

Halving It All

How Equally Shared Parenting Works

FRANCINE M.
DEUTSCH



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Chapter 1

Why Not Equality?

Steve and Beth stood in their kitchen discussing how they were going to manage the afternoon care of their four-year-old. Steve is a Spanish teacher at a community college; Beth is the executive director for the Council on Aging. Like most American dual-earner families today, they lead full and busy lives. But this family differs dramatically from the norm in one important sense. Steve and Beth share parenting equally. Their lives defy what has come to be accepted as the standard scenario in most dual-earner households: the mother and father both work in the paid labor force, but the mother also works a “second shift” at home, a shift that is not shared fully by her husband. Steve and Beth are the exceptions.¹

I heard their conversation only because I had arrived early for my interview with Steve as part of my study on equally shared parenting. Steve was planning to take their teenage daughter and a friend to a basketball game that afternoon, while Beth needed to go to a meeting for her job. After mutually detailing the intricacies of their afternoons, they arrived at a plan whereby Steve would pick up their four-year-old son, Sean, and deliver him to Beth, who would arrange for him to play with a coworker’s child during the meeting. Perhaps my presence influenced them to be on their best behavior, but the conversation I heard couldn’t have been faked. The fast-paced coordination and cooperation between the two of them smoothly led to a workable plan. As I watched them good-naturedly discussing how to work things out, it struck me that I was witnessing equality in the making.

As I listened to them go back and forth about who was to do what that afternoon, it was evident that Steve felt every bit as responsible as Beth. There wasn't even the slightest suggestion that caring for children, or even figuring out how to care for them, was solely her job.² Steve and Beth have shared a commitment to equal parenting ever since their first child was born. Beth didn't have to fight Steve to get him to share. In fact, they were so equal that when their daughter, Stephanie, was a baby, Beth says, laughing, she seemed to call out for each of them 50 percent of the time. Yet, even when couples don't fight about equality per se, there is a lot to negotiate in working out the details of everyday life. Beth humorously describes how in the early days of parenting they did everything together. Bedtimes were a two-parent affair. One of them would get Stephanie's pajamas, one would run the bath, both were involved in an hour-long ritual each night. Beth muses:

It hit me that this is ridiculous, we're both using up an hour every night, both of us, two people, two adults, two on one, putting one kid to bed. It doesn't make any sense that we should both feel sort of involved in this. Neither one of us felt free to go read a book because that would be putting too much of a burden on the other one.³

So Beth suggested that they take turns. That way, without any guilt, each could have a bit of free time every other night. They worked out alternating responsibility by a process of trial and error. As Beth says: "That was something we learned by doing it wrong . . . It wasn't so much that we changed the proportion of how much he did or how much I did, but rather we realized we were both doing it and it didn't take two people." Turn-taking was an easy, readily agreed-upon solution to the inefficiency of doubling up on the bedtime routine. But other problems of modern family life are not so easy to solve.

Consider the dilemma they face when one of their children gets sick at school or daycare. Someone will have to leave work. With humor again, Beth describes what happens:

Whoever gets the call, we have a quick conference to see who's got the most important appointments. Of course (suddenly), all our appointments become much more important. "(I've got a) really important meeting with five important people." "Well I've got one

with six important people.” We manage. People understand. You may just cancel your appointments.

Just as in unequal couples, a conflict emerges when an unexpected illness interrupts workdays. Yet, in this family there is no assumption that the mother will be the one to leave work.⁴ On any given occasion, Beth and Steve decide who goes by sparring over whose meeting is more important. Their infusion of humor in these discussions guarantees that even when there is conflict, it’s resolved with good feeling. Their commitment to equality ensures that each is willing to cancel appointments, and overall, Beth reports, they “do it half and half.”⁵

Equality in parenting is achieved in the details of everyday life. It derives from explicit mundane decisions like those I witnessed Beth and Steve making: decisions about who is going to pick the child up from daycare and who’s going to take the day off from work when the baby suddenly comes down with the flu. But it also results from the ad hoc acts of parenting that occur every day as when a parent notices and wipes a child’s runny nose, or steps in to mediate a dispute between siblings. It is these myriad details, some consciously negotiated, some fought over, some just unconsciously lived, that add up to equality or inequality between mothers and fathers. Steve and Beth make equality look easy. But we know from decades of research, and many of us from personal experience, that it isn’t easy.

