

The 50/50 *Split*

By Sara Solovitch

New Book by Two Silicon Valley
Executive-Moms Shows You
How to Get There



Sharon Meers has balanced career and parenting by treating her husband as a full partner.

Sharon Meers and Joanna Strober were giving a talk at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business a couple of years ago when they were taken aback by the tone of the questions, mostly from female students, who widely assumed that their decision to pursue a high-pressure career ruled out any chance at motherhood.

That assumption got the two mothers of young children thinking: How did they do it? At the time, both held high-pressure jobs: Meers, as managing director at Goldman Sachs, and Strober, as managing director of a private equity firm in Palo Alto.

When they put their heads together after the class, Meers and Strober decided that the young women at Stanford were hearing only negative stories about balancing careers and children. Then and there, they decided to write an action plan for couples based on the simple belief that, to achieve a successful work-life balance, there must be equal participation of both parents.

The result: *Getting to 50/50: How Working Couples Can Have It All by Sharing It All*, published this month by Bantam Books. The book, which presents a blueprint on how to successfully work with your husband, your boss and yourself, is receiving lots of national attention.

We sat down recently with Sharon Meers to talk about how working moms can embrace a 50/50 solution that addresses the conflicting priorities of childcare, job demands and home life responsibilities.

Q Do you think the 50/50 conversation needs to start before kids?

A It always helps to talk early. I don't think it's ever a simple or easy conversation, but you need to maintain a sense of humor and remember that nobody is being mean. But there are a lot of assumptions. The enemy is the assumption we don't have to talk about it.

Sometimes, it's just a matter of saying, 'Look, I cannot do this. There's a negative consequence if I fail in my job. Two careers are better than one.'

If a husband understands that in the long run he needs to pick up some of the duties, her job is more secure.

And that's especially relevant today in this economy. A man will have more flexibility in his career if his wife is still working, no matter how little she's making. One woman we talked to made 20 percent of what her husband did, but it was enough to pay the mortgage. And when he got laid off by his tech firm, she was able to reorient her career to work more hours, which meant he could take longer to find the right job.

Q How do you get to 50/50 when employers, especially here in Silicon Valley, demand so much more than a 40-hour workweek? How can men push back with employers who may not understand that Daddy needs to leave to go pick up the kids?

A There's research to show that if a man leaves work at 4:30 p.m. to go to a Little League game, he will get less flak than if a woman does it. In our book, we write about a book called *Tempered Radicals*,

where the author (Debra E. Meyerson) describes how men can be thoughtful about how they take on responsibilities at work. If they're asked to attend a weekly 5:30 meeting, they can make it clear that's not good for them. They don't have to say they need to do daycare pickup; they can just say, 'A lunch meeting would be better for me.'



Joanna Strober and family.

Q Do women need to do a better job of "letting" men share the responsibility of childcare and household management? Is part of the problem that we don't trust the men to do things the "right" way – or, in other words, our way?

A I think the biggest epiphany for us is what a big deal this is: women believing there is a right way to do home life. My husband loves to tell the story about how, when our son was 3 weeks old, he got diaper rash. A friend who was a nurse gave me a list of things to do. One day, my husband was diapering the baby and I came in and said, 'No, you have to do this and this ...' And he turned to me and said, 'Look, if you want to do it all that way, you can do it for the rest of time.'

He's an intelligent guy. I married him because he's smart, he cares. He may consult different authorities, but just because I'm the mother it doesn't mean my word is better than his. And that is really, really hard for women ... maybe the single biggest thing we are trying to get people to open up about. When you talk to men about it they look at you like

66
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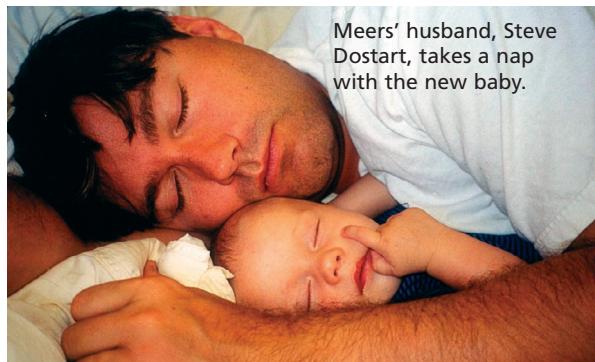
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50/50



Meers' husband, Steve Dostart, takes a nap with the new baby.

Q Is the 50/50 goal realistic, given the nature of 24/7 access to BlackBerries and all the other devices pulling us away from family – even when we're home?

A We all want the same thing. A prominent physician told us that, in the '70s, 'When my kids were little I was the only dad in the carpool line at preschool three days a week. I didn't tell anyone at the office where I was going, and they never asked.'

Another guy, the CEO of a startup, told us, 'I pick my kids up at 6 p.m. and we go home and make dinner. That's my time with them. I turn off my BlackBerry and my cell phone, and if someone can't reach me for two hours – too bad. I'm on flights all the time for two hours, and no one complains.'

There's so much research out there that says dads really matter. This is at least as big a priority as the next meeting. Sure, there are deals that have to close sometimes, and things will blow up if you're not instantly available. But they don't get blown up every day. Those are the exceptions, not the rules.

Q How can we make employers understand that there needs to be a reasonable balance between work and family life?

A This is not a great moment, in this economy, to demand working differently from people. The first six months you make a job change – that's a bear. Those times that I've transitioned between jobs, it was very hard having boundaries that would really work. After my son was born, and again after my daughter was born – both of those times my hours were much worse than before. But my husband understood that it was a temporary investment to prove my credibility.

To learn more about the book, visit the Web site: www.gettingto5050.com. ■

Sara Solovitch is an associate editor of Bay Area Parent.