



BROOKINGS

NO MORE SIDEWALKS

No More Sidewalks: Parenting Today
A podcast from the Brookings Institution

“Tradwives and the manosphere: New cultural scripts for parenting”

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Episode Summary:

On this episode of *No More Sidewalks*, host Abby McCloskey leads a discussion with her guests about how the expectations and responsibilities of motherhood and fatherhood have evolved in this generation. Richard Reeves, president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, former CEO of New America, join her to explore balancing work and care, changes in family structure, and emerging scripts for parenting ranging from tradwives to the manosphere. Together they discuss what can be done at the household and government levels to support parents.

SLAUGHTER: Fully 72% of parents across income groups want to be able to spend more quality time with their children, and by that they don't just mean care, they mean play, they mean engagement.

REEVES: I think some of the manosphere stuff, doesn't speak to the aspirations or hopes and realities of what young men currently really want, or what they're actually doing.

[music]

MCCLOSKEY: Welcome to *No More Sidewalks: Parenting Today*. I'm Abby McClosky. The expectations and responsibilities of mothers and fathers are constantly evolving, but maybe never more so than in this generation. There's been a rise in intensive parenting. Both mothers and fathers are spending more time with their children than ever before. This as 40 percent of working mothers are also the family's primary breadwinner, an historic share of fathers are unmarried and no longer live in the home.

There are new cultural scripts for parenting. On social media, muscled men in the manosphere are encouraging procreation with as many women as possible. There's the glorification of trad wives and recreating a 1950s home. There's a glorification of not having children at all. There are financial pressures and rising costs alongside Pinterest pictures for what a good birthday party looks like if you really love your kid.

Not to mention the new mental burden of digital communications that now come with parenthood, constant messaging and pings. No wonder in 2024 there was a surgeon general advisory warning that 41 percent of parents are so stressed they cannot function.

But what's the script for those of us just trying to be a good mom and dad? We're so fortunate today to not have one, but two of the most thoughtful people I know to discuss the evolving nature of motherhood and fatherhood and the implications for parenting today. Anne-Marie Slaughter is the incoming dean of the School of Public Policy at the London School of Economics. She's the former CEO of New America and former director of policy planning for the U.S. State Department. And her *Atlantic* article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" in 2012, became one of the most read pieces in the magazine's history.

Richard Reeves is my former Brookings colleague and the founder of the American Institute for Boys and Men. His book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*, was hailed as a landmark book by so many, but also including President Obama, *The New Yorker*, and *The Economist*. He has an upcoming book on fatherhood.

Anne-Marie, Richard, welcome to the show.

SLAUGHTER: Pleasure.

REEVES: Great to be here. And congrats, Anne-Marie, on the new gig, by the way. I haven't said that publicly yet, but amazing. They're so lucky to have you.

SLAUGHTER: Thank you.

REEVES: Thank you. Enjoy London.

[2:32]

MCCLOSKEY: Anne-Marie, I want to start with you, and just in a few sentences, when you think about the care work and being a mother today versus a generation ago, what's your sense on if it's easier or harder, and why? And just in a few sentences, and we'll dig into more as we go on here in the conversation.

[2:54]

SLAUGHTER: Well, when you say a generation, I immediately thought of my mother, and then had to realize that's actually two generations ago. You know what? The answer is both. It is much harder being a mother when you're also working, and over 60 percent of American women in the workforce are having to work, not necessarily because they want to, but simply so their households can thrive. And I think there's no question that trying to hold down a job and be the parent you want to be is harder than being a full-time parent.

On the other hand, it can be infinitely more satisfying and safe because you're bringing in your own income, so if something happens, you're still self-reliant.

I think it is much harder in that the demands of what a good mother is, and a good father, have just steadily ratcheted up in terms of all the things you're supposed to be providing for your children all the time, and again, juggling that with work and a world that has speeded up to the point that all of us feel like we are stretched way too thin.

[4:11]

MCCLOSKEY: Yes. Yes. And I wanted to get to you, Richard, but just staying on that point, what do you think is behind the ratcheting up of expectations of what a good mother is and does?

[4:22]

SLAUGHTER: You know, there are, there are lots of theories about this. I mean, part of it is just intensive parenting to give your child the edge they need in life. And life is more competitive. Getting into good schools, getting jobs, all of that really has become more competitive for many reasons.

I think also high-income parenting in particular, there's an infinite array of enrichment activities, and it also all involves driving around, often taking your whole weekend to be a travel parent for sports. We just told our elder son, who wasn't the greatest pitcher in the world anyway, "No, we can't do this." You know, we—but if you want your child to be a real athlete, that's much harder.

So all of that, also the ability to keep tabs on your kids, which we didn't have, where you can't just send them out to play.

The other big piece, I think through media, social media, but we're just so aware of the dangers to children, which are actually not that great. But when you see kidnapped kids, abused kids, you know, we've been reading, if you leave your kid

outside a store in a stroller while you run in, Child Protective Services can come for you.