Over the past twenty-five years social scientists have been telling a grim story of inequality. Literally hundreds of studies have examined women’s and men’s roles at home.⁶ Initially, when women started to flood into the paid workforce, some researchers assumed that roles at home would change dramatically. Women and men would become equal partners in marriage, sharing the responsibilities of both bread-winning and domestic labor.⁷

The bad news for proponents of equality started to emerge almost immediately. Although women were taking on paid employment in record numbers, their husbands weren’t returning the favor. Changes at home were minimal or nonexistent. Studies of domestic life in the 1970s and 1980s showed that men whose wives worked outside the home didn’t seem to be doing any more at home than men whose wives were still full-time homemakers.⁸ A few studies did show that the *percentage* of men’s contribution to domestic labor increased,⁹ but closer examina-

tion often revealed that this was not because men were doing more, but because their wives were doing less.¹⁰

Even if the news from most households wasn't very good for those waiting to welcome an age of gender equality, perhaps at least some families were approaching participation in this new world of role-sharing. Researchers turned to studying the forces that caused variations among couples. A glut of studies, starting in the 1970s, attempted to identify the factors that were associated with an increase in men's participation in domestic labor. Using the findings of these studies, researchers argued that men did more of the work at home if their wives, compared to other women, earned relatively more of the family income¹¹ or worked more hours per week in the paid workforce,¹² or if they or their wives had relatively liberal ideas about gender.¹³

But doing more of the work doesn't mean doing an equal share. What most of these studies ignored was that even when these variables successfully accounted for variations among men in different households, they didn't come close to explaining the inequality between men and women that persisted in almost all of them. Even in the households in which men did more than their male peers, they usually did a lot less than their wives. Inequality persists even in the face of liberal sex-role ideology, equal work hours, and equal pay.¹⁴

Not all are content in the face of this persistent inequality. Arlie Hochschild, in a brilliant study of the modern dual-earner household, reports that women doing the "second shift" are tired and not very happy about it. Marriages suffer from the unspoken and spoken resentments of a highly unequal workload. Households in which men aren't frying the bacon are highly problematic in an age in which women are working harder and harder to bring it home.¹⁵

Equality does exist in some households. I set out to understand a group of couples who share parenting equally, and this book grew out of that study. In contrast to most previous research, which has relentlessly documented, described, and reiterated the persistence of inequality, my study focuses on couples who have transformed roles at home to create truly equal families.¹⁶

Equal sharers constitute an unusual group of people.¹⁷ They are exceptional not just in the United States, but throughout the world. Currently, there is no known society in which women do not do the majority of childcare.¹⁸ Until now the equal sharers who *are* out there have

been virtually invisible. It is important to bring this revolution in parenting to light because the gender roles of “mother” and “father” can seem so intractable.¹⁹ Typically, even among the most egalitarian of couples, after the birth of a first child husbands and wives revert to more traditional roles.²⁰ Couples are often shocked at the extent to which they look and act like their own mothers and fathers once they have children. When they look around at their friends they see the same thing happening to them. It is easy to mistakenly conclude that no other kind of family is possible. Equal sharers show us, however, that this trajectory toward traditionalism is not inevitable.²¹

Parenting is the key issue in the gendered division of labor at home because the drastic asymmetry in workloads and the divergence in life courses between husbands and wives develop when children enter the picture. When dual-earner childless couples who work full time divide up household labor, women may do a bit more than their husbands. Children, however, create an inequality of crisis proportions.²² Hochschild estimated that compared to their husbands women work an extra month per year, a workload that leaves them sleep deprived and without a moment for leisure.²³ In families in which two full-time incomes aren't a necessity, women can opt out of the paid full-time workforce, relieving themselves of the relentless burden of demands by following a path different from their husbands'.²⁴ However, for women socialized to believe they could have it all, that is a compromise laden with costs.²⁵

The existence of equally shared parenting shows that there *is* an alternative to each of these scenarios. Equality is achievable. Although equality may still be the exception in American households, men and women today increasingly believe in gender equality. When my students surveyed dual-earner couples at a local shopping mall, over 70 percent of them thought that if both parents were employed full time, they should split the care of their children 50-50. Despite the ubiquity and persistence of gender inequality, and the forces and dynamics that sustain it, couples *can* thwart those forces, and produce a revolution at home. Equal sharers, though rare today, are our models for tomorrow.

The definition of equality I used for my study was a simple one. Families were classified as equal sharers if husband and wife agreed that, overall, when everything that went into the care of children in a typical week was taken into account, the work was split 50-50. Equality takes

many forms. This definition included parents who split each task down the middle, alternating who cooked the kids' dinners, who took them to daycare, and who got them dressed in the morning, as well as families who split the work into separate but equal spheres. By and large, in these equally sharing couples, fathers spent as much time with children, and were as involved in the less glamorous aspects of parenting as were mothers.²⁶ Equality meant that fathers were more than playmates, more than helpers, and more than substitutes for mothers. Just like their wives, they were primary in their children's lives.²⁷

My definition of equality is bound to raise two questions. First, "What about housework?" Although I did not specifically ask about the division of housework, many of the tasks associated with taking care of children could also be classified as household chores—preparing meals for children, washing and buying their clothes, and picking up their toys. Housework was spontaneously mentioned in virtually all the interviews. Given these comments, I estimate that approximately two thirds of the equally sharing parents split all the housework that did not involve childcare equally. A quarter of the equally sharing families solved at least part of the housework problem by paying someone else to do it.

