave policy would need to benefit all New Zealand families or risk exacerbating inequality, says Jess Berentson-Shaw, co-director of policy think tank The Workshop.

The problem with paying partners a high proportion of their salary – what overseas researchers say is needed to encourage men to take leave – is that it means more taxpayer dollars are going towards those who need them least.

That’s already happening with the current scheme, Berentson-Shaw says; women earning more than \$70,000 get the bulk of parental leave payments. “You have to be careful with these policies that you’re not just creating more inequity, whereby the middle classes

get everything they need, and nobody else does.”

Not all families fit the 1950s model of mum and dad raising kids under one roof – “that’s a very Pākehā-centric view about who cares for children” – and family policies need to work for them, too.

“Children from sole-parent families, in particular, are very vulnerable to lack of resources, so if you introduced partner leave you would have to make sure it could be used by an alternative – a family member or friend – so that sole-parent families could access it.”

One alternative to a universal national entitlement, Berentson-Shaw suggests, would be to encourage employers – via tax breaks or other signals – to play a bigger role in changing workplace cultures, while the government did more to help people on low incomes.

However we do it, making it more financially viable and culturally acceptable for families to have time together in the intense first weeks of a child’s arrival would surely reduce stress, and allow both parents the chance, at least, to be fully involved with their children from the start. Then, later in the child’s first year, if it were seen as more normal for men to take over caregiving for a while, perhaps that would start to shift our ossified ideas about whose work is most important.

More parents would know both the small joys and the frequent frustrations of a day at home with the kids – and the “pot left on the stove” feeling of walking out the door to work.

My hope is that increased empathy, on a nationwide scale, might help shunt us towards a more flexible world, where we can all have more balance between career and family, and be happier for it. Other countries’ experiences suggest change is possible – if we’re ready for it.

Our baby is six months now, and I’m writing this from a cafe. My partner works four days a week, and today it’s his turn to look after the kids. Every few hours, he brings the little one over for a breastfeed (while the older ladies at the next table look at him admiringly).

It’s not equal – I’m not even sure that would be our ideal – but it’s a bit more even. I get to write, he gets to spend time with our two little girls – and they get to grow up knowing both their mother and father work, and care.

DAD’S EYE VIEW

TVNZ reporter Mark Crysell on his six months as a stay-at-home dad.

Nothing makes you feel your mortality more than being an old dad. I was 52 when we had Edie, and we’d lost a child before that. I wanted to make the most of it – I wanted to make sure Edie and I got as much of each other as possible.

My wife Briar [McCormack, then an executive producer at TVNZ] took the first six months off and then TVNZ allowed me to take the second six months – unpaid, of course. We have an Auckland mortgage; we did definitely take a hit, but that’s not the most important thing in life.

The day I left, everyone on the TVNZ current affairs floor applauded. Maybe they were just happy to see the back of me, but I think it was actually, “Good onya mate, you’re going off to do your fair share.”

A week before I went on leave, I met a guy at a party. I asked him what he did and he said, “I’m a house husband, I’m a stay-at-home dad.” I said, “That’s amazing, I’m going to be doing that next week.”

He said, “It’s the worst time of my life, no one cares about what I do. I seem to have no purpose any more.”

But for me, it was the opposite – it was this incredibly enriching time. I got really fit and lost heaps of weight, because two or three times a day we’d go out for a walk so she would sleep in the pram. It’s not a holiday, but it’s a different rhythm from work life.

It was a steep learning curve. She wasn’t great at drinking out of a bottle, so that was a real struggle. I felt this terrible guilt that Briar was trying to find places during the day at work to express milk... We would defrost it and then Edie wouldn’t drink it.

I used to make up dumb blues songs: “I’m gonna take this bottle, mmm mmm mmm... I’m gonna



Mark Crysell and daughter Edie: “It was actually really hard coming back to work because I felt like I’d lost a limb or something. I was always thinking about where Edie was and worried whether she would be okay.”

stick it in your mouth... mmm mmm mmm mmm... and you’re gonna drink it all.” She would open her mouth and laugh, then spit it out.

We watched the cricket together. I was feeding Edie and I turned her high chair around to the TV and we both sat there and watched Brendon McCullum score his 300 at the Basin Reserve. I think it meant a lot more to me than it did to her.

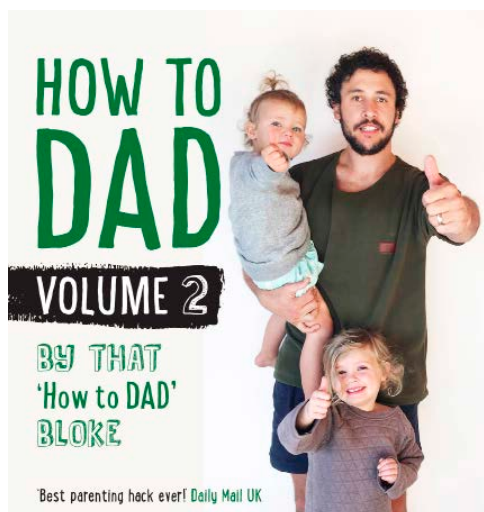
It was actually really hard coming back to work because I felt like I’d lost a limb or something. I was always thinking about where Edie was and worried whether she would be okay.

