

**Gender**

# **Gender Equity Starts in the Home**

by David G. Smith and W. Brad Johnson

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Martin Poole/Getty Images

**Summary.** Many men teleworking from home for the first time are getting a front row seat to the daily demands of running a home and caring for kids, as well as a crash course in learning to “balance” work and family. Although many men have experienced traditional role reversals for short stints, most have never worked from home for an extended period while leaning in as primary caregiver for children. Most of this work has fallen on women.

The presence of more men sharing more fully in domestic duties for an extended period of time has the potential to create a sea change in gendered norms — at home and at work. Men teleworking during the pandemic are more likely to

appreciate women’s work-family experiences, understand the value of flexible work arrangements, appreciate the benefits of relationships with work colleagues, and role model more equitable work-family gender roles for their children. [close](#)

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Jack Koban, a geologist and engineering project manager, is working from home during the pandemic shutdown while his wife, Ashley Saucier, works long hours as a pediatric emergency medicine physician. In our recent call with Jack, he reflected, “I don’t remember the last time I’ve cooked three meals a day and done the dishes for three straight weeks. It’s been nice being home, having more family time, and being more involved with the kids. We’ve definitely achieved a new work-life balance.”

Not everyone is seeing a silver lining in the shutdown, though. Families are struggling with unemployment, keeping small businesses afloat, and having to work to survive in the absence of paid sick leave. What’s more, many individuals are now discovering what it’s like to spend so much of their time managing work, childcare, and a household.

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For most women, this last challenge is nothing new. Despite the fact that women outnumber men in the paid workforce, women still do more of the domestic work and childcare — almost twice as much as their male partners. The pandemic has closed many schools and daycare centers, creating childcare scarcity and exacerbating the stresses and strains of caregiving, home-schooling, and domestic duties, especially for

dual-earner mothers who were already doing more unpaid work. Even with expanded use of telework and flexible work arrangements by many businesses, working from home isn't necessarily easier when parents are juggling job responsibilities, full-time childcare, and supervision of children's education.

Because 44% of all U.S. households with children are comprised of married dual-earner full-time working couples, and because 1.57 billion children are currently out of school globally and most non-critical workers are now teleworking from home, a seismic shift in the traditional division of household responsibilities is likely. It is not a stretch to expect that men are doing more housework and childcare during the pandemic — an enlightening experience for many.

Many men teleworking from home for the first time are getting a front row seat to the daily demands of running a home and caring for kids, as well as a crash course in learning to “balance” work and family. Although many men have experienced traditional role reversals for short stints, most have never worked from home for an extended period while leaning in as primary caregiver for children. Nowhere is this more evident than among men who are partnered with women who are essential healthcare professionals, currently required to work even longer hours outside the home. Because the healthcare industry is female-dominated (25 of 30 occupations are majority women), many of these families include a husband who is taking on primary caregiver and household responsibilities during the pandemic.

The presence of more men sharing more fully in domestic duties for an extended period of time has the potential to create a sea change in gendered norms — at home and at work. Men teleworking during the pandemic are more likely to appreciate women's work-family experiences, understand the value of flexible work arrangements, appreciate the benefits of relationships with work colleagues, and role model more equitable work-family gender roles for their children.

In interviews we conducted for our forthcoming book, *Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace*, women told us that gender equality at work had to start with men becoming equal partners at home. Real allyship and gender partnership demands that men do their fair share of household chores, childcare, transportation for children's activities, the emotional labor of planning and tracking activities, and supporting their partner's career. When men genuinely enact equal partnership at home, it accelerates gender equality at work in three ways.

First, women with equal partners at home are more successful at work. When people are less concerned with the impact of their job on family responsibilities and able to focus and commit more fully to their work, it's no surprise that they're more productive and able to take advantage of growth and advancement opportunities.

Second, fathers who are equal domestic partners role model equity for their children, shaping expectations of our future workforce. Daughters with dads who do their fair share are more likely to pursue their career aspirations, often in less stereotypical occupations, with more self-esteem and self-autonomy. Sons who see their father role model equal partnership in household duties have a more egalitarian perspective of women's and men's roles at home and work.

