

Mother Nurture

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Getting More Help From Your Partner

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I did all the organizing for our son's second birthday, hoping that Bob would help out during the party itself. But no, he spent the whole time talking with his buddies while I raced around doing everything, except for when he cut the cake and then looked at me like he deserved some kind of reward! I want someone who doesn't need me to stamp my feet to get some help, who takes initiative with the kids and the house, whose mind is not elsewhere all the time. Somebody who does things because he wants to do his share, not just to get me off his back. I need to really feel like I have another half.

Some couples are equal partners in the work of making a family. But that's the exception, since many studies have found that the average mother is on-task, working away at one thing or another, about twenty hours a week MORE than her partner is, whether or not she is drawing a paycheck. And if she has no partner, in most cases just about all of the work of raising children falls to her alone.

If you are one the many mothers who would like more help from the father of your children, we suggest you do two things:

- Establish the facts of who is doing what – One good way is to keep a fair record several days or a week of how each of you spends your time (keep it simple, and don't take more than five minutes a day to track your time); facts are facts!
- Communicate your principles as to why it's fair and good for the children, you – and him – for the total workload that comes with children to be shared more equally.

Here are examples of principled responses to various objections we've heard fathers make to carrying more of the total load; please adapt them to your own needs and voice:

- He says: "I'm not as good at it as you are. Plus the kids go to you anyway."
You say: "Like anything, you just need to practice a little. The kids will get used to you doing certain things, and I'll direct them to you more. Plus you could initiate and not wait for the kids to come to me. Additionally, even if I'm the one who always washes their hair, you could still help more by reading to them or cleaning up the kitchen."
- He says: "You always interfere, and I've quit trying."
You say: "I don't always interfere, but I do sometimes. I'm trying to help, anyway, not interfere, but I can understand that you feel crowded, so I'll promise to back off."

- He says: "You just want someone to do things for you."
You say: "Nope, I want you to do things with me. It's not just about getting stuff done. When you do your part, it makes me feel connected to you, like I'm not alone and we're in this together. I made a baby with you and I would love for us to share that experience in a happy way together."
- He says: "I do more than my dad did."
You say: "That's great, and I appreciate it. But there is still more to do if we're going to be fair about it."
- He says: "That's woman's work."
You say: "There is no law that says so. You did dishes before you met me, and it wasn't women's work then. I don't think you take it easy while I wash clothes or give the kids a bath out of high moral principle, but simply because that's your personal preference. You're just as capable as I am of putting a child to sleep or feeding a toddler."
- He says: "My job is so stressful that I need to rest at home."
You say: "Remember how you nearly fainted with relief when I finally got home after you were alone with the kids that one time for a few hours? Now imagine doing that for many hours instead of a few, and for a thousand days instead of one. If we're talking about getting a break based on the stress level of our typical day, in fairness I deserve rest at least as much as you."
- He says: "Making a living counts for more than raising children."
You say: "I believe that it's the other way around. Child rearing counts for more since it so directly impacts our precious children. And it's usually harder, day after day. I am not setting child rearing above making a living. But it is at least equal."
- He says: "I make all the money, so you should handle the housework and kids."
You say: "I do handle the housework and kids while you are making money. I'm talking about what you do when you're not commuting or at work. You wanted children and now we've got them. You can see that it's best for them when we are both involved in the morning, at night, or over the weekend. Speaking personally, it does not feel fair for me to keep on going while you watch TV or go out with your friends. How would you feel about someone at work who did that sort of thing while you kept getting things done? Would you feel resentful? Would you be eager for them to do their share?"
- He says: "I make more money than you."
You say: "I appreciate all the money you bring into our family. But that does not change what is good for our children and our relationship when we are both at home in the mornings, evenings, and weekends." (And follow with the points just above.)
- He says: "It's because you're working that the kids need so much and there's so much housework."
You say: "I think that's hitting below the belt. If I didn't work, our kids would still need you to help out in the evenings and weekends. We need my salary, and even if we didn't, I have as much right to work as you. Besides, we could just as well turn the point against you: The kids wouldn't need so much if you, their father, stayed home. In fairness,

the hard choices between career and time with children should fall just as much on a father as a mother. We both work, we both need to parent, and we both need to do housework.”

- He says: “Quit telling me what to do.”

You say: “I don’t want to tell you what to do. Usually I try not to. And if I ever do, it’s because you won’t make a reasonable agreement with me about who does what—or you make one but don’t stick with it. I’m the messenger of what our kids or home needs, so please don’t be angry at me for just bringing the message. If you saw what needed doing in the first place, I wouldn’t have to bring a message at all. Besides, why is it fair for you to tell me what to do about the car or computer or mutual fund or whatever but I can’t tell you anything about what to put in a lunchbox?”

- He says: “Get off my back, or else.”

You say: “I’d be glad to talk about this when you’re calmer. But I’m going to ask: What’s the “or else”? Are you really going to hit me or walk out on your kids because I’m tired of picking your socks off the floor? Because I’d appreciate it if you’d get home sooner? Your kids need you to be more involved, I need it, and our marriage does, too.”

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