

Hello! And welcome!

We're so glad you're here. Well, mostly glad. We know you picked up this book because you're struggling to figure out how to do all of the things, while also staying sane and in love.

Unfortunately, when we became parents no one handed us a manual on how to keep it all together, and it feels near impossible most days. It's too much to be expected to parent well, earn enough money, take care of our individual needs, have a social life, have any kind of romantic relationship, and address our never-ending to-do list. Understandably, we feel a lack of energy and capacity to connect with and care for each other. Even when trying our best to work together, we find ourselves overstretched and exhausted.

If you're feeling this way. You're not alone. Feeling like you're not on the same team and that you have an unequal workload and mental load is one of the biggest relational issues that parents face.

However, it is possible to feel supported, seen, and loved well during this time. With a comprehensive and connected Family System as a foundation, you can handle your responsibilities, and also feel like you're not drowning in them. You can have space to rediscover who you are and then create the opportunities to do the things that are fun and fulfilling to you.

A Family System is the organization of structures and practices that create the opportunity for the greatest feelings of love, connection, and well-being for everyone, as defined by us as individuals and together. But it doesn't just go one way. The more connected we are, the more we're able to create fulfilling structures and practices that feel good and work for our family.

This guide is going to help you create a Family System through education, exercises, processes, calendars, templates, checklists, and tools. You'll learn how to make sense of why you're feeling how you're feeling, how to effectively and equitably divide roles and responsibilities, how to seek joy and reconnect to your sense of self, communicate, check in with each other, and troubleshoot. You'll have what you need to be the people, partners, and parents that you want to be.

Ready? Here we go.



Keeping Score

Because of how much is required of us to be successful in parenting and life, couples have no choice but to divide and conquer. But in dividing and conquering, we often end up so separated in our roles that we feel like we're on two different pages, or sometimes like we're leading two entirely different lives. Parenthood naturally creates conditions for tremendous **disconnection**.

Additionally, it's unlikely that in early parenthood either of us is going to feel balanced and thriving. We probably won't be vlogging about how we're living our best life. Instead, we're most likely going to feel like the newest daily commuter on the **struggle bus**.

Disconnection + Struggle Bus = Keeping Score

Keeping score is when we find ourselves tallying what each of us are doing in a competitive way. It can sound like this:

"I've planned and made the last five dinners. What have you done?"

"You've been able to hang out with your friends three times this week, and I haven't even gone out once."

Saying to your partner, "I'm so exhausted," only to hear in response, "You're exhausted! I'm the one who has to work all day!"

Comments like this happen frequently in parenthood, and for many of us, they happen almost daily. We may find ourselves in a continual state of offense and defensiveness. Yet, it's exhausting and painful to so often be thinking about what your partner is doing wrong and feel like you're being attacked, it never accomplishes what we hope it will, and it leaves little opportunity for connection.

So why do we do this to each other?

When we're struggling, our brain wants to know why, and the easiest answer to make sense of this is looking to the person who is supposed to be helping us. We think, "This sucks. Whose fault is this?!"

We may be on to something, and we are doing more than our partner. Turning it into a measurable fact feels like we can make sense of our suffering for ourselves. And maybe it will help our partner to see us and the situation more accurately and motivate them to do more, give more appreciation, create more opportunities for us to get our needs met, and

please for the love of God do it without having to be told what to do.

However, it's also possible that when we go to tally up our partner's side, we're either not seeing the big picture or we aren't seeing each other very clearly. We naturally make assumptions about what and how our partner is doing, feeling, and thinking. Unfortunately, our brain has a 3 to 1 negativity bias, so when we make those assumptions, it's likely going to be negative. (Human nature is kind of a bitch, huh?) And even if we do see what our partner is doing or not doing, disconnection can skew our perception of each other. If you feel connected, you may think, "Oh my partner forgot to take the trash out. That makes sense because they had a super late night with the baby." If disconnected, our thoughts may sound like "Why am I the one that is always cleaning up after everyone?"

The thing with keeping score, is that no one is winning. It's a negative game we play to try to make sense of the disconnection and personal struggle we're feeling. If we want to stop questioning each other through blurry lenses, we have to have a better structure rooted in connection to ensure we feel like we're on the same team.

Connection + Structure

Traditionally, when couples feel disconnected they seek out private coaching or therapy sessions. Coaching and therapy tend to focus on the "roots" of the issue and have the primary goal of helping couples get through to each other and create shared understanding and empathy from which to move forward. This is the **CONNECTION** part of solving the problem. It's very important, but it's not all that you need.

More recently, we've seen books and articles, and even a game, blossom that have the critical goal of the equitable division of tasks, the **STRUCTURE** part of tackling this problem. Again, very important, but also not the whole picture.

While we stand by private support sessions tremendously, even if you can connect deeply and resolve issues in your sessions, without having a structure in place, the disconnection between you will continue to come back.

While we also love structure, we cannot assume that within the process and discussion of creating something equitable, the feeling of being connected and on the same team will automatically happen.

We believe that we must have both an equitable division of tasks and also principles and practices to nurture love and the feeling of being on the same team.

CONNECTION + STRUCTURE

And while you'll most likely still have to divide and conquer most tasks, the experience will feel different. Instead of divide meaning a physical and emotional gap between you, we want it to feel more like you are coming together as a team to thoughtfully collaborate on your roles and responsibilities and stay connected along the way. It's beyond figuring out laundry and lunches and checking things off your lists without conflict. You'll create a system that enhances the well-being of your family, your relationship, and you as individuals.

The Family System Principles

There are four main principles that we'll refer to throughout this guide. They are ways of relating to your experience. Perspectives to consider. These icons will be reminders for you to keep the associated principle in mind as you do the exercises or absorb the information.

