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Support for parents and families: A
retrospective look at family life articles in
Broome County Living magazine 1986 – 1988

Local and Regional Projects

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Men and housework

V. Sue Atkinson

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Cornell
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May/June 1988
Broome County

Living



•
Summer
Opportunities
For Teens

•
Men
and
Housework

•
Visit
Our
Gardens

Living

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Information Center Tip

What's new in the Information Center?

If you visit our Information Center, you can look through the current issues of the following publications -Consumer Report, Money, Sylvia Porter's Personal Finance, and Changing Times.

In the areas of Financial

Management and Nutrition and Health we have several new free fact sheets, including "Health Care and Finances: A Guide for Adult Children and Their Parents," "Allergic to Wheat?", "Food Additives," "Heart Attacks," and "How to Handle the Anorexic/Bulimic Child in the Family."

Cover: Teens employed by Kid's Stuff preschool program

experience more than "just a summer job."

Men and Housework

V. Sue Atkinson
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Editor's Note: This is the second part in a series, "Changing Roles of Men and Women." The first article in the series dealt with how we feel about the changes in men's and women's roles over the past 30 years.

If more women are working outside the home and sharing the role of breadwinner with their husbands, then more men must be participating in housework, right? It only seems fair, doesn't it?

It may be fair, but that doesn't mean it's happening. Men are doing more than in decades past, but all too frequently, women are adding a fulltime job outside the home to the fulltime job they already have at home. A recent survey reveals that husbands of employed women do more housework than husbands of fulltime homemakers, but the total number of hours spent on employment and housework is still greater for women than men. Interestingly, couples in which the woman works part-time have the closest to equal division of total labor (job plus housework and child care).

I asked a few local women about their husbands' involvement in household chores:

- Becky, 25, mother of three children, not currently employed: "Joe helps me a lot with the housework. He's really good about it. And



Surveys reveal that husbands of employed women do more housework than husbands of fulltime homemakers.

he's really good with the kids."

- Diane, 33, mother of four children, homemaker, farm wife: "When Ray gets in from the barn, it's so late and he's so tired, I can't ask him to start cleaning the house. When he does have time, I'd rather he'd spend it with the kids. I'm usually

too busy with the kids to help him in the barn, either."

Both of these women accept housework as theirs to do or delegate, and involvement from husbands is seen as an optional contribution over and above what is expected. Both understandably see child care as a

priority for their husband's available time.

- Debbie, 34, mother of one child, employed fulltime: "We both just do things that need to be done. I guess I do more cleaning, but he cooks a lot. And my mother cleans when she comes over to babysit, which I don't like, but it does get the house clean . . . I know I do more than Ted, but usually I just don't feel like hassling about it."
- Janet, 42, mother of three children, employed fulltime: "Neither of us does very much. We have cleaning help, and the house doesn't look very good in between."

The few couples I found who approached equality with respect to housework seemed to achieve it by doing equally little and utilizing outside help.

- Lauren, 32, mother of two children, employed part-time: "I just do it because it's not worth nagging about. It's easier just to do it myself."

Is it worth worrying about who does the housework? Assuming that housework requires 15 hours a week (a very conservative estimate when you include food shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and various miscellaneous tasks), then sharing it equally would free up about an hour a day, seven hours a week (almost a working day), 30 hours a month, 365 hours a year . . . What could you do with all that extra time?

But not every woman wants her husband involved in house-

work. Some women prefer to keep the household their area of expertise and are proud of their abilities in this area. These women benefit from recognition of the importance of the work they do and the managerial skills involved in running a household. Some women who find it difficult to let their husbands share in household decision making prefer to maintain control and settle for occasional assistance.

But what if you really prefer to share household chores, particularly if you and your spouse are employed fulltime? How do you convince your husband to participate in household chores? Guilt-producing pleas from your sickbed? Chore charts? A well-timed strike? Nagging? Do these methods sound petty? Remember the 30 hours a month you stand to gain!

Here are some more effective approaches:

- Sit down with your husband at a quiet moment (in a clean house) and come to an understanding. What is fair? What's feasible? What jobs do you each hate? not mind? Older children should be a part of this process, too.
- Point out, if necessary, in a positive, non-blaming way, that your husband may be doing less than he thinks he is. A lot of husbands who tell me they do housework don't know where the cleaning supplies are stored or how to change a vacuum cleaner bag (or that they need changing . . .)
- Accept different ways of doing things. My husband

uses too many garbage bags and too much detergent, but I've learned to stifle my ecological concern and let it go.

- Don't be too quick to bail him out. If your husband agreed to do the laundry and didn't do it, then he doesn't have any clean underwear. Don't feel guilty.
- Stop referring to housework as "yours." Say, "The dishes need to be washed" rather than "I have to wash my dishes," or worse, "You have to wash my dishes . . ." Along the same line, don't refer to your husband's involvement as "helping with the housework" or his caring for the children as "babysitting." Assuming that they're also his children and that he lives in the house, eats food on plates, wears clothes, and so forth, it stands to reason that the work thus generated belongs to everyone in the house who's capable of doing it.

If this seems like a lot of effort, remember that you're providing a great model for your children, and in the long run, everyone benefits by becoming a more self-reliant human being who understands and respects the work of others. My aunt always took care of the house as was expected in her generation. When she died, her daughter had to travel from another state to take care of her father, to show him how to shop in a grocery store and take care of his basic needs. The way I see it, I'm doing my husband a favor by never letting that happen to him.