

TIP SHEET: NAVIGATING LIFE AS A DUAL-CAREER COUPLE

Boston College Center for Work and Family

With increasing demands both at work and at home, it has become more complex to juggle two careers and a family. Common stressors in dual career couples include: whether and when to have children, and how many children, combining work and family roles, child care, concepts of equity/fairness and occupational mobility/travel, and lack of time for each other and/or for the family. While many of the examples provided reference husbands and wives, the ideas shared are relevant for same-sex partners, as well.

1. Have the career/life conversation early and often.



You might decide that both of you want to put your full efforts into your career, and perhaps wait or decide not to have children. Or perhaps one member of the couple has better career prospects, and the other one is willing to be the "accommodating spouse" and take on more duties at home. Sit down and talk about career aspirations and opportunities, at least every year as it will change throughout your life cycle.

3. Take deliberate steps to prevent either partner from making sacrifices that they are not comfortable with.



- Be intentional: Rather than allow traditional roles on the basis on gender or higher income seep into your household, "actively work to build and maintain consensus on what [you] want" and what works for your family at a given point in time.
- Develop a common vision and keep each other track; Practice honest, frequent conversations about the roles you are playing in your household and at work, the balance between partners, and what each partner needs from the other.
- Be willing to experiment: Trying out new work hours and home schedules, taking advantage of flex options offered by employers, changing up each partner's household responsibilities.

5. Schedule time for you and your spouse.



- Our busy lives have always on the go, so schedule some special time on your calendar for yourselves as a couple. Whether it is an official date night, or a breakfast or lunch date, a walk together or whatever works for both schedules. Take the time to focus on your partner, to listen and remember what drew you together.
- Take some time for yourself, because being completely tapped out does not make you a happy partner or a happy parent. Make time to enjoy your family together, doing activities that you all enjoy and can make special memories together.

7. Consider making strategic moves and changes at the same time to maintain equilibrium



While career advancement does not need to be the focus of dynamic changes in partners' work situation, maintaining an equal sense of fulfillment and contribution (albeit not necessarily monetary) is critical (A Strategy for Happy Dual Career Couples, Wall Street Journal, February 2017):

- Couples should work to ensure that "both have activities they find fulfilling and rewarding, either paid or unpaid." Partners must demonstrate respect for the work each other finds meaning and value, regardless of whether such "work" is in a strict career sense, a parenting sense, a community impact sense, or a creative or hobby-based sense.
- Couples should be in frequent conversation about their personal professional ambitions and the steps they wish to take to achieve such goals.

2. Consider your "A" Stage and how you can best cope with phase you are in.



Professor Tim Hall from Boston University, in one of the earliest books on dual career couples (Hall & Hall, 1979), developed a schema more than 30 years ago that is still useful today. He suggests that dual-career couples often fit into one of four prototypes, which all begin with the letter "A." Couples can be "allies, acrobats, adversaries, or accommodators."

- We start off the marriage as allies. In this case, both partners have a heavy investment in one sphere of life.
- Then kids enter the picture and both spouses become acrobats, trying to "do it all."
- The adversaries stage comes when we come to an important but dangerously flawed realization: I could be an acrobat if only I had married someone who could hold up his / her end of the bargain. Thus we begin finger pointing and the blame game.
- The final stage, accommodator mothers can scale back, fathers can scale back, or both can make the adjustments needed to sustain gainful employment, a healthy home-life, and some semblance of sanity.

4. Take advantage of workplace policies



Many employers have great family supportive policies, but they aren't always communicated well and employees don't know what is available. Make sure you know what your employer offers. This might include child care services, resource and referral services, employee assistance and more. Take your full allotment of Maternity AND Paternity leave. Be a pioneer-help normalize taking of paternity leave at your organization.

6. Negotiate roles at home



- Throw old gender stereotypes out the window. Our new, complex work and family situations require us to have a fresh perspective on how caregiving and home duties get accomplished.
- Divide and conquer household tasks-what do you like to do? What are you good at? What can we outsource?
 - Let go of the idea of "perfection" for your home and for your parenting and the pressure to be supermoms and superdads.