The second question is, "Can't families be equal if men work more hours for pay while their wives put more time in at home?"²⁸ In approximately three fourths of the "unequal" couples I interviewed, when paid work and household work were considered together, women worked more hours than their husbands. Although in a fourth of the "unequal" couples, the overall amount of time spouses spent working was equal, I am reluctant to call equal time working true gender equality. In this "separate but equal" model of equality women have less say in the family, are less valued outside the family, have worse mental health,²⁹ and are more economically vulnerable than their husbands in the case of divorce.³⁰ Even if we do consider those families "equal" in some sense, I hope to show that both men and women lose by splitting parenthood and paid work unequally by gender.

In my study I interviewed a wide range of dual-earner couples, who had children ranging in age from babies to teenagers. My research assistants and I recruited them from daycare centers, schools, and through word of mouth. We asked everyone we contacted to recommend couples who equally shared childcare. We then called all those who had volunteered

or had been recommended and asked their overall estimates of the division of childcare in their families. Many of those reputed to be equal were not. However, a surprisingly high number of couples we talked to by phone initially claimed to divide the care of children 50-50. When we investigated further with questions about specific tasks their estimates changed. “How do you divide picking up after children? diapering them? getting up at night with them? feeding them? taking them to birthday parties?” Reminded of the myriad tasks associated with childcare, many of the couples revised their estimates to more realistically reflect the disproportionate share shouldered by mothers.

Equal sharers, of course, were the stars of the study, but I also interviewed their unequal counterparts to highlight what made equal sharers special, as well as what made them ordinary. The unequal couples I interviewed were not all the same. Among them were some in which mothers did the vast majority of childcare (75-25 split) and some in which mothers did only a bit more than half of it (60-40 split).³¹ Participants included doctors, lawyers, dentists, teachers, artists, social workers, college professors, business people, administrators, and therapists. Although the majority of these equal sharers and their counterparts were affluent, highly educated men and women who worked in high-status professions, I also interviewed fire fighters, mail carriers, and secretaries. Almost all of the participants were white.³² (See “How I Did the Study” for detailed information about the sample and my methods.)

Finally, I interviewed another group of couples whose lives were very different from the lives of the rest. In these “alternating-shift” couples, blue-collar husbands shared the care of their children by working different shifts than did their wives. While the men worked at their paid jobs, the women were home with the kids and vice versa, eliminating most of the need for paid childcare. That meant that even when they weren’t equal sharers, the working-class fathers in these couples were extensively involved in childcare. I included them because their involvement debunks middle-class stereotypes that hard hats wouldn’t be caught dead changing diapers. They make eminently clear that the “revolution at home” is not simply an upper-middle-class phenomenon.³³

To understand how equally shared parenting works, I spent over a year talking to equal sharers and other dual-earner couples. In all, I inter-

viewed husbands and wives in 150 dual-earner couples (a total of 300 interviews). These tape-recorded interviews were conducted separately with husbands and wives at a place of their choice, usually their homes. Occasionally, however, an interviewee preferred to meet with me at my office, my home, or at his or her workplace. The interviews lasted an average of two hours each, but some were as long as four hours, and a few were as short as an hour. Transcripts of the tapes, as well as the notes I recorded after each interview, provided me with rich information about the couples.

These men and women told me the history of their lives as parents, shared their conflicts, and explained why they had made the choices they had. The questions I asked all participants are included in "How I Did the Study" at the back of the book, but I also elaborated on those questions to pursue issues in more depth when it seemed appropriate to do so. For example, occasionally couples claimed to be completely satisfied with the division of domestic labor when asked about it directly, but at some point later in the interview hinted at conflict over roles at home. When the issue reemerged, I would probe to allow the participant to expand on it.

