

PARTNERS IN PARENTING

Soo Ewe Jin and his wife, Angeline, have each enjoyed fulfilling careers while also taking turns to stay home as full-time parents to their two boys, who are now in their 20s. This unconventional arrangement – some call it “tag-team parenting” – continues to yield extraordinary returns. Asian Beacon spoke to the couple to find out their thoughts on life, home and parenting.

AB: Some people say that if one parent is to stay home, it should be the wife, not the man, who is supposed to be the one who works.

ANGELINE (AL): That line of thinking is probably based on 1 Timothy 5:8, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” I believe the important point is providing for the family, rather than who stays at home. With our arrangement, the family was provided for comfortably, no matter which parent was drawing the salary. And make no mistake about it, the parent at home definitely works as hard, even much harder, than the one who is employed! Also, we were clear about our roles, and Ewe Jin’s position as head of the household was never in question, whether he was in the job market or at home.



EWE JIN (EJ): Having been a homemaker, I can say that it is akin to being a full-time worker, minus a fixed salary and the perks and privileges of full-time employment. One is on call all the time. From the time we got married, we had already decided that our income was to be pooled together, so it did not matter whose name appeared on the salary slip. We also decided that we will both do our part, so even before I stayed home full-time, I already did my share of housework, from washing to cleaning up, cooking, etc.

AB: How did you deal with the comments by those who found your lifestyle strange?

EJ: Well, it was quite a cultural shock at first, especially at social events when one is invariably asked, “So where do you work?” Somehow, I have noticed that people don’t usually ask the woman this question, but for the men, it’s automatic. So when I said I was not employed, I could see the shock on their faces. But once I got down to sharing about my lifestyle, I found that I became the life of the party as everyone was curious to know more. I also found that in my full-time homemaker days, the women were my best friends and all the men felt I was putting them under pressure.

AL: For me, my years at home were undoubtedly more fulfilling than my years in employment – although I also enjoyed

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my career while it lasted. But of course, being a stay-at-home mum is not half as unique as having a stay-at-home husband! I feel really blessed to have a spouse who is confident enough to go against tradition and do what we feel is best for the family.

AB: What did you sacrifice by way of salaries, perks etc?

EJ: A friend wrote in a recent column in *The Star*, from a financial perspective, the sacrifices made and opportunity costs incurred by the stay-home caregiver can be easily computed in dollars and cents. It is a very simple computation – monthly salary plus benefits plus annual bonus multiplied by the number of years, factoring in inflation and potential increment. This cost can be significant. On top of that, sacrifices in terms of lifestyle adjustments, which are almost always required when a family with children changes from dual income to single income, also have to be taken into account. To date, both of us have given up 16 income-earning years, which translates to quite a bit in terms of savings and what we will have in the EPF. But it cannot be compared with the value of what dependency on God means.

Although I had no fixed income, I was able to do some freelance work from the comfort of my home. There was plenty of pro-bono work for charity. Once I was paid with apples and pears. But God also provided me with a fantastic job for a charity in Cambodia that paid me more than what I earned in a year in my previous job.

AL: Ewe Jin once said that I am “low maintenance”! I don’t enjoy shopping so that made it easier for us to adjust our finances. Making do with one salary was, for the most part, quite painless. We have always lived simply anyway. We still had our holidays, although they were budget ones. The boys did not buy impulsively, so they would only occasionally ask for items they really wanted, like a PS2 or an acoustic guitar. I don’t think they felt deprived at all.

Not having much of a surplus in savings meant that we could see God providing for us in very real terms, such as an unexpected cheque arriving just when

it was needed. Our boys saw firsthand Matt 6:33 working out in practical ways.

AB: Yet, you consider it an investment. Why?

EJ: To me it was the intangible returns that mattered. Being there for the boys, being a part of their significant milestones – like getting the basketball into the hoop, cycling without training wheels, receiving their first trophy at school, etc – are things that cannot be quantified. Having time to engage in conversations even in their early age paved the way for me to continue to be their pair of listening ears, even when they are all grown up.