So the whole send your kids out to play and have them come home for dinner, which I actually think has many advantages, that's very hard to do.

[5:48]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, that is very hard to do. That's a huge change even from when I was growing up in the '80s and '90s. I'm so excited to talk about all of that more with you as the mom of three young kids. I feel all of that intensive parenting and driving so deep in my own heart.

But Richard, same question. When you think of fatherhood today, what, what's your take? Easier or harder than it was a generation ago, and why, just in a few sentences?

[6:12]

REEVES: I'd say it's harder but better. And I think it's harder in the sense that it's less clear. When I think about my own father in particular, the roles were just so clear. And I think that that clarity of role actually is, you know, can be a real gift. It wasn't easy for him. When he became unemployed, he had to go get another job. Right? But he didn't have to sort of wake up and think, "Well, what's my role right now?" And he wasn't thinking, people talk about family careers now as opposed to individual careers. Right?

Because you gotta think about how does this affect the other half, and, you know, Abby wants to do a podcast. What does that mean for who's looking after the kid? It's a very different world, and that's true across the the class spectrum, so I think it's harder in that sense.

I think it's better because we do have those opportunities. Like I I was able to be at home with my kids for a while, but it's just something that my father could never have done. And already my sons are all in their 20s now, my oldest is actually 30, and they're in, two of them, pretty serious relationships.

And, you know, their full expectation is that they're gonna have to think about two careers, and they're gonna have to think about this kind of dual earner, dual carer model one way or the other in a way that is, of course, harder. And I'll get to the intensity point in a minute just briefly, but harder in that sense.

But also just imagine the opportunity that we all have now to be able to do both. Like, my mom was unable to pursue a career really, and my dad was unable to really be a kinda hands-on dad. But I've been able to be both, and so has my wife.

Now, that is much more complicated. And I think that what's changed is the bit that you were just talking about Anne-Marie, which is this intensity point. We're like you, full ban on travel sports. To be clear, and you can use this clip, travel sports are the work of the devil. And actually private equity funded now, just like, absolutely forbid it.

And that is a bit of a collective action problem, too, and I think that it's true that we want our kids to have skills because it's a more skill-based economy, but you clearly hit diminishing returns at some point. But how do you know when that is when all of your neighbors are still doing it?

And so I liken it a little bit to some of the social media stuff that Jon Haidt and others have been doing, which is there probably is a shared desire to sort of, you know, just ratchet this down a little bit.

But, like, you don't want to be the only one doing that when everybody else is still going full ratchet. I don't quite know the solution here, but I'm sure that there is this pent-up demand to just be a bit more chill. And frankly, if we're gonna keep working and caring together, there's just no way we can do intensity as well.

[8:38]

MCCLOSKEY: But Richard, on the the fact that your father had such a clear script, and now there's either no script or an abundance of scripts, in your opinion, is that because there are actually fewer ways to support a family on a single income, and so you're kind of being forced into this more flexible model? Or is it there's just more opportunities at fathers' fingertips? How would you slice that?

[9:01]

REEVES: Yeah. Look I think we should make a big distinction here between the mothers in particular, who I would say the word forced might not be too strong, right, who actually would prefer, uh, the option to have more time, particularly with really young kids. Right?

And I think part of the problem here is that we talk about one-year-olds in the same breath as we talk about 11-year-olds and 16-year-olds, and that's a a real mistake. Like, everything I look at suggests that parents feel really differently about their one-year-old than they do about their 10-year-old. Right?

I think there are some, but I actually think it's, in some ways, the more positive version of this is because women have so much more economic independence now, that has created much more choice and flexibility within families. And so I think that it's more that.

interestingly, there's just this report, a very recent research report suggesting that actually married women might now actually be getting a slight wage premium, whereas they used to get a wage penalty. And one of the suggestions as to why that is, is because they've got a higher reservation wage. In other words, like, if there's two earners, you you don't have to just take whichever job you can get. There's this kind of weird horseshoe thing where actually marriage might help with the gender pay gap.

But but the broader point is I think it's mostly a good news story. Just see it in the labor market now, like, women want to work. They want economic independence. They want fulfilling careers, and they want to be able to be moms, and dads want all those things too now.

But that's very new to try and do both those things at once, for both of you to do both. That's the challenge.

[10:26]

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah. I think one of the fascinating developments to me has been the increase in care that mothers and fathers are providing. Among millennial women, I think it's up 10 percent, 12 percent from our mothers. Among millennial men, it's more than double that of kind of the time that boomer dads spent with their kids.

Richard, this is interesting to me on the the father angle because we still have such a large share of single-parent households, and fathers who are not living in the home and yet are increasing the amount of care they're providing for their kids. Can you help explain that for us?

[11:04]

REEVES: Yeah. So I think it's two things. One is that you're right, on average, overall, just a massive increase in parenting time. And to be clear, a lot of that is in the kind of direct parenting. This is not I'm in the house while the kids are around, quote, "parenting."

