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The Equal Parenting Movement Meets Reality

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Will dad ever do his share? That is the question asked by the cover article in Sunday's edition of *The New York Times Magazine*. Reporter Lisa Belkin takes a look at the movement for what is called "equal parenting." The most obvious problem with "equal parenting" is that it doesn't turn out to be very equal in reality.

Belkin starts out profiling Marc and Amy Vachon, young parents of baby Maia — and parents who intend to create their own equal model of parenting. Here is how Belkin describes their plan:

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.

The part of their plan that first caught my eye was the part about the "mental to-do lists." The idea that a dad's list will match a mom's in depth, clarity, or accuracy is crazy, it seems to me. I hope the magazine does a follow-up on the Vachon's experiment. I would like to know what they will learn about the reality of the parenting equation.

The significance of Belkin's article is not so much in the focus on the Vachons, however. The real interest is in the background to the story. Belkin provides a most interesting look at one of the enduring quandaries of our times — why is it that the vast social changes of the past several decades have produced so little change in the division of domestic labor in the home?

As Belkin reports, those committed to the "equal parenting" movement share a simple assumption: "Gender should not determine the division of labor at home." This includes all that is involved in domestic life. Nevertheless, this assumption just doesn't seem to work its way into reality, even among those who say they are committed to it.

She cites Francine M. Deutsch, a professor at Mount Holyoke College and the author of *Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works*. "If you gave people a survey they would probably check all the answers about how things should be equal," she says. But when they explain how things actually work out in the home, "ideal does not match reality."

As Belkin explains:

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 article is both extensive and substantial, and the questions she raises are important. Why *do* women still do most of the parenting and the domestic work? The assumption of the researchers cited in the article seems to be that this stubborn imbalance must reflect either a refusal by men to do what they should do or a reluctance by many women to liberate themselves from old roles and expectations.

What seems to be unthinkable is nevertheless very hard to resist — what if this enduring reality points to something objectively different in terms of the gifts, passions, intuitions, and roles of men and women . . . fathers and mothers?

One key and unavoidable insight of all this research is the fact that egalitarianism doesn't end up being very egalitarian in reality. Mothers are still mothers, and fathers are still fathers — and there is still a difference. Those who operate from a secular worldview informed by feminism must assume that this is just another representation of enduring cultural prejudice. Those operating from an evolutionary worldview will be tempted to suggest that this is evidence of the enduring power of ancient adaptations.

The Christian, operating out of a biblical worldview, must see this as an affirmation of the fact that men and women are assigned complementary, and not identical roles. As fathers, men are called to loving leadership in the home, and this will mean an active and loving engagement with his children. The Christian father will love his children no less than the Christian mother, but his role will not be the same.

There is certainly no shortage of men who are lazy, unfaithful, and disengaged from family life, but this does not answer the question *The New York Times Magazine* is asking. The idea of "equal parenting" is not just unrealistic, it is unreal. Reality can be a hard thing to accept, but it is also a hard thing to resist.

