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When Mom and Dad Share It All

By LISA BELKIN

On her first day back to work after a four-month maternity leave, Amy Vachon woke at dawn to nurse her daughter, Maia. Then she fixed herself a healthful breakfast, pumped a bottle of breast milk for the baby to drink later in the day, kissed the little girl goodbye and headed for the door.

But before she left, there was one more thing. She reached over to her husband, Marc, who would not be going to work that day in order to be home with Maia, and handed him the List. That's what they call it now, when they revisit this moment, which they do fairly often. The List. It was nothing extraordinary — in fact it would be familiar to many new moms. A large yellow Post-it on which she had scribbled the "how much," "how long" and "when" of Maia's napping and eating.

"I knew her routines and was sharing that with Marc," Amy recalls.

She also remembers what he did next. Gently but deliberately, he ripped the paper square in half and crumbled the pieces into a ball.

"I got the message," Amy says.

That message was one the Vachons had agreed on from the evening they met, though they were clearly still tinkering with the details. They would not be the kind of parents their parents had been — the mother-knows-best mold. Nor the kind their friends were — the "involved" dad married to the stressed-out working mom. Nor even, as Marc put it, "the stay-at-home dad, who is cooed at for his sensitivity but who is as isolated and financially vulnerable as the stay-at-home-mom."

Instead, they would create their own model, one in which they were parenting partners. Equals and peers. They would work equal hours, spend equal time with their children, take equal responsibility for their home. Neither would be the keeper of the mental to-do lists; neither of their careers would take precedence. Both would be equally likely to plan a birthday party or know that the car needs oil or miss work for a sick child or remember (without prompting) to stop at the store for diapers and milk. They understood that this would mean recalibrating their career ambitions, and probably their income, but what they gained, they believed, would be more valuable than what they lost.

There are Marcs and Amys scattered throughout the country, and the most interesting thing about them is that they are so very interesting. What they suggest, after all, is simple. Gender should not determine the division of labor at home. It's a message consistent with nearly every major social trend of the past three decades — women entering the work force, equality between the sexes, the need for two incomes to pay the bills, even courts that favor shared custody after divorce. And it is what many would agree is fair, even ideal. Yet it is anything but the norm.

"Women entering the work force changed the work force far more dramatically than it changed things back home," says Jessica DeGroot, whose senior thesis for college 27 years ago was about this conundrum and who, as the founder and president of the ThirdPath Institute, coaches families wanting a shared lifestyle. "When I graduated, I thought things would change, if not for me, then for my children." Her daughter, Jocelyn, is now 17, and her son, Julian, is 11.

"If you gave people a survey they would probably check all the answers about how things should be equal," says Francine M. Deutsch, a psychology professor at Mount Holyoke and the author of "Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works." But when they get to the part where "you ask them how things work for them day to day," she says, "ideal does not match reality."

Deutsch has labeled the ideal "equally shared parenting," a term the Vachons have embraced. DeGroot prefers "shared care," because "shared parenting" is used to describe custody arrangements in a divorce, and while "equal" would be nice, it is a bar that might be too high for some families to even try to clear. Whatever you call it, the fact that it has to have a name is a most eloquent statement of both the promise and the constraints facing families today.

"Why do we have to call it anything?" Amy asks.

Marc adds, "Why isn't this just called parenting?"

Marc Vachon was one of six children, raised in a working-class Massachusetts town with a high crime rate and, for a few bad months, a nightly curfew. His mother stayed home, his father worked for a small manufacturing company and neither had a college education. "My father's job was a means to an end," he told me when I first met him and Amy at their home last fall, "a way to put food on his family's table."

Marc paid his way through the University of Massachusetts at Lowell and then set out with his degree in mechanical engineering (and later an M.B.A.) to earn a lot of money. Working on the management track at an electric company, "I was playing the game," he remembers. "I was working 60 hours a week. I bought a fancy sports car."

But a few years in, he came to see that he only used that car to drive to and from work. When the human-resources department sent out a memo outlining a reduced-hours plan, he applied. His manager seemed surprised that a single man was asking for part-time status, but eventually he agreed.

For six months he worked three eight-hour days, at a reduced salary. When his temporary "leave" ended, he had to go back full time, and he stayed at the company for only another year. "Once I got the sniff of other interests in my life," he says, "there was no going back into the box." He trained himself in computers and took a job doing information and technology-support, ultimately working five days a week, 7 a.m. to noon. When his bosses offered a promotion, he agreed to work his personal version of full time: 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., with no lunch,

at a big jump in pay. Periodically he would be offered a management position, which he turned down because
“you can’t work part time as a manager.”