MCCLOSKEY: Right.

REEVES: This is doing stuff with the kids parenting, so direct parenting. It's roughly doubled since the '80s in aggregate if you add moms and dads together. Which is remarkable when you think about it. The women have increased their paid work hours so much, but we've also doubled the amount of parenting we're doing.

And as you say, that's because of both moms and dads. It's not clear to me that kids need twice as much parenting today as we did in the mid '80s. Right? It's not clear to me at all. And that's back to this ratchet thing.

But the other thing which your question gets at, is that that's the average. And the average is disguising very big distributional differences. And so we've actually just published a piece by Ari Binder, a Census Bureau economist, showing a huge increase in the amount of hours being done by college-educated fathers in particular. So he shows that among college-educated couples, just since the pandemic, we've seen the paid work gap shrink by six hours, from 17 hours to 11 hours, and that is almost entirely because dads are doing more unpaid work, this kind of direct parenting.

So even the last few years, we've seen this massive shift in the distribution of labor within households where there's college-educated folks, and they're the ones who are just racking up the parenting hours on top of their working hours. There are lots of families where that is not true, and if you're a single parent, you actually may want the opportunity to do more parenting.

So we have to be very careful about this whole intensive parenting kind of argument, which is it's quite class-based, and we should be careful. Like, the the problems of

Bethesda, Maryland, where I used to live, and Butler, Tennessee, where I've been recently, they are not the same parenting challenges.

Look, if I could have my way, we would redistribute parenting. Right? But that's obviously really hard to do.

MCCLOSKEY: A bit tougher, sure.

[12:55]

REEVES: So what's the Gini ... But what's the Gini coefficient in parenting? I don't know, but it's pretty high. And so I do think it's still the case there are some kids who frankly could use a bit more parenting, and there's probably a lot of kids who could use quite a bit less.

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah. So you're... there's this bifurcation between intensive fathers at the college-educated end, and then among those with a high school diploma or single-parent households, which are mostly led by mothers, are we still seeing the phenomenon of kind of absent father—

REEVES: —or at least fathers—

MCCLOSKEY: —male mentors—

REEVES: —struggling. Like it's clearly easier in a residence. And I think it's crazy to deny that being a resident in the same household makes it easier. Most of the kids born to mothers without a four-year college degree are born outside marriage. It's 55%. Roughly 90% of the kids born to college-educated moms are born with inside marriage.

And so there is this just massive class gap now in family formation and family form and family structure, and I'm sure we'll get to this. But I think that means that policy should be built around the families as they currently are, rather than the families as they used to be, or maybe the families of the elite, where you do get the sorts of challenges that we've mostly been talking about so far, but that's a very different world.

Like, my wife and I arguing over the Google Calendar on a Sunday night over whose meeting is more important on Tuesday is not the problem that most Americans have, and I think it's just important to say they're both problems.

I'm not saying one isn't a problem, but I'm saying we have to be careful not to overgeneralize them.

[14:23]

MCCLOSKEY: Yes, that's really important. And Anne-Marie, kind of switching to the role of care of mothers. You wrote in 2012 your amazing *Atlantic* article about how women, you know, still can't have it all. Since then, women have increased the care they're providing, work hours have increased. It feels like we're still trying to grab it all, and yeah. What do you think is behind this from the mother point of view?

[14:50]

SLAUGHTER: Well, I want to start by reinforcing what Richard said about class differences, because there's an enormous demand across all parents. Fully 72% of parents across income groups want to be able to spend more quality time with their children, and by that they don't just mean care, they mean play, they mean engagement.

So the time squeeze is real, and it's much greater in lower income distributions, where, in fact, it's most tragic because that is exactly where working mothers who may be single mothers, or even if they're not, do not have time with their children. Often their jobs don't allow them to be there when kids are awake, and they feel that most keenly. So I want to emphasize the issues of mothers who are doing more are mothers who can afford to do more.

I think, as we said before, that the demands of parenting have ratcheted up. In other words, what being a good mother is. My mother's theory was benign neglect. She she really believed that, you know, as long as she was there and she was there to be helpful, and she raised three very successful children. But I mean, I can't even imagine anybody saying that now. I say that we really believed in self-reliance and letting our kids be on their own, and they're both artists now, and maybe they spent a lot of time imagining, you know, an imaginary play.

But it's that sense that, you know, I have to do everything as a mother. I have to be there all the time. I have to be doing all these extracurricular activities, and I have to do my job.

But the larger shift, Abby, and it's really reflected in in this podcast, is that when I wrote my article in 2012, I was writing it from the perspective more of a, as a worker, a foreign policy expert, than as a mother. I was starting where traditional second-wave feminism has started, which is, you know, the most important thing I can do is to be a breadwinner, and I also need to be a mother, and I don't want to make that trade-off.

