

Sharing the parenting spotlight

My husband is the “good cop” with our daughters, and that’s not fair — to me or him.

By Rachel Rabkin Peachman October 27, 2017, 10:01 a.m.



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“I want Mommy to do it! She does it better,” my 9-year-old daughter announced one recent Saturday morning.

“Move over,” I said, shooing my husband away from the kitchen counter. We didn’t have time to debate the absurdity of the situation, which was that apparently I had superior skills when it came to pouring a glass of milk and adding a dash of vanilla.

To be clear, I’m not a former bartender or even a good cook. But in the eyes of my daughters (the second is 5), I am uniquely capable of handling their domestic needs. I’m the one who untangles hair, cuts the tops off yogurt squeezies, and wrestles doll clothes onto tiny plastic bodies. It doesn’t matter that I sometimes wield a brush unenthusiastically, dispense snacks unceremoniously, or curse at the inflexible toys that resist costume changes. What matters is that I usually do these things because I work from home, while my husband commutes to the office and gets home late.

The upshot is that the girls frequently object when their dad tries to step in — and sometimes I do, too. It’s a lot easier to just untangle hair than to explain the process to someone else. So my husband has found other ways to be there. He coached the softball team, reads bedtime stories, hangs with the kids on weekends when I’m working, and goes into the ocean with them even if it’s too cold.

And yet I haven’t protested my daughters’ perception of my prowess, because let’s face it: I’m the showrunner of this production. I oversee daily operations, make sure favorite foods are on hand, book dental appointments, remember to pack jazz shoes, and know where the snow pants are stored.

This disparity between partners is hardly unique to my family. Research shows that mothers handle the majority of household chores and child care — and the mental burden of organizing it all — even when they work the same hours as their husbands at a job.

So if I sometimes get props from my kids for holding down the metaphorical fort, I figure that's payback for the fact that my husband gets to be the "fun parent" who builds literal forts with the kids in the basement while I'm upstairs sorting through hand-me-downs. But it's not exactly fair to either of us.

That Saturday night, as I thought about the vanilla milk, something clicked. Though that incident had cast me as the preferred parent, it left a bitter aftertaste, flavored with my own resentment, because it devalued my husband's abilities. Co-parenting isn't a competition. At best it's a tag-team effort, and my partner and I are supposed to be on the same team. But it hadn't always worked out that way — and the kids were keeping score.

The next morning, I got in the car with my younger daughter and saw that the gas tank was nearly empty. My husband had driven last, and because it was Sunday, the gas stations near us were closed. As I searched for an open station, I grew increasingly irritated that basic maintenance was falling to me again. Just as I was about to grumble, "Daddy didn't fill up the tank," I caught myself. It wouldn't serve anyone to blame my co-parent.

What was important was for my daughters to adore their dad for his goofiness, patience, kindness, intelligence, and other attributes. I didn't want to alert them to his imperfections any more than I wanted him to alert them to mine. I did, though, want us to rethink the model we were presenting to them, and figure out a way to switch up our roles now and then.

With that in mind, I didn't say another word. I found an open gas station, rejoiced that we were still running, fueled up, and started again.

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