

The Language of the Homefront

Co-Parents as Co-Pilots?

Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works

By Francine M. Deutsch
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It was one of those incidents that I have come to expect, though they still annoy me. There was a holiday party at my daughter's preschool, which meant that after dropping off your child, you were encouraged to hang around, drinking juice and eating cookies.

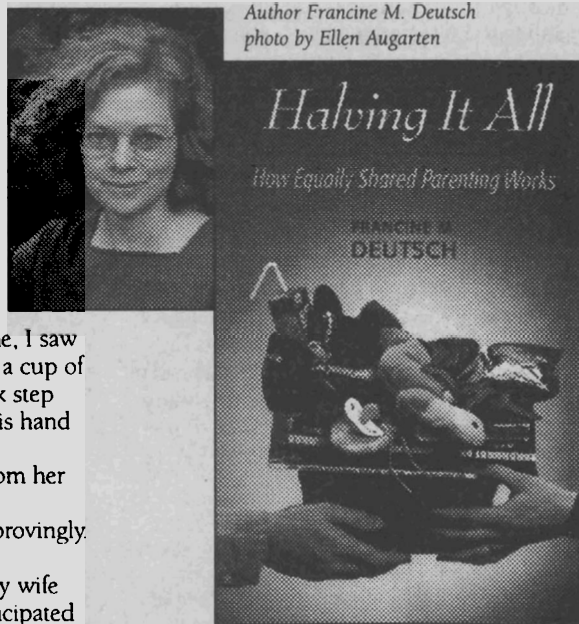
And so we were clumped in the room, a handful of parents, a core of mothers talking, a few fathers as the less voluble satellites. Near a table a few feet away from me, I saw one of the boys moving awkwardly, a cup of juice ailt in his hand; I took a quick step and a half, removed the cup from his hand and landed it safely on the table.

One of the women looked up from her conversation and smiled at me. "Just like a mother," she said approvingly.

When our daughter was born my wife had to do something she hadn't anticipated doing. She had to learn to be less of a mother than she wanted to be, both moving toward parenting and stepping back, almost at the same time. While we had long talked about shared parenting, she found it much more difficult than she had imagined it would be to step out of the way when I was taking care of our child. Among other things, she wanted to correct me in a variety of ways. And, while she certainly wanted help and support, she was suddenly ambivalent about whether or not she really wanted us to have equal authority and equal emotional import for our daughter.

This battle that my wife waged with herself was one that I knew little or nothing about at the time. Perhaps naively, I thought things went rather well. We both, it seemed to me, took great pains not to step on each other's parental authority, first as a matter of not inflicting ego damage on each other, and, second—as our daughter quickly became aware of her surroundings—so as not to give her the impression that we didn't respect each other.

The truth of the matter was brought home to me only recently, occasioned by the fact that we both read Francine M. Deutsch's recent book, *Halving It All: How Equally Shared Parenting Works*, a book exploring heterosexual couples' parenting practices. One of the interesting, and somewhat counterintuitive, realities that Deutsch uncovers in her examination of the parenting practices



of some 150 couples is that—even among the couples who practiced what Deutsch refers to as equally shared parenting—mothers remain, in some fundamental way, invested in being the "primary parent," a position in which the fathers, virtually unanimously, support them.

Of this syndrome, Deutsch writes: "Mothers seemed disturbed if the balance shifted too much toward their husbands. When asked about the parents' division of responsibility for their child's emotional life, one mother was reluctant to admit that it was equal. 'I would hope it would be me more . . . I don't know why I would hope that, but I would hope that it would be me.'" On a subsequent page, she notes that "[m]en seemed just as invested as their wives in retaining the notion that the mother is the primary parent."

What has most often—and surely correctly—been ascribed to men's resistance to taking responsibility for domestic labor now has a more complicated complexion. In April of 1999, *Sacramento Bee* columnist

Maggie Gallagher tagged this syndrome "maternal gatekeeping." I had begun to suspect as much on my own. In researching gendered language in the past couple of years, I have been increasingly interested in examining the reasons that gender-neutral usage, which has made at least some inroads in the professional sphere, has made virtually no progress in the domestic realm, particularly in the language used around nurturance and childcare—a fact brought home to me on a regular basis when people refer to me, when I am taking care of my daughter, as being the "mother."

The language use Deutsch reports on the part of her subjects dovetails with this. The fathers she studied chose to see themselves as "mother's helpers," or in some cases to take on the appellation "Mr. Mom." Nurturant behavior on the part of men is still referred to as "maternal," or as "mothering."

Deutsch's book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on shared parenting, all the more for being not just another "how to" manual but for providing instead a wealth of concrete insights into what kinds of attitudes, practices, and perceptions facilitate effective equally shared parenting and what kind inhibit it. While she makes no pretense of coming at the subject without a point of view—the issue of equally shared parenting, she says, became a personal issue for her as she contemplated the classic quandary of balancing career and family—the voices in the book largely speak for themselves, painting a picture that is vibrant in its complexity and richness of detail.

Many of her insights, moreover, are surprising. The most ardent practitioners of equally shared parenting, for example, are not the progressive, middle-class families most ideologically committed to such practices. Instead, she found that blue-collar workers, while simultaneously maintaining a more conservative and traditional view of family structure, were more likely to share parenting, often on a shift system: secretaries and fire fighters, construction workers and nurses, police officers and utility workers. These families often have a variety of motivations, among them, greater resistance to utilizing paid day care, for reasons that range from the economic to the emotional. Thus, she describes the paradoxical effect of adherence to tradition facilitating change, as a growing number of parents make the

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decision that, rather than consign their children to the care of others, they'll redistribute caregiving within the family.

"I don't let people outside my family watch my kids," one father is quoted as saying. "You don't know those other people. It doesn't matter that they got a sign out that says they're certified. . . . There's a lot of things out there that happen to kids. . . . I don't want nothing to happen to my kids."

Along with the issue of—often subtle but clearly strong—maternal ambivalence, Deutsch cites a number of other obstacles to shared parenting. The impact of "[f]riends, coworkers, parents, in-laws, and neighbors," for example, is not always what one would expect. Often, the interviewees reported, praise for a domestic division of labor that encourages fatherly nurturance can be an obstacle to equality: the father whose efforts are lauded when he changes *one* diaper may feel that this is as good as changing half the diapers; the mother may take such comments as indirect criticism. There are, in this area, the more traditional obstacles as well: the onlookers who either overtly or subtly convey disapproval, both of mothers who do not "do enough" for their children and of fathers who allow parenting to become a competing priority with professional duties.

Perhaps in part as a result of these societal judgments, some men, while actively becoming equally sharing parents, and professing to enjoy the enhanced relationships this gives them with their children, remain leery of too much of this family information becoming public; many women also have reason not to publicize a more equal division of domestic labor, for fear that this will reflect badly on a traditional image of motherhood.

In spite of all the hurdles, the picture that Deutsch and her interviewees paint is ultimately hopeful. Some changes are coming for ideological reasons, some for economic reasons, some simply because a more equitable division of domestic labor strikes more and more people as both rational and just.

As these changes filter into the feedback mechanism of language, which should accelerate the rate of change, this all raises the possibility that we will—sooner, rather than later—reach the day when a woman, seeing a man taking an active role in the care of children, will simply smile and say, with a nod of understanding and identification, rather than approval: "Just like a parent."

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