The description of the uniform procedures I followed, however, gives nothing of the flavor and diversity of these interviews. For me, each interview was an uncharted voyage into a world created by each family, and my role was to discover as much as I could about this world. Because the families' incomes varied widely, each setting was a bit different, from cramped walk-up apartments to luxurious designer homes. But what struck me more than the economic disparities among the families were the attitudes toward life that they conveyed. Some couples imbued their family life with love and joy that were almost palpable. One particularly memorable mother laughed as she described how she and her husband would drop everything to take their kids for a surprise trip to an ice-cream stand, and enthusiastically told me how much she enjoyed the challenge of shopping with coupons when I questioned her about recent financial difficulties in her family. In a few families, however, sadness or tension seemed to prevail. Although equality was neither a prerequisite nor an assurance of happiness, in homes where both parents worked full time and women did most of the work at home, free and easy happiness never emerged.

To a person, the interviewees were extremely generous with their time and their willingness to share their lives. Some initially appeared

to be worried about how they appeared to me, or nervous about talking on tape, but in the course of conversation, virtually all seemed to relax and welcome the opportunity to tell their stories.

I undertook this study partly for personal reasons. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as a young female academic just beginning my career, I was worried. I wanted to have children some day, but reports from the homefront sounded ominous. The troublesome tale being told by social scientists was coming across loud and clear: whether women worked outside the home or not, they were responsible for the work at home. This problem began to loom large in my future. Two images in particular, both promoted in the popular media, haunted me: superwoman and former superwoman.

Superwoman, able to spend fifty hours a week pursuing success in the profession of her choice, who, disguised as traditional woman, returns home to juggle a never-ending onslaught of meals, baths, bedtimes, and household responsibilities. I just knew I didn't have it in me to do that. The glamour of the media image seemed ludicrous. I remember one particularly infuriating TV ad in which a woman, alternately dressed for success, housework, and seduction, sang, "I can bring home the bacon. Fry it up in a pan. And never let you forget you're a man."³⁴ How could any woman achieve that? Who would want to?

The image of former superwoman was even more disturbing to me. This was the woman who had tried to do it all, had failed, and had now happily retreated to domestic bliss in her immaculate house, spending her days building Legos, baking cookies, and thoroughly enjoying life as a full-time mom.³⁵ Although I am certainly in favor of parents of any gender spending time with their children, and I would be the last to advocate a seventy-hour workweek, several aspects of this former superwoman picture troubled me.

I doubted that I would be content as a stay-at-home mother. After six years of graduate school pursuing a Ph.D., and five more years on the job market until I obtained a position on the faculty at Mount Holyoke College, I couldn't imagine throwing my job over so lightly. I wondered how many women could really be so sanguine about relinquishing their professional lives.

I couldn't know then how intensely I would love my child when I did actually become a mother, and how silly the rewards of career would sometimes seem compared to the joy of listening to my child laugh.

watching him play the violin, or hearing “I love you, Mommy,” after I had managed to assuage one of his worries. Nevertheless, I know that full-time childcare has its downside. Your patience can wear thin after you clean up the umpteenth spill, whining can grate on your nerves, the lack of adult company can make you lonely, and playing with Legos can quickly lose its thrill. No matter how intensely you love them, caring for small children full time is incredibly hard work, much of it stressful, boring, and isolating. Even though I feel a bit guilty as I write this, I know I’m not the only mother who feels this way.

In fact, there is mounting evidence that regardless of educational background, mothers in America today are happier when they work outside the home. Women whose jobs might be viewed as dead-end by more privileged women also derive satisfaction from bringing home a paycheck, and from the accomplishment of paid work well done, no matter how poorly it is remunerated.³⁶ The image of the blissful full-time mom belies the depression, low self-esteem, and stress that women often experience when motherhood is their only job.³⁷

And for those women who would enjoy a chance to be home full time, what about the money? The unstated message about the former superwoman is that, married to a high-earning husband, she is unfettered by financial concerns; the decision to stay home is entirely her choice. This image blatantly ignores the real economic constraints faced by most American families today. For the average family, two incomes are simply necessary for survival, or at least to achieve middle-class status.³⁸ In more affluent dual-career families, the sacrifice of the mother’s income would mean a substantial decline in the family’s standard of living. The economic forces that have driven women into the marketplace operate to keep them there. For most women, dropping out entirely is not a viable option.

As solutions to the dilemmas of modern family life, the superwoman and the former superwoman are both illusions. It is not glamorous to “do it all”; it’s stressful and exhausting. It is not blissful to revert to traditional roles; it’s depressing or financially unfeasible.

As I pondered my future, another solution kept coming to mind: equality—men and women equally sharing the care of their children. Coming of age in a feminist era, I thought equality was simple and sensible. If parents could be peers, not only would women escape from the no-win bind of superwoman or former superwoman, but men would be liberated from the burdens of solitary breadwinning and freed to

develop meaningful relationships with their children. The question I asked myself then seemed as relevant a decade later when I began interviewing: "Why not equality?" Out of that question my study was born.

