



Silas Dent Zobal, his wife Catherine Zobal Dent and their son Emerson Dent Zobal, 3, sit down for a meal at home in Shippensburg, Pa. "My mom strongly identified with the feminist movement," Silas says, which is why he easily identifies with equal parenting.

# More parents share the workload when mom learns to let go

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Enlarge By Kalim A. Bhatti, for USA TODAY  
Silas picks up his son Emerson as Catherine holds the stroller. She's due to deliver their daughter in two weeks.

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Equality is gaining ground at homes across the USA, but the move toward parity leaves some mothers in a quandary; they're ready to share the workload with their partners, but to do that, they'll also have to come to terms with the loss of hierarchy at home.

"Women who want to create this sometimes don't appreciate the level at which they must let go," says Amy Vachon of Watertown, Mass. She and her husband, Ma bearers for a philosophy called "e

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"It's not so much the stereotypical kids in things that don't match' — It's more the deep-down letting g child runs to your husband instea on the playground," she says. "M other mothers didn't notice becau me."

The idea that Mother Knows Bes is deeply ingrained and complicated by gender roles, socialization and culture, experts say. And now new research is beginning to help make sense of that maternal angst.

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"There are a lot of pressures that keep reinforcing the division of responsibility in parenting that leaves moms in the control

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position — the 'expert parent' role," says demographer Catherine Kenney of Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, who has studied how mothers' beliefs affect fathers' involvement.

New research into the idea of "maternal gatekeeping" shows how attitudes and actions by the mother may promote or impede father involvement.

"For women who insist they have the gold standard around parenting and housework, men just tend to walk away," says Joshua Coleman, a clinical psychologist in San Francisco and Oakland. "They feel their own ideas about how the house should look or ... how the children should be raised aren't given equal share."

Kenney presented research she co-wrote at a meeting of the Population Association of America over the weekend. The study of 1,023 couples from 20 large cities in the USA found mothers were protective of their caregiving and educational engagement with the child but were less so for playtime activities that "were not considered threats to the mother's caregiving identity," the paper says.

"Maybe he's not more involved because mom is holding him back," Kenney says.

Through interviews at the child's birth and at ages 1, 3 and 5, mothers and fathers reported about their own parenting expectations and beliefs as well as the time personally spent in various caregiving activities.

### Dad needs woman's support

Other gatekeeping research co-written by Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, an assistant professor of child development at Ohio State University in Columbus, is significant because it studied actual behaviors rather than just beliefs, and of the 97 couples participating, fathers were more involved in daily care of infants when they received active encouragement from the wife or partner.

"This study provides perhaps the best evidence to date that the phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping exists and that, under some conditions, it may have the potential to affect fathering behavior," says the study, published last year in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Corinna Buchholz, 34, of Portland, Ore., says "gatekeeping is real because you love your child so much and want to say, 'Wait, do it this way.' I try very hard not to because it's somewhat counterproductive."

At the Shippensburg, Pa., home of Catherine Zobel Dent, 37, and Silas Dent Zobel, 35, equality has reached a greater level of sharing.

Both are college English professors who recently left their respective campuses and will share one tenure-track faculty position this fall at Susquehanna University, about 80 miles away. They have a son, Emerson Dent Zobel, 3. A daughter, whom they plan to name Lake Zobel Dent, is due in two weeks.

"My mom strongly identified with the feminist movement," Silas says, explaining a fairness mentality that sometimes even surprises his wife.

Says Catherine: "I have this image in my head of my mother preparing and serving the food and my father being the social conductor. When Silas and I are entertaining colleagues or friends, sometimes I find myself wanting to revert to that position. I'll stand up to clear the table and think it's OK if he continues to sit, but he doesn't. He stands up, too."

Other names for the same approach include "co-parenting," "peer parenting" or "shared care," but the concept "equally shared parenting" the Vachons adopted was first suggested 10 years ago in a book by psychologist Francine M. Deutsch called *Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works*.

They've created a website, [equallysharedparenting.com](http://equallysharedparenting.com). Their book, *Equally Shared Parenting: Rewriting the Rules for a New Generation of Parents*, will be published in January.

### Not 'just a hired hand'

"There are those that absolutely want equally shared parenting. They want a true equal partner who wants an equivalent say," Amy Vachon says. "But I also hear a huge group of people focused on these task divisions. They want a better helper at home, and that is not equally shared parenting."

The Vachons are both 46, and each works outside the home 32 hours a week. She's a clinical pharmacist. He works in information technology for a market research firm. They have two children, Maia, 6, and Theo, 3.

"I want to be an equal partner here," Marc Vachon says, not "just a hired hand."

He says planning a birthday party for their daughter starts with his wife's list of what has to be done — to which he agrees or disputes — before they decide how to divvy up the jobs.

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"I don't want to be nagged or reminded," he says. "If I'm watching TV or going to play tennis, she has to trust me as a person living up to my responsibility. I'll get things done. She does not need to worry about it."

That's not what happens in many homes, says Andrea O'Reilly, associate professor of women's studies and director of the Association for Research on Mothering at York University-Toronto.

"She might delegate to her partner, but if you have to do the remembering and the organizing, the planning and the worrying, that's not equality," she says. "The intellectual labor of running a household — that work is still done predominantly by women."