1) Make It Yours



This guide is meant to meet you where you are. You may be ready to make changes and want to jump into the tools, or you may need some support with communication or to address any hesitancy you have before doing the exercises. Whatever you're experiencing, the most valuable thing you can do is to be honest and sincere about what feels good to you and what you may need in that moment.

Unfortunately, creating a successful family system isn't something you'll always inherently know how to do. What tends to happen to fill in the gaps is we get sucked into the trap of comparisons to friends and family, kids' friends, and Instagram. But a family system doesn't come from pressuring yourself to measure up to all the shoulds that are stacking up in your head. It's important to create something that is in alignment with you.

However, we're not suggesting that you can just look within and have all the answers. It's wise to ask for examples and guidance as a foundation for your choices, and we're excited to be on this journey with you. This principle will remind you to make sure you're filtering everything through who you are as a person and what feels right to you, and we'll work together from there.

2) Guess and Test



Given you were inclined to pick up this book to create a new Family System, you're most likely in a period of transition and learning. While it can feel uncomfortable to try new things, you can't improve anything if you aren't willing to make some changes.

Unfortunately, you probably don't know exactly what that perfect set of changes may be, so we suggest being open to trying things out and seeing if they work before assuming they won't.

You also need to each have the space to take risks and change your mind without self-judgment or being hard on each other. Over time, you may hate things you thought you'd love, love things you thought you'd hate, or get sick of things you used to like. And what you thought would feel balanced at first, may not end up feeling that way. You're still both going to have to do some adulting, but you get to figure your responsibilities out together and aim toward more well-being. Your Family System is a continuous collaboration that evolves as you and your family do, and the more space you can give each other to grow the better off you'll be.

3) Aim Toward Connection

While it's been well documented that the early years of parenthood tend to have a negative impact on personal happiness and relationships, we believe that this tender time in your life actually presents an extraordinary opportunity to connect more deeply, both internally and with your partner.

Allow yourself to recognize your honest feelings, some of which may be vulnerable, confusing, and new. You can access the cherished pre-parent parts of you, while also discovering how you've changed and who you are becoming.

When interacting with your spouse, prioritize nurturing and understanding one another. If you're reading a section or doing an exercise and you find yourself shutting down or spiraling, remember your goal of wanting to feel like more of a team.

Our North Star in any moment of tension is the question: "How can I use this moment as an opportunity to become more connected?"

4) Let It Be Playful

We understand that parenting and partnering can be incredibly demanding. We are not into "positive vibes only." We understand this is serious and can cause a lot of tension and pain. But, we also believe you can more easily address these issues if you allow yourselves to relate to them with more lightness to balance out the intensity.

One way to apply this is in the way you communicate with each other. Addressing relationship dynamics can feel vulnerable and challenging, but being humble, seeing your flaws, and understanding how you are a pain in the ass to your partner (we're all a pain in the ass in some way), can be more sincere and less hyperbolic than you probably assume.

Think more, “Yep! I totally forgot the trash again. I’m seriously so sorry! I need to think about how I can get better at remembering it.”

And think less, “Come on, I’m so tired from work. Why are you always riding me!? Nothing I do is enough for you.”

The other way to incorporate playfulness is in your approach to doing this work. And as you go through this book together, you may want to grab a drink and do some exercises as you would play a game (with just a healthy amount of competitiveness).

Meet Aaron + Jessica

Now feels like a good time to properly introduce ourselves, since we’re guiding you through this process, and you’re about to jump in.

We’re Aaron Steinberg and Jessica Trouillaud, two of the co-founders of a relationship education & support company called Grow Together, and we’re not married.

One of us is a system lover, and the other not so much. One of us is a man, the other is a woman. We have different personalities and different experiences as parents and partners, but we’ve both been with our spouses for over a decade and each have two young children.

We currently both live in dual-income households, but we’ve also been the sole earner or the stay-at-home parent at some point as well. We know these issues inside and out and from all sides of the equation, and have had to adjust our Family Systems many times.



Aaron

Hey, I’m Aaron. I’m the one who isn’t into systems. But, I’m really just not into restriction, and I sometimes conflate that with systems. I am, however, obsessed with relationships. I love investigating why they aren’t working and creating tools to make things better. After quitting professional poker, I’ve taken every psychology, coaching, therapy, and personal development class and workshop I could find, and parlayed that into supporting couples professionally since 2010, as a coach, counselor, and educator.



Hi! I'm Jessica. I'm a type-A system lover. The love is so deep that I sought out an Entrepreneurship major (yes, that actually exists), and for over fifteen years, I've been creating management and leadership systems for companies and their teams. I believe that structure and systems grant a sense of relief and peace. On the connection side, I've been conducting an independent research study about identity and relationship best practices since I watched Eat Pray Love too many times and ventured off to France in 2012, only to meet my husband 30 days into the trip.

In addition to the main content, we'll each be leaving you little notes as we go. We hope hearing two different perspectives from time to time helps you relate to the content, and potentially gives you inspiration for different ways to set up your Family System.

Choose Your Own Path

One of our favorite things about In It Together is that it's a guide, not a 300 page book. The chapters are short and sweet and you can tailor the order depending on how you're feeling and what you need at that time. No slogging through things you aren't interested in before you can get to the good stuff. At the end of each chapter, you'll have at least two places you can go to next. Here's your first fork in the road!

If you're at the point where you're ready to rock and start getting your lives back, you can jump right into the first structural tool, **Checklists + Exercises** on **pg. 31**

If you're still unsure that you want to read this guide, you're worried it will open up a bunch of drama, the word "system" makes you queasy, or you've tried things like this before (for what it's worth, we completely understand these concerns, and hell, we have them ourselves from time to time), you can head over to **Ambivalence** on **pg. 08**