[17:17]

And so I was writing about all the changes we need to make in the workplace to allow mothers, and really parents to take care of their kids in the ways, as I documented, kids really needed, whether in crisis or not. But that you couldn't just time manage your way out of this problem.

That was my point. You know, you can be the most efficient human being on the face of the earth, if you have a child who suddenly has a set of needs, if you get divorced, if you move. I mean, there are all these things where life throws curve balls at you, and the workplace didn't allow that.

Ten years on, 12 years on, we are talking about parenting as a national issue, and Richard has played a huge role in that on the male side. But we now have a care movement, and it's on right and left. I've spent, since 2015, focusing much more on raising the value of care than on the more traditional points about equal pay for equal

work, all of which I think are really important, and I run a workplace that says family first.

But that's been the biggest shift. We now focus on care, and care needs, and parenting.

[18:33]

MCCLOSKEY: And I want to talk about if workplaces have caught up with where that national conversation is, because I think there can be a bit of a gap between the rhetoric of the value of families and what actually happens on the ground.

But on that care point, I was thinking about it, Anne-Marie, as as you were talking, and Richard, you had mentioned the phrase kind of direct care, and the difference of my mother being in the house making dinner or doing laundry while we're running around, versus I'm doing a puzzle with my daughter. Then we're doing a drawing session with my son and having this kind of intense parenting.

I think, I reflect back to my own childhood, it can create a sense of guilt, of I should be not doing that, and my kids can find something to do. But when they run out into the street, into the neighborhood, there are no children outside. Everyone is in their scheduled activities.

Everyone's being carted around to their various sports. And so it almost feels like, at some point, I'm sure the switch to intensive parenting was a choice, but now it feels like there's not really an alternative for your kids because there's nowhere for them to go unless you as the parent are taking them there or somehow curating a social event. So it feels like a bit of a trap.

[19:46]

REEVES: Yeah, that's why I think it does feel like a collective action problem, to be honest. But I don't think that's one you can solve with sort of regulation. I mean, much though I would like if I had, you know, supreme power for a day to ban travel sports, among many other works, Satanic works. But, but I just think we just have to start doing it, and I think people are doing it. I'm starting to see that.

What's interesting about this is that the the care movement does relate to this question, I think, and, I almost maybe we want to ping this back to kind of Anne-Marie, because I've been reading a lot of kind of care ethics feminism recently as part of my my work for fatherhood and Gilligan and Nel Noddings and these people.

I actually think that what happened was there was this movement which said, "Okay, we need to stop talking about this as feminine. Let's talk about care." But then actually feminism moved into this second wave that Anne-Marie talked about, which is like, "You know what? We just need to get economic power."

I actually think that might have been the right decision, but I'm interested to see how Anne-Marie reflects on that because it's almost like until you'd done that, it was always going to be dangerous to talk about the importance of care, especially if it was seen as this kind of feminine activity. I now think we've got to a point where we have to talk about care, and we have to talk about women and men doing care.

[20:55]

I don't think you have to do that androgynously. Maybe we'll get to it, but, like, I I want to care. Right? But I'm not sure I care in a feminine way, and I'm not sure that being told that I can be just as good a mom as my wife is a particularly inspiring vision for me.

But this is what what some of the feminists ended up doing. Right? Gilligan ended up saying that, "Well, you know, men can mother, too." I'm like, "Well, thanks. Great. That's not very exciting."

But I think now we're at a stage which Anne-Marie's career actually captures very well, which is now we do have to get back to these questions of care. But not just care of kids, care of ourselves and care of each other. Right? We are not just inputs into the human capital of our future, you know, children, right? We're also human beings ourselves who have relationships and needs and marriages too.

And so what I'd like to see is that the discussion of care becoming one that is just not just about childcare, but is just more caring generally. And that includes myself being able to lie on the sofa on a Saturday morning rather than lug my kid off to some godforsaken soccer field somewhere.

[22:01]

MCCLOSKEY: And I want to also ping this over to Anne-Marie because I agree with you, but I also come at this from a center-right background that the role of a workplace is to produce profit, and whatever you do for caring is, you know, over here, and if the government gets involved in care, it's gonna tip the scales towards a certain type of family, and maybe that raises questions.

And so I agree with you on the holistic vision. But I I wonder if in practice, and even what we see right now in the midst of a moment where there is family policy being promoted on both sides of the aisle, as you you both have rightly pointed out, that it is still the case that the vast majority of workers don't have access to paid family leave. The vast majority of people who are eligible for childcare subsidies do not receive them from the government.

And workplaces who have generous policies on paper may or may not follow through with those in practice, so there's actually a lot of pressure to not take the full paternity leave or to actually leave at 3:00 to pick up your kid from school because the school day doesn't align with the workplace.

So, Anne-Marie, on the ground, do you think that workplaces have really taken this mantle on and are becoming more holistic places where you can earn a wage and also feel cared for as a human with your family needs?

