

Hands-on fathers: Admiration from a "bridge father"

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 11, 2005](#) issue

Men my age are “bridge fathers.” We began being fathers in one era, and before the last child left the nest we realized that fatherly responsibilities and expectations had changed significantly. Now we find ourselves watching own sons practicing a new style of fatherhood based on assumptions which were simply not part of the culture when we started out.

An eloquent sign of the change in fathering is the disappearance of the father’s waiting room in the maternity ward. What dreadful, ugly places those rooms were—cramped, with two straight chairs, a table with *Field and Stream* and *Guns and Ammo* magazines, and an overflowing ash tray. Fathers were peripheral to the birth process and regarded as altogether useless. I was in such a waiting room when our first child was born. Ten years later, at the birth of our last child, that room had become obsolete. I was invited to be with my wife during labor and even suited up to be part of the delivery. I was, and am, grateful for the experience.

My fatherhood was based on what I saw in my home. Mother did what mothers did—cooked, cleaned, did the wash in the basement, canned fresh vegetables. Dad cut the lawn, put up storm windows, painted the house, fired the furnace. In terms of parenting, he was the final authority; she was the daily implementer and I could negotiate with her.

Now I watch my sons (and daughters) sharing household and child care duties, living incredibly busy lives and doing, from my perspective, an amazingly effective job of working, parenting, living. I’m grateful, and not a little envious, that my sons are hands-on fathers in a way I was not.

W. Bradford Wilcox’s book *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*, thoughtfully [reviewed in this issue](#) by Don Browning, focuses on how religious faith is shaping the way men live out their roles. It’s fascinating to consider, as Wilcox does, how families have become weaker as modernization has

advanced. And it's important to know that in some ways conservative evangelical men are at least as good if not better at being fathers and husbands than are men in the more liberal mainline churches. Wilcox punctures a few stereotypes, and helps us think self-critically about things as basic and intimate as how we parent.