

Parenting as Partners

Five Tips for Creating an Equal Partnership at Home

By Susan Finck-Lockhart

He's an attorney. She's a professor at a Christian university. Their 2-year-old son has just started to walk. Although they both say he's a handful, more often than not it's her hands that are full. She packs the bag for the sitter each evening. She takes their son to daycare. She cancels her classes and stays home when he's sick. Like many couples struggling to balance parenting, household tasks and two vocations, something has broken down between their belief in shared parenting and its actual, everyday practice.

Although some women are called to be homemakers, this article is for families where God calls both spouses into realms of responsibility beyond the home. For these couples there is still laundry to wash, meals to prepare, grass to mow, a house to keep clean and — most importantly — children to nurture. How can couples craft their lives to reflect the belief that the vocations of both spouses are equally valuable?

It's easier to default to a traditional model of marriage, particularly as more children enter the picture. An equal partnership is harder to achieve because it takes more communication, negotiation and emotional work. What follows are five principles that can serve as building blocks, or at least discussion starters, for couples seeking to implement an equal partnership. The results are worth the thought, discussion and time: happier spouses, richer marriages and children who see themselves as part of a team.

It's All in Your Head

Developing a marriage where each spouse recognizes and supports the calling of the other spouse is a crucial first step toward an equal partnership. Try this exercise: Can you write a paragraph about your spouse's calling or vocation? What are his or her passions? In which areas of kingdom business is your spouse uniquely gifted?

Read these thoughts to one another and discuss them. Refine them with the other person's input. Pray over your spouse's vision regularly during your personal times with the Lord. As partners who support each other, each spouse should understand and accept each other's God-given vocations.



Equal Partnership: Although it may be easier to fall into more traditional roles in marriage, couples can successfully build equal partnerships.

During the first years of our marriage, I was a seminary student with a two-hour early morning commute. My husband, Bill, woke up with me to make breakfast or help pack my lunch. He listened as I wrestled with new ideas and challenges. I felt loved, supported and validated in this new, unfamiliar calling. In turn, I helped out at Bill's inner-city mission: sleeping with the homeless on holidays and distributing food to neighborhood residents. With an understanding of each other's calling, supporting each other came naturally.

Mutuality or Perfection?

An equal partnership requires giving up control. Many spouses resist doing this in the areas of life that have traditionally been their gender's domain. For example, I have a friend who complains incessantly that her spouse doesn't "pitch in and help," but she has high standards and a strict timetable for every chore.

It's much more important to delegate responsibility and to have the family function as a team. This means one spouse doesn't assume responsibility for everything that needs to be done. Let some things slide so other family members will take the initiative and notice things that need to be done.

For example, when my children were young, I was the pastor at a small rural church about an hour from our home. Bill and the kids attended a church closer to home. Each Sunday, he dressed the kids so I could get ready. Some Sunday afternoons I noticed some of the "creative" outfits my husband put on the children.

"What did my friends at church think?" I wondered. Then I stopped those thoughts and said to myself, "I was able to get up and prepare to preach and teach. I was able to pursue my ministry all day." I loved what I did, and I was thankful for the type of marriage we had.

I never said a word about the kids' clothes. Instead I offered to lay out their clothes on Saturday

nights, which Bill said he would appreciate. Even if he wouldn't have taken me up on the offer, I know that mutuality is more important than perfection. It has a higher priority than control.

A great benefit of living out mutuality in everyday life and tasks is that children grow up participating in household tasks. We have enlisted our four children to be part of our "team" and, as the saying goes, "many hands make light work."

Now that the kids are older, they help clean the house while Bill maintains the yard. I teach the kids to do certain tasks and offer plenty of praise. Is the house perfect? No. But is it presentable? Yes. As an added bonus, if we miss a week of cleaning, the kids now say, "Ugh. The house is dirty. We need to clean." They feel ownership.

Don't Despair — Share!

After exploring your beliefs about gender roles and identifying each spouse's calling, mutuality in parenting begins with the birth of the first child. Take turns responding to the baby's cries. If one person always responds, the pattern will be difficult to change.

When the baby cries and both of you are in another room or are otherwise occupied, discuss who should respond this time, asking, "Do you want to get her or do you want me to?" A question frames the issue as a task that either of you could perform instead of seeming like one spouse is telling the other what to do.

In the areas in which you tend to assume responsibility, leave space for your spouse to initiate taking care of the need — be it a crying child in the other room, a meal that needs to be fixed or taking out the trash. Unless you have mutually decided that one spouse will be responsible for all of the family's meals, asking "What should we do for dinner?" or "Do you have any thoughts on dinner?" is more diplomatic.

Sharing responsibilities can be more structured and formal, however. For example, when our kids were little, Bill and I developed the concept of the "parent-in-charge." This person handles the kids and

whatever needs to be done at home. We took turns being the parent-in-charge so the other person could be alone for an hour or so in the morning to exercise, have time with the Lord or get ready for the day.

Let's Talk About ...

Besides being a day for worship and rest, Sunday in our home is for planning the week. With our calendars, Bill and I look at each day of the upcoming week. Who has a late meeting? Who will take Maria to gymnastics and pick up everyone from choir? This is the micro-planning and negotiating that makes us feel on top of our week and solidifies us as a family team. During macro-planning, we decide who is responsible for which tasks on a regular basis. We base our decisions on personal interest, gifting and time available.

