



# ADAPTING TO CHANGE

*Fishing Families, Businesses, Communities, and Regions*

## The Ebb and Flow of Fishing Family Life

*A Publication of the Patterns of Involvement in Business and Family Life Project*

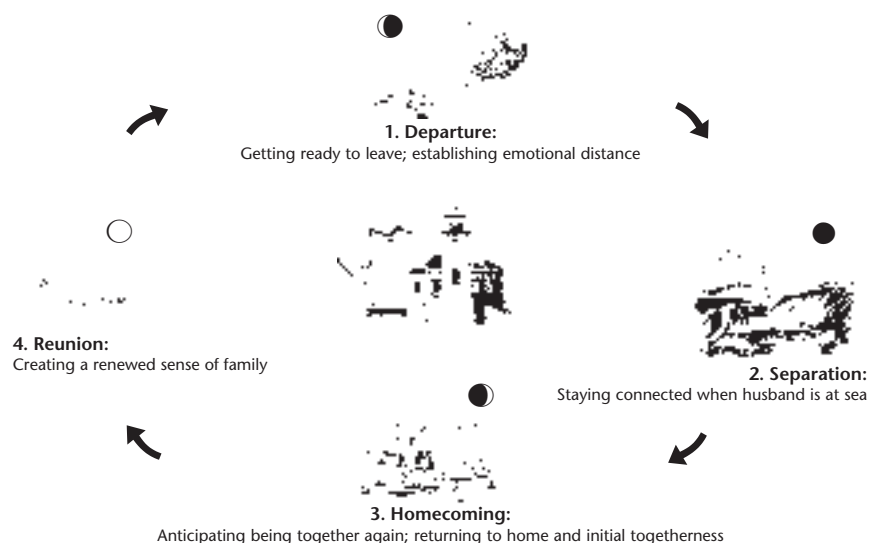
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Families involved in commercial fishing are familiar with change. In fact, many fishing couples enjoy the changing nature of family life that accompanies the fishing cycle. Husbands enjoy their connections to the sea and a sense of self-sufficiency that comes with fishing. Wives enjoy a sense of accomplishment and independence by running their homes and working for pay on land.

Fishing families experience many benefits from the lifestyle that commercial fishing brings, but they also experience challenges in adapting to husbands' trips to and from the sea. Through studying fishing families over the past several years, we have learned of the creative ways fishing couples cope with the particular challenges that commercial fishing brings to family life. We hope to share insights from our study—insights that we have developed by talking with fishing wives and husbands.

We want to emphasize that no two families, including fishing families, are exactly alike in their circumstances. Fishermen fish for different types of fish, hold different types of positions on the boat, and have different types of fishing schedules. Fishing wives are not the same in terms

### Family Life and the Fishing Cycle



of whether they care for children or work for pay, or even in the type of paid work in which they participate. With all of the complexity involved in family life, common themes do emerge. All fishing families depend on the sea for their livelihood and must create a family life that involves times when husbands are home and times when they are at sea. We intend to describe a general pattern of family life that is connected to the fishing cycle. We also offer ideas for managing the challenging parts of this cycle. These are suggestions that fishing couples have offered to us and are offered to you as possibilities to try.

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## Change and Stability in Fishing Families' Lives

Separations due to the requirements of commercial fishing are normal—though sometimes stressful—events for fishing wives and husbands. Studies have shown that families dealing with regular and expected separations can build more satisfying lives by using strategies *to increase their sense of togetherness, to improve their ability to be flexible with change, and to communicate in regular and positive ways.*

In addition to regular and expected separations, fishing families contend with unexpected and frustrating changes. For example, weather patterns shift in unexpected ways, resulting in unplanned changes in both fishing and family schedules. Unexpected change can be more stressful for families, particularly if family members have relatively little control over their circumstances. Wives and husbands we spoke with acknowledged that having control over either the family schedule or the fishing schedule—or an equal say in both schedules—was an important factor in their feelings of well-being. Whether change is expected or unexpected, we believe that understanding the general processes of adapting to change can help fishing families build closer and more satisfying family relationships.