Sampson Lee Blair, an associate professor of sociology at the University at Buffalo, studies division of labor in families. He says decades of research have found a "very sharp gender divide of 'his work' vs. 'her work.'"

#### For the same-sex couple

Negotiating roles is somewhat different in same-sex couples, says Esther Rothblum, a women's studies professor at San Diego State University.

"It's unusual in same-sex couples that one person does everything and the other person does nothing," she says.

Psychotherapist Anne Coyle, 45, of El Cerrito, Calif., says she and her partner of almost 16 years have "divided it more like a traditional, heterosexual couple" as they parent a son, age 8.

"I pick up Isaac and tend to do more of the cooking and cleaning, whereas Linda tends to work more and bring in more of the income. We're choosing that, and it's each of our preferences," she says.

Schoppe-Sullivan, 34, says that although she and her husband try to share parenting of their 3-year-old equally, she understands what mothers have at stake.

"I have certainly felt ambivalent about relinquishing control over what my daughter wears or eats. There are times when my husband dresses her in an outfit and I think, 'What is he doing?' I try to bite my tongue," she says. "The way your children look, a lot of mothers feel like it reflects on them."

"The way I would describe it is, in the end, society is still not going to come down on the father," she says. "Society is going to come down on you."

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**PierceHarlan** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 4d 20h ago

Excellent article, and factually correct. But marred by the yipping yapping of a Women's Studies associate professor who insists on falling back on tired cliches from the radical feminist playbook -- which seeks always and everywhere to blame men for pretty much everything (sometimes they refer to us by their codeword "patriarchy"): "She might delegate to her partner, but if you have to do the

remembering and the organizing, the planning and the worrying, that's not equality," she says. "The intellectual labor of running a household that work is still done predominantly by women."

Um, read the rest of the article, professor, it will enlighten you. The fact is, women learn from their mothers who learned from their mothers who learned from their mothers -- all the way back to Eve -- to guard their "territory," and to transmogrify their husbands into little better than babysitters.

It's not the men who need to change this time, professor. Sorry this blame-the-women scenario doesn't fit your woman-as-victim metanarrative. It is views such as yours that engender disrepute of the modern, marginalized feminist movement.

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**johnnynobody** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 10h ago

I'm glad my wife believes in the traditional role of a man. I'd feel less of a man if I wasn't able to provide for my family.

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**Deedee58** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 12h ago

I stayed home with my son the first 11 yrs after he was diagnosed with autism. In addition to the usual cooking, cleaning & laundry, I ran him to various therapies & doctor visits each week, sat through parent workshops & school conferences, etc. When my husband was laid off for 2 1/2 yrs, I went back to work in retail. After he found a new job, he said I "didn't have to work". I said I needed to because I couldn't ever feel dependent on one income ever again. I also hadn't contributed enough to Soc Sec & didn't want to be like my mom, subsisting on survivor's benefits. After going full-time & taking a modest promotion, I was able to secure health benefits for my family &, after my husband's latest lay-off, I'm able to support my family. He hasn't stopped looking but he has taken over the shopping, home repairs & some household chores. He also has the chance to spend more time with our son - now 18 - at a time when his influence is needed the most. Sure, some days I don't feel like he appreciates how hard I work but I'm sure he felt the same when he was the breadwinner.

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**CommonSense0423** (1 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 12h ago

Some day, women are going to want real men back.

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I suck at everything

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**H2Oinsider** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 13h ago

Stupid article. Marriage is not perfect. It will never be perfect. Probably why the divorce rate is like 50 %. Before you get married, seek counseling to work out as many of those irritating little details that seem to cause so much trouble later on. My wife and I have gone through many trials and tribulations over our 27 year marriage. Many times we have fought over things mentioned in the article. But all the negative comments by both the men and women posting here makes me wonder if marriage is on it's way out. My wife and I are the only couple still married in our circle of friends. Everyone else has divorced, remarried and divorced again. Goes hand in hand with our throw away society. Folks marriage isn't easy, but it isn't impossible either.

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**boilerman10** (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 5d 13h ago

I've been a USMC wife, a mom, and a working person. All at the same time. Marines, when home are great dads and help. Unfortunately, The Marine Corps has said for years, "If we wanted you to have a wife we would have issued you one in your gear."

same for children.

People need to get over this idea that one is better than the other.

My Marine is better at taking the kids fishing. I'm better at keeping them fed, watered, and not looking like a house plant.

If you ask our kids which one of us is better, first find out which parent told them they could have a slice of cake for breakfast and wear their tutu all day.  
{one hint. He's out playing Weekend Warrior.}

This pretty much sums it up ...

Guys are more apt to be better at (or prefer to do) some things and ladies at others ... it's natural.

Example: I handle house repairs, lawn mowing, oil changes, providing \$\$ for the family, etc ... She's better with the kids.

I always love these articles showing couples that have one kid to take care of ... give me a break ...

Have 3 or 4 and come back and see me ... You can't "share" efficiently with multiple kids .. everybody has a role ... just like work.

p.s. - Thanks to your husband for his service and equal thanks to you for your support of him. You are both heroes.

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