Each month we look ahead, planning any trips or special things. Both of us have work or ministry responsibilities that take us out of town for days at a time on several occasions during the year. We always check with each other before making commitments.

For example, in January I went to Nicaragua for 10 days to minister to Young Life staff. Bill was the parent-in-charge so I could be in ministry in this country I love so much. Because he finds it helpful when I plan out as much as possible in advance, I helped arrange meals and rides for the kids. I tried to make things as easy as possible since Bill would be shouldering the whole "home front" for so long. Each spouse must be sensitive to how much "managing" the other spouse appreciates.

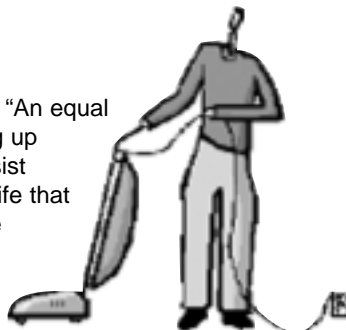
Seek Out Mentors

Do you know of another couple that has a marriage you admire? Make a point to get to know them, to watch how they "do life."

In college, a couple in my church had a unique marriage and family life that made an impression on me. He was a dentist who set up his practice next to their home and she handled all the administration for the practice. They had two children who were home schooled. The husband worked fewer hours than a traditional dentist. He said he could make enough money by working six hours per day, freeing up time for him to participate in family life.

From this family, I learned the importance of allowing kids to see each parent doing various tasks in the hope that they will grow up with less gender stereotyping. As parents, you are investing in their future adult lives. As you are also modeling this style of parenting to your married peers, you might provide impetus to help others who desire a more mutual marriage.

Mutuality vs. Perfection: "An equal partnership requires giving up control. Many spouses resist doing this in the areas of life that have traditionally been the domain of their gender ... Mutuality is of a higher value than perfection."



continued on page 26

Parenting as Partners

continued from page 25

A final word: Make sure you schedule time to play. Plan regular date nights and overnights. Mutual marriages can easily turn into all business. Regular playtime as a couple helps to keep the joy in marriage. ■

Susan Finck-Lockhart, a PCUSA pastor, writes from her home near Waco, Texas.

For the Union: When each family member considers tasks as being “for the union,” a sense of teamwork and ownership results.



Dividing Chores Without Multiplying Frustration

By Jaime Hunt

Despite 10 weeks of premarital counseling and a shared belief in the importance of an equal partnership, my husband, Dave, and I experienced turbulence as we attempted to put those beliefs into practice.

At first we divided up the chores, sorting them so we were each responsible for at least one onerous task such as cleaning out the refrigerator or scrubbing the bathroom. However, the most repugnant tasks were seldom completed due to our household policy that we would never “nag” each other about the undone chores.

So with mold growing on the shower walls and rotting apples in our produce drawer, Dave and I tried Plan B. Under our new philosophy, we would each be responsible for an entire room or area of the house. For example, Dave was in charge of all the chores completed in the bathroom while I took care of things in the kitchen. The person responsible for the room was supposed to complete his or her tasks by the end of the week.

On paper, Plan B sounded perfect. But the lack of flexibility inherent in strict chore divisions made it difficult to adjust to changes.

After a lot of tinkering and a move into a much larger space, Dave and I have discovered a strategy for sharing household tasks that works. We identified the areas in which we are gifted and applied those to the chore breakdown. For example, Dave loves to cook and wields a saucepan with authority. Therefore, he has taken over preparing meals while I clean the kitchen after dinner.

Meanwhile, I love to vacuum but I am recovering from a hand injury, so Dave totes the Dirt Devil up and down the stairs for me so I can banish dirt with a

flourish. He runs ahead and moves remote controls and pets as needed. For the distasteful tasks no one likes, we take turns.

It may have taken a lot of work to find a plan that is effective, but the important thing is that we proceeded with love and respect — and we didn’t get bogged down by “traditional” roles.

Finding a spouse who is willing to work with you as you attempt to form “a more perfect union” will save a lot of heartache as you get the bugs out of your division of labor plan. Although Dave and I knew we were in sync as far as biblical equality goes, we took several steps that helped us develop a strategy.

First, we asked ourselves: how important is it that each person spends an equal amount of time on chores? For our marriage, we decided that the time was important, given our fixation on “fairness.” If one person feels the balance of labor has become unequal, he or she asks the other to take over a task.

Second, we determined where our individual gifts were. Initially, I was the family chef because my husband had seldom prepared a meal while growing up. However, we quickly discovered he is a gifted cook and shifted the chores to reflect that fact.

Third, we identified our personal pet peeves. The dog is “my” pet and therefore any messes she makes are mine to remedy. Similarly, I despise toting the trash to the bin in the garage, so Dave usually performs that task.

Finally, we reminded ourselves what is important. A clean house is not as important as the teamwork it requires. By working together as “home-makers,” Dave and I have grown closer to each other. We see the home as “our” space rather than the domain of one or the other. That is worth all the effort we put into it. ■