

Note from the author (2006): The term "shared parenting" has changed in meaning since this article was published in 1988. The term now specifically means "joint custody" held by parents who have separated. This article is about parents sharing care of a child in a non-separated family. -CvB

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Part Time Work and Shared Parenting: An Option for Health Professionals

SUMMARY

The author and his wife, both psychologists, have worked half time for the past six years, while each has spent half time at home with their two young daughters. Factors influencing the choice of part-time work are reviewed. It is concluded that this arrangement for shared parenting, while still rare, is one of many increasingly viable options for child care, and that it has many benefits for parents, children, and employers. People who enjoy some professional autonomy in their work, such as physicians, may be particularly suited to such arrangements.

Can Fam Physician 1988; 34:1759-1762

Key words: parenting, child care

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur et son épouse, tous deux psychologues, ont consacré un demi-temps chacun à leur vie professionnelle au cours des six dernières années, l'autre demie fut vouée à s'occuper de leurs deux jeunes enfants à la maison. L'auteur passe en revue les facteurs qui ont influencé ce choix de travail à temps partiel. Il conclut que cet arrangement de garde partagée, malgré sa rareté, est une des options de plus en plus viable en ce qui a trait à la garde des enfants, et qui offre de nombreux avantages aux parents, aux enfants et aux employeurs. De tels arrangements peuvent très bien convenir aux gens qui jouissent d'une certaine autonomie professionnelle dans leur travail, comme les médecins par exemple.

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SIX YEARS AGO, on my first experimental day at home with my four-month-old daughter, I baked blueberry muffins for the first time.

Why was it an "experimental" day? Since Rebecca's birth, I had been struggling with one of the hardest decisions of my life: whether I should continue as a full-time professor, split between hospital and academic tasks, or cut back my work to half time and share housekeeping and parenting with my

wife, Debby. She was willing to stay home or to work part-time, depending on my own decision.

As psychologists, Debby and I thought that quantitative rating methods would solve our dilemma. For two or three months I made weekly ratings of the pros and cons of each choice. Then I added up all the ratings. The two sides came out dead even: no decision. A more empirical method was called for. Hence the experiment. Debby, who was then on maternity leave, offered to leave me at home with Rebecca during the daytime for a week. She provided bottles of expressed breast milk and went off to the library. Rebecca and I got along fine, and my blueberry muffins came out right. My misgivings allayed by a week's joyful experience of fatherhood, I completed negotiations for a half-time hospital job and sent in my resignation to the university. It has been six years now. I have no regrets and many delightful memories. Rebecca is in Grade 1, and we have a

second daughter, Alison, who is now two years old.

Our Schedule

Our family's week is divided into 21 "shifts" (morning, afternoon, and evening). Debby and I are each "on duty" for 10 shifts spread over the seven days, and we get a babysitter for the leftover shift, which falls on Saturday evening. While on duty, we are responsible for child care, housework, shopping, driving the children to their activities, and so on. Each of us cooks dinner half the time. Our 10 off-duty shifts are taken up mainly by our jobs (five or six half-days) and volunteer involvements in our church and professional organizations. One evening, for example, Debby teaches prenatal classes while I take our daughters to the children's library; she spends the next evening with them while I work on Saskatchewan Psychological Association business. Of course, not all couples engaged in shared parenting develop

such a structured schedule. In our case, we found that it helps our relationship to have a clear agreement about who is in charge of the children: this arrangement allows the other partner to feel completely free of domestic responsibility if he or she needs the time.

Rewards

The benefits of a shared-parenting lifestyle are many. I hesitate to reveal my favourite reward, fearing it will sound like the gloating of an irresponsible loafer: I get to sit in the sunny park, chatting with the young mothers and watching our children play, while my colleagues, immured in their offices, are frowning over computer keyboards and lab results.

