



Building Stepfamilies That Work®

Time/Energy/Money Investment

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Preamble: The fact is, that in any family, there is a lot of work that needs to be done. Often, we find ourselves feeling that we have to do more than our fair share. If this continues for any length of time, resentment will build and/or we will begin feeling unappreciated or “used”. This is particularly true in stepfamilies where many tasks are performed with a conscious effort rather than being motivated by “blood bonds”.

Consider two workers on the job. Both have specific responsibilities and tasks to complete. Worker #1 completes all of his/her duties for the day and begins reading the newspaper. Worker #2 has not yet finished his/her tasks for the day, and notices Worker #1 casually reading the paper.

Should Worker #2

- expect help from Worker #1?
- get angry towards Worker #1 if they fail to volunteer to help?

As Worker #1:

- should you be able to “kick back” and enjoy the spare time you have earned without feeling badly?
- should you volunteer to help Worker #2 without being asked?
- would you soon become resentful for having to do your own work **plus** Worker #2’s work as well?

Clearly, this situation, that often finds a parallel in the home, can quickly become problematic for both workers. Two issues need to be examined in order to identify the underlying problems and resolve them. They are:

- 1) the workload distribution, and
- 2) the terms of reciprocity.

1) Workload Distribution: In the family context, the first problem is that jobs are typically assigned implicitly, rather than explicitly. As a result, we are less than clear about where our responsibilities begin and end, so our “job description” keeps expanding. As we take on more responsibilities, others typically take on less. This becomes the so-called “dance of responsibility”. Secondly, we naturally tend to focus on the things that we believe we are responsible for, and that remain uncompleted. We tend not to think of the many tasks our partner is managing or has already completed, or the level of difficulty they have encountered in meeting their responsibilities to the family. Third, we fail to consider that every task requires a different investment of time, energy and/or money; and we are most likely to feel that the work is being shared when our partner is contributing to the task at hand in the same manner that we are—even if they are already making a meaningful contribution in some other way.

Solutions: The solutions for workload distribution problems are to:

- 1) explicitly negotiate what each person's responsibilities are and are not, and
- 2) evaluate the equity of the distribution of tasks by the investment of time, energy, and money that each person makes in the bigger picture of family responsibilities.

2) Terms of reciprocity: Even when the workload has been equitably distributed, there will be times when the circumstances of the moment bring increased demands on one partner or the other. When this happens, **expectations** represent a likely problem spot. If you happen to be inundated with work, and your partner chips in and helps out without being asked, they are being considerate. They should be thanked for their help. However, because they have volunteered to help with a particular chore in the past does not mean that you can expect them to do so in the future. Nor does it mean that you are obliged to help them when they are inundated with their responsibilities—but it does represent an excellent opportunity to underscore how much you appreciated **their** help when **you** received it.

Keep in mind, your partner is much more likely to help when you need it, if you have expressed your appreciation when they helped you out in the past. If you want help when you need it, practise being appreciative.

Solutions: When you are feeling inundated (and assuming that the jobs have been equitably distributed) follow these rules:

- 1) Ask for help,
- 2) specify the kind of help you would like,
- 3) make sure that you express your gratitude if help is forthcoming, but
- 4) be prepared to **accept** "No" (or some variation of "No") for an answer, and
- 5) leave it at that. (Don't even think about "getting even".)

When your partner is inundated, consider it an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that you truly are a team by:

- 1) asking if they would like some help, and
- 2) asking how they would like you to help, but
- 3) don't **expect** them to return the favour.
- 4) Consider your help as a loving gift that is given with no strings attached.

Consider this:

In a relationship it's never 50% - 50%. Instead, expect that each of you will have to contribute at least 60%. ;))

Your Assignment:

Make two copies of the Time/Energy/Money Grid that appears on page 4 below. Then complete Steps 1 through 3 of this exercise separately.

Step 1:

For each item on the grid, note: a) your contribution, and b) your partner's contribution as a percentage. The total for each item should equal 100%.

Consider: the time
 the energy, and
 the money involved in each to arrive at your (percentage) ratings.

Step 2:

Next, place a Y (for Yes) or an N (for No) to indicate if you are happy with this balance.

Step 3:

In a similar fashion, state whether you believe your spouse is happy with this balance.

Step 4:

When you have both completed this questionnaire, compare your answers. Notice and discuss the differences in your ratings. Are you both OK with the overall balance, or does the workload need to be more equitably distributed? If a redistribution is required, you might consider revisions to specific items, or revising an entire area. Figure out necessary resolutions. Agree; agree to agree on your differences; or agree to disagree. Don't fight. Just honour the differences in perception.

If you are bogged down after 15 minutes of discussion, set a time to return to the task. If you remain bogged down after the second go-round, adopt a "let's try this" plan for a week or two—but agree to a time to review how it's working.

Keep in mind, that **you** reap the benefits when your partner isn't feeling they are bearing the bulk of the burden for keeping the family and household afloat.

The Time/Energy/Money Grid*

	My Contribution (%)	My Partner's Contribution (%)	Are You Happy? (Y or N)	Do You Feel Spouse is Happy? (Y or N)
HOME				
<i>Basic Contribution</i>				
<i>Maintenance</i>				
<i>Inside Work</i>				
<i>Outside Work</i>				
<i>Upgrading</i>				
<i>Entertaining</i>				
<i>Meals</i>				
CAREER				
<i>Mine</i>				
<i>Partner's</i>				
CHILDREN				
Mine				
<i>As Caretaker</i>				
<i>As Teacher</i>				
<i>In Play</i>				
Partner's				
<i>As Caretaker</i>				
<i>As Teacher</i>				
<i>In Play</i>				
Ours				
<i>As Caretaker</i>				
<i>As Teacher</i>				
<i>In Play</i>				
PRIOR SPOUSE				
<i>Mine</i>				
<i>Partner's</i>				
PLAY TIME				
<i>With Partner</i>				
<i>Alone</i>				
<i>With My Children</i>				
<i>With Partner's Children</i>				
<i>With Our Children</i>				
LEARNING & GROWTH				
<i>Personal</i>				
<i>Partner's</i>				
<i>Joint</i>				
MISCELLANEOUS				

* adapted from Jeanette Lofas in *Stepparenting*: Kensington, 1995.

Time Energy Money Grid.rtf Feb 2008