## Understanding the Ebb and Flow of Fishing Families

Husbands, wives, and children experience a variety of thoughts and feelings regarding family life as a result of the comings and goings of fishermen. In looking at the comings and goings of fishermen, we found that there are really four phases that families go through. We will present the four phases in detail below. We provide this model as a way to give fishing families information about potential emotional reactions to changes in family life that commonly occur as a result of fishermen's departures and returns.



### Departure

*I'd rather be home but I know that you've got to go away to make money in this business.*

—A fishing husband

*Usually when my husband leaves, it's all understood between the boys and me that their dad will be gone for at least two or three months and we just have to do what we have to do on a day to day basis to survive emotionally.*

—A fishing wife

Departures can be hectic and stressful times for fishing families. This period may be particularly challenging after a long span of being together in combination with the anticipation of a long time being apart. Many fishing couples told us that they cope with departures by accepting that the leave was necessary for the common good of the family. For example, though many fishing wives stated that they wished their husbands had different jobs (at least at some point in their marriages), they also had reconciled themselves to the fact that they depended on fishing income for survival. Fishing husbands coped with their sadness about leaving behind their wives and children by defining their fishing work as something they did *for the family*. Thus, wives and husbands create a common belief, a marital value, that fishing is necessary for their family life. When both partners did not have this common belief, the marriage was less satisfying.

The departure period may be experienced by couples as a time when more emotional or psychological distance exists between them. They may stop sharing intimate thoughts and feelings with each other and focus on the tasks of the departure. It is important to recognize that this distancing is a normal and adaptive part of preparing for the departure. Psychological distance helps both partners prepare for the upcoming time when they will have to be more independent of one another. Delays in departures can be uncomfortable as they extend the distancing period—when couples are not really together and not really apart. Husbands

- Departure is easier when families view the departure as necessary for the common good of the family.
- Many couples cope by establishing emotional distance between each other.
- It is common for husbands to feel guilt for leaving and for wives to feel anger for being left behind.
- Couples who discuss their feelings regarding departure appreciate and understand each other better.

may think, “Let’s get on with it,” while wives are thinking, “If you have to go, go!” The distancing process is a delicate balance, also, because too much distance too soon can be hurtful to the relationship. Sometimes this adaptive distancing process can become problematic if it seeps into larger areas of the relationship.

In addition to the increased distance couples may experience, wives’ feelings of anger and husbands’ feelings of guilt are common. Wives may feel angry for being left behind and husbands may feel guilty for leaving. Many wives and husbands were hesitant to admit their feelings of anger or guilt for fear of hurting their spouse. Through participation in our fishing study, some wives and husbands became more aware of their feelings and talked to their spouses about these feelings. Every person who spoke of this process explained that becoming more aware of their feelings and speaking to their spouse was a way to gain understanding and appreciation of each other.

The presence of children often intensifies the feelings that wives and husbands have during departure. Both spouses are aware of the additional responsibility and work that are associated with children. Wives may feel particularly resentful of having all the responsibility for children while their husbands are at sea, and husbands may feel especially guilty for leaving. In fact, many husbands told us of decisions to change the pattern of their fishing by minimizing long trips and increasing the number of short trips in order to spend more regular time with children. For those

couples who must cope with long periods of separation, children need understanding and reassurance during the departure period. Fishing wives explained to us that they sometimes feel overwhelmed by their own and their children’s feelings during times of departure. It is helpful if both mothers and fathers address their children’s feelings and concerns. Bringing children in on the family value that fathers fish *for the family* will help children accept departures.

Finally, the sheer work involved in preparation for departures can be overwhelming for husbands and wives, particularly if the fishing trip will be an extended one. Both the home and the boat must be prepared for lengthy separations at a time when tensions may exist between marital partners. Fishing husbands and wives often work together to prepare the boat and crew for departure. Both spouses are concerned about readying the home for the time when husbands are not present. Disagreements may arise over what needs to be done before husbands leave. Many people we talked with explained that awareness of their partners’ contributions helped them to cooperate with and show appreciation for their spouse.

