



# Communication can bridge parent-child gap



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AMERICAN IMAGE MAKER

By Mary Anne Leonard  
Staff Writer

When Jerry Cammarata's wife Margaret had their second child in 1973, he stayed home from work.

Not, like most fathers, for a day or two to take care of their older daughter while mother tended to the new baby girl.

He was on leave for four years and is still trying to return to the job he left.

"Things became financially rough," says Cammarata, the first man in the country to win paternity leave. "But part of our decision was to sell our home and move in with our in-laws."

Visiting Albany earlier this week, Cammarata talked about the sometimes frustrating but apparently rewarding journey that took him from his job as a speech pathologist with the New York City school system to his current status as author, teacher and professional father.

To get paternity leave, he battled as high as the Federal Equal Opportunities Commission, which issued an edict stating he was entitled to the same four-year, unpaid leave as women received for maternity leave. So four months after his daughter Michelle was born, Cammarata won the right to stay home with her.

By selling his house and a second car, he was able to use the income to support his wife and two children. Living with his wife's parents, he says, also saved both sets of families because heating bills and other household expenses, such as the telephone, were shared.

His wife also was not working, so along with her retired parents, there was a whole household of grown-ups watching the kids.

"There was no role reversal, where I stayed home and my wife went to work," says Cammarata. "What I've found from my readings is that there's no extra benefit to having the mom going out to work and the dad staying home."

Cammarata faced a great deal of disbelief among neighbors and relatives when he announced his intention to seek paternity leave.

"It was bad, particularly in the beginning," says Cammarata, who lives

"The cutoffs and layoffs were so tremendous, that a lot of jobs were eliminated, including mine," says Cammarata.

He is still fighting to get his original job back, "to complete the cycle," he says, and to prove a father can take a leave and return.

Would he still be working as a speech pathologist if he had not fought the Board of Education for his paternity leave?

"I probably would have been laid off, but I would have been back by now. As I see it now, all of the teachers who started working with me have been laid off but are now coming back to work."

*'That's what being a parent is all about — it's creating ways to teach kids how to do things.'*

on Staten Island. "The dads in the neighborhood thought it was an absurd, ridiculous process. But as the weeks and months went on and they found their kids weren't home but were over at our house, they began to wonder."

After two years, the money from the sale of his house ran out and Cammarata got a part-time job teaching six hours a week at nearby Wagner College, where he still works.

By 1978, he was ready to return to work after his leave, but his job was no longer there.

Cammarata doesn't regret his decision to take the leave, which has opened up several new opportunities.

He recently served as a delegate to the Governor's Conference on Families and will be traveling to Washington, D.C. this summer as a state delegate to the White House Conference on Families.

With the help of Frances Spatz Leighton, he also wrote a book about his experiences, *The Fun Book of*

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**FIRST FATHER** — Jerry Cammarata during paternity leave, the first in the nation, with daughters, infant Michelle and Elizabeth.