[23:25]

SLAUGHTER: I don't think there's one answer to that question. I think some workplaces definitely have, and workplaces that really allow remote work often created by mothers, parents, but also, as Richard said people of my generation who are caring for their parents every bit as much as, as for children.

I think, though, we need a larger shift in our economic system to take on your, your point, and I I would start by saying, I do think women had to have substantial and ultimately equal earning power. My my father, you know, raised me in the '60s in Virginia, and after my article came out, I said, "Dad, you know, why did you raise me to have a career?" Because my childhood friends were saying, "Our fathers didn't encourage us."

And he said, "Because the 1960s were the age of a dramatic increase in the divorce rate, and I was watching a lot of 50-year-old women, 50 to 60, who had not gone to med school or law school so they could put their husbands through those schools, and their husbands were now leaving them, and they were high and dry.

And I swore my daughter would never be in that situation." He then added, "You've taken it a little far, dear."

MCCLOSKEY: Oh!

[24:41]

SLAUGHTER: But, you know, I I think that's right. And I think we still are struggling, although it is changing because women are doing so much better in school and because we have this crisis of men and boys, which I completely agree with.

But still, when you look at the commanding heights of the economy, you know, and particularly in finance or tech, the two wealthiest areas, we have a long way to go.

But the deeper shift, I think, is what women who wanted it all, that whole having it all, it was, Yes, I want to be able to be a breadwinner, and I'm not giving up that extraordinary life satisfaction that being a caregiver gives you. It's hard. It's not always fun, but you are needed, and you are valued, and you have a relationship with another, and it can be with a child, a parent, a spouse, a mentee, a student.

I mean, these are not just family relationships that gives us such deep satisfaction. And that then, Abby, goes to your question. That's at the core of, well, wait a minute, we don't want to monetize that. The whole point is these were traditionally labors of love. That's correct. Nobody in their right mind wants everything in the household to be paid for.

At the same time, there are many care jobs, obviously childcare and eldercare, all of that, but also teaching and coaching and ministering, there are, there're a whole lot of jobs that depend on human relationships, and all of them are paid much less well than our traditional breadwinner jobs.

So I actually think about workplaces and an economy with care at the core. In the same way we have competition. I I think these are both, right? We are very competitive, many of us , and we are very caring, and we care in many different ways.

And it's not just about the care economy. It's about making room for care and valuing care in our economy in its many, many different forms.

And Richard, I'm with you. I'll close with this. My, my husband said early on, "I will be an equal parent or a lead parent, but I'm doing it my way, not your way. If you want to micromanage me to death, fine, come home and be the mom." But I came home one weekend, and I had all these plans, and the kids had to do this, that, and the other, and Andy had decided it was the weekend they were gonna watch all the Marx Brothers movies. And that's what they were doing.

Now, over a lifetime, I guarantee you they think that time was better spent with dad caring than whatever I was going to do. So, you know, men and women do lots of things differently. Great. We need to value care across the board.

REEVES: Vive la difference. Right?

SLAUGHTER: Exactly.

SLAUGHTER: Absolutely.

[27:33]

REEVES: I had this experience. So when my wife was working very hard in a in a very professional job and I was at home, she came home one day, I guess our kids were, like, six and eight or something, and she came home and they were still up and I was in bed. She was like, "What," sorry, "What's happening?" And I explained to her that we'd had a bet that if they could beat me five times in a row at foosball, that they could put me to bed rather than the other way around. Right?

MCCLOSKEY: Were you actually asleep, Richard?

REEVES: I think I was. I was very tired, Abby. I was very tired.

And she's like, "What's happening?" And I said, "Well, they beat me at foosball, and, you know, a promise is a promise." I, by the way, I had no idea they were gonna beat me. They've never played better.

MCCLOSKEY: great, I'm gonna use that this afternoon. Take an extra-long nap. Sure.

But when we talk about vive la difference, I mean, where do we see that any more clear than on social media and on the internet? And now, not only differences between how mothers and fathers parent, but even within those roles, really very

And I think one place where that is spiking among men, Richard, to to stay there, is this manosphere. And you've probably, I don't know, spent more research time there than I have, but I think from what I've read, there's just an increasing prioritization of men not having said attachments we've been talking about, not having said responsibilities. Actually, to be a man is to be self-fulfilled, both physically, sexually, as a provider, et cetera, that's really in direct conflict with kind of what you're, you're speaking of, of it being kind of a family system of care and work.

And so in your research and writing, how much of that do you think is noise that is on weird parts of the internet and can be ignored versus actually a growing potentially cultural script for what it means to be a man and a father in modern America?

[29:35]

REEVES: I don't think it's completely noise. I think there's a little bit of signal in there too. But I would start by saying I try to look at what's actually happening. What's happening in the labor market, what's happening in households first.

And what I see is, you know, women's employment reaching historic highs. Sure, there's more to do, but huge progress on that. As we've already discussed, massive increase in the amount of fathering being done by dads within the home. And in working-class families too. You see the biggest changes in these professional couples, but it's true of working-class men too. Right?