## Separation



*The leaving part is hard, but the real hard part is being and staying gone.*

—A fishing husband

*I’m a different person when he’s home and when he’s gone.*

—A fishing wife

*What worries me the most are my kids I guess. Being gone so long and not having the discipline, the guidance from me there all the time that I think they need.*

—A fishing husband

Not all fishing families experience extended periods of separation, but for those who do, these periods create challenges in maintaining a sense of

- Wives often feel proud of what they accomplish and how they tackle their responsibilities.
- Husbands focus primarily on their work and the changing rhythm of daily life on the boat.
- During separation, staying connected to one another is important for families.
- Couples work out how they will stay connected to each other by determining how often they will talk and what they will discuss.

togetherness for couples and their children. Short separations also can be disruptive. Fishing couples must work to enjoy both their times together and their times apart.

After a period of adjustment, wives often feel proud of their independence when husbands are away from home. Many wives stated that having their independence was the best thing about the fishing lifestyle. While in some ways wives feel a sense of freedom to “run the show as they please,” they also can feel overwhelmed with responsibility. Demands from children, outside employment, and other family concerns can be difficult for one individual to handle. Some wives feel vulnerable at night and may have difficulty sleeping because of their responsibility for nighttime security. Wives also worry about the safety of their husbands while at sea. Regular communication with husbands seems to help lessen the wives’ concerns about their husbands. Many wives told us that by connecting with other women who are in similar circumstances, they gain a sense of belonging and normalcy that they may not have otherwise.

Husbands focus on the job they have to do and on adjusting to the pace of life on the sea. Many fishing husbands explained that they try to maintain psychological distance from their families, particularly during the first part of the trip, in order to cope with the separation and do their jobs well. Their energies are focused on catching fish, maintaining safety, and living in close quarters with each other. Although husbands try to focus on

their work, they also benefit from communication with their wives and children via cell phone and radio.

Maintaining a sense of marital closeness can be challenging for couples who are separated for long periods of time. Cellular phones have increased fishing couples’ ability to have intimate conversations while husbands are at sea. Many couples use letter writing and radios to communicate as well. Separation of spouses also requires couples to trust each other. Regular communication helps to decrease concerns about faithfulness as well.

Connections with and discipline of children can be difficult for parents during separation. Fathers struggle to maintain connection with their children (See *Connecting with Fathers at Sea*), while mothers cope with tensions that occur from daily interactions with them. Discipline of children can be difficult for parents to coordinate at this time. One longtime fisherman explained that he appreciated his wife’s efforts to discipline their children as problems arose and to keep him informed of what was happening while he was at sea. He supported her efforts over the phone and when he returned home.

## Homecoming

*People at work know when he’s coming home cause I always get excited.*

—A fishing wife



*The coming home is really good. I don’t know of any other job that you can plan on coming home. I suppose there are other jobs where you can plan on coming home and having a vacation or whatever. But it’s almost like a party for a whole week solid. Everybody’s all excited.*

—A fishing husband

*When it’s closer to crossing the bar, you see your wife up on the point waving at you. You hope she’s smiling, not frowning.*

—A fishing husband

*Coming home. He's really clean, he wants body contact. It's "Touch me. I need affection."*

—A fishing wife

At some point during their time at sea, fishermen recognize that the trip is half over. One fisherman describes "hump day" as the point when thoughts begin to turn towards home. He begins to initiate more contact with his wife and children in anticipation of renewed connections with them. While both husbands and wives experience similar questions regarding homecoming, each has additional thoughts that separate them into *the ones who go away* and *the ones who stay home*.

