



ADAPTING TO CHANGE

Fishing Families, Businesses, Communities, and Regions

Fishing Marriages Over Time

A publication of the *Adapting to Change: Patterns of Involvement* project

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Over the course of the past year, our research team conducted a series of focus groups with women who are married to commercial fishermen. From the material we have amassed, common themes emerged concerning how marriages to fishermen change over time. Although each family's experiences are uniquely its own, we hope this discussion of common situations and how women coped with them will inspire you, as they have us.

Early in Relationships: Romantic Love and Worry

Most newly married couples begin life together with an idealized image of their marital partners and their relationship. That was true for many of the commercial fishing wives who talked with us. At first, many said, fishing seemed “romantic” to them. Some recalled driving for miles to see their husbands for a romantic rendezvous in port.

Other women told us that they anticipated their husbands' homecoming intensely, and went to great lengths to make it special: candles, wine, special dinners. As one fishing wife put it, “I was close to port, so we'd see each other, and so that was real nice. It was fresh love and everything, and it was really quite enjoyable.”

**Love is blind, but only for a season, and passionate kindness does not last forever.
—Willard Waller, 1938**

At the same time, many women also remembered that they worried a lot during the early stages of their marriages. Worries fell into three categories:

- *Worry about husbands:* Urgent worries often characterized early relationships. Women would ask themselves: Is he safe? Is he carousing at ports? What will happen if the weather conditions worsen?
- *Worry about the financial uncertainty of the fishing industry:* With current conditions, many fishing wives worried: Will fishing continue to support our family over the long run? Should we take steps for financial security outside of fishing?
- *Worry about making appropriate financial decisions alone:* With husbands gone for long periods of time, many fishing wives fretted about decisions: Should we buy this? Will he agree with the decision?

You know, he might have gone out and the weather turned on him and can you imagine the worry that she would be feeling right now about whether that boat is going to be safe, what channels should she be listening on for the Coast Guard messages, is it going to be her husband, any time you hear there's a boat aground or there's a boat up on the jetty, or something, you'd be worrying that it was yours, your husband's boat.
—Oregon fishing wife

The early romantic period appears to last longer for fishing wives than for wives who see their marital partners every day! It makes sense that the fishing schedule would allow “absence to make the heart grow fonder.” For many fishing wives, it seems that the romantic period of the marriage lasts until children come onto the scene.

Strategies for Early Relationships

1. *Look for methods to communicate with each other, especially when husbands are at sea.* Many wives had cellular phones, message machines, and call waiting so that they would not miss any calls from their husbands. Others talked about receiving letters from their husbands, which were pleasant surprises.
2. *Pursue some interests of your own, whether they are educational opportunities that might benefit the fishing business (such as bookkeeping classes), education for your own career goals, or just cultivating personal interests and hobbies such as horseback riding or needlepoint.* Wives who felt they could effectively manage the waiting period spoke of having pursuits that kept them busy and that allowed them to see progress from month to month.
3. *Be aware that over time, the intensity of your worry will fade.* Other matters—or, as one woman put it, “life”—begin to take over. The more complex their lives, with jobs, children, and daily concerns, the less wives told us they focused on worry.
4. *If you find yourself unable to concentrate on your life, organize your life, or pursue an interest for an extended period of time, you should seek support from family, friends, or a professional.* If you want professional guidance, there are probably counselors in your community who have experience with fishing families. Seek out opinions of people you trust and ask about the counselor's professional credentials.



Developing a Sense of Team: The Transition into Parenthood

One of the most popular areas of study in family relationships is the transition to parenthood. Many scholars have found that having children changes marriages. As fishing wives adjust to being new mothers, they also contend with the frequent absences of their husbands and the periodic returns home, which are different with a baby at home! Fishermen experience the changes in family life associated with new parenting as even more sudden and drastic than most new fathers.

From pregnancy to 9 months after the birth of the first child, the extent to which spouses characterized their marriages as a friendship and as a romance decreased over time, while the extent to which they viewed their relationship as a partnership increased.

—Jay Belsky, Michael Rovine, and Mary Lang, 1985

You might feel that your life changed dramatically once the baby was born. According to the Penn State Child and Family Development project, both new mothers and new fathers change in how they view their marriage. Those changes can be predicted by how the two view children and child rearing before the baby is born. Many couples differ with each other over how children should be

raised. According to the research, whether a marriage declines or improves depends on the marital partners' ability to reach across their differences.

For fishing families, it might seem at first that they don't need to reach across their differences and compromise about child rearing, since wives do most of the child rearing and the children are in the mothers' care a great deal of time. However, fishermen need to be welcomed into the father role. Many fishing wives acknowledged that they had different ideas about child rearing than their husbands. Many women felt they should have "the last word" since they were the ones who had to deal with the results. While it's true that wives generally spend more time in the children's company than do husbands, having totally different daily schedules and rules "when Daddy's gone" and "when Daddy's home" does not build a sense of family teamwork.

Many fishing wives expressed the need to establish a consistent daily schedule and pattern, whether or not their husbands were home. For some women, this need became obvious as a result of a crisis with one of the children, or as a result of their own recognition that the pattern they and their children had "eased into" was one that gave them no adult time. As one wife explained about bedtime:

I realized that I was not as consistent as I had been . . . and so I went back to being real consistent with the bed time, because I found out that it made a big difference in my attitude the next day . . . I try to get them there at about the same time every night, whether or not my husband was home . . . So, at night now, I do have projects that I do, but I do things for myself as well.

With every additional child, the family system changes. Of course, each child is a new individual who may adapt differently to the periodic absence of his or her father.

