

# Same-sex couples divide household chores more fairly—here's what they told researchers works best

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Who does which household chores—or who does the most—is a perennial source of tension for many couples. From cleaning the toilet to

taking out the trash, it's sometimes the little things that can cause the biggest trouble.

Not without reason, either. Research shows women still do the bulk of the housework and caregiving in most heterosexual couples. And this unequal labor can lead to [burnout, health problems and financial stress](#).

We also know [same-sex couples](#) often have a far more equitable division of labor than [heterosexual couples](#). But it's not clear how same-sex couples manage to achieve this fairer split of [household chores](#).

Our [recent research](#) aimed to shed some light on this. We surveyed same-sex couples in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, and identified three key factors that enabled them to share the chores in ways they both feel is fair.

The couples in our study focused on achieving a sense of fairness and equality over time, rather than a strict 50-50 split. They all had different patterns of dividing tasks. However, they shared some common strategies that offer valuable lessons for any couple, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

## **1. Keep changing things up**

We know that when couples negotiate roles based on their individual availability and what they like doing—or what they least despise—it contributes to a [sense of fairness and satisfaction](#).

Same-sex couples we interviewed embraced flexibility when it comes to dividing housework. They negotiated chores based on their specific needs, preferences and availability. Flexibility is key—if the person who usually takes the children to swimming lessons has a lot on at work, the other partner would step in.

Beyond the day-to-day, same-sex couples often play the long game, balancing unpaid labor with each other's career progression. Some couples in our study planned their working and family lives so both partners could progress at work by taking turns as the main caregiver when their children were born.

Others recognized that task specialization —such as one person always doing the taxes and the other always cooking—could lead to dependence and rigidity. So they consciously practiced task sharing to avoid this.

## **2. Communicate**

Couples who engage in honest conversations about their labor responsibilities [tend to view](#) their household division as fair. On the flip side, negative communication—aggression, avoidance or criticism—[fosters a sense of unfairness](#).

In our research, effective and open communication was key to achieving an equitable division of unpaid labor. But these conversations weren't always easy.

Couples who felt guilty about not doing enough around the house or frustrated with their partner for not pulling their weight found simple conversations could become emotionally intense.

We all have different standards of cleanliness, gender socialization and family background that shape how we approach housework. And this can also make it difficult to understand a partner's perspective or expectations.

Couples in our survey navigated disagreements through candid conversations, transforming conflict into opportunities for greater mutual understanding and agreement.

It's not just about talking but also about regular "check-ins" to see how each person is feeling about the labor load and renegotiating things when household circumstances or feelings change.

### **3. Remember unpaid labor is valuable**

Housework is often devalued when compared with paid work. Previous research has shown how undervaluing housework [diminishes the quality](#) of relationships.

Same-sex couples in our research sought to revalue unpaid labor by assigning it equal worth to paid labor. As one person said, "The domestic tasks, we might not enjoy them, but we both value them equally. We both think they are important."

Some couples actively acknowledged and appreciated difficult and time-consuming tasks, such as their partner cleaning the bathroom. Participants also found value in unpaid labor beyond the chores themselves, viewing them as acts of love, and found joy in small tasks.

One couple even turned household chores into a game, writing tasks on slips of paper and randomly selecting them from a bag—including enjoyable activities like walks or coffee breaks as rewards.

This not only lightens the mood but is also a strategy for involving children with less fuss.

### **4. Do a stocktake of the unpaid load**

We often fall into patterns of domestic labor without realizing it. In our study, we found completing simple time-use surveys and discussing them can illuminate disparities in responsibilities.

Why not try it yourself? List down the household tasks done last week, including physical chores (like shopping or cleaning), emotional tasks (caring for children or pets), and mental tasks (planning meals and managing finances).

Estimate the time both you and your partner spent on each task. Then, have a heart-to-heart about who is doing what, how you both feel about it, and how it can be fairer.

## Lessons for all couples

Adapting these strategies in heterosexual relationships isn't easy. Deep-seated gender norms and societal expectations about the feminine "homemaker" and masculine "breadwinner" can be tough to shake.

And same-sex couples are [more likely to both be working part-time](#) rather than having one partner at home and one working.

But that's the challenge—to redefine and negotiate labor in a way that works for your unique relationship. Start by tossing out the old gender scripts about who should do what. Next, open a dialogue about chores.

Flexibility, communication and revaluing unpaid labor are strategies available to everyone.

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