

## *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*

# His Work and Her Work: Roles Partners Play and Power in the Relationship

John D. DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator; Maureen H. Burson, Extension Educator; Ann M. Fenton, Extension Educator; Jeanette L. Friesen, Extension Educator; Janet S. Hanna, Extension Educator; Mary E. Nelson, Extension Educator; Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator; Dianne M. Swanson, Extension Educator; LaDonna A. Werth, Extension Educator

Throughout history and even today, men have been seen as strong and hard-driving, while women are stereotyped as kind and gentle, but there are ways to minimize role stereotypes and focus on the unique strengths of each partner. This is No. 11 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

For centuries, America has been engaged in a vigorous and emotional discussion of the alleged differences between men and women. Throughout our history and even today, men have been seen as strong, tough, hard-driving. Women, on the other hand, have been stereotyped as kind, gentle, emotional, and eager to connect with other people.

Putting males and females into convenient boxes makes it easy for us to talk about them as groups, but when we look closely we find countless individuals that just don't fit into the stereotypic boxes. The trouble is, when one partner has an unequal share of the power, the relationship can suffer; resentment can grow to poison the love that the couple once shared.

### Relationship Issues Related to Household Roles

How does this translate into the daily lives of couples? David H. Olson, Amy Olson-Sigg, and Peter Larson found in their study of more than 50,000 couples in the U.S. that there were five major role relationship issues many couples faced:

- 49 percent were concerned about the unfair division of housework.

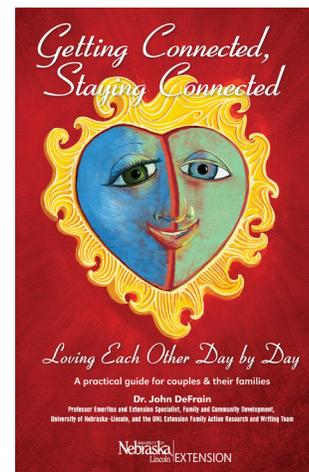
- 44 percent believed that housework was based on traditional roles rather than individual interests.
- 44 percent believed that the husband was not as willing to adjust as much as the wife.
- 40 percent disagreed that both worked to maintain an egalitarian or equal relationship.

Researchers who study how people spend their time in the home and issues surrounding the division of labor between men and women

tend to side with mothers and see a clear imbalance: Mothers seem to put in more hours of work at home than fathers, both in housework and in caring for children. Other researchers note that fathers tend to put in more hours on their jobs than mothers, on average, but all things considered, mothers appear to work more hours in an average week than fathers.

The key issue, then, seems to be individuals' perceptions of fairness more than simply the number of hours worked. If one of the partners perceives a definite imbalance in the workload, negotiations need to begin before resentful feelings poison the relationship.

If we are to increase mutual respect between partners, which is the foundation for a loving and caring relationship,



For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).

we need to find ways to distribute power, authority, influence — and housework — more equally and fairly in the home.

### Discussing Household Roles

What does this all mean for a couple hoping to achieve a strong, loving and caring relationship? It means that as a couple, you would find it useful to talk about your personal beliefs regarding roles in the partnership:

- Do you each have specific roles?
- Do you share some roles?
- Does it seem fair to each of you?
- Are there some things you would like to change?
- How can you work together to make these changes possible so that your partnership will be even stronger?

Discussing these questions leads toward mutual respect in the couple relationship. Partners see they are equals in terms of value: Each brings unique and important gifts to the partnership and the family and these gifts are of considerable value to all.

### Short Stories from Real People

**He:** *She's always so manipulative. She always tries to pull a fast one on me. She sweet talks me and tries to trip me up. Why can't she just come out and say it.*

*Why can't she be more straightforward? Be more like a man?*

**She:** *What am I supposed to do? You're so big and get angry so easily and start huffing and puffing and yelling. I'm afraid of you! I've got to figure out subtle ways to change your mind on things because you're so stubborn and aggressive.*

*You don't fight fair at all.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*My husband has always made less money since I was able to pursue a master's degree and find better paying jobs. His staying home was a win-win situation for us as he was able to pursue his carpentry as a self-employed person. This also made it easier for us to manage the children; He was free to take off work when they were sick or go to their games and activities.*

### Tips for Strengthening Your Relationship

1. Marriage is a team effort. Your job is to work together to increase each other's happiness.
2. As a couple, build on the important similarities you share, rather than the differences.
3. We are all different and unique. See your differences as a couple as strengths, not as problems. Partners each bring important gifts to the partnership.
4. Remember that important principles of communication are: listening carefully and respect for each other.
5. An unequal share of the workload, even if viewed that way by only one partner in a couple, can jeopardize the partnership. Communication and fairness are key concerns. Be willing to discuss unhappiness in the division of labor; and be willing to negotiate changes if the workload is viewed as unfair by your partner before resentments overpower the relationship.

**For greater understanding** of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFrain and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

### Resource

Olson, D. H., Olson-Sigg, A., & Larson, P. (2008). *The couple checkup*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

**This publication has been peer reviewed.**

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Families  
Family Life**

Issued September 2012

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2012, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.