The only downside to this laid-back worldview was its chilling effect on his romantic life. The women he was meeting, he says wryly, did not aspire to say, “My husband works at the help desk.”

The last of those women was Amy, and they found each other eight years ago on matchmaker.com, when they were both 37. Their first date was on a dreary March evening, and over dinner they learned each other’s stories.

Amy’s began with a childhood in Ann Arbor, Mich., shattered at the age of 8 when her father, a brilliant but troubled professor of biochemistry at the University of Michigan, committed suicide. Her mother, who had been a lab assistant until Amy was born, was forced back to work. Her “chemistry skills were rusty beyond repair,” Amy says. She eventually found a job as preschool teacher.

Watching her mother “get up each morning to face another day as the only parent” made Amy determined “to assume full responsibility for myself, because anything can happen at any time, and to share the entirety of my life with a true partner, because I saw how hard and sometimes empty it was for my mother to play all the parts alone.”

Like Marc, Amy also paid her own way through school, getting a doctor of pharmacy degree from the University of Michigan and starting a career as a clinical pharmacist. She married at 20 and then divorced at 31 because she was not ready to have children. All the married mothers she knew seemed nearly as alone in their roles as her own mother had been.

She and Marc talked for hours that first night. At the end of dinner, they split the check. Amy went home wary, thinking that “this guy was too good to be true.” Marc woke up a friend and announced he had met the woman he would marry.

Their wedding was in September 2001, and they moved into a house with a picket fence that Amy bought a few years earlier. Maia was born in July 2002, and during her pregnancy, Amy kept thinking: It’s real now. There’s no turning back. If this partnership promise doesn’t work, I’ll be saddled with all I feared.

Social scientists know in remarkable detail what goes on in the average American home. And they have calculated with great precision how little has changed in the roles of men and women. Any way you measure it, they say, women do about twice as much around the house as men.

The most recent figures from the University of Wisconsin’s National Survey of Families and Households show that the average wife does 31 hours of housework a week while the average husband does 14 — a ratio of slightly more than two to one. If you break out couples in which wives stay home and husbands are the sole earners, the number of hours goes up for women, to 38 hours of housework a week, and down a bit for men, to 12, a ratio of more than three to one. That makes sense, because the couple have defined home as one partner’s work.

But then break out the couples in which both husband and wife have full-time paying jobs. There, the wife does 28 hours of housework and the husband, 16. Just shy of two to one, which makes no sense at all.

The lopsided ratio holds true however you construct and deconstruct a family. “Working class, middle class, upper class, it stays at two to one,” says Sampson Lee Blair, an associate professor of sociology at the University at Buffalo who studies the division of labor in families.

“And the most sadly comic data is from my own research,” he adds, which show that in married couples “where she has a job and he doesn’t, and where you would anticipate a complete reversal, even then you find the wife doing the majority of the housework.”

Housework, in this context, is defined as things like cooking, cleaning, yardwork and home repairs. Child care is a whole separate category — one that is even more skewed. The social scientist's definition of child care "is attending to the physical needs of a child — dressing a child, cooking for a child, feeding and cleaning them," Blair says. It doesn't include the fun stuff, like playing and reading and kissing good night.

Where the housework ratio is two to one, the wife-to-husband ratio for child care in the United States is close to five to one. As with housework, that ratio does not change as much as you would expect when you account for who brings home a paycheck. In a family where Mom stays home and Dad goes to work, she spends 15 hours a week caring for children and he spends 2. In families in which both parents are wage earners, Mom's average drops to 11 and Dad's goes up to 3. Lest you think this is at least a significant improvement over our parents and grandparents, not so fast. "The most striking part," Blair says, "is that none of this is all that different, in terms of ratio, from 90 years ago."

Back when women had to tend fires to cook and put clothes through the wringer and then onto the clothesline, they spent 50 hours a week on housework and men spent 20. (A ratio of 2.5 to 1.) And back in the 1950s, when no one was even bothering to measure how many hours men spent on child care because it was thought to be negligible, the average mother spent 12 to 15 hours caring for her children — the same as they spend today.

