

## **MoxieTopic: Parenting With Another Person**

This guide is for anyone who is going to be parenting a child with another person, whether both of you are the child's parents (biologically or not) or are just sharing parenting roles. Some of the issues that come up here will apply more strongly when the couple is female/male because of societal roles and expectations, but the framework for approaching sharing parenting applies to any two people parenting a child together.

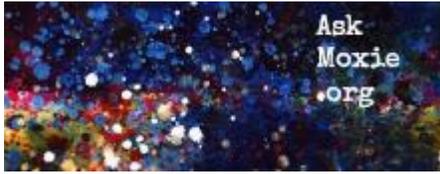
I'm going to refer to "The Mom" and "The Dad," capitalized, in the worst-case scenario part of this guide because some of the behaviors we fall into have more to do with expectations and culture and gender roles than anything else.

(If you're a single parent with no other person to share parenting with, you might still want to read this to get some insight into your own childhood, experiences your friends are having, and cultural influences that affect our whole society.)

### **Assumptions**

If you are a romantic couple, the assumption is that you'll approach parenting together the same way you approach other aspects of your life together, with shared partnership and teamwork. But that seems not to be the case for many of us, and that has repercussions for relationships with our partners and children, societal roles, and even the economy. There are plenty of resources for "child-proofing your marriage," but I'll argue that "marriage-proofing your parenting relationship" is at least as important. I think being intentional about how you parent with a partner naturally keeps the partnership in better shape while also making parenting more simple, open, and less fraught for everyone.

This idea that we'll approach parenting together the same way we approach all other joint tasks is pervasive, but it ignores huge pressures from society, along with biological factors, that push us into patterns that are counterproductive for the way we live our lives now.



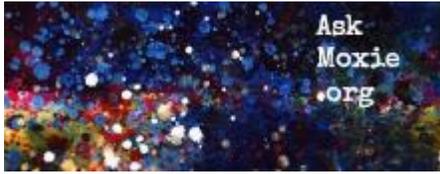
Is this all sounding hypothetical? Let's talk about some scenarios. **Here's the stereotype:**

The Mom is the primary caregiver of the child from birth. When the baby cries, she comforts them. If The Dad tries to comfort the baby, he doesn't do it as efficiently as The Mom does, so soon The Mom takes on all parenting duties and relegates The Dad to jobs without direct contact with the baby. Eventually The Mom is doing all parenting duties and The Dad is cut off from the child's emotional life and from contact with other parents. The Mom feels resentful of being the only one caring for the child and for being forced to balance her own career with caregiving. The Dad is pushed further into work, which is the area he excels in, and has more work responsibility and less family time, and becomes even more cut off. The two parents are at odds, and the child doesn't get the best from either parent, because of resentment, stress, and time.

**Let's examine what's happened here.** The Mom (or whichever parent slides most easily into the role of the primary caregiver) begins taking care of the baby because she's The Mom (cultural message) and because hormonal and biological forces attune her to the baby's cries. If she is breastfeeding, her body becomes the source of food for the baby, and since she is spending so much time feeding the baby, The Dad can feel left out and useless.

*There are two ways to go with this: Either allow The Mom to keep doing all the caregiving tasks and channel The Dad into other things, or acknowledge that The Mom is breastfeeding and that the Dad can do other caregiving tasks as well--comforting, burping, diaper-changing, snuggling. The first choice is favored by inertia. The second choice requires some conscious decisions from both parents, especially in the first few weeks.*

Next, the cycle continues. When The Dad offers to help, The Mom accepts it, but since The Dad has not spent as much time in physical contact with the baby and cannot breastfeed, The Mom is able to assess problems and comfort the baby more quickly. The Dad feels incompetent and The Mom either jumps in to "save" the baby (and perhaps The Dad from feeling uncomfortable) or becomes increasingly anxious as The Dad can't comfort the baby immediately or as quickly as she can. The next time, The Dad's enthusiasm to help is not as strong and The Mom's enthusiasm to allow The Dad to help is not as strong. Eventually The Dad stops offering and The Mom wouldn't accept anyway and each feels hurt and resentful.