I like to think she got something

out of it, knowing her dad was there for her all those months... I think it did help us bond.

There’s just so much you don’t know you don’t know when you have a child: emotionally, physically, practically. There’s a sense of wonderment and excitement and disbelief that this little child is yours – and you’re so proud when they have their first poo in the toilet.

Like Clarke Gayford, I’ve got an ambitious, high-achieving wife, and I was quite happy to fill her sails and let her go. Men have to learn to let go a little bit – step back and let women do their thing as well, that’s as much a lesson as looking after the baby.



FATHER FIGURE

It was a classic social media launch. A joke-video, “How to Hold a Baby” – posted online and tagged to a mate – went viral, and in mere weeks, Aucklander Jordan Watson was a YouTube and Facebook star. Three years later, the *How to Dad* web series has topped 200 million video views and two books (*How to Dad* and *How to Dad: Volume 2*, Allen & Unwin) are still selling their woolly socks off. We tossed some parenting questions to the sleep-deprived father-of-three.

North & South: How does it feel, the prospect of being relegated to second-most-famous Kiwi dad, once the First Baby is born?

Jordan Watson: Ha! I think Mr Gayford and I will have to have a Gumboot Throw Off or Jandal Race to determine that one!

N&S: Now you have three daughters to wrangle, does that mean *How to Dad: Volume 3* is imminent or are you too sleep-deprived to contemplate it?

JW: Too sleep-deprived – but that’s when I do my best work (look at me, sounding like a real author).

N&S: More seriously, do you think your high profile has helped break down some of those barriers around men being hands-on parents?

JW: Yeah, absolutely, all unplanned. I set out to make fun, funny parenting videos. What I didn’t foresee was the amount of positive feedback about playing/interacting/being a goofball with my kids. I think it’s bloody awesome that a dad can see me play Barbies in a video and then go and do it himself. Being a parent means we can be big kids for that little bit longer.

N&S: Do you think women are better at looking after children? Or are dads more chilled?

JW: I think it’s each to their own. In some couples, Dad is the enforcer and Mum the softy, and others the complete opposite. My wife and I are a mix. Some days, she is the bossy one; next day, it’s me. It’s like a screenplay written by drunks. Who knows what’s coming next and you just roll with it. Our biggest success is we communicate a lot, so always know who’s the good cop/bad cop.

N&S: Do you think dads would develop better relationships with their children if they were more involved parents in those early years?

JW: Yes and no. A lot of people saw my videos and jumped to the conclusion I was a stay-at-home dad. I was actually working 9am to 6pm but making the most of the time I did have with the kids, making it memorable; for me, that was the norm. Of course, more time with your kids will help a relationship, as long as they aren’t just pooping everywhere during that extra time. I now work for myself from home and love the flexibility. I can go to school shows, daycare trips or look after the wee one while the missus pops out. It’s a whole new experience.

N&S: What’s your view on New Zealand’s paternity leave?

JW: Jeez, this is the most politically loaded question I’ve ever had! Again, I fall back on my own experience. When my first two kids came along, I was working and had only seven days off because, living in Auckland, you need to work. I made the most of my time before and after work and at weekends with them. It just wasn’t

financially viable for me to have more time off and I don’t regret that. I’d say most dads would like to have more time off, but I think financially we’re all in the same boat. It’s that “holy sh*t” moment when you’re suddenly down to one income. Your work hours become very important because that’s what keeps your family afloat. But not all couples are the same... one of you might be on the tip of a huge career moment and the other isn’t... things can change your plans as to who stays home.

N&S: In some ways, you play on being a parent who doesn’t know what he’s doing, at the same time you’re a prominent example of a true hands-on dad. What kind of feedback do you get from dads, mums, online busybodies?

JW: Touch wood, but I’m very strangely a “troll-free” page. In more than 200 million video views, there are only two or three instances that have stuck with me. A funny example was a mum from Sri Lanka who was outraged when she saw me washing my baby in the sink with the dishes (tongue in cheek, of course). She thought it was serious and said she had called Mark Zuckerberg! On a serious note, I do get new dads private-messaging me and asking for real advice. I freak out for a second and then do my best to answer in a mature manner. I get so much positive feedback, it’s insane. So I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing.

N&S: Today’s fathers are certainly much more involved with their children, especially in the early years, than were their fathers and grandfathers. We have a way to catch up with the Scandi countries regarding shared parenting, but are we getting there?

JW: Definitely. My dad used to just grunt and you’d watch whatever he was doing, but never be a part of it. Even in smaller, more traditional rural towns, you don’t see much of that anymore. Dads are cuddling, laughing, playing with their kids IN PUBLIC and even more, in front of OTHER DADS. That was not a thing in my childhood. We’re on the rise. She’ll be right.