I was there when Rebecca took her first tottering steps without support, from my hands to a bench in the art gallery. I had the privilege of taking her to an infants' swim class, and the sound of her gleeful shrieks still rings in my ears. I had the honour of accompanying her kindergarten class on their farm trip and watching Rebecca cautiously make the acquaintance of a lamb. And I have the treat, every warm afternoon, of grubbing in our sandbox surrounded by exuberant neighbourhood youngsters. Of course, every father has some of these experiences, but in the traditional family the mother spends far more time with the children, and the father misses so much. These are moments of pride and delight for me.

Beyond these fine brief moments, parenting offers a long-term education for the parents themselves and a setting for self-actualization. Caring for young children brings out our spontaneity, honesty, tolerance, patience, ingenuity, and creativity—if we pay close attention to the children's needs. Trying to be a good father, for me, has led to my developing many new skills.

In a way, I owe my present closest friends to my children. As an active participant in a babysitting co-operative, as well as a parent-co-operative indoor playground, I have developed trusting and caring relationships with many families in our neighbourhood. Not only are we able to exchange child care with confidence, but we often have family picnics and field trips.

Could part-time work be good for a man's health? Colds, 'flu, and sundry aches seem to come less often than they used to. I think this might have some-

thing to do with the fact that work stress never builds up for more than a day or two at a time. Holidays seem much less vital to survival than they did when I was working full time. On my days at home, if I feel like it, I can have a nap in the afternoon while Alison sleeps, and I can stretch out on the floor and relax any time, which is just the advice psychologists give for relieving stress and back pain. On the other hand, when my patience with the children wears thin, it's reassuring to know that my peaceful office and my predictable computer are just a shift away!

Maybe the biggest rewards, after all, are the moments of pride in fatherhood that began with Rebecca's birth and have occurred frequently ever since. A day or two after Rebecca was born, while she and Debby were still in hospital, I got a lesson from a nurse on how to bathe my baby and care for her umbilical stump. Then I was proud to teach my wife the skills I had learned. Four years later, Rebecca asked me to tell her what "in-laws" means. I began, "If you get married, your husband's parents..." She interrupted, "Of course I'll get married, 'cause who would look after my baby?" To her it was completely natural that the father would care for the baby—the strongest endorsement I have received of my principles and my choices in life.

Costs

Shifting gears

Every lifestyle has its disadvantages. In our case, one problem is the difficulty we sometimes have in "shifting gears" from home and children to our jobs and back again. A part-time worker comes with a full-time conscience: at times, both Debby and I get so immersed in our work that we have trouble concentrating on the children when we come home and are "on duty" again. Moreover, when work demands are heavy, there is a lot of temptation to let them encroach on our family time. I've had to get babysitters from our cop, recently, to allow me to attend PhD dissertation committee meetings and research grant review sessions that cannot be fitted into our child-care schedule. Each time, I feel a bit of resentment at the loss of valuable time at home.

Maintaining balance

In a more general way, finding the right balance between our professional

aspirations and parenting is not easy, either. Debby and I are both strongly committed to professional psychology, finding in it many opportunities for intellectual challenge, public service, and recognition. To the extent that we value professional achievement, time spent with the children is a cost. Promotions, acclaim, big grants, and offers of more senior and responsible jobs are among the rewards for success in our work; we have had to make a deliberate choice to de-emphasize the importance of these rewards while not negating them entirely.

A different problem for us is that our home is highly child centred or child focused. Because each of us has made a primary commitment to parenting, the children's needs come first, sometimes to the detriment of our relationship with each other. We have learned to make a point of preserving our Saturday evenings together, without the kids, despite the many demands for our time.

Financial

In the majority of two-parent families today, both parents work, mainly for financial reasons. Most families would have difficulty in meeting their financial obligations if they had only two half-time incomes, and part-time work would lead to financial distress. Debby and I are fortunate in that our professional income, our geographic location, our savings from earlier days of full-time work, and our fiscal priorities all combine in a way that does not lead to problems of this type. But the budget would definitely be a factor to consider for families contemplating shared parenting. Changes in taxation policy allowing deductions or tax credits for time spent in child care would make part-time work and shared parenting feasible for many more families, relieving some of the burden both on parents and on day-care services.