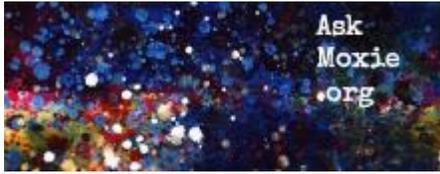


*What could happen instead: The Mom walks away completely, out of the house, even. (This is a good time to go read a magazine while drinking an iced coffee, or get a pedicure, or even just walk around the aisles of the grocery store feeling dazed.) The Dad is actually alone with the baby and can figure out how to comfort the baby without feeling time pressure or the pressure of The Mom observing. At the appointed time The Mom comes back. Even if the baby is still crying, both baby and The Dad have survived. The Mom and The Dad talk about how hard it was and commiserate with each other. The next day they do it again. Each time it gets easier for The Dad to comfort the baby, and each time it gets easier for The Mom to know that The Dad is getting it.*

Finally, The Mom and The Dad have each accepted their roles, even though both feel cheated. The Mom is taking on way too much, being responsible for everything involved with the child along with all her other responsibilities of a job and house duties (even if both parents split chores). The Dad is so cut off emotionally from the child that he wouldn't even know where to step in to do things like scheduling doctor visits or buying preschool snacks or any of the other tasks that are logistical and could be possible for him to do if he knew how to be part of the child's world. Family life is resentment for both parents. Neither is able to have the free and happy relationship with their child that they wanted.

*What could have happened instead: The parents realize that by pushing The Mom into all childcare and shoving The Dad out of family life and into work, they're creating the kind of separation that is the opposite of the reason they became a family in the first place. They make a plan and work together to shift childcare responsibilities to The Dad until the balance feels equal to everyone. They enjoy the greater emotional connection everyone in the family feels to each other. Stress is reduced on The Mom, The Dad, and the child.*

This worst-case scenario happens all the time, to all kinds of couples, no matter how much of a team they were before having children. The combination of biology and societal pressures is strong, and it feels easier (and sometimes "natural") to get into a pattern of the "primary parent" owning the relationship with the child and deciding how much access and responsibility the "other parent" gets.



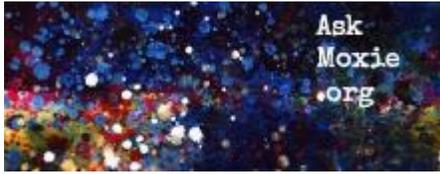
A note about biology: We are hard-wired for mothers to care for our children. Our bodies are designed to breastfeed babies, and we have hormones that make us more responsive from the very first minute of parenthood to our offspring. This system worked really well in societies in which mothers and children lived mostly separately from fathers, who provided food and shelter for their families but only interacted with them in a limited manner, and in which marriage created an economic unit instead of an emotional unit. Our entire societal structure and expectations for marriage and family are different now. This means that some of these natural biological functions don't serve the way we create families now, and we need to be specific about interacting with our children and our biology to create the relationships we do want.

This is also why it's important to be intentional about relationships and jobs even when you aren't in a male-female couple or when your child has come to you through adoption. The family structure isn't the same as centuries ago, but the lingering cultural expectations are still there, tugging at you all the same.

**Let's talk about how things could go.** Here's the ideal:

Both parents are invested emotionally in the child from the time the child comes into the family. Even if one parent is breastfeeding, the other parent does caregiving duties and comforting and snuggling, too. The parents understand and talk about how it feels uneven now because of the time and physical demands of breastfeeding on one parent, but that this will even out as the child gets older, so they support each other, let each other vent, and create as many opportunities as possible for the non-breastfeeding parent to care for the child. As the child grows older, the parents share the jobs in a way that feels equitable to them, even if they are each doing things that they are told by culture they aren't "supposed" to do. They pay attention to their child and what the child needs and what will work for the entire family in making decisions. As the child grows, the parents maintain a strong relationship with each other, a relaxed family life, and careers they are satisfied with. The child grows up knowing that parents are people, too, and having strong relationships with both parents.

That sounds like what we all want, doesn't it?



