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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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### Changing roles of men and women

V. Sue Atkinson

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Cornell  
Cooperative  
Extension

January/February 1988  
Broome County

# Living



•  
Celebrate  
Change  
With Us

•  
Zoning  
and  
Child Care

•  
Help Our  
Garden Grow



# Living

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## Information Center Tip

Are you really doing all you can to be as healthy as possible?

All of us want good health, but many of us do not know how to be as healthy as possible. Health experts now describe "lifestyle" as one of the most important factors affecting health. In fact, it is estimated that as many as seven of ten

leading causes of death could be reduced through common-sense changes in lifestyle. This information comes from a fact sheet available in our Information Center. It is a test to tell you how well you are doing to stay healthy. Call or write for a free copy of "Healthstyle - A Self-Test."

**Cover: Join us as we celebrate significant changes. We've been developing new ways to help you put knowledge to work.**



## Changing Roles of Men and Women



V. Sue Atkinson  
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A generation ago, men's and women's roles were more clear-cut. Men were to be good providers and women were to care for home and children. Of course, there have always been many who have not conformed to these roles, (almost 12 percent of mothers of children under age six were employed in 1950 - far less than today, but a significant number nonetheless), but there was general acceptance of traditional roles in the media and in the minds of most Americans.

Now things are changing. How do we feel about that?

Researchers have identified four groups based on feelings about those changes:

- **Progressives** who feel positive about changing roles and who comfortably follow a lifestyle that includes employment for women, and child care and household responsibilities for men.
- **Traditionalists** who subscribe to and follow traditional roles.
- **Ambivalents** who simultaneously hold traditional and

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**FACT:** In March, 1986, 62.8 percent of all women with children under 18 years old worked outside the home.

**FACT:** Married mothers of children under age six make up the most rapidly growing segment of the American labor force.

**FACT:** POWs returning from Vietnam, when asked how things had changed in America in their absence, commented most often on changes in women and women's roles.

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progressive views although they are clearly contradictory; for example, agreeing that a family is stronger if husband and wife share responsibilities including providing income, and at the same time agreeing that it's better for wives not to be employed unless it is an economic necessity. These are often families whose lifestyle may be more "progressive" than their philosophy. For example, the wife may have taken a job out of economic necessity, and while the



advantages of that employment are appreciated, both husband and wife feel ambivalent about the rightness of the situation.

- **All talk and no action** is the rather harsh term for the fourth group in which behavior lags behind attitudes. Feminist mothers leading traditional lives at home with children might fit into this category. Perhaps more deserving of the label would be the new "involved" fathers who sound good to their friends and in their best-selling books (Bob Greene's Good Morning, Merry Sunshine comes to mind) but somehow manage to emerge from their child's early years without changing a diaper or getting up in the middle of the night.

It may be helpful, instead of thinking of changing roles, to think of the multiple roles that we increasingly play. Women traditionally have been homemakers, mothers, directors of the family's social life, volunteers, and now paid workers as well. Men's traditional role has been that of wage earner. Added to that role today is greater involvement with household and children. An obvious benefit of our changing ideas about men's and women's roles is more choices and therefore more likelihood of choosing roles that fit. Men stand to gain from the satisfactions of the nurturing role, closeness to growing children, and involvement in family life. Women may gain freedom from economic dependency, a more powerful voice in the family, and more opportunities for satisfaction on the job. Researchers are finding other benefits as well. While filling multiple roles can be stressful, it can also have benefits for our

mental health. Smith College psychologist Faye Crosby describes the concept of "buffering" - if something negative happens in one role it can be buffered by something positive in another. In other words, if we experience problems on the job, we can still feel good about ourselves as successful family members and parents. Conversely, we can take problems with children in stride because they are "buffered" by accomplishments at work. A more traditional example of this would be saying, "I may be a rotten housekeeper, but at least I'm good with the kids."

While multiple roles can have many benefits, the news is not all good. Forced multiplicity of roles - for example, a mother who adds a fulltime job to her other roles out of economic necessity - often leads to role overload, or trying to fill too many roles for too many people.

An example of this is the employed mother who continues to do all the cooking, cleaning, shopping, and child care at pre-employment standards when she is home. The young mother who returns to work when her baby is four weeks old because she can't afford to lose her job may not be an enthusiastic proponent of new roles for women. Changes in society that have been liberating for some (by allowing and encouraging multiple roles) are limiting for others.

Whether we view changes in men's and women's roles positively or negatively, we can see that certain stresses accompany the changes. When our lifestyle does not reflect our beliefs (as with the "ambivalent" and "all talk and no action" groups), we feel more conflict and stress. Many of our institutions and





services still operate as if every household includes an at-home wife and/or mother. Many schools schedule parent-teacher conferences and other events only during the day; certain offices and services are only available from 9 am to 5 pm; doctor's appointments often involve overly long waits; and appliance installation and repair may mean at least a half-day wait at home. Lack of services - primarily good quality, affordable child care - adds stress for families when mothers take on the role of wage-earner in addition to their other roles.

#### HOW CAN FAMILIES COPE?

- Establish priorities and work to create a balance between work and family life. (See "How to Balance Work and Family," *Living*, January 1987.)
- Be prepared to compromise on household standards and career aspirations.
- If possible, pay for services or arrange other help to reduce role overload.
- Be prepared to discuss and modify arrangements for housework, child care, and employment when needed.

- Seek support through contact with families with similar lifestyles and goals. Role models can be hard to find for those pursuing non-traditional lifestyles.
- See your spouse as an ally and source of support, a person with whom to share mutual problems and needs.
- View men's and women's changing roles as new options, not prescriptions. Media images to the contrary, all women are not enjoying prestigious careers while simultaneously rearing perfect children, and men are not all the "new nurturing fathers" who also magically generate enough income so that these lifestyle decisions are choices rather than necessities.

I asked a friend how she felt about all of this, and she said, "I always assumed that I'd work, and that if I had children, I'd be a working mother and do a decent job at both. So I suppose I'm glad to be living in a time when that's not too disapproved of - where I don't have to read and hear about how bad it is for the kids everywhere I turn. But sometimes I get nostalgic for the 50s (or my image of the

50s) where I might have been regarded as exceptional for managing a job along with a child. Nowadays, with one child and a part-time job, I feel like a real underachiever."

These are challenging times we live in. Challenge can be unsettling, but it can also be exciting.

For more information on changing roles in families, request from our Information Center:

Changing Roles in a Changing World, 75¢

Stress of Balancing Work and Family, 70¢

Flexible Work Arrangements, 75¢

Time: A Precious Commodity, 70¢

Let's Talk About Child Care, 35¢

#### Speaker's Bureau Topic:

Balancing Work and Family

## Nutrition for Teens (cont'd)

continued from page 10

tion teacher from East Middle School, a home and career skills teacher from Chenango Forks Middle School, and two Cooperative Extension home economics educators, one from Broome and the other from Otsego County. Together as a team we will be training approximately 100 teachers this spring on the use of "Nutrition For Life"

materials.

Parents and teens should watch for these materials in their schools by late spring. And older adolescents shouldn't feel left out, because the ninth through twelfth grade NFL program will be available by late 1988. By then, Cornell Cooperative Extension's school-based nutrition education pro-

gram will be complete, as we will have programs that span kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Our goal in promoting nutrition education through these programs is to help our young people develop a very basic life skill - eating to promote health and well-being for today, tomorrow, and for life.