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## Q&A

### He took off four years to become a full-time daddy

Jerry Cammarata, a speech pathologist in New York City, was the first man to win a paternity leave. He serves as an adviser on the White House Conference on Families. Cammarata, 33, wrote, "The Fun Book of Fatherhood." He was interviewed by Ginger Grace.

**Question:** What gave you the idea to take a paternity leave?

**Cammarata:** While my first daughter was growing up, I found myself running around and getting involved in the materialistic endeavors of life — getting two cars, having a big house. I was doing four or five jobs to make lots and lots of money.

One day as I was walking out of the house, my oldest daughter said, "Daddy, when you come back I want you to bring me home a rat." I said, "Bring you home a rat?" She said, "Every day you leave and say you're going to the rat race." That finally made me realize that I should be evaluating what my wife and I needed to be doing as parents.

And it was because of that attitude that I finally decided to go to the New York Board of Education and ask for time off to be at home with my children. They said no, and I said they were sexist. They said, we don't agree with you,

and I said, I guess I'll have to make you agree with me.

I filed suit in court, and the Federal Employment Opportunity Commission decided in my favor. Therefore, fathers throughout the country right now have an opportunity to be home with their children and wives. It's a most unique suit.

**Q:** What was your wife's initial reaction to your decision to ask for a paternity leave?

**A:** She thought I was nuts.

**Q:** Did she go to work while you stayed home?

**A:** No, we both stayed home. We were trying to be equally important to the children.

**Q:** How long was your leave?

**A:** Four years, without pay.

**Q:** How did you manage to maintain a family for four years without bringing home a salary?

**A:** I wasn't a millionaire, so I had to make some very hard-core decisions. One of the decisions was to sell the house. We moved in with my wife's parents and lived in an extended family. Instead of having two cars, we only had one. Instead of us cooking a meal downstairs and my in-laws cooking a meal each night and ate together. So everything was cut somewhat in half.

After two years, I started feeling the financial pinch, so I started working part-time — about 12 to 15 hours a week.

**Q:** How do you view the role of the family in the future?

**A:** I think that the traditional role of the family is becoming

more respected. There's nothing wrong with the word tradition. Tradition is a stabilizing characteristic, always modified by new things.

I think that over the next two to three decades we will see a general tendency toward the extended family. We will realize that the support of aunts, uncles and grandparents can be a marvelous stabilizing feature in an escalating economy. The nuclear family served its place in time, but it is not the kind of ongoing family structure that we've witnessed throughout the ages.

**Q:** How can extended families exist in today's business world, where families are frequently uprooted and moved across the country?

**A:** I think that business has a responsibility beyond the family picnic once a year, beyond the gold watch after 25 years. And that is to support the family life.

There needs to be a concern about corporate giants breaking up families. They will think nothing of saying, "If you want a vice presidency, move to Manhattan. We'll ship you out there and pay you \$75,000." But the family is in California. I think businesses need to realize that if a person wants to stay with his family, he shouldn't be discriminated against.

**Q:** Do you feel that families are being threatened by the high increase in single parenthood?

**A:** Personally, I am a traditionalist. I believe in the support of the mother and father in the home. Yet I am not prudish — I respect the rights of other people to see the family in a slightly different way. Ultimately, what we're really looking at is the transition from one generation to the next.

**Q:** Was it a difficult transition going from speech pathologist to full-time father?

**A:** Well, when you think about it, all good super pops and super moms need to be able to talk to and listen to their children. So actually, I'm giving my education right back to my children.

**Q:** You have a few unique parental methods, such as learning from the animal kingdom.

**A:** Every time we have a family problem, we look at the animal kingdom — whatever we have thought of doing as parents, animals have already thought of.

Parents are helped to death. We rely too much on psychologists and pediatricians to tell us what to do, rather than just trying to be ourselves and be loving people. There are no cure-alls, there is no one who can tell you exactly how to be a parent. If you're asking yourself about what kind of parent you are, don't call up your local psychologist. Make a beeline to the zoo and check your local baboon, alligator or otter.

**Q:** And you use telephone books to teach your children geography?

**A:** I've got the largest collection of telephone books by a private citizen in the U.S. — 3,500 books. This all came about because we have to pay for information calls in New York. I got so uptight about it that I called the phone company and said I didn't want to pay for information. They said, why don't you order more books? They're free. I said, fine, give me all of New York State. Then I called them back and said, give me all of Pennsylvania.

Now I've got half the country. They're in my office, along one wall. I thought, "You've ripped off



Jerry Cammarata  
"Make a beeline to the zoo."

the phone company. How can you put these books to use? So I decided that the telephone books would be a good way to teach the girls about geography, psychology, sociology, meteorology and human nature — all by making one telephone call.

Once a week they call up any place in this country, any person they chose. They say, "My daddy is letting me make a phone call to find out how other people live in the United States. I come from New York City, and right now it's very nice outside. How is the weather there?" After 6 p.m., it's under \$1.20 for three minutes. It's the cheapest education you can give your child.

**Q:** What was your family life like when you were growing up?

**A:** I was an only child. Sometimes people say to me, "You've got so many interrelationships going on, you must have come from a large family."

My mother and father brought me up one very good way — they said, "anything you want, you can have, but God forbid you should abuse anything we give you."

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