Which does not mean women are happy about this. There are plenty of studies of that too, and according to Blair's research, 58 percent of women say the division of labor in modern families is not fair to them. (Eleven percent of men, in turn, feel that the division of labor in their own marriage is unfair to them.) When couples argue, it is most likely to be about children, money or the division of labor. "Those are always the Top 3," Blair says. "The order changes around, but the topics don't."

Why then does the status quo continue? "You assume people will look at relationships rationally, and if there is such inequity and such a sense of unfairness, they would end it," Blair says. "When you look at this rationally, it is very difficult to understand why things are the way they are."

The obstacles to equity are enmeshed and interwoven, almost impossible to separate from one another. Deutsch did a study of 150 couples who tried sharing to various degrees, and her results suggest that social norms play a large part in why so few marriages are truly equal. Choices are made in a context. It is rare that you choose something you have never seen. So men who do more around the house than their fathers and spend as much time with children as their neighbors feel that they are doing their share and their wives feel grateful to have such involved partners. That is why the single-most-predictive factor of how equal a couple will be, Deutsch says, is how equal their friends are.

Messages, loud and soft, direct and oblique, reinforce contextual choice. "A pregnant woman and her husband," Deutsch says, "how many people have asked her if she is going to go back to work after the baby? How many have asked him?"

Looked at through that lens, what seems like an external institutional barrier to equal sharing becomes something else entirely. He makes more money than she does, so of course she should be the one to step back her career; she has a more flexible line of work than he does, so of course she should be the one to work part time. Those may seem like choices, but they have their roots in social norms.

"They weren't born in those jobs; they chose them," Deutsch says. What decision tree, planted decades earlier and steeped in unspoken assumption, she wonders, led him to be a surgeon and her to be a social worker? What led her to work in a field where four-day weeks are common and him to work where they are unheard of?

"It's a chicken-and-egg thing," she says. "Even when men and women start off with equal jobs, they make decisions along the way — to emphasize career or not, to trade brutal hours for high salary or not."

She goes on to suggest that the perception of flexibility is itself a matter of perception. In her study, she was struck by how often the wife's job was seen by both spouses as being more flexible than the husband's. By way of

example she describes two actual couples, one in which he is a college professor and she is a physician and one in which she is a college professor and he is a physician. In either case, Deutsch says "both the husband and wife claimed the man's job was less flexible."

She has a similar response to those who say that they would love to share equally but that one parent — almost always the wife — has parenting or housekeeping standards that the other cannot (or will not) meet. Dad dresses the children wrong and diapers them wrong and sends inadequate thank-you notes and leaves the house a mess. This may look like a cranky power struggle, Deutsch says, but the dynamic, which sociologists call "gatekeeping," also reflects social pressures.

Women, she says, know that the world is watching and judging. If the toddler's clothes don't match, if the thank-you notes don't get written, if the house is a shambles, it is seen as her fault, making her overly invested in the outcome. Many women will also admit to the frisson of superiority, of a particular form of gratification, when they are the more competent parent, the one who can better soothe the tears in the middle of the night.

Deutsch says that equality in parenting should be every couple's goal. Yet, as we all know, the nuances of relationships are complicated, built on foundations that even we may not see until we try to alter them. If your partner's ambition is what attracted you in the first place and if his/her decision to dilute that ambition would make you think less of him/her, then this is not for you. If part of the security and warmth you feel from marriage is because of the familiarity and tradition of husband and wife roles, this won't work for you, either. And if one of you is dead set against it or if both of you think the required regimentation that comes with equal sharing just isn't a way to live, then Deutsch probably won't persuade you. So go with your comfort level. But understand where that feeling of comfort comes from.

When Jo and Tim Pannabecker first met, their work was at the center of their lives. They knew they would not get rich trying to better the lot of the poor in Africa, but they did think they could change the world.

Jo, born in New Zealand, was working in Chad, researching how to grow crops in the dry season, and Tim was stateside coordinating the effort of development workers like Jo. They were both in their early 30s, having put off marriage for their peripatetic careers, and Jo in particular was worried that having children would table her dreams. "I was scared that if we had kids, I would be left home with the cooking, the cleaning and the children," she says.

Jo had not yet put those fears aside when she married Tim in 2001. Living in Lancaster, Pa. (where their employer, the Mennonite Central Committee, was based), they tried sharing all housework equally so that they didn't slip into the "wife as caretaker" pattern, and they got a dog and a cat "as our first step toward children," Jo says.