AL: The returns are immeasurable. Ewe Jin being at home did something for the boys that my being at home could never do. For a time, they had with them, on a 24/7 basis, a father figure they could model their lives after. How many children have that privilege? They did “boy” things together – cycle, flykites, swim, etc. Those years have built up a “memory bank” that serves them well now that the boys are



young adults. They both aspire to be good fathers to their children, and I believe the baton has been handed over.

AB: Would you encourage other Christian couples to do the same?

EJ: Yes, I would – not just Christian couples, but everyone. But we have to bear in mind that not all of us are predisposed to being at home. Sometimes being at the office may be less stressful. But in my opinion, the bigger issue is for Christian couples to firmly put the foundations of family foremost in their lives. If we are to teach our children Christian values, we must be able to show them by the way we live that we are not slaves to the world. My years as a homemaker reminds me that we are all full-time fathers, whether we quit our jobs or otherwise.

Having experienced being without a job, we both found freedom in not being chained to the workplace. It is a wonderful feeling when even your bosses know that they cannot control you with perks and privileges or by making you desperate to remain even when it is time to go. That is the sort of freedom that makes our life more complete.

AL: I would certainly encourage having one parent at home, whether it is mum or dad. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it.” Training children when they are young is critical. As parents, we have a good number of years to mould our young children’s character. But if we squander those years, are too busy with our careers and leave the training to maids or babysitters, we may one day find that the children have become rebellious teenagers and we have a much tougher job to do. Parents have such an important task – to pass on their values to the next generation. The effect of doing this well will ripple out to society as strong families can change the social fabric altogether. **ab**

Bringing Up Boys



Ewe Jin and his sons share the lessons they have learnt from their time with each other.

Soo Ewe Jin

I HAVE BEEN IN THE WORKFORCE FOR 30 years. I spent 6 years at home, and I can safely say that the best years of my career are these very years when I was a full-time househusband. When asked to write about this part of my life, I hesitated at first. It seemed such a long time ago, now that I have been back in the workforce for a good 10 years. But each time I look at my boys, now 23 and 20, I am reminded that the fruits of our labour are beginning to show.

I remember clearly the day I decided to exit from the workforce to be home with the two children. I had been working at an environmental organisation, and I felt the tension of the job. I asked God to show me what He wanted me to do. He pointed me back to my house. I was at the office, and I called Angeline to tell her I was resigning. She gave me her support. Many friends thought I was crazy to do such a thing. Some wondered whether I had a lot of money stashed up somewhere. But no, it was just a simple belief that our God will truly provide.

So my first journey into full-time parenthood began. It was not all that difficult because from the time my eldest son, Kevin, was born, I had been a very involved

father. I could fold nappies faster than many mothers. My mother had remarked then that I have physically held my son more in one month than my father ever did in his lifetime. So bonding with the two boys at that time when I first exited from the workforce was not all that bad.

With so much time on my hands, I basically played with them, read to them and talked with them. At that time, Kevin had just started Standard One so I walked

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him to school and was the guardian to many of his friends. Tim was just the right age to be fussed over without a care in the world.

Three years on, I went back to the workforce and my wife came home. She jokingly remarked that she had to come back to "repair" the damage I had done in bringing up the boys. Yes, I pleaded guilty to



not minding too much about their studies.

It was a happy turn of events as I reconnected back to the world. My family must have heaved a sigh of relief as they had been struggling to explain why the man of the house was indeed the man in the house. But my re-entry into the workforce did not last long. Barely two years on, I found myself back at home. It was another time when I heard God telling me, in no uncertain terms, that my job was turning me into someone He was not pleased with. I admit that I had reentered the workforce with a passion, and suddenly my job was all that mattered to me.

So began a second phase at home. The boys were much bigger now, and the interaction was different. I now had teenagers with me. But because I also had time, the usual angst and frustration associated with this part of their growing-

up years seem to pale into insignificance.