Housework

For me, one normal frustration outweighs the others. Parenting often seems to deteriorate to mere pointless housework. The laundry always needs to be done, and there is always something to pick up. When I'm immersed in such tasks, I sometimes find myself musing, "Why don't I work full time and earn money to hire someone to do this for me?" But this reasoning is wrong, for me at least. The great moments of fatherhood often arrive un-

predicted, like unexpected songbirds in the midst of a great wasteland. I have to be at home (doing the housework) when the moments arrive, or I'll miss them. And besides, "helping" me sweep and wash dishes is as absorbing as any other activity for my toddler. That's what I tell myself, anyway, to get the jobs done.

Principles Underlying Our Choice

In our nine years together before Rebecca was born, Debby and I developed a shared perspective on sex roles that has its base in feminism. We believe that women and men have potentially equal contributions to make both in work and home life. We believe that it is unfair to both sexes and wasteful, as well, to define home and work roles on the basis of sex. Women can benefit from the increased esteem, income, and status they gain from rewarding work, and men can benefit from the warmth, love, and pride they gain from their involvement in child care. There is no evidence that one sex of humans is behaviourally better suited to parenting than the other, despite the structural sex differences.

There has been some sociological research on changes in family structure. I cannot claim familiarity with this literature, but I can give here some examples from my brief examination of recent reports. Few studies have looked specifically at the effects of half-time work and shared parenting arrangements.¹ One Swedish study² examined couples who changed their work arrangements voluntarily to share a single job or to take two part-time jobs. Fathers in these families reported that they had better and more open contact with their children, felt closer to them, and understood them better. Mothers enjoyed their children more and believed that they benefitted from their reprieve from full-time child care. Similar results are reported in studies of families where the fathers are primary caretakers while the mothers work.^{3,4} Moreover, it has been found that the highly involved fathers in these non-traditional families set higher educational expectations for their sons and daughters, and the children responded by developing greater internality, and a higher belief in their own ability to control their fate and to determine what happens to them. It is suggested that

people who are willing to depart from social norms would perceive themselves to be in control of what happens to them in their own lives and would thus provide models of self-determination for their developing children.³ Finally, a study of people with androgynous sex-role attitudes⁵ has indicated that job and marital satisfaction in both parents was associated with the extent to which child care and domestic duties were shared. But this increased satisfaction apparently occurs only when the father's increased involvement is a result of his choice, and not when he is forced into parental responsibility by being laid off work.

In reviewing literature referred to above, I was highly selective and I based my choice on a cursory search. A more thorough investigation of existing literature and further research on shared parenting would undoubtedly lead to a more complex picture of the costs, benefits, and factors in success of this method of parenting.

Other Sources of Support

While our attitudes and beliefs about sex roles had an influence on our choice of shared parenting, several external factors also had an important effect.

The simple fact that permanent part-time jobs were available for both of us was of major importance. Unlike many part-time workers who receive no seniority or benefits, we belong to a health-care professionals' union that has negotiated fully prorated seniority and benefits for part-time workers. Thus, between us both, we have the equivalent of full pension, insurance, and dental plans, as well as seniority based on the number of hours we have worked. People in many occupations would have to give up these advantages in order to work part time.

The fact that Debby and I both work in a discipline that enjoys a certain amount of professional autonomy is also important. In many occupations, conditions of work are set by the employer without regard to the employee's family circumstances. In our case, we were able to define our shifts at work in a way that was satisfactory to both of the departments that employ us, though not necessarily viewed as ideal. Our department heads have been supportive, inviting us to be involved as much as we could while never giving the impression that our part-time con-

tribution was not enough. Conversely, our employer has earned our loyalty: we know that few employers could offer the flexibility and benefits that we enjoy as "part timers" here. The loyalty we feel leads to our willingness to work extra hours and to stretch our schedules when it is necessary.

Fortunately, we have never been alone in our departure from traditional models. We found influential models among our iconoclastic friends in our local Unitarian fellowship: men and women who had given up promising and lucrative careers to spend time with their children or to live by their principles. These self-actualizing individuals, by their example, showed us that our own departure from traditional roles could be made to work.