I found that families come to equality through many paths. Steve and Beth are exactly the kind of people that you might expect to be equal sharers. Sixties activists, profoundly influenced by the women's movement, they are nontraditional, liberal people who believe in equality between the sexes. Yet they are not typical of equal sharers. Many of the couples I interviewed don't seem the least bit radical. For example, unlike Steve and Beth, only a minority of them began parenthood sharing equally. An ideological commitment to gender equality is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the creation of an equally sharing family. Couples who share parenting are more likely to become equal to deal with the overwhelming labor demands of a two-job household than to fulfill an ideological agenda. Equal sharing is not simply an end; it is a by-product of the negotiations over all the details of everyday life in a family. Like Steve and Beth, all couples who share parenting equally are on their own journey, which they continue to improvise and revise as they go along.

When I began listening to the stories of the people I interviewed, I was looking for the magic key to equality. What was it that made equal sharers different from other couples? Yet what I discovered was that the paths that eventually took equal sharers and their traditional counterparts on different journeys initially diverged only slightly. The real scoop about equal sharing is that it is not primarily a story of who but a story about how—how equality is created.

Equality exists without magic. Husbands and wives become equal sharers together, fighting, negotiating, and building as they go. The big news is that despite its rarity, equal sharing is not the province of a special elite. Avoiding the pitfalls of a home life built around superwoman or former superwoman, equal sharers are ordinary people simply inventing and reinventing solutions to the dilemmas of modern family life.

Chapter 2

Creating Equality at Home

No couple is ever really prepared for the upheavals that accompany the birth of a first child. Although expectant parents probably attended childbirth classes together, chances are little was said about what each would do when they arrived home with their new infant.¹ The humorist Nora Ephron confided what new parents soon find out: the baby is “a grenade” that sets off an “explosion” in the marriage.² Sociologists concur, describing the birth of a new infant as a crisis in the family.³ Certainly it was a crisis in the days when it was taken for granted that women (at least in middle-class families) would leave their jobs to care for their infants and men would shoulder the breadwinning responsibilities, and today that crisis has deepened with the breakdown of consensus over roles in the family. Now, more than ever, family life must be created day by day.

“Create” is the key word here because there is nothing automatic about equally shared parenting. Equal sharers must work out all the details. Will husband and wife divide all tasks 50-50 so that their roles are interchangeable, or will they create separate but equal roles? Will one of them stay home with the new infant? Who will do what, with and for children? Who’s going to buy their clothes, take responsibility for doctor’s appointments, research the best preschools, change the sheets on children’s beds, teach them to tie their shoelaces? Who will respond to a child’s cry from bed, “I’m thirsty”?

Surprisingly, many of the parents I interviewed more or less fell into equal sharing, not because of their initial intentions or a particularly

passionate egalitarian ideology, but because it was a practical solution to the problems of modern family life. But even when equality *is* intended, putting egalitarian principles into practice is a shaky and messy business. There are no guarantees. Some factors, like comparable jobs, liberal friends, and a belief in nontraditional sex roles, can help. These factors, however, do not predetermine the choices couples make, but simply provide the milieu in which couples negotiate, struggle, and co-operate to create an equally sharing family.

The milieu of family life changes continually. Intentionally or unintentionally, jobs change, friends change, interests change. Most important, children and their perceived needs change. This means that the division of labor at home is never settled once and for all, but must be continually recreated. Although the equal sharers in my study were dividing domestic labor 50-50 at the time of the interviews, sixteen of the twenty-six had not always done so.⁴ In fact, thirteen of the mothers had taken more than a year off from paid labor while their husbands continued to work, and thus they had a rather traditional division of labor in the early months of their parenting. Equality today does not ensure it tomorrow, nor does inequality in the present preclude it in the future.⁵

Creating equality is fraught with potential pitfalls as husbands and wives struggle with the anger, guilt, frustration, and ambivalence produced by the conflicts between them and within each of them, and by the sometimes impossible demands of paid work. In their struggles, couples differ among themselves in three important ways: in how they define and divide family work (the “who does what” of equality), in how they explain it (the “why” of equality), and in how they negotiate equality.

To examine how these families fashion equal sharing, let's look inside a few homes. These forays will reveal the creative process at work in all the families, as well as a bit of the diversity among them. First, let's visit Janet and Daniel, two untenured professors in the same political science department at a small liberal arts college in Vermont.

Janet and Daniel: Just a Rational Choice

Janet and Daniel are the proud parents of a twenty-three-month-old baby boy named Noah. Daniel chuckles when he recounts how Noah announces every move he is about to make: “I'm going to pick up this