

A Woman's Perspective: It's You and Me Against the World

By Kathy Jackson
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I once shot in a competition at our local range where the participants were divided up into five-person teams. The goal of the stage was to knock down 15 steel targets as rapidly as possible. On our first attempt, our team's score was abysmal. Several of the steel silhouettes had multiple shots on them, while others weren't getting hit at all. The problem was that we were functioning as a bunch of armed individuals, not as a team. On our second attempt, each person agreed to shoot three specific targets and to call out for help if they couldn't get their targets down. Our score improved dramatically. The few minutes we spent talking about how to work together to accomplish the goal made all the difference.



When people train for self-defense, we usually train as individuals. We train to do everything ourselves and not rely on anybody else to help us out. That can be a good thing, if we are alone when attacked. But the concept of teamwork is often neglected despite the tremendous advantage of functioning as a team when possible.

Teamwork is important whether or not your partner carries a gun. If you are one of those folks whose partner does not and will not carry a gun, you may still glean some important concepts from this article. And even if you and your partner both carry, you may not yet be functioning as a team.

The most essential element of creating a team is communication. And by this I mean two way communication. No communication creates chaos. One-way communication creates a dictatorship (one that is likely to be overthrown at any moment). Only two-way communication creates a team.



If both partners are armed, couples have more options when confronting a potential attacker. By splitting to a 45-degree angle from the attacker, this couple divide the attacker's attention and avoid getting into each other's line of fire. Photograph by: Bob Jackson, with special thanks to models Tom and Diane Walls, and Don Stahlnecker.

Defensive plans have to be worked out together. One person cannot do this alone,

because both partners must be prepared to creatively improvise if (when) the intended plan needs to flex to meet reality. No sensible plan is rigid. Good plans are designed to evolve as the situation evolves. This means that both partners have to understand the concepts that form the foundation of the plan as well as the specifics of it. If one person simply takes over and dictates, the plan becomes dangerously rigid because only one member of the team understands the plan well enough to change it.

For this reason, the most important part of this conversation is not the answers you come up with. It's the questions you ask each other, and the give-and-take which develops as you explore those questions.

For instance, do you think your partner would take the hostage shot if you were the hostage? Would you want him to? Would you take that shot? If so, how can you do that most safely? Will your partner immediately drop to the ground on a pre-arranged signal? If you regularly shoot together, you can talk about these things with a carefully-realistic assessment of each other's developing abilities, and discuss options for various scenarios.

As you discuss your safety plans, you will probably find gaps in your collective abilities that need to be filled by deliberately directed practice. But getting to the range and learning alongside your partner is often more pleasure than chore.

What's the plan?

In addition to reviewing sensible everyday safety precautions such as paying attention to people around you, locking doors, and improving the lighting around your home, you probably will want to discuss some general plans for dealing with possible criminal events. Such events might include a restaurant or store robbery while you are together, an attempted mugging as you approach your car in a parking lot, or a disturbance in a public place that appears as if it might turn violent. Obviously, it would be impossible to determine exactly what will happen, so your plans must be general and flexible rather than specific, but once you start talking, you'll begin to discover some common themes you can work with.

For example, assuming a middle-of-the-night home break-in, what's your basic plan? Who gets a gun? Who gets the phone? Who deals with the kids? Where do you hunker down to defend your family? Who's got the flashlight and where is that flashlight stored during the night?

Most instructors agree that even when both are armed, the most viable strategy is for one partner to handle the "tactical / shoot him!" concerns, while the other handles everything else as the family retreats to a barricaded safe room. The partner with the primary responsibility for shooting takes the point position, placing himself or herself in the best position to fire toward the threat without endangering the rest of the family. The other partner, in the backup role, focuses on everything else that must be done, such as

calling 911 and shepherding the children, and also helps look for other threats by watching the surrounding area.



If one partner is both unarmed and unable to fight back, the armed partner may decide to interpose between the non-fighter and a potential assailant. Photograph by: Bob Jackson, with special thanks to models Tom and Diane Walls, and Don Stahlnecker.

Once you have discussed this possible situation, asking and answering as many questions as seems reasonable to you, you might even want to role play a bit. As a family, you can practice getting into the safe room with flashlights, phone, and firearms, in the same spirit and maybe at the same time as you practice family fire escape drills.

What "Covering your Back" Really Means

Covering someone's back is all about trust. If you're going to work as a team, you have to trust your partner. Your job will be to keep your eyes focused not on his task but upon your own. When moving down a hallway together, if you have point, your job will be to keep your eyes pointed forward (and left and right from there) while your partner looks to the rear (and left and right from that angle). The discipline of keeping your eyes on your own area rather than taking over your partner's area is very much harder to do than it sounds, and it is worth practicing.