Finally, men who equally share unpaid work at home aren't afraid to ask for and talk about why they need flexibility in their work schedule. When women alone request and use flexible work arrangements, paid sick leave, and parental leave, the perception that these programs exist solely for women creates a stigma that deters men from using them. For example, although men are more likely to be in jobs that allow telework, women still telework more than men. But when men lean in to truly equal partnership at home, they tend to use flexible work policies, normalizing it for everyone.

This pandemic has created a golden opportunity for men-as-allies to purposefully leverage their newfound domestic partnership chops. Men can start with considering how to intentionally lean in to being a

better ally to their partner at home. Here are some recommendations to jumpstart better male allyship at home today:

**Do your fair share of chores and childcare.** There is no time like the present to check in with your partner and ask for a domestic performance audit to assess how you're doing. And when she tells you that you need to do more, don't get defensive; figure out how to be better.

**Take on the emotional labor of tracking, planning, and organizing family needs, activities, and special occasions.** The mental lists that women are more likely to maintain for their family is another form of unpaid work — cognitive labor. Grocery lists, holidays, birthdays, children's school requirements, children's clothing, medicines, pets' needs — the list is seemingly endless. Men need to do their fair share of this labor.

**Be purposeful in prioritizing work and family responsibilities.** To help you prioritize, use “ruthless compartmentalization” in setting boundaries between work and family and adhere to them. As you set goals for work, do the same at home. Set key performance indicators (KPIs) for your family responsibilities the same way you do for work. This will help you self-monitor and ensure you're being the dad and partner you intend to be.

**Support your partner's career without reservation.** This may mean putting your own career on hold, reducing current work responsibilities, or changing your work hours so she can have the time she needs to not just do her work but explore opportunities for professional growth. We find some couples creatively striking a balance by designating paid work (telework) days and non-paid work (kids and chores) days for each parent. This establishes a clear and shared priority for childcare and household duties.

**Deliberately role model allyship for your children.** Depending on the age of your children, openly communicate family and career goals. Life is messy, so show your kids how to disagree, listen, and

respect others' perspectives. Be transparent with your children in how and why decisions are made through compromise and balance. When you lean in to doing your fair share of domestic work, let your kids see that this is important and meaningful, and not just another task. Your positive attitude toward childcare and household responsibilities will send an enduring message of commitment and allyship to your children and your partner.

**Be authentic and transparent about your current work-family situation.** This includes transparently managing your daily schedule and availability so that you can prioritize family responsibilities. Most people now realize that when you're working from home with children, pets, and others in a shared space, it's futile to try to create an image of peace and serenity. Accept and normalize it for yourself, your family, and your coworkers. Authenticity makes you more effective in all your roles.

**Leverage your partnership at home to build connection and community at work.** We've all learned that it's not only okay to talk about family and domestic challenges right now, but it's actually quite powerful and meaningful in building relationships, emotional connection, and a caring community. Share both your wins and setbacks in achieving work-life integration so that others feel comfortable sharing theirs as well.

The current crisis is presenting new experiences for everyone at home and work — especially men. The silver lining for men's experiences may be the ability to engage in gender equality and partnership in a way that we have not seen before. The benefits of equal partnership at home may be the catalyst to finally create a workplace that is equal for women.

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**David G. Smith** is a professor of sociology in the College of Leadership and Ethics at the United States Naval War College. He is the coauthor, with W. Brad Johnson, of *Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace* and *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*.

**W. Brad Johnson** is a professor of psychology in the Department of Leadership, Ethics, and Law at the United States Naval Academy and a faculty associate in the Graduate School of Education at Johns Hopkins University. He is the coauthor of *Good Guys: How Men Can Be Better Allies for Women in the Workplace*, *Athena Rising: How and Why Men Should Mentor Women*, *The Elements of Mentoring*, and other books on mentorship.