"It was a test," Tim explains. "We would have to decide who would take the dog out at night, who would walk her early in the morning, who could work with vomit."

A test he passed, his wife says: "The dog was the only evidence I had that Tim would change his schedule to accommodate the dog. That was my intellectual bridge, into 'I think I can trust this.'"

While pregnant with their first child in 2003, Jo read a short description in a woman's magazine about ThirdPath, and the couple signed on to be coached in the ways of shared parenting. Jessica DeGroot and her husband, Jeff Lutzner, lead the life DeGroot teaches (they have done so for all 18 years of their marriage), and they keep track of who is home and who is working with the help of a color-coded computer chart. Lutzner's schedule is blue, DeGroot's is pink, child care from nearby grandparents is purple and time at school is gray.

To Jo and Tim, the idea of the chart was concrete evidence that sharing was more than just talk. "We saw it could be done," he says. "It's like a puzzle. You have a certain number of hours during the day, and you decide who does what when."

At about the same time in a Boston suburb, Bill and Alexandra Taussig were also learning about ThirdPath and shared

parenting. They met as undergraduates at Cornell, stayed together while she was at business school and he was at law school and were fiercely committed to work.

“My career is extremely important to me,” Alexandra says, referring to her job in marketing at a large financial-services firm. “It’s a big part of how I define myself.” When their first child was born in 1997, “it did not occur to me to opt out or go on the mommy track or take an off-ramp,” she says. “I wanted a career and wanted to be a good mother, but I thought it was up to me to figure it all out.” She did as she had assumed she would do — took a four-month maternity leave and then returned to the office on a four-day schedule.

Instead, it was Bill who did the unexpected. His firm had a gender-neutral policy offering three months of paid parental leave, and he asked for one. Looking back, he thinks he was responding as much to a desire to spend time with his son as to a gnawing realization that he wasn’t interested in the intense life of those who would make partner.

When the leave was over, he didn’t want to go back to his 60-hour weeks, but he didn’t want to become a stay-at-home parent either. “The work is very important,” he says. With a baby at home, he learned that sometimes he couldn’t wait to get back to work because there’s sanity. It can be an oasis.

The couple hired a nanny, and Bill switched jobs a few times — to a clerkship for a judge, to a solo practice, to a smaller firm — looking for the right fit. Alexandra rose through the ranks at her company, and after their second son was born in 2000, she continued working four days a week. Her schedule — every Friday off, spent with the children — appealed to Bill, who took a job in the compliance department of his wife’s employer, though it would be a while before he would get up the nerve to ask for a four-day week too.

In 2004, when Jo and Tim’s son was born, Alexandra was pregnant for the third time (she would have another boy), and Bill came across a ThirdPath conference about “Creating Work-Life Balance in the Law.” That was the first he knew that what he was trying to fashion had a name. Like Jo and Tim, he was reassured and inspired by DeGroot’s orderly charts, and while he did not go as far as making his own, he did adopt her worldview.

Jo and Tim did draft a chart. After her three-month maternity leave, their schedule worked like this, as Tim explains: “I would get up extra early and head to work, and Jo would be home until later in the morning and then take him to day care. She would leave work again at lunch for an hour to nurse him. I would take half a lunch and leave work by 2:30 or 3, pick Seth up and take him home. Jo would stay at work until 6.”

They agreed to share chores at home too, but their varying definitions of “done” soon made things unequal. “He would do the laundry,” Jo says, “but he was so slow about it that I took it back. His level of alertness to mess is quite different than mine. I see dirt two or three days before he does.” So she took back a lot of the cleaning too.

Their work-home time was evenly divided for about a year, and then in the summer of 2005, their daughter, Kate, was born. Jo tried to envision a schedule that would account for the demands of two children under the age of 2. “I realized what it would take to get all of us out of the house by a certain time in order for us to keep the life we had . . . ,” she says, trailing off. She calculated that her take-home salary, which was substantially lower than her husband’s, would barely pay for child care. She took a hard look at the satisfaction she got from her office job, which was nil compared with the joy she had found while planting crops in Chad. “If I could get a job that would pay me \$50,000 a year, that would rival or compete with Tim’s . . . ,” she says, letting that thought trail off as well.