So I see more women going into work. I see more men doing parenting, And that's been happening for the last five, 10 years. Okay.

So if we're gonna talk about trad wives and the manosphere, let's just balance that a little bit by saying... you know, I say this to young men, " If you're holding out for a trad wife, you're gonna have a very long wait." Like, have you looked around you at the young women? Sure, sure, you will find a few on TikTok, yes. You're not gonna find any of it in the real world.

And, and similarly, I think some of the manosphere stuff, doesn't speak to the aspirations or hopes and realities of what young men currently really want, or what they're actually doing. That said, I think it's tapping into an anxiety about some of the stuff we've already talked about. Like, just how am I supposed to be today? What does success look like? I think a lot of women, and I'll speak briefly on that, are like, "Yeah, this fourth second wave thing, this is kind of not working," right? You got the woman on the subway looking for a man in finance. You know, you've got the the the sort of romanticization.

And I think it's speaking to this hunger for actually having a more caring and a more chill and just a nicer family life. Right? I think that that's understandable, and I think people are like, "Okay."

I think that the manosphere stuff, and in particular, I mean, the reactionary end of it. Like, I like the dadosphere, right? There is also a very, very—

MCCLOSKEY: —oh, I didn't even know there was that, Richard.

[31:28]

REEVES: Well, it's not interesting, Abby. What there is is, like, a really good, healthy conversation among a lot of men about how to be a dad, when to discipline. Am I the same as my wife? How do I struggle with that. Right? But that's really boring. That is not going to make it to the front page of *The New York Times*, whereas every time Andrew Tate sneezes, it will get on the front page of *The New York Times*.

So it is speaking, though, I think, to this anxiety that kind of a lot of young men have. What I find very interesting about it is that fatherhood is completely absent. In fact, it's almost, like, anti-paternal, as you just said. Right? it's actually about competition, dominance, as you say, sexual conquest. It's actually about high testosterone.

Actually, your testosterone level drops a bit after you've had a kid. You know, you become a different kind of man.

And it's very interesting to me how the ideology of this kind of new masculinity of the right- is completely devoid of discussions about fatherhood and what it means to be a good dad. That is a massive change on the right. Used to be that the right was all about being a good dad. Right? And it was a bit different to being a good mom, but it was like a noble thing to be a good dad. Now that is not there at all.

Meanwhile, on the left, there's this real reluctance to have discussions about sex differences or dads or whatever, for understandable reasons.

And so I actually think there's a bit of a gap here of saying, "Dads are really good."

MCCLOSKEY: Yeah, that's true.

REEVES: And being a dad is awesome. And also, I don't want to be told to do more parenting because it's good for gender equality. It might be, but that's not the goal. Right? I want to do it because it's awesome, and I don't want to be told by these people on the right that there's something wrong with being a dad, and that somehow by having kids and looking after kids, that makes you a simp or a cuck or whatever is the slur they've got for you, which they occasionally use for me.

I'm sorry. If you want an expression of pro-social masculinity at its finest, it is good fathering. And I don't hear enough of that from either side right now.

[33:19]

MCCLOSKEY: No, I love that. Anne Marie, shifting to you, do you think this kind of growing niche, maybe bigger, of trad wives is in some ways a reaction against the fact that, yes, workplaces have advanced and there's remote work, but as you mentioned, there still aren't a lot of women at the top, and just even if you don't want to be at the very upper echelons of business or policy, it's really hard to work full-time and have young kids.

And so thus, is this the pivot to say, Well, I don't actually even want that at all, and I'm just going to make kind of the role of raising children and being in the home as appealing as it possibly can, which I think is in some ways what the trad wife movement is trying to do. Like, do you see this as a reaction against a society that actually still is struggling to figure out how women can manage work and care?

[34:16]

SLAUGHTER: I see it more as a reaction to the insanity of work/family life as we've been discussing, and it's very hard to get any statistics on this. In Britain, 64% of people had never heard of tradwife. Younger women had, but it wasn't affecting their behavior. I think it's more of a, you know, an Instagram lifestyle influencer niche than it is actually a driver of behavior.

But I understand some of that. A lot of it is, I want a simpler lifestyle. I want to bake my own bread. I want to have time to be at home and make a nice home and be with my children, cook dinner if I want to. You know, you can call that tradwife, but again,

I ... there's no evidence that they're giving up their jobs to do that. Maybe if they buy the finance, you know, they marry the finance guy. But frankly, the number of children and the ability to have a wife who's not working is a status symbol in some circles, very, very wealthy circles where you have more than, more than than two children.

It is definitely a cultural phenomenon. It's not at all clear to me that it's a behavioral or economic phenomenon. It is telling us, I think, that we have been way too prescriptive about gender roles. What I hear, and like Richard, there ought to be room for men and women to do whatever mix of care and competition, breadwinning and caregiving, however you want to think about it, that their life circumstances, personalities, marriage or, or partnership dictates.