Some of our reading also had a great effect on our choice. A little Pennypress pamphlet entitled "Fathering and Career: A Healthy Balance"⁶ had an indelible effect on me when I read it shortly after Rebecca was born. The author, David Stewart, a university professor, asks "Can a father do well in his career and do right by his family at the same time, or is it impossible to do both?" Stewart points out that the rewards of professional success—fame, grants, promotions, and acclaim—are never permanent, and generally count for little after four or five years. After that time, if the successes have not been repeated, one becomes a "has-been". On the other hand, the rewards of parenting, according to Stewart, endure for life. I have known a few distinguished academics who realized this truth too late, when their children were grown up, and now regret the single-mindedness of their early careers. If they could live those years over, they would take time to smell the flowers with their children, even at the cost of some reduction in their scholarly output.

The timing of the children's arrival makes a difference in the flexibility one feels to alter one's work arrangements. By the time Rebecca was born, both of us had completed our doctorates and had been working for several years; I had earned tenure at the university, which among some of my relatives seemed to count as an indication of having reached adulthood. It would have been much more difficult to make our choice earlier in our careers, when we had not yet completed our training or

proved to ourselves that we were capable in our work.

Finally, I must give credit to Debby's openness to my involvement in parenting. She has never seemed threatened or disturbed by my active involvement in child care and domestic tasks that are traditionally seen as a woman's work. If a woman's self-esteem and identity depend mainly on being a good mother and housekeeper (and I have met many such women among my patients) she would probably consider her husband to be encroaching on her preserve, and she would demonstrate this perception of a threat by perfectionism in her domestic work and criticism of her husband's contributions. Shared parenting thus requires androgynous attitudes rather than stereotypic, highly differentiated masculine and feminine sex roles.

Conclusions

Shared parenting based on job sharing or part-time employment has many benefits for parents, children, and employers. However, it is just one of many options for child care in dual-career couples. Being a househusband will not suit the temperament, interests, and skills of many men, just as being a full-time housewife is not satisfying for many women. Other options include involving nannies and babysitters (both relatives and non-relatives), full-time work by both parents on different shifts, formal day-care centres, and various forms of parental leave. We believe that it is in society's best interest to support many different options for child care, and to support parents in changing their work arrangements as their children grow older and their needs change. Government policy on taxation, labour codes, and family support will need to be changed to support this flexibility in child care, by means of improved parental leave and increased tax relief for parenting, as well as non-parental child care. The relationship between home and workplace must become more flexible if employers are to keep their most innovative young employees, those who will demand the right to work part-time, to take parental leaves, and to integrate their lives as parents with their lives as workers.

Private medical practice seems to me to be among the best-suited occupations for engaging in part-time work and

shared parenting, because it offers professional autonomy, control over one's schedule (assuming one is part of a group practice), and a reasonable level of remuneration per hour worked. At least in Saskatoon, and probably elsewhere in Canada, there are many women in family practice who combine part-time medical work with raising children. These doctors can serve as a source of inspiration and a model for male physicians who would like to have a major role in child care.

For couples considering this choice, I'd offer some very simple advice: try it out, with your own baby or a borrowed baby, for several days in a row. You'll probably know soon whether shared child care suits you. And look around for other couples who have chosen to share child care in non-traditional ways. You'll be reassured by seeing the confidence and pride both partners can bring to their work as parents. ■

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful for suggestions and literature on shared parenting and sex roles made available by Dr. Bev Pain, College of Home Economics, University of Saskatchewan, and by Dr. Hilary Lips, Department of Psychology, University of Winnipeg. Thanks are also expressed to the following people who reviewed an earlier version of this paper: Nancy Dill, Judy Martin, Dr. Bev Pain, Dr. Lillian Thorpe, and Doug Thorpe. Obviously, a major contribution to the paper was made by Dr. Deborah Lake, the author's wife, during 15 years of shared homemaking and discussion.

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