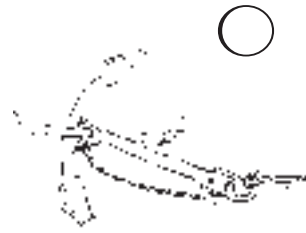
Many fishing wives express a strong sense of responsibility for their children during separation. So, although wives often feel great joy about their husbands' homecoming, they also are concerned about how to assimilate husbands back into the family. For instance, wives question how to bring fishermen up-to-date on family decisions, child activities, and personal experiences that occur while he is gone. Fishing wives also are concerned about the success of the fishing trip, as a good catch influences both their economic security as a family and their husband's frame of mind.

For most husbands, the satisfaction of their fishing trip influences their feelings about homecoming. As they come closer to home, many fishing husbands feel happy to return, but also anxious about what has happened at home during their absence. In addition, fishermen are concerned about fitting back into family patterns.

- After the halfway point, husbands and wives devote attention, and feel some anxiety how it will be when he is back home.
- Husbands wonder about what has happened at home in their absence.
- Wives speculate about what husbands will think about being home and how they will readjust to home life.
- The success of the fishing trip affects how positive couples feel about homecoming.

They worry about being overwhelmed by family concerns before they have a chance to settle in.

Many couples describe a festive atmosphere when they finally are reunited. Some fishermen describe the initial homecoming as like a party, while fishing wives talk of romance by saying that reunions keep marriage "fresh." Once the initial homecoming activities are finished, however, fishing families find that they have many issues to negotiate or work out.



## Reunion

*There's the initial excitement but then after that it's sometimes, I think the wife resents the husband because she gets things going the way she likes it*

*done at home and then when the man comes home, he expects to step into the throne. It just doesn't work that way.*

—A fishing husband

*It's hard to run a house six months at a time; you either do or you don't. If you've got a system, it needs to be in place all of the time. Yet, they feel like they're not really part of the family. They want to get into the family, and I can understand that side too. They want to become part of the family at home—they're going to try and find a little spot there.*

—A fishing wife

*She makes decisions regarding our daughter, so sometimes when I get back it takes me awhile to kind of fit in again, like things are pretty well organized and I feel sometimes if I come home and make demands, it sort of disrupts the routine that's been set. It takes awhile to get back into the routine of the family.*

—A fishing husband

When husbands are at sea, fishing wives control most aspects of home life. As a consequence, this control can be problematic for both wives and husbands during reunion. During this time, families often shift away from a life structured by one parent to two. Some wives and husbands

- It is natural for the “party” or the “romantic reunion” to end.
- It is a big adjustment for a family to switch gears from a one-parent system to a two-parent system.
- Both husbands and wives crave togetherness but also crave solitude and privacy during the reunion time. Couples will have to negotiate how to best meet these needs.
- How fathers readjust to parenting and choose to spend time with children are critical issues during reunion.

desire to make decisions together once fishermen return. Other couples simply acknowledge the wives’ authority whether husbands are present or at sea. Fishing families find a variety of ways to adapt to husbands’ return home. Regardless of whether couples choose to share decision making and control of home life or continue with wives’ authoritative role within the home, the bottom line for successful reunion is the agreement between partners.

Maintaining intimacy within the husband-wife relationship once husbands are in port is a common concern for couples. For instance, the tension between the desire for physical intimacy and the need for personal space must be negotiated between spouses. When husbands are at sea, they get accustomed to the different pace, the quieter atmosphere, and the lack of human contact. They need to adjust to “clock” time and to a noisy household. After the “party” of homecoming is over, both husbands and wives experience fatigue and a need to catch up on sleep. When both partners feel rested and relaxed, couples are ready for emotional and physical closeness.

Relating to children is an especially critical issue for most fishing fathers. Many fathers are particularly concerned about their responsibility for discipline and help wives in establishing family order. One fisherman talks of the pressure to discipline his children immediately after arriving home because his wife “wants to push the discipline part to you for awhile.” In addition to discipline, fishermen are also concerned about

expressing affection and feeling close with their children when reunited. This process, of course, varies depending on the ages of the children. Children who are older are seen as more able to anticipate the ebb and flow of family life within fishing families, although fishermen express regret at being unable to attend significant events. Part of the reunion phase includes time to spend individually with older children in child-centered activities. For infants and toddlers, more time is spent in reintroducing Dad into the family and having time for them to play together.