Jo would not disagree with Deutch’s point that she had a role in creating that inequity — choosing to major in international rural development, with little practical career application, while her husband obtained two master’s degrees, one in counseling and the other in college student personnel, with better job potential. Even marrying a man who was ahead of her on the career ladder, and therefore likely to remain ahead of her, was a choice. But there comes a point where the origin of the cards you hold becomes irrelevant, and you have to play the hand you are dealt.

Jo left the work force completely. Now she is home full time, doing nearly all the cooking, child care and cleaning

— exactly the life she feared a few years ago when she returned from Africa and married Tim. While there are “a lot of days” that she thinks “this isn’t what I signed on for,” for the most part she is far more content with her choice than she could have predicted before the children were born.

Contrast their lives with those of Bill and Alexandra. What Bill took from his involvement with ThirdPath was that he had the same right to flexibility as his wife, and he requested a four-day schedule. While hers was granted automatically, his met with resistance, and eventually he “just took it,” he said, by negotiating a paternity leave that he would parcel out one day per week for 10 weeks. When the 10 weeks were up, he kept taking Fridays off.

A year later, his somewhat amenable manager was replaced by “the kind of guy who came in early and stayed late and had a stay-at-home wife” and who called each employee in for a schedule review. Bill was asked to return to a full-time schedule.

And that was how he worked until Alexandra, who has always had a more senior position than her husband, was offered a new job within the company. That job would require a five-day week, at least at the start. She made it clear to Bill that it was his turn to spend an extra weekday with their children.

Bill was able to negotiate a 90 percent plan — every other Friday off — in part, he thinks, because the company didn’t want to risk losing both of them. Eventually Alexandra took on that schedule, too, and now they alternate being home on Fridays. The 10 percent salary cut that they each take is a price they consider worth paying, understanding that this is an option available only to those who can make ends meet in the first place.

They are each equally likely to plan birthday parties or put the children to bed or be the parent who goes along on the school field trip. They have noticed that whoever is home on a Friday becomes the boys’ “favorite” parent — the one they call when they are hurt or want a bedtime story — for the rest of the weekend, which they see as the payoff for making sure that Bill is equally immersed in and responsible for their lives.

Less equal is their allotment of household chores. Alexandra shops for groceries. Bill deals with the cars. She calls the baby sitter. He drives the baby sitter home. He has gotten better at putting birthday invitations on the calendar, but she is the one who remembers to buy the gift. Most of all, she keeps the literal and mental lists. “I know that Teddy missed his dentist appointment and needs another appointment, and that was three months ago, and it hasn’t happen yet, but at least I am tracking it,” Alexandra says.

The keeping of those lists, they agree, makes her the defacto C.E.O. of the Taussig family. “Ideally that should be 50-50,” Bill says, “but Alex is just better at that. Also, outsiders expect her to do it — we both gave the teachers our e-mail addresses, but the teachers only e-mail her.” (But of course, says Deutch. There’s the world getting in the way again.)

Periodically they make an effort to rebalance, but it feels forced and accusatory, “too much like keeping score,” as Bill puts it.

“I’d prefer to have it unequal than spend all our time measuring,” Alexandra says.

“It’s a 60-40 split, with her doing the 60,” Bill says. “I am aiming to bring my percentage up to 42.”

For Amy and Marc Vachon, 42 percent is not enough. After Maia was born, they negotiated part-time schedules, which turned out to be the easy part. Amy worked four days a week, Monday through Thursday; Marc worked three 10-hour days, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The division of work led naturally to the division of child care. On the days he went to the office, Marc would leave early and bike to work (having only one car, despite two commutes, is one way they are able to afford life on two part-time salaries), while Amy did the entire morning child routine. On Monday and Wednesday, when she worked too, she would

take Maia to family day care across the street from their house. On Friday, she and Maia would spend the day together. On Tuesday and Thursday, Amy would sleep a little later and leave Maia in Marc's care. If Maia got sick on a Monday, they agreed in advance that Marc would take off from work, and Amy would do the same if the sick day was a Wednesday. It was a schedule that continued after Theo was born three years later.

Less seamless, though, was the division of everything but child care because they had lapsed into unequal patterns during their parenting leaves. Amy, the planner of the duo, spent those months reading every child-care book she could find — and hating most of them. “Those books don't mention men,” she says.

But while she disagreed with what she read, she was learning nonetheless. How to structure a nap schedule. How to introduce solid foods. How to soothe a colicky baby. “We had fallen into the trap,” she says, “of master and apprentice.” Marc, despite all their intentions and expectations, “was settling into the helper role.”