And part of the problem we have is we had this vision of the career woman, very strong. Then we got the career woman who could also be feminine, which is great. I always think, Abby, you know, those early days when we had to wear the little bows that looked like ties, and you know—

MCCLOSKEY: Oh, Anne-Marie, I never had to wear a bow, but I did have my share of, like, black and gray suits, and pink—

SLAUGHTER: —exactly—

MCCLOSKEY: —would've been like—

SLAUGHTER: And, and I remember the first CEOs in the '90s who started wearing heels and cool stuff, and then you had people like Serena Williams, like, who's the greatest athlete of all time on the tennis court, who's a Vogue fashion icon, and I'm like, "You go."

MCCLOSKEY: It's incredible.

[36:42]

SLAUGHTER: We don't have that for men, and we just don't. We don't have a vision of what a good man, a good, strong man—the very word strong man is, is politicized. You know, the traditional male role was protector, provider, and protector physically as well as in in other ways. And that is all treacherous ground in many many circles.

I think good father, but I still think protector is a role, in in many ways, protecting the weak against the strong. There is nothing wrong with that. Women don't necessarily have to be the weak ones, but there are plenty of people who need protection.

So, so I think I see tradwife also that way, that it says, well, if you know, I can reject the idea that I that I have to be both. I can be somebody who wants to stay at home and raise a family, and my husband, partner, is going to be the chief breadwinner. That's okay. In my view, we need to create room, much more room for families in any shape or form.

[37:50]

MCCLOSKEY: Yes. And it's my understanding, I think, why the tradwife thing has hit a nerve here versus in other places is just because we do still have, I think it's about a third of women with young children are stay-at-home moms.

I think the desire to have all sorts of different family, work, and care arrangements is one that I imagine most everyone would share. And yet, the the moment you enter into the policy conversation, it feels like to support one type of family and their need is to distance or shun another type of family.

I'll give a few examples. So, if there's childcare subsidies for low-income women who work, that is basically saying being a stay-at-home mom is not valued. If there's supports for single-parent households because of economic need, that's a strike against marriage. If there's supports, and at some points in the conversation I've run into lines of thought, if there's support for parents at all, well, that's actually, that's really unfair to the childless.

The moment you're trying to actually get in there and help families, you're offending or somehow saying another type of family isn't valued, which can create kind of a thicket for these conversations. And I think one way around it in the U.S. has been, well, we'll do a child tax credit, and just kind of everyone, more or less, it could be changed to be more refundable. Everyone more or less gets cash and do with it as you will.

But when you get into these more specific conversations about childcare or paid leave, or are there marriage incentives, a whole host of different things, it becomes controversial.

[39:28]

So, Richard, starting with you, are there policies you think that would have broad support that support fathers specifically?

[39:41]

REEVES: Well, I think the first order question is, should we support kids? ? Do we collectively have a role in doing that? Because you raised that. I think we have to answer that question first. My answer to that would be yes. You know, for all the usual reasons, that's the future of the economy, the future of society. We do need some people to take on the joys and burdens of raising children, and I think it's perfectly appropriate to subsidize that in one way or another, including through direct cash.

I don't think we should be prioritizing one particular family form over another or one set of lifestyle choices over another. And it's this weird situation right now. Again, there's a little bit of this left-right thing, which is that there is this sort of commitment on the left to promoting employment. Right? So you can only get the childcare tax credit if you're working. And then on the right, there's this growing interest in moving some of that money to couples where one of them stays at home, but only if they're married.

Which is interesting. Because actually, of course, now you can have same-sex marriages, so they can't exclude same-sex people. So what that would mean is that a lesbian married couple would get it, but a heterosexual cohabiting couple would not. I find all that very interesting from a political point of view. But anyway, just take the thumb off the scale. Just, you know, give parents financial support, is my view, and let them figure it out.

Now, if you want to separately deal with the supply side of the childcare market, whatever, fine, but just let parents decide. Right? The kaleidoscopic variety of family forms now is so great that I think that attempting to put a thumb on the scale to say, "This is, this is how you should be," is not gonna work. I have some fatherhood specific ones, but I, I feel like you're just disagreeing, Abby.

MCCLOSKEY: Well, well, but this is interesting because you're saying you'd be game presuming that our childcare block grants are completely funded. You'd be

REEVES: I, I, I would.

MCCLOSKEY: —or voucher—

[41:22]

REEVES: This is not an area of great expertise for me. But it seems to me that the direction here, and this is what most European countries will do, direction here is just give parents money. Give the caring parents money. Right? Give them more money than the parents get now, make it fully refundable. Uh, move towards something more like a child allowance. Don't condition it and say, "Oh, you get even more money if you're, you've got a wedding ring on, or if you choose to go to work."

Because as Anne-Marie said a moment ago, I think part of the challenge here has been, like, we've lost something about the valuation of caring for children in and of itself. Right? That's been one of the unfortunate consequences of that kind of of recent welfare reform and some waves of feminism.