## **What We Have Learned from Fishing Families**

### ***Suggestions from Fishing Families and from Research***

In our study of fishing families, we found consistent themes in how couples deal with regular and expected separations. Similar to other families dealing with periodic absences, fishing families employ several strategies to build strong family foundations. By increasing their sense of togetherness, improving their ability to be flexible with change, and communicating in regular and positive ways, fishing families established a firm foundation for successful departure and reunion stories.

#### **Families learn to create a sense of togetherness**

- Families learn to give each other space, as well as welcome togetherness. All families have to deal with this tension. You will need to discuss and compromise to find a pattern that works for you.
- Both fishing husbands and wives talked about respecting each other and respecting and valuing the responsibilities they both held during separation. Research on families has shown that when husbands accept the wives’ power and decisions, couples are more likely to stay happily married. In a recent study, this was one of the three most important qualities for an enduring marriage.
- Families decide, one way or another, when conflicts or problems are discussed. Making

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this decision jointly helps to avoid bombarding each other once the boat is in port. Having a time when you both know you'll discuss these issues can prevent a feeling of dread or worry during the homecoming phase of the cycle.

- Couples need to create room for intimacy. Without intimacy, family home life is not complete.
- Children feel more secure when they understand the fishing cycle and stay connected with fathers. Keeping all family members within the communication loop is essential.

### **Fishing families are experts at being flexible**

- Most fishing families described schedule changes with humor. Research on what makes marriages endure happily has found humor a key element in preventing stress and hostility.
- Stress is a common result of unanticipated changes. Research has shown that when married couples work to soothe each other, stress does not take away from the quality of their lives.
- When stresses were identified among families and then talked about together, they became easier to manage.
- Fishing families felt that effective planning and structure were important for the well-being of children.
- Families who understand that the patterns of fishing life are normal and healthy are effective managers of each aspect of the fishing cycle.

### **Fishing families work at keeping channels of communication open**

- Couples who agree on a set time for different types of discussions (fishing business, family issues, intimacy) can avoid feelings of frustration.
- Once a conflict is started, couples can try to resolve it. Research has indicated that when couples do not solve a problem, they feel hurt, continue to worry about the issue, and ultimately become detached from each other.

- Fishing couples often have conflicts about decisions made by one partner while the husband was at sea. It is helpful to talk about your decision-making process without blaming or criticizing each other. What you learn from these talks can help you create a better plan for making future decisions.

- Couples benefit from focusing on the positive aspects of marriages.

Many couples talk individually about how much they love the time that husbands had at home once their trips are completed. Depending on the type of fishing or the time of year, many fishing families feel fortunate that the fishing family lifestyle provides them with intimate time in which fathers have extended periods with wives and children. The critical issue for many of the fishing families is that the absences or readjustments that occur in their families do not in themselves cause undue stress. Once husbands, wives, and children are able to adapt to the ebb and flow of their family life, families thrive.

## **Suggested Reading**

### **Available from Oregon Sea Grant**

A. Zvonkovic, T. Trosper, and M. Manoogian-O'Dell. 1996. *Connecting with Fathers at Sea*. Corvallis: Oregon Sea Grant. ORESU-G-96-005.

A. Zvonkovic, S. Moon, and M. Manoogian-O'Dell. 1997. *Fishing Marriages Over Time*. Corvallis: Oregon Sea Grant. ORESU-G-97-007.

### **Available Elsewhere**

Gottman, J.M.. 1995. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Curran, D.. 1985. *Stress and the Healthy Family*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.

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This research is part of a larger project entitled *Adapting to Change: Fishing Families, Businesses, Communities, and Regions*. The project, sponsored by Oregon Sea Grant from 1995 through 1997, sought to provide research-based information about cycles of change that affect U.S. fisheries and the people and communities involved in them. Beneficiaries of such information include policymakers, fisheries managers, and fishing communities and families themselves. This research did not use funds allocated for disaster relief funds for salmon fishermen.

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