The problem made itself clear on the morning Amy went back to work and in that clarifying moment handed her husband the List. She was feeling anxious and vulnerable when she scribbled the schedule, she says. He ripped it not in anger (because Marc is the laid-back type who rarely gets angry), “but he clearly was telling me to butt out of his day with Maia.”

Other couples might have resigned themselves to inequity, redefining it as choice, but Marc and Amy fought back. If they were to avoid skirmishes over their parenting standards and if they were to avoid defaulting to Amy as the expert, they would have to decide what those parenting standards were. Marc explains: “Did we want to work toward a set nap schedule? Yes. Did our daughter's outfits have to match perfectly? No. Did we need to take the diaper bag when our daughter came with us to the grocery store? Not necessarily.”

They also had to give the other the freedom to do things the “wrong” way — i.e., not “my” way. In the hours before bed, they decided, Maia would be the responsibility of the parent who would be tucking her in that night. If it was Marc's turn and he wanted to roughhouse and “party in the tub,” Amy would bite her tongue and not object. She would not point out that this might not be the best way to ease a baby toward sleep. She would not point out that the books suggest evening calm. After all, if Maia was too worked up, that would be Marc's problem, wouldn't it?

That settled, they moved on to the details of housework. Like Jo Pannabecker, Amy feels happier and more centered when her house is clean enough for unexpected company. Marc thinks fretting about cleaning is “an undue burden.” In many homes, as in the Pannabecker home, the result would be that the wife cleaned to her standards. But in an equally shared home, what is the solution? That he clean to her standards? That she lower her own?

Each question led to another. How often should the dishes be done? What constitutes “doing the laundry”:: Washing it? Folding it? Putting it away in the drawer? How often do we need to vacuum, mow the lawn or dust the shelves? Does the litterbox need to be scooped every day or is once a week acceptable?

Marc's first reaction was to point out that he was far more of a contributor to home and hearth than any man he knew. Amy told him — à la Francine Deutsch — that other men were beside the point.

Slowly, consensus emerged. The cooking is done by whoever is home from work that day. The laundry is divided in half, with Marc doing the darks and Amy doing the lights. And yes, it has to be put away. Marc pays most of the bills, because he enjoys it and Amy does not. Ditto for mowing the lawn. Amy, in turn, buys nearly all the clothes for the children, an activity she loves and would feel “cheated” if she couldn't do. And thank-you notes to Marc's family? Amy has agreed that if Marc doesn't want to write them, they won't get written, and she will stop feeling as if his relatives are somehow blaming her.

Sure, some of their tasks would fall along traditional gender lines. The point, they say, is not to spit at tradition for the heck of it but rather to think things through instead of defaulting to gender. The result of all their talking, Amy says, is that “there is no nagging, passive-aggressive forgetting, feigned incompetence, unspoken resentment or honey-do lists.”

There is one pocket of American parenting in which equality is the norm or, at least, the mutually-agreed-upon goal. Same-sex couples cannot default to gender when deciding who does what at home. How these parents make their decisions, therefore, sheds some light on why married men and women act the way they do. They are the exceptions that both prove and challenge the rules.

"Heterosexual couples can learn from gay couples about sharing housework and child care," says Esther D. Rothblum, a professor in the women's studies department of San Diego State University whose comparative study of the relationships of 342 couples — lesbian, gay, heterosexual — was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology* in January. "They are good role models."

One standard research questionnaire for looking at the division of household labor has been a survey known as "Who Does What?" created by Philip and Carolyn Cowan, both emeritus professors at U.C. Berkeley. Respondents are asked to rate "How It Is Now" and "How I Would Like It to Be" in dozens of household and child-care tasks. Created with straight couples in mind, it was adapted by Charlotte Patterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, for lesbian parents. The study found little of the inequity that shows up when heterosexuals fill it out. (There has not been the same research attention paid to gay men raising children because only recently have gays begun adopting or hiring surrogates in large enough numbers to support a study.)

Which is not to say that lesbian mothers do not argue often over child care. But, says Dr. Nanette Gartrell, a psychiatrist with the University of California at San Francisco who has been studying lesbian families for 22 years, the arguments among those in her study sample tend to be the opposite of heterosexual couples'. While "straight parents get into the blame game about who is shirking responsibility," she says, "lesbian moms bicker about not getting enough time with the kids," a dynamic that can be intensified in families in which one of the women gives birth to the baby.