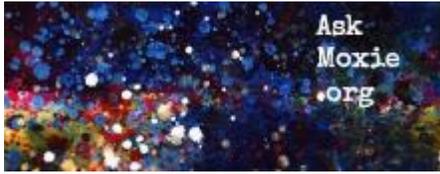
Here are some side effects of really sharing the parenting with a partner:

**More emotional connection for both parents.** If one parent is in charge of the emotional connection and bonding with the child, the other parent is aced out. At the same time, the parent with the emotional connection is likely to get so fried from all the caregiving that they won't be able to be as open and free in the relationship as they would if they were sharing the parenting. So neither parent has the level of connection they could have with the child if they were sharing the duties and the connection. The child loses in this scenario, too. In addition, if the parents are tied up in their rigid levels of interaction and connection, they are unlikely to be able to share themselves with each other, so they miss out on emotional connection with each other. Sharing the parenting opens more connection for everyone.

**Less stress on the total household.** Everyone's just doing whatever they're supposed to be doing, and helping each other out when needed. No resentment, rigid role maintenance, or identity politics. Parents get to love their child and each other without an agenda. The tough situations are still tough situations, but without an overlay of disappointment and resentment. Everyone's on the same team, and works together.

**Better workplace conditions for everyone.** Imagine how things would be different if every father in the executive suite at every company had spent time being awake in the middle of the night with a teething baby, or had spent the entire weekend alone with a toddler. We would have more sensible family leave policies that gave men time at home to care for children, too, and we wouldn't penalize mothers for being parents. There would be greater understanding that parents are good workers, and that mothers can perform at work as well as fathers do. Men wouldn't be identified only for the paid work that they do, and women wouldn't be forced to make false "work-life balance" choices they have little control over.

**By making the deliberate decision to parent with your parenting partner instead of siloing yourselves, you are contributing to positive change in society that is going to have real benefits for your children and grandchildren.**



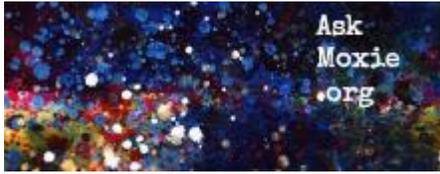
So how do we do this? It is easier if you start from the beginning, but no matter how old your child is and how entrenched your roles are, you can make changes that bring you all closer. Here is how:

**Before the baby even comes, make a plan for making decisions for the first few weeks.** You know how everyone tells you you'll have no idea what it's like until you're in it? That's because there's no way to describe it until you're in it. And so much of the first few weeks is reactive, driven by fear that your baby isn't ok or that you're doing something wrong. If you make a plan for the decision-making process before you have the baby, you have a better chance of surviving the first few weeks really sharing the parenting instead of shrinking to default roles out of stress. I am NOT suggesting planning things out in detail, because the reality will not match up at all with what you plan (unless this is your twelfth kid, and even then maybe not). Planning how you approach decisions and sharing time and tasks gives you a framework to fall back on when unexpected things happen. Will one of you be the decisionmaker? Will you share all decisionmaking? Will you split who does the research and decisionmaking by topic or area? What process will you follow for escalating problems to experts? Deciding what your process will be can set you up for better teamwork and less siloing from the start.

**Understand that “equal” doesn't mean “identical.”** Parents can both be caregivers of their child without both having to do the same tasks or be interchangeable. If one parent is breastfeeding, for example, the other parent can do other jobs that are important (albeit not as consuming for the first few months) and establish their own relationship and mastery as a caregiver. Children's attention shifts as they grow older, so a baby who strongly prefers one parent is often a three-year-old who strongly prefers the other parent. If you can find tasks that are of equivalent emotional weight to both parents, even though they may vary widely, this keeps the parenting as equal as possible and helps both parents be as emotionally invested as possible.

**If you are the “primary parent,” step back.** Unless your baby is in actual danger, let your partner have the time and space to find their own relationship with the baby. Take turns holding the baby. When the baby cries, alternate which of you picks up the baby and starts running through the list of what to try. Yes, it is frustrating to hear your baby cry and know you could comfort them in 10 seconds while it will take your partner 10 minutes. But that 9:50 minutes now contributes to better relationships for all of you and a happier household later on. Play the long game.

