Twitter Thread by Claire McGuire ■■■■



Claire McGuire ■■■■
@vcmcguire

If you know me IRL, you know that my (male) partner is our household's primary cook and launderer. We share parenting more equally, but we have each been the primary parent at various times. I have a few thoughts about this.

One of my BFFs asked me one time, when she was a new mom, how it was that my kid was so close to their dad? Her baby only wanted her, and her husband was quick to hand the crying baby off to mom and admit defeat.

My answer: You've got. To leave. Them alone together.

Nobody can develop a close, trusting relationship if that relationship is always being observed and mediated by a third party.

We had the same barriers to this as every family. I was the breastfeeding parent, and I was home more in the first couple years.

But leaving the kid alone with their dad meant that they developed their own way of dealing with each other. He didn't comfort the baby the same way I did. He had a different sleep routine (with some similarities, of course.)

This was good for all three of us!

But what if I was constantly there, so the baby knew that the comfort of breastfeeding was just on the other side of that door? It would have been harder for the two of them to work things out without me.

But what if you don't work outside the house? What if there's a pandemic so you can't go anywhere?

Leave the house anyway. Go for walk or a run. Take the car and go park it somewhere beautiful and read your book. Bring a snack.

Time for yourself + time for them alone = win win

The other thing that I haven't seen mentioned--the power dynamics. Women have less power in almost every aspect of life. But we are taught from early childhood that in our own home, we will reign supreme. The dishwasher will be loaded our way. The kids raised our way.

Cis women are taught that only THEY have that all-powerful mothering instinct.

And it can be hard to give those scraps of power up. But if you really want to share the work equally, you also have to share the power.

It used to drive me crazy. I wanted my partner to do half the work, of course I did. But I also wanted him to defer to me when it came to tough parenting decisions.

Example: When the baby was sick, I wanted to be In Charge. We'd get into fights bec I would try to overrule him.

I didn't play the Mothering Instinct card too often, and it didn't really come into my mind, UNLESS the kid was sick. My partner does not believe something is real unless there's incontrovertible proof.

So I'd be like: Baby is sick!

And he'd be like: Maybe. We'll see.

So this whole feminist family life thing was hard for me to accept. I wanted it very badly, and it was a big part of why I was drawn to this specific person. (Also he is gorgeous and funny and smart. But the feminism thing was key.)

I had to be willing to give up some of these crumbs of power that society was willing to throw me as a woman in order to have a family life where:

a.) my kid is very close to their dad
b.) I can travel, go out with friends, work or be sick and the household ticks along smoothly

Building a feminist family also won't work unless both partners are fully committed to it. It's going to be exhausting if one of you is constantly having to police the other. "I did the dishes every night this week. Could you step up tonight please?" Etc.

That's MISERABLE.

So I think our good intentions about co-parenting and sharing domestic work would have come to naught if HE hadn't held me to it. Regularly.

One time when the kid was maybe 8-10mo, Matthew was getting the baby packed up to go out somewhere. I was sort of following him around the house, saying things like, "Do you have an extra pair of socks? Oh, I think the wipes need to be refilled. This is their favorite book rn."

Matthew stopped me & said--I can get my own kid ready to go out for the afternoon. I don't need you to pack the diaper bag for me.

So "packing the diaper bag" became our shorthand for this kind of interaction.

Any time I was acted like I knew more about what our kid needed than he did, Matthew would say, "Stop trying to pack the diaper bag for me."

There were still bumps. I got really tired of trying to share every task equally, lest we accidentally fall into gender roles.

I'm much more networky and social, but M couldn't stand the idea of my keeping the family social calendar. So we tussled about that.

And there were still times when I felt like I was doing labor that he didn't even know was happening. I'd spend hours finding someone to fix something in the house, arranging to be home, supervising the work, finding the $$ to pay for it. M didn't get how much time that took.

One time I was like "I got the such-and-such fixed and you didn't even thank me." And he said, "why should I thank you for that? It's not like you fixed it yourself." And I had to detail all the work that was involved in managing the work. He gets it now!

Emotional labor is another big piece. For many years, I was always the one who suggested and planned visits to see his friends and family. I stopped doing that a few years ago because I realized nobody even noticed I was doing it or appreciated that labor.

And there were things that I, as a cis woman, was raised to think of as necessary parenting work that he didn't know was a thing AND he didn't think was important.

Example: Our relationship with the kid's friends' parents and with their schools.

My mother did all of that, and I saw her doing it, so I knew it was part of parenting.

You gotta go to events at the school, get to know the teachers, get to know the other parents so when shit gets hard for your kid at school you have relationships to call on to help you.

I never did convince him to help me build those relationships at school. I was the one to serve on the preschool board, help set up for the school fundraiser auction, fill my phone with contacts that say "[school] parent" in the notes field.

But that's also something we learned over the years. You don't have to share EVERY parenting/housekeeping task. You just have to keep things roughly equal, and be vigilant so you don't fall into harmful gender roles or so one person isn't doing 80% before either of you realize it

Last point--the age difference. In that NYT story, one of those couples has a 15-year age difference. That can play into power dynamics and you have to watch out for that.

We are 13.5 years apart. When we first started dating, M said, I don't want the age difference to give me too much power. At first it seemed like it wasn't an issue bec I am assertive as fuck and he is more easygoing. BUT.

I realized over time that I had been deferring to him on some big parenting decisions partly because he's older and partly because he's super intelligent and he's a scholar and I'm more of a flibbertigibbet. Turns out a young, smitten Claire found him a little intimidating.

Example: Vaccines. I grew up in a very woo-woo family and it has made me, if anything, NOT inclined to go against the grain of standard medical advice. But he did all this research and determined that we vaccinate too young (and too many shots at once) in this country.

I was uncomfortable, but he had done the research! He was so smart and good at research! I trusted him! He knew shit! And he was 40 to my 26 and we were new parents and I just went along with it. So we did a delayed vaccination schedule.

There were school decisions, too, that I went along with bec I didn't feel like I was any match for him in our debates.

So if you're an opposite sex couple & the man is older--it's easy for power dynamics to get fucked up.

And I think that's prolly a factor with the NYT couple.

In conclusion: It is possible! But you have to both be committed and cis women have to be prepared to give up some tiny scraps of power in order to have something approaching real equality. And the work of building that equality never stops. We're almost 20 yrs in!

OH--one other thing. Straight, cis couples can learn a lot from queer families when it comes to anti-sexist family life. We are both cis, and we're straight-passing altho I am bisexual. BUT. We had a huge advantage in that we had a lot of queer friends.

Some of our earliest parenting role models were lesbian couples, and when our kid was a baby we were super fortunate to get to know some genderqueer parents, too.

They were much less likely to follow the prescribed, sexist rules of American family life.

Anyone can break those sexist rules! You can do it even if you're straight and cis and not blessed with queer friends. But it helps a lot to see what's possible if you are looking for inspiration from other people who are rewriting the rules.