Harlyn Aizley, mother of a 6-year-old daughter, describes the moment that her then-partner, Faith Soloway, first took their newborn in her arms in the delivery room. "Just moments after I gave birth," Aizley writes in the anthology *Confessions of the Other Mother: Nonbiological Lesbian Moms Tell All*, "Faith scooped up the baby, cooed into her squishy newborn face and said: 'Hello there. I'm your mommy.' I wanted to kill her. Faith, that is. I wanted to be Mommy, the only Mommy."

Where a birth mother can feel possessive, the nonbiological mother (or co-mother, eliminating the negative vibe) can feel left out. For lesbian parents, as with straight biological parents, breast feeding means one partner has an additional, intimate, way to bond. In Gartrell's study, 64 percent of co-mothers acknowledged feelings of jealousy and competitiveness around bonding and child-rearing issues. "Whenever [the child] is tired or sick or cranky, [the child] wants the breast," said one co-mother, quoted by Gartrell. "I sometimes get upset that I can't soothe [the child] in the same way that [the birth mother] can."

Aizley says that while she felt possessive, her partner in fact felt excluded, referring often to "the holy trinity — baby, Mommy, breast." As a result, she theorizes, Soloway became "more like a working dad, and I was the default mom."

Most lesbian couples work hard to return to equal balance, however, Gartrell says. And how do they do that? More or less the way Marc and Amy Vachon did. They trade off breast and bottle feedings, share bathtime and bedtime rituals and talk out the conflicts. "We talked, and we talked, and we talked, and we talked," says Dorea Vierling-Claassen of feeling like the odd-woman-out when her wife, Angela, was breast-feeding their daughter, who is almost 2 years old.

"We developed a wonky theory," Dorea says of all that talking. "You need a rabid N.G.P. — nongestational parent. The N.G.P. has to push if you are going to get an equal relationship."

All this deliberate sharing means that 75 percent of couples in Gartrell's study considered themselves "co-parents." The other 25 percent said they consider the birth mother the primary parent, but that the day-to-day tasks of child care are nonetheless equally shared.

Who does what, lesbian couples say, is instead determined by personality and logistics. "Gaeta tends to be the soccer mom, the coordinator of the sports, while I am the coordinator of music lessons," says Dr. Audrey Koh, an ob-gyn in San Francisco whose sperm donor was a close relative of her partner, Gaeta, so that both mothers would share a genetic link to their two children. "Gaeta keeps mental track of the children's shoe sizes, shops for their clothes," Koh says, "but when they are sick in the middle of the night, they come for me."

Lesbian couples also have a more equal division of housework. Rothblum found that it is only heterosexual mothers who do the lion's share of housework for the family each week — between 11 and 20 hours for her survey respondents. Lesbian parents, gay parents and heterosexual fathers all look the same on paper when it comes to cooking and cleaning — they all report doing between 6 and 10 hours a week.

Both partners in lesbian couples seem to make equal professional sacrifices in exchange for this equality. That does not mean there are no "traditional" relationships — Koh works long hours and earns more money as a doctor, while Gaeta, a naturalist for the local park district, earns less and is home more. Similarly, Aizley's partner worked full time while she was home with their daughter for several years. (The couple split up about two years ago; Aizley has gone back to work and says Soloway is still very involved in their child's life.) But more common is the couple in which both women "typically work shorter hours or have declined career opportunities so they can be more available at home," Gartrell says.

Their work schedules look far more like those of Marc and Amy Vachon or Jessica DeGroot and Jeff Lutzner than like a "typical" family. Patterson found that while heterosexual fathers work an average of 47 hours for pay each week and heterosexual mothers work 24, the average for lesbian mothers, both biological and nonbiological, is about 35. Added together, both sets of families are working a total of slightly more or less than 70 hours; they just divide the work differently.

It is not clear, however, why lesbian couples split parenting more equally. "Is it because you take gender out of the equation or because women are better at sharing or because parents of the same gender see things more similarly?" Gartrell asks. "We don't know," and "won't know," she says, until there is equivalent data on gay men who become parents.

In the absence of statistics, however, Rothblum's informed guess is that it is the last of these reasons. "If men are from Mars and women are from Venus, it's really a miracle that hetero couples manage to ever make things work," she says.

