



Husband, Wife Work Part Time To Share Child-Care Duties

By Sue Shellenbarger

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Solving the child-care dilemma when your household needs two incomes can be a headache -- and a heartache -- for parents. For the past three-and-a-half years, Mark and Kimberly Gavagan, both 37 years old, of Mendham, N.J., have pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy: Both have cut back to part-time work so each parent can care for Audrey, 3, and Sophie, 2, while the other is at work. Mr. Gavagan works three days a week as an independent stock trader and entrepreneur. Kimberly works two days in the office and the equivalent of a third day at home for an employee communications firm. Their story shows the ups and downs of sharing work-family duties -- and the surprising benefits it can bring. Here they take turns telling their tale:

The Problem

Mark: "When Kimberly was pregnant with Audrey in 2003, we had a lot of stress as we tried to figure out what to do. I didn't want to have to go work at a full-time corporate job to support the family, but I didn't want to be a full-time parent. Kim didn't want to work full-time either. We rethought it again and again."

The Solution

Kimberly: "Having each of us work part-time was Mark's idea. I liked the idea, but I was skeptical. The biggest obstacle was, 'How am I going to convince my company?'"

Alison Davis of Davis & Co., a 20-employee Glen Rock, N.J., employee communications firm and Kimberly's boss of 12 years: "We immediately said, we're going to try to make this work because she's such a valuable asset [to the company]."

Kimberly: "Also, I was concerned about whether Mark would really want to take care of an infant. He hesitated; he said, 'Well, we'll see. I'll do my best.'"

Mark: "The first days Kim went back to work after her first maternity leave were really tough. I'd changed a million diapers and had done each piece of child care by myself, but when you're alone, it's different. I phoned Kim a lot about things like heating the bottle.

"I still look back on one day with horror. I refer to it as The Brownout -- the day of the exploding diaper. Audrey was in her crib and her diaper had exploded all over everything. When I walked in the room, I thought, 'We may have to move to get away from this.' Fatherhood has brought me some of the longest days and the shortest years of my life."

Kimberly: "It was hard to share responsibility for Audrey at first. I had to let go of this pressure we face in our society for our parenting to be perfect. Mark would never get Audrey dressed. I'd come home and he'd say, 'Oh, we went to visit my mother,' and Audrey was still in her pajamas. I said to myself, 'OK, you have to let go.' She got her feedings and diaper-changings on time, and he was playing and engaged with her. I trusted Mark on those things. And Audrey certainly isn't any worse for it today."

Mark: "Kim really has maintained control on child-care issues -- she has read all the books and has knowledge I just don't have. But we have similar philosophies. Most days we go for a walk together with the kids in a stroller and talk about what's going on with her at work, with me, with the kids, so we're connected."

"Kim is making more than half our household income right now; the rest comes from my work and income on our investments. I made good money as a day-trader in the late 1990s, but changes in the financial markets have reduced those opportunities. Now, I trade one or two days a week and pursue entrepreneurial ventures in film production, fund-raising strategies and Internet marketing."

[A business associate of Mark's, Celine Rattray of Plum Pictures, a Manhattan film-production company, says she wasn't surprised to learn of his nontraditional fathering setup, which she calls "quite inspiring." Mr. Gavagan, who partnered with Plum as executive producer of a documentary, is "not bound up" by conventional thinking, Ms. Rattray says, but is "very much driven by his passions and interest."]

"But even though Kim and I have each been the primary breadwinner, at no time has either of us ever said, 'Look, I'm the breadwinner here and we're going to do what I want.' We're a team, 50-50. I give her a ton of credit. I'm sure she'd like to work a little less. One of our goals is to get to that point, where she can."

The Downside

Mark: "To do this, you have to avoid consumer debt beyond a modest mortgage or education loan, and keep overhead low. Also, sometimes it's frustrating not to have more time to spend on my business."

Kimberly: "Our income is adequate but it doesn't leave a lot of room for extra things. We typically don't take vacations. We're both driving 7-year-old cars."

"The hardest thing for me is the constant juggling act. I have clients and deadlines. If Audrey is at preschool and Sophie is taking a nap, I'll sit down and do some work. After she wakes up, I sit down on the floor and read a few stories, then check e-mail -- 'Omgosh, here's an e-mail from a client,' -- and I have to switch gears from 'The Cat in the Hat' to a big project, while I have two little ones tugging on my sleeve saying, 'Read me a book.' After they're both asleep at 8 p.m., I go back to work for 1-1/2 hours."

"In some ways this has held me back on the job. It's difficult to run projects as a part-time employee, so now I support my peers. But keeping a toe in the water is better than not working at all. It's a fine tradeoff for now."

The Outcome

Mark: "Some days I'll be sitting with Audrey and Sophie reading a book. And Audrey just turns and faces me and snuggles into my side. I feel like my heart is going to leap out of my chest. These few wonderful years where we are the center of their universe can never be replaced.

"With Kim, sharing child care has brought us a lot closer. I have a full appreciation for what it's like to be that full-time parent. And I have a full appreciation for what it's like to go to work all day and then come home to family responsibilities."

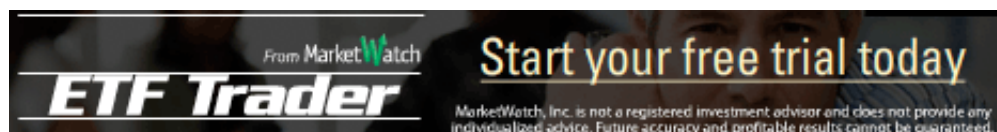
Kimberly: "I know families where the husband walks in the door at 7 p.m., looks around and says, 'Why is the house such a mess? Why is dinner not ready? What did you do all day?' There's a gap in his understanding. But Mark and I respect each other's roles very much.

Email your comments to cjeditor@dowjones.com.

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