Strategies for New Parenting

1. *Prioritize how and where you'd like to spend your time.* Several of the wives we have spoken with talked about new insights they had that led them to reorganize how they spend their day. For one wife, it meant doing less housework and playing with and teaching her young children more—being with them on the floor rather than with a mop in her hand! For a woman with older children, it meant being clear with the kids about when she and her husband needed private time.
2. *Keep an open dialog with your husband about your children and child-rearing ideas.* This seemed to be a struggle for many fishing families, as it is for families everywhere. It would be nice if you could just leave the kids with their father so you could have a break the

first day he's home, but it isn't realistic to think that either the kids or the father will have an immediate, perfect understanding about what life has been like for the other after a long separation. Make sure you communicate about the kids and about how you are dealing with them.

3. *Make room in your family's life for the dad's viewpoint and way of doing things.* Fishing wives in focus groups raised this point repeatedly. This is an ongoing process that needs to be talked about when Dad is gone, when the family is expecting him, and when he is there. Even very young children can understand that different adults act differently, but make sure kids are prepared for the differences. Mom, Dad, and the kids need to know what the rules are so they can know what to expect.



Later in the Relationship: Claiming Her Title

All of the women we talked with were proud of the title “Fisherman’s Wife.” Many felt like this title recognized them in the fishing industry, and gave them formal involvement in it, whether or not their involvement included pay. Wives who claimed their title felt more comfortable managing their households and the fishing business in their husbands’ absence. Claiming your title is not magical; it’s built on small steps of accomplishments and triumphs, and on support from your family, friends, and neighbors.

Normal families have arguments. In their experience, it’s not bad to get into arguments—it’s how you get out of them that counts.
—*Mary F. Whiteside, How Families Work Together, 1993*

When husbands supported decisions wives made alone, rather than complaining or second-guessing them, it was easier for wives to claim their title. The couples’ discussions about decisions made in the husbands’ absence did not need to be totally conflict-free in order for the couple to feel satisfied with their status as a fishing family. Even in discussions about difficult decisions, however, wives described using humor and a sense of teamwork that made the couple feel okay about what had happened. As they described such situations to us, wives related amusing stories of their husbands’ reactions.

In this way, fishing families’ conflicts have much in common with other marriages. Satisfied

Sometimes I have to stop him at the door and say, “Listen! I’m your wife, not your crew.”
—*Focus group participant*

couples talk more together, even if that talk includes criticism or disagreement. Satisfied couples use humor to manage the emotions in their discussions, as long as the humor isn’t directed against the other partner. What is different in fishing marriages is that the time to talk is limited; and thus needs to be spent carefully. Fishing wives’ pride and identification with the industry help them to adjust to change and develop positive strategies that work for them.

Strategies for Claiming Your Title

1. *Recognize that circumstances dictate you make important decisions without your husband.* Women become increasingly comfortable doing so. Decisions wives have made alone included buying insurance, making financial investments, finding a full- or part-time job, moving to a new residence, and decisions about children’s schooling and activities. Knowing that other fishing wives must make decisions also helps.
2. *Involve yourself in the fishing industry.* Women in this study were involved heavily in local fishermen’s wives organizations; sought to involve their children in fishing family activities; and advocated for the industry, in particular around issues of insurance and safety.
3. *Identify aspects of your life and your marriage that might be obstacles to “claiming your title.”* For wives who work full-time, this might be the lack of time to involve themselves in the fishing industry in order to feel connected to it. For other women, it may be that other family members don’t recognize or value the role you play in the business. For still others, there may be problems in how you and your husband

communicate. After you identify the obstacles, you can develop a plan to work on them.

Conclusion

We have been encouraged to chart the path of increasing adaptation to the challenges of the commercial fishing family life. That path often begins with romantic notions about love and the fishing life. Over time, by meeting the challenges that life imposes, fishing wives can grow to appreciate their solitude and enjoy the time with their husbands as a rare and precious thing. They form new intimacy with their husbands and a sense of empowerment by meeting these challenges head-on.

For Further Reading

Markman, Howard, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg (1994). *Fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. A handbook for couples, with specific exercises to improve communication. Based on research on preventing divorce and preserving love.

Whiteside, Mary F. (1993). *How families work together*. Marietta, Georgia: Business Owner Resources. A short paperback book targeted at family business members. Offers many insights on how family businesses operate and how family ties affect the business enterprise. Most appropriate for commercial fishing families in business for more than one generation.

Other Sea Grant Publications

Zvonkovic, Anisa, T. Trospen, and M. Manoogian-O'Dell (1996). *Connecting with Fathers at Sea*. Oregon Sea Grant. ORESU-G-96-005. Draws on ideas from fishing families and on the authors' backgrounds in human development and family science to offer practical advice for seafaring fathers who wish to forge strong bonds with their children, from infancy to young adulthood.

Frishkoff, Patricia (1997). *Teaching Children About Money*. Oregon Sea Grant. ORESU-G-97-001. Patricia Frishkoff, director of Oregon State University's Austin Family Business Program, describes basic principles about money and suggests ways to teach children from toddlers to teens how to manage it. Although directed at fishing families, this short publication is applicable to families in all walks of life.

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, seeks 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 does not use funds allocated for disaster relief funds for salmon fishermen.

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This publication is funded by Oregon Sea Grant through NOAA, Office of Sea Grant and Extramural Programs, U.S. Department of Commerce, under grant no. NA36RG0451 (project no. R/FDF-5). Oregon Sea Grant is based at, and receives additional support from, Oregon State University, a Land Grant, Sea Grant, and Space Grant institution funded in part by the Oregon Legislature. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of NOAA or any of its subagencies.

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