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Bill Taussig, the lawyer married to the marketing executive, was recently promoted to a vice president of his company, giving him some confidence that his 90 percent schedule will not sideline his career. He has also joined the board of ThirdPath. "I am a poster child for being equally engaged with your children and still succeeding at work," he says. As far as the chores go, he adds, "we outsource a lot."

Mia Pannabecker was born last May, which means that Jo is home caring for three children under age 4. That home is now in Bluffton, Ohio, where Tim grew up, where his parents still live and where he works in the development office at Bluffton University.

He is at the office from 8 until 5 and travels often. The children spend a lot of time with their grandparents. Jo is now pursuing a degree in dietetics, the science of food, hoping to eventually establish a career in nutrition.

She says that she is pleased that she tried equal parenting but that she is also fine with the fact that it was not right for her family — at least not right now. Yes, she misses work, she says, and yes, she still wonders how she became "the happy homemaker," but sometimes you take the least stressful route for the family as a whole, and this seems to be it.

“The question should not be, Is it all exactly equal, but, What is best for all of us as a group right now?” she says. “If we decided it’s really important that we are 50-50 on everything, we would work on that. If we decide it’s really important that we be close to family, then we work on that.”

Rather than thinking in terms of equality day to day, she says, she has begun to strive for equality over the course of a working life. Before getting married, she and Tim agreed that they would live, for several years at least, in New Zealand, where she plans to go back to work. Maybe then, she says, Tim will stay home.

A year ago, Marc’s department was eliminated. At first, he wasn’t worried. He and Amy deliberately live well below their means, so their necessary bills can be paid with one salary. He spent a relaxed summer buffered by a separation package, enjoying time with the children and working on their Web site, equallysharedparenting.com, because he and Amy wanted to spread the word.

As the months passed, the dynamic of home changed. Amy started letting Marc take charge of the children every morning while she took a “long leisurely shower.” While she was at work, he did most of the cooking and the grocery shopping. He began to feel frustrated with the imbalance. She, in turn, began to feel guilty that she wasn’t having one-on-one time with Maia and Theo. She also felt stressed. “I had guilt that I wasn’t doing enough around the house, and also I could understand what a primary breadwinner guy would feel, especially if his wife was complaining,” she says.

The solution? They divided the days as if Marc were working. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, he left the house early and went for a bike ride while she had her usual morning time with the kids.

As he sent out résumés, Marc struggled with how much of his tale to tell upfront. At first he bared all, stating in his cover letter that he had been working reduced hours for several years and that he planned to continue with that schedule. No one responded.

Next he took the information out of his letter, waiting to raise the question of schedule in person. That led to many interviews, but when he asked about a three-day-a-week option, friendly conversations became frosty, and he did not hear from the companies again.

In February, he got a lead on a job that looked like a perfect fit. It was advertised as a full-time position, and he said nothing about hours in his cover letter, during phone interviews or even at the interview. He waited until he received a firm offer, which was far lower for 40 hours a week than he earned for 27 hours at his previous job.

He used that as an opening, but was told the job required at least 55 hours a week. He turned it down.

In April, he had another hot lead, and again he kept his goals to himself. When an offer was made, he replied that he needed to come in and talk in person about some details. Before he left home that Monday morning, he and Amy agreed that he would turn down the job if the schedule was not negotiable. “There was a point where I would take a full-time job, because I have a responsibility to my family and to my kids’ future,” he says. “We weren’t at that point yet. We were close, but we weren’t there.”

His prospective bosses at the marketing firm of Chadwick Martin Bailey were surprised, but they didn’t say no. Instead, they asked what schedule he had in mind. He offered two choices: four eight-hour days, which would be his preference so he would still have a full day off to be with the children, or a five-day week, with three days working 9 to 5 and two days working 8 to 12.

They chose the five-day option, a 32-hour week with a 32-hour salary and an agreement that he will always carry a BlackBerry and be available in emergencies.

Now he bikes to work every day, and when he leaves on his two short days, at least five hours earlier than everyone

else, he must walk through the center of the office, dressed for cycling. There is no way to hide the fact that he is leaving. Not that he wants to — he’s proud of how he has constructed his life and work — but he sees no reason to rub it in either. So he has learned to walk on the sides of his biking clamps, making the noise a little less noticeable on the polished wood floor as he heads out the door.

Lisa Belkin, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about her former nanny, who was accused of assaulting two elderly patients in Ireland.

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