And the last thing I'll say is that even if you do all that, you're still missing the fact that there's much more complexity in family life now. So from a father point of view, one of the challenges we have is that, I'll use divorce to start with. It is now more common for a divorce court to give equal custody than it is to give sole custody to mothers. Equal. And then you've got these shared custody, but the lines just crossed. Right? So anybody who thinks that what happens in divorce is moms get custody, no, no, no. It's actually more likely now that they'll get equal custody, 50/50.

MCCLOSKEY: I know. I feel kind of mixed about that.

REEVES: We should get to that, but because an increasing number of states have a rebuttable presumption of equal custody.

[42:36]

But my point for the purpose of this conversation is our tax system cannot cope with that. Who gets the child tax credit? And I think we need to think quite hard about a situation where one of the parents is caring for the kid two-thirds of the time, or a

third of the time, or 50% of the time, et cetera. Right now, we don't know who to give the child tax credit to if it's 50/50, and so there are various ways in which the tax system is just not fit for purpose in a world where there's just much more complexity of family life now.

So we need something like a carer credit or something like that. I don't want to take any money away from the primary carer, for sure, but non-resident parents who are doing quite a lot of care currently don't get anything.

[43:15]

MCCLOSKEY: Wow. Yeah. Fascinating. Anne-Marie, what public policy levers would you pull to support mothers?

[43:23]

SLAUGHTER: So I I would go for supporting parents as a whole, and I think unlike many who are more on the left, I I count myself center-left, , New America and and one of our our top researchers on this subject, Tara McGuinness, has come out with co-authors with a proposal for a childcare choice guarantee where you'd have publicly funded childcare and guaranteed access to a childcare slot, because childcare for two people is more than the cost of rent in almost all 50 states.

But if you didn't want that slot, you'd have it if you needed it, you would get \$1,000 a month to stay at home. And that would say, Look, we aren't gonna tell people that if they can care for their their kids through their family, through their their arrangement, great. We want people to have enough time to care for their kids.

MCCLOSKEY: Right.

SLAUGHTER: Good childcare generally. So I really think, I'm I'm with Richard. I think you provide money, you don't try to choose between different kinds of families. And I would go further and say, I think we need a whole suite of policies for families with children under 5. When I turned 65, I got Medicare. I have Social Security. I get discounts everywhere. You know, I get all sorts of breaks because elder poverty was a huge issue in the 1930s. I mean, those were the poorest people, were old people. Well, we adopted a set of policies.

If you look at families with kids under 5, their expenses go way up and their work time goes down, and they have to take time out. So I would, I would do that specifically on childcare.

But I would also say, look, this is like a protected class or a valued class where we need to to tailor those things. I think, look, right now, that would still help moms more than dads. Moms are still providing most of the care.

MCCLOSKEY: Right.

[45:31]

SLAUGHTER: But I wouldn't do it in any way that discouraged for dad be the lead parent, dads or however, again, 50/50, however a couple wants and can manage to split it, or a family, Because it isn't just a couple.

REEVES: Yeah, Because at some point, at some point you have to start trusting the parents, don't you? You have to start saying, Look, they are figuring it out the way that that works for them," rather than saying—

SLAUGHTER: —grandparents, too—

REEVES: —"nope, you're, you're not doing it the right way."

I think the other thing Anne-Marie and I will agree on, which, I didn't mention, is paid leave, where there is... I mean, I just... look, we have to be realistic about this. Asking businesses to fully absorb the costs of, you know, raising the next generation, I just—

MCCLOSKEY: —Doesn't make sense—

REEVES: —I just think that's just crazy. Right? And so there is a collective action thing there that we have to solve around. But interestingly, in 2019, Donald Trump gave three months of paid leave to all federal workforce employees at 100% wage replacement. The take-up has been extraordinary. A couple years later, President Biden did the same thing for the U.S. military.

So I'm sorry, but if Donald Trump can give three months of paid leave at full wage replacement to the federal workforce, and President Biden can give three months of wage replacement to the military, surely that's making a pretty strong case that this is a good idea. Right?

And so—

MCCLOSKEY: —yes—

REEVES: —but this is not gonna happen just through worker power. I think we have to be realistic about that. This is where I think the state has to intervene, and I'm very strongly in favor of pretty aggressive paid leave policies, and I know Anne-Marie is, too.

SLAUGHTER: Very strongly.

MCCLOSKEY: As am I, which means you have paid leave, a child allowance, and a protected class for families with kids under 5, which seems like a pretty good place to start. I could keep talking with both of you—

REEVES: Mm, love that ...

MCCLOSKEY: —all day. But Richard, Anne-Marie, thank you both so much for being in this conversation.

SLAUGHTER: Abby, thank you.

[music]

MCCLOSKEY: I'm Abby McCloskey from the Brookings Institution, and this is *No More Sidewalks: Parenting Today*. This podcast is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network and the Center for Economic Security and Opportunity at Brookings.

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