I truly appreciated all the wonderful connect time I had with them. It was the building of bonds and the preparation to pass on the baton of faith to them. Throughout this journey, I can say that it would not be possible without a helpmate that supports and truly understands what we set out to do. We were novices, but we learnt together. There were tears as well, but the joy cannot be explained. The spiritual and emotional growth of our children was not left to someone else. We took full responsibility and were rewarded at every critical milestone of their lives.

Kevin Soo, 23

IN SEPTEMBER, I WILL BE LEAVING for the United Kingdom to pursue a master's degree, and it will be my first time living away from home. It will be the most difficult experience of my father's life (perhaps also of my mum, though she seems less affected), which I do not think I will fully understand until I have children of my own.

I am grateful that I have memories of spending significant amounts of time with both my father and my mother in my childhood. Because of this, I benefited from their different forms of parenting. My father is a more emotional person, a blend



of passion and wisdom, and I can recognise his continuing influence over me today. My mother operates primarily on a cognitive level, thinking through all her decisions with care and precision. I have inherited this, and I still enjoy conversing with her to this day because of this similarity in the way we think.

I have spent 23 years under the direct authority of my parents. Over this period, they have tried to pass on the baton of faith to me and to mould me into an independent



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man, capable of responsible citizenship and headship in a family. In other words, it has been to render their roles in my life obsolete. This is exceptionally hard for my father, and most of the disagreements between us over the past few years have been due to my inability to see how hard it is for him.

By God's grace, I have been learning to take their constant advice in my stride, and I find that it becomes not so much as "instructions", but godly counsel that I treasure. As I grow into the man they want me to become, I become more keenly aware of my need for family, and the advice of people wiser and more experienced than myself.

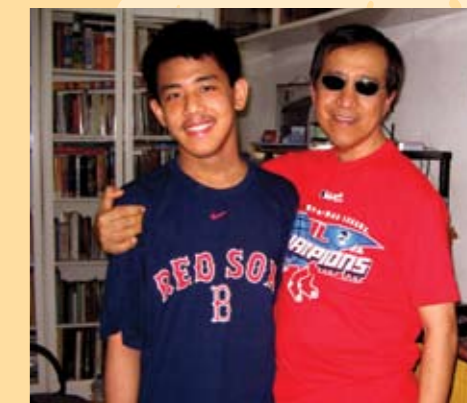
As I step into adulthood, I realise that what I need most is the affirmation that I, as an individual, have earned my place in this world. I need to know that they believe in me enough, and trust God enough to release me into the world.

My plea to all parents is that, when the time comes, they trust God enough to release us to earn our places in the world and find our places within God's plan. If they have done it right, it will not be the last they see of us. We may return different, boys as men and girls as women, but still needing the love of our parents.

Timothy Soo, 20

LOOKING BACK ON MY CHILDHOOD, I can confidently say that God has richly blessed me with a great family, which showers me with love, protection, guidance, and builds a powerful foundation for my faith. Perhaps one of the biggest gifts I received in my childhood was my parents' time.

My father may be the family's breadwinner today, but he stayed at home for most of my childhood. He is a funny, jovial man who is always ready to help others, and he looks to God for leadership, even today. My brother and I thoroughly enjoyed the time he spent with us. We spent many days simply playing the games that



boys play, swimming or going out for treats. It is indeed a rare thing that my father would so readily and willingly put aside his career for our sakes.

My father is truly the agent that God uses mightily in our lives. One would have thought that once my father returned fully to work, his time with us ended. However, even today, he is still there when we need him; he always makes time for us. Today, my mother is the one who is usually at home to advise and guide us. The role that she now plays is no less valued, and my mother has proven equal to the task of seeing me through my teenage years.

I am often reminded of my father's sharing during long drives from one destination to another. He told me that parents who spent all their time at work could order all manner of gifts for their children, but he would rather be a father who had the time to take his children shopping himself. Perhaps that perfectly sums up my childhood and why I treasure it. **ab**