

CHAPTER

16

CASE STUDY

GENDER ROLES

The roles and responsibilities traditionally assigned to one sex or the other have been increasingly challenged in the last half of the twentieth century. Jobs that once were considered to be the sole territory of males or females are now frequently held by both men and women. Other changes are seen in the assignment of roles in the family. Traditionally, males held jobs outside the home and were the prime source of support for the family. Females stayed home to care for the children. If both parents worked, the needs and demands of the husband's job always superseded those of the wife's job.

In the late 1970s, James Levine researched families that did not follow the traditional assignment of gender roles. The results of his research are presented in his book *Who Will Raise the Children? New Options for Fathers (and Mothers)*. The excerpt that follows summarizes the case of Philip Kramer (false name), who was one of the fathers who made the deliberate choice to stay at home and take care of his children.

Philip Kramer

On Wednesday morning, two days after Sarah Kramer's third birthday, the living room in the large one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, New York, is still hung with a Happy Birthday banner and crepe-paper streamers. The pigs, goats, and horses from a Fisher Price farmhouse set are grazing on the dark brown carpet, surrounded by "Number-ite," "Speak and Peak," a finger-painting set, and more toys. Across the room, a wall lined with bookshelves holds stacks of the *New York Review of Books* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and thick textbooks. On a low coffee table are some of Sarah's books—*The Sheep Book*, *Richard Scarry's Best Word Book Ever*, *Grownups Cry Too*.

On Wednesdays, when Sarah is done watching "Sesame Street," Philip Kramer usually buys fish for dinner. Since the local aquarium store is near the fish market, Philip and Sarah usually stop in to look at the brightly colored fish swimming in their green-blue tanks. They are a familiar couple to most shopkeepers in the neighborhood, known by sight if not by name—Philip, a tall, barrel-chested man whose thick dark beard and balding head make him look older than thirty-three; Sarah, a small golden-haired girl who whisks along in a stroller or prances next to her father's very deliberate stride. Today they have to stop at the bank to deposit the birthday money that Sarah has received from her grandparents, aunts, and uncles. The local branch of the Chase Manhattan has a large open hall with ropes along the sides to guide the customers efficiently into a waiting line.

"Most mothers make their kids stand in line," says Philip. "I let her run. She doesn't really bother anybody." Sarah wanders off to explore the surfaces of the smooth white stones that serve as a decorative base for the bank's two potted plants.

A teenage girl sitting on a nearby bench watches Sarah for a while, then says, "Where's your mother?"

Gail Kramer is in Room 208 at P.S. 83 in the Bronx, a good half hour's subway ride away, teaching English to eleventh graders. It was what she did for six years before Sarah was born, and is what she has done for the last two years since Philip resigned his position as a Legal Aid attorney to stay home with Sarah, then a year old.

► **CHAPTER 16**, *continued*

“We just did it, we just agreed,” offers Gail, indicating how natural it seemed to reverse roles. “I love little kids, but I realized after a year that I’m not the Earth Mother type. I really missed teaching. Philip, at that time, wanted to get some perspective on his job. We’re pretty open about our lives. We never planned to do it for more than a year; we try to take things year by year. I don’t see how you can plan much further than that.”

The Kramers were, however, on what they call a “ten-year plan.” Translate: Philip didn’t want to have children until after ten years of marriage. In fact, during the first year of Sarah’s life, Philip didn’t participate at all in the child care. He was literally a father who wouldn’t change a diaper.

“When Sarah was four months old, I started to take an African dance class on Monday nights,” says Gail, “and Philip was pretty anxious.”

With a law degree from Cornell and, ostensibly, not the least inclination to change a diaper, why did Philip Kramer take on full-time fatherhood?

“I did it because it was the right thing to do,” says Philip, “I have a very strong sense of justice, and I realized how totally unjust I’d been. Gail wanted to work. Why shouldn’t she?” The income difference between Gail’s salary as a public-school teacher and Philip’s as a Legal Aid attorney—a few thousand dollars—did not alter the situation. “I’ve never been the sort of person who believed in work. You work if you need money. We won’t be rich, but we can live on Gail’s salary. Anyway, people have the wrong concept of a lawyer. They think it means someone in an office with clients, making money hand over fist; not someone who is trying to help poor people and who is drawing a salary.”

The decision that one parent would stay home with Sarah was never really discussed; it was just assumed. “This isn’t the upper west side of Manhattan,” says Philip. “Most people around here are very traditional. They yell a lot when there’s no need to. They’re always treating the kids as if they have less intelligence than they do. We like a strong-willed, self-assertive, self-directing kid. Somebody else might see that as demanding. What was I going to say to someone—let her be free? What does that mean to another person?”

Philip is now in his third year as a full-time father. Because he enjoyed the first year so much, he decided to try another, and then another. When Sarah is four, she will begin attending a day-care center, and Philip Kramer will begin training in early childhood education at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

QUESTIONS

1. Levine’s book was written in the 1970s. Has much progress been made since then in the acceptance of nontraditional gender roles? What evidence supports your answer?
2. Do you think a man needs to have any particular personality traits to choose to stay home with his children? Why or why not?
3. What do you think are the most important factors in successfully reversing traditional gender roles concerning child care?