That means deliberately handing the baby to your partner to give your partner a turn, even when you know that you can do it right away. It means having your partner pick up the baby and bring them to you to breastfeed instead of getting up yourself sometimes.



It means alternating who's behind the camera and whose hands are in the shot. It means both of you will get peed on. It means that your partner will also notice weird things and go look them up in the book to see if they're something to worry about.

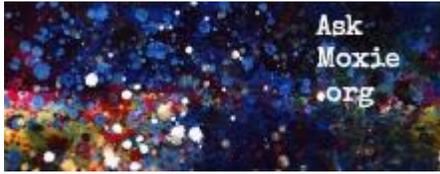
**If you are the “other parent,” step forward.** We know you don't know what you're doing. No one does, with a first baby. (Or with any successive baby, either, frankly, since all babies are different.) The only way to develop skills is by practicing them. It's hard to seriously screw up a baby, but it takes time and a lot of trial and error to figure out how to keep them happy. Keep trying and you'll get it.

Be willing to talk to your partner if they start giving you pushback about being a caregiver, or if you feel disapproval from them because you haven't figured something out as easily as they have. Remember that this is your child's relationship with both of you at stake, and the only way to create good relationships for all of you is for you to jump in. It's not only your right, but it's also your responsibility.

**Know that you will feel uncomfortable feelings.** You are fighting biology here, since humans evolved back when the system was that men provided and women cared for children and there was no crossover during early childhood. This means that to develop the skills you each need to develop (the “primary parent” holding back to allow the “other parent” to learn, and the “other parent” to develop caregiving skills), each of you need to go through a learning process that involves inefficiency, friction, and some crying (from the baby and perhaps the adults, too).

**Create opportunities for success.** When one parent succeeds, the other parent does, too, so create opportunities for this to happen. For instance, if you're out of diapers, instead of sending the “other parent” out for them while the “primary parent” cares for the baby, do the opposite. This allows the “other parent” time to be alone in charge of the baby, but for a limited amount of time so things will probably stay calm. At the same time, the “primary parent” gets practice not being the only one in charge, but for a short time. Both parents develop confidence that the “other parent” can do it, and they can increase the lengths of time.

The more you do this, the more both of you will get in the habit of looking for opportunities in your routine to create spaces and take the load off each other. This will not only help both of you become more fluent in parenting your child, but it will increase your teamwork.



**Be vigilant about sliding into rigid roles.** Therapist Bill Eschen says that defining roles too rigidly in a relationship is a way of avoiding intimacy. It makes sense. If you stay in one tightly-defined role, you have no way of rubbing up against anything you aren't good at, or that requires excess emotion, or feeling uncomfortable or incompetent. Those places of friction are where growth happens, skills develop, and relationships are created. So remaining flexible about who does what allows you to pick up the slack for each other and also connect more fully with your child.

**Make a conscious effort to share the brain work of parenting.** Parenting is a lot of snuggling, a lot of being soaked in fluids, and a lot of detective work. Part of the inequality of parenting that becomes most galling is the fact that the "primary parent" often develops that running track in their mind of things that need to be done--from laundry to registering for school to scheduling dentist appointments to actually going to the dentist appointments to assigning and tracking chores--while the "other parent" doesn't, and only does tasks as assigned by the "primary parent." Question this. Both of you are smart people, and people who have grown to adulthood and productive contributions to society, so you can certainly both think about and research problems and solutions to childraising questions. This doesn't mean that both of you have to be attacking the same problem with equal ferocity. Sometimes it makes a ton of sense to divide and conquer. But having one person do the research (not the same person every time) and both of you make the decision together can keep both of you in the loop and doing what you do best.

**Stay on the same team.** You both, and your child, are working toward the same goal. If you can keep in mind the fact that when you win you all win together, it will be easier to deal with uncomfortable feelings, stressful situations, honest conversations, and asking for what you need.

Parenting is hard. And it's high stakes. So it's easy to revert to stress behavior and shrink into roles that don't serve you. But if you can stay conscious of wanting to be on the same team and of trusting each other to learn, you can create a family style that makes everyone in your family feel connected.