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In search of the good wife

Being a perfect parent is now deemed more important than being a good spouse. Our correspondent tries to define what makes the ideal partner

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The millionaire founder of Kwik-Fit, Sir Tom Farmer, was recently asked to give his best piece of advice for becoming a business success. His answer was simple: find a good wife. "I know it sounds romanticised but it's true," he said. "The most important person in my life has been my wife."

Undoubtedly, many people will find this sentiment romantic. A good many more might be confused. What exactly does a good wife mean these days? Is it someone who stays at home to raise the children, or who shares the financial burden by going out to work? A high-earning glass-ceiling breaker or a yummy mummy who keeps a well-stocked fridge? In February the Office for National Statistics told us that the number of couples choosing to marry has dropped to its lowest for 111 years, and divorce rates remain high. "Good" wives and husbands are apparently thin on the ground. *The Good Wife's Guide*, published by *Housekeeping Monthly* in the 1950s, advised women to put a ribbon in their hair as they served their husbands' evening meal — a suggestion that most modern women would deem to be insulting — while a 1958 edition of *Housewife* magazine invited them to take part in a "How good a wife are you?" quiz (pictured above). Yet the guide at least set out exactly what was expected of wives. As the author Marilyn Yalom says in her book *A History of the Wife*: "To be a wife today, when there are few prescriptions or proscriptions, is a truly creative endeavour."

Some experts believe that as modern life becomes more demanding, what defines a good partner has not only become obscured but has been pushed down the pecking order. So much emphasis is now placed on being a Good Parent that being a Good Spouse comes a poor third after a) the children and b) the job. Marital conversation is reduced to "Have you got the juice?" "Yes, have you got the wipes?" The advice given by her mother to Jerry Hall that to keep a man a woman must be a maid in the living room, a cook in the kitchen and a whore in the bedroom seems ever more quaint now that housework is increasingly outsourced, food is fast and marriages become increasingly sexless (witness the emergence of books for the sexless marriage with titles such as *Okay, So I Don't Have a Headache, I'm Not in the Mood* and *For Women Only*, which lists techniques that wives use to avoid sex). Has the race to raise the brightest child, get him/ her into the best school, ferry him/her around to the highest number of improving activities actually put marriage under strain?

Val Sampson, an author and a couples counsellor, has launched relightmyfire.org, a website dedicated to helping couples to find their passion again and make each other a priority. She says: "I see a lot of people who have lost sight of fact they are a couple and see each other only as Mum and Dad. Women in particular get a lot of affection energy from a child. They turn to the child for cuddling, touch and sensual needs. They become almost absorbed by the child. It is like a grenade exploding in a marriage."

When some women become mothers later in life their standards of parenting go up, so they devote even more time to it, often to the detriment of their relationship, she says. "It is great to put lots of energy into it, but often you are taking on an unnecessary role. Once your relationship as a couple starts to disintegrate, it has an immediate impact on your children. But a happy couple makes a happy family. It isn't all about ferrying Johnny to flute lessons; it is about enjoying a night out on your own occasionally — that's better for him than being driven to activities."

So what now constitutes a good wife? Sampson believes it is the way we handle "equality" in the relationship. "We all think that we have moved on from those 1950s roles — until we have a child. People get married with a fantastic view of equality, but don't think through how that will work in practice. Once you have a baby, you expect it to be the same, but it's not. Point-scoring isn't going to work."

A recent survey of 5,000 people found that a lack of sex and the stress of parenting were among the top reasons cited for arguing within a marriage. Especially the former. A website for men, www.nomarriage.com, illustrates this problem with almost comical misogyny. "My wife is a frigid, shrivelled bitch," writes one contributor. "Before we were married, we had plenty of sex, but as soon as we passed the six-month mark after our wedding she stopped being interested. My wife only f***s when she 'feels sexy'." Translation: when I give her jewellery. She is just a withered old bag at the age of 35." Here's another: "[Before we got married] sex then was four to five times a week. Now I have a four-year-old son who sleeps in my bed with my wife more nights a week than I do. Sex now maybe once a month." Borderline demented as some of these comments are (the website has published a book that contains a guide to whether a woman will make a good wife, more of which later), it seems to be a fact that sex within marriage is suffering. Studies have indicated that when men aren't touched affectionately they become more aggressive, and increasingly don't

want any contact that isn't sex. At the same time women are encouraged to seek more independence and not be tied to the home, yet there is a heavy modern expectation on a man to be a "good husband".

Laura Schlessinger's book, *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands*, suggests that in the age of feminism we have paid too much attention to women's needs and forgotten that men have them, too. We have also developed a notion that a woman who seeks to meet her husband's needs is subservient, but a husband who fails to meet his wife's is a pig. "Most of the women who complain that they are not getting what they want from their husbands should stop and look at how disrespectful and disdainful they are of them," writes Schlessinger.

Anita Jackson, a psychotherapist and the author of *Rekindle the Magic in Your Relationship!* (rekindlethemagic.com), says: "One problem with equality — which I approve of, by the way — is that we have moved away from the man being the man and the woman the woman, except in terms of the women having the baby and making more of an emotional transfer. There is still something about being in relationships with a man/woman role, so the man is in charge but not controlling and the woman may have her bag full of stuff, be forgetful and change her mind. Because this *is* how we are and it is what we do."

So what makes a good spouse? Letting natural roles emerge and not fighting them? "In a way, yes," says Jackson. "We are being asked to be perfect parents. We can't be perfect individuals, let alone perfect parents or perfect spouses. If we strive for perfection, we lay ourselves open to failure. If we try to be the best we can be, that's enough."

Some take a rather more extreme view. An e-book published by the nomarriage.com website, written by a man, defines a good wife as one who wasn't brought up with Western values. "Pick a woman to marry who will be a GOOD WIFE and KNOWS HOW to be a happy, successful wife, and KNOWS HOW to help you be a better husband," it says. "Pick a woman from a culture that encourages this. In other words, DON'T marry an American/Western woman. They are much, much harder to be married to, simply because they have been trained to NOT make any effort to be good wives. They have been trained to focus exclusively on their own needs, and to completely ignore yours. They have been trained in a thousand techniques for making it all 'your fault'. Not fun. Being married is damned near impossible anyway. No need to make it harder."

Hysterical though this viewpoint is, might we be making things harder than they need to be? Denise Knowles, a Relate counsellor, says she has to hammer home to couples the fact that making time for each other is a necessity, not an act of selfishness. "There is a misconception that to be good parents the couple has to be sacrificed," she says. "I often find myself asking people, 'What happened to the couple here?' Everything seems to be pivoted around the children and work." So what is her view of a good wife? "One who can offer support when needed, but can also receive support and ask for it."

Margaret Ramage, a sexual and relationship psychotherapist, believes that we can sometimes become too hung up on the concept of "serving". "I don't see that serving each other is necessarily a bad thing. It is an act of love," she says. "As long as it feels equal, so what? If you are subservient on a Tuesday and he is subservient on a Thursday, what does it matter? We are so busy standing on our rights sometimes that we forget important things. Doing the ironing is an act of love, as is putting out the compost."

She adds that in striving to be good parents, we forget that the best parents are often those who are genuinely happy together. "To raise children with love, there has to be a strong bond of love between parents," she says. "It is that love between the parents that sustains them. If it isn't there, the child misses something. If people neglect the nurturing they need to give as adults, their parenting will break down in the end."

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