

My child has two parents. Why does day care call only me? ^[1]

Parenting has changed, but schools still assume Mom is the one doing all the work.

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EXCERPTS

When my husband and I began touring day-care centers for our baby, we brought along a list of questions. We asked about outside time and whether screens were ever used in the classroom; we asked about teacher turnover and discipline policies. One question we didn't ask — the answer to which would be the reason we withdrew our son, after only his second day, from the day care we waited months for a spot in — was whether they explicitly supported equal parenting.

On my son's first day, the director added me to what I assumed was the family text group. She shared pictures of the children playing with toys and a video of them playing outside. Later that evening, while cooing over our sweet babe and wondering whether he'd enjoyed the day after the brief jag of crying at drop-off, my husband said he hadn't received the messages. Assuming an oversight on the center director's part, I sent her a message asking her to add my husband to the communication. She responded that the communication was only for mothers. I could screenshot and send him anything that was relevant, but she would not add him to the thread.

After much back and forth, the director held fast: She sent messages only to mothers, it was how she'd always done things, and she was adamant that her policy would not change simply because our family didn't like it. My husband and I decided to remove our son from her care.

Fathers today are more engaged than any generation in history. Fifty-seven percent of them (compared with 58 percent of mothers) say parenting is extremely important to their identity, according to the Pew Research Center; they spend three times the amount of time on child care than fathers did in 1965. Yet mothers still spend significantly more time physically caring for their children than fathers do — 14 hours per week vs. eight for men. Family circumstances and personal preferences play into how parents split up the work, but deeply ingrained biases toward women as caretakers and men as breadwinners make it nearly impossible for women to avoid the role of the default parent.

In our situation, the day-care director was explicit in her belief that moms should be the ones receiving, interpreting and remembering information. For many families, the onus placed on women appears more covertly.

Megan Thibeault, who works in the dental industry and lives in North Carolina, says the institutional assumptions that she would be the primary parent started early. "For most of my kids' lives, my husband has been the one at home or working from home, so he knows their schedules much better than me," Thibeault says. "When we would go to check-ups together when they were infants, the doctor would ask me questions and, after I referred them to him to answer, since he was the one at home, they would continue to address me as if I knew more than him." Her husband, Jacob Thibeault, who is self-employed, says, "It often feels like if the nurses or doctors do talk to me, they're talking to me like I'm on babysitting duty."

For women who keep tight work schedules, telling a day-care center that it should reach out to the father first doesn't always yield the results they're hoping for. Meghan Butler, a project manager in the tech industry from suburban New York, spends a lot of her day on the phone or in meetings with clients. She also finds herself repeatedly fielding calls from her child's day-care center, even though she has expressed a number of times that her husband should be the primary contact.

"I am the main breadwinner and work in a high-stress job," Butler says. "We've asked the day-care team to call my husband first, but they always call me first anyway, often interrupting important calls." After she's talked with the day care, it can be difficult to refocus on work. "I manage 20-plus major projects," she says, "so staying focused and organized throughout the day is important. When day care calls, it's a whole shifting of gears that can impact my productivity until I'm able to refocus."

Rachel Fisher, a writer and photographer in California, says her daughter's school continued to call her about minor injuries and illnesses, even though her husband was listed as the primary contact. "When I spoke to the office, they said they didn't want to bother my husband at work," Fisher says. She requested that the school contact her husband first on several occasions, but it wouldn't. "At one point they even called my mom and my grandmother, who live 2,000 miles away, before they even tried to call my husband."

"They call me first for everything," Ashley McRae, a certified nursing assistant at a skilled-nursing facility in central North Carolina, says of

her 3-year-old's day-care center. "I wouldn't mind, but when I'm working, I'd rather they call my husband because the cellphone policy at our jobs is totally different." Because she can't carry her phone as she works, but worries that important messages about her son will sit in her voicemail until her shift ends, she's considering buying an Apple Watch so she can screen messages.

A lack of direct communication from a day care or school is even more fraught when parents are separated. If mothers aren't effectively communicating with fathers — which, given the complicated dynamics of divorce or an ended relationship, isn't hard to imagine — fathers could be locked out of their children's school lives, missing events like parent nights, teacher meetings or performances.

A school's unwillingness to communicate with fathers, while most disruptive to the mothers who end up doing more than their share of the family care work, can affect children, too. Elizabeth Strand, whose children are 7 and 10, recalls a number of times when her husband, whom they had selected as the "primary contact," was skipped over as the school decided whom to call. Time-sensitive messages were left on her voicemail while she was busy working as a probation officer in New York. In one instance, after missing a call, Strand discovered that the school had never reached out to her husband. "My poor son was stuck sitting in the nurse's office sick and waiting for over an hour," she says.

There are many reasons mothers end up doing more child care than fathers: Women tend to have longer parental leave, thus more time to develop confidence and efficiency as parents; fathers often fear taking time away from work; sometimes, this dynamic simply works for a family, and they happily embrace it. But even when parents decide to chart a more equitable course, the institutions and systems they interact with often conspire against them. This can be subtle — the pediatrician slightly turning toward the mother with every question, a barrage of advertising depicting dads as clueless and moms as capable, parenting articles that address "moms" instead of "parents." Or it can be direct — a school flat-out refusing to bother a father with a parental task.

If schools and other institutions aren't willing to change, parents might consider another tactic. "I've been known to let it go to voicemail and text my husband to call back," says Kristin Saunders, who works in banking and is the mother of a 2-year-old. Saunders, like so many moms, feels the frustration of being the default parent. "My child has two parents. She's just as related to my husband as she is to me. We both work, and my husband wants to be an equal parent, but other people can't get on board. I'm so tired of people assuming I'm the only caregiver my daughter has."

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