This becomes even more critical during an active encounter when the tendency is to really tunnel in on the known threat. If your partner is holding a criminal at gunpoint, your job as backup would be to force your eyes away from the criminal and instead keep close watch on the surrounding area to see if he has a buddy lurking in the shadows. Conversely, if you do spot another threat, your partner must force himself to keep his eyes on the criminal he is already dealing with, and trust you to deal with the new problem which just became your responsibility. If his attention instead wanders toward your problem, the first criminal can, and probably will, take advantage of that failing.

If you do not believe that you can muster up this level of trust for each other's abilities, then you will need to frankly and honestly discuss that, too. The most important thing is to find out, in advance, what you can realistically expect from each other. If you are both willing to develop this level of trust, but aren't there yet, you might begin working towards that goal by taking classes together and practicing regularly to improve your skills. But talk about what you will do in the meanwhile, too.

Code Talkers

When my children were still quite small, we adopted a family habit of using code words for certain things. Some of this was simple fun: three taps on the shoulder means, "I love you" in a language that even an embarrassed teenager can hear. Some of it was parent-practical, like teaching the kids to whisper their need to "visit Uncle John" instead of blurting out, "I gotta go PEE!!" in the middle of a restaurant. But over time, some of our family code has evolved to deal with various types of danger.

Codes can be used to signal everything from, "Keep your eye on that creep over there," to "Everything is well," to "Let's get out of here, right now," to "Hang up and call the police." The only limits are what you have talked about in advance or your ability to improvise on the spot.

To Love, Honor, Cherish ... and OBEY??

Defensive events happen quickly. Whether your marriage is based on traditional, hierarchical roles or on a more egalitarian model, it's important to realize that during a high-stress event when every split second counts is not the time to be debating about which of you should follow the other's lead. It should be understood from the very beginning that whoever opts for (or lands in) the backup position must obey, instantly and without question, any command given by the person taking point.

The division of labor should not be based upon sex, but upon which partner is best suited for the tasks that must be done. If your husband is faster and stronger than you are, better capable of running at high speed while carrying both your preschoolers out of danger, then perhaps you need to be the point person so that he can get the kids out of harm's way while you cover your family's retreat to safety.

On the flip side, if your children are old enough to do their own running, you might prefer that your husband take point while you retreat with the children, especially if his size or martial-arts training or some other factor make him better suited for blocking a criminal's pursuit.

The two of you might decide that point should be taken by whoever has a more decisive command voice, or by whoever has the coolest head under pressure, or by whoever is the faster or more accurate shooter. You might decide that the one who first spots the danger takes point. Or that you will take point if something happens at home, but he will take point if something happens in public.

What I'm getting at is that the choice of roles can be based upon a lot of different factors. But ultimately, which person takes point isn't nearly as important as knowing who the point person is. When you know in advance how the labor will be divided, you can work together smoothly when the crunch comes.



Unarmed doesn't always mean unable to fight back. Here, the unarmed partner executes a simple wrist escape while the armed partner moves to a position of advantage and begins to draw. Photograph by: Bob Jackson, with special thanks to models Tor and Diane Walls, and Don Stahlnecker.

Knowing What's Important

A while back, I read one of those online "this happened to me" stories about a young couple who were accosted by a violent street person as they were getting into their vehicle. The interesting thing was that, in telling the story, the man explained that they had not left quickly enough to avoid the slowly-developing danger because they had to buckle their toddler into her car seat before they could drive away.

This was a case of misplaced priorities if I ever heard one!

Folks, car seats are important. But car seats aren't THAT important. If danger looms, toss the kids into the car, slam and lock the doors, and drive off. You can pull over in two or three blocks to buckle up. Riding a few blocks without a car seat is a lot safer and less traumatic for your child than watching her parents get their brains beat out by some dangerously enraged nutcase.

Keep first things first. The immediate threat has to be dealt with before you start worrying about future or theoretical threats. Even if you always wear a seat belt, or always obey the red lights, or always stand and talk to the cashier for a few moments as you're leaving the restaurant, these things can and should go right out the window if you spot trouble coming and you can avoid it by driving off before you buckle up, by blowing a red light, or by dropping enough cash on the table to pay for the meal and leaving quickly.

What's all this got to do with armed partners? It comes back down to trust again. If your alert and aware partner spots trouble brewing, and gives you the code word for an immediate evacuation, you may be tempted to slow him down with trivialities like these. Don't give into that temptation. Agree in advance to trust each other on the spot, absolutely and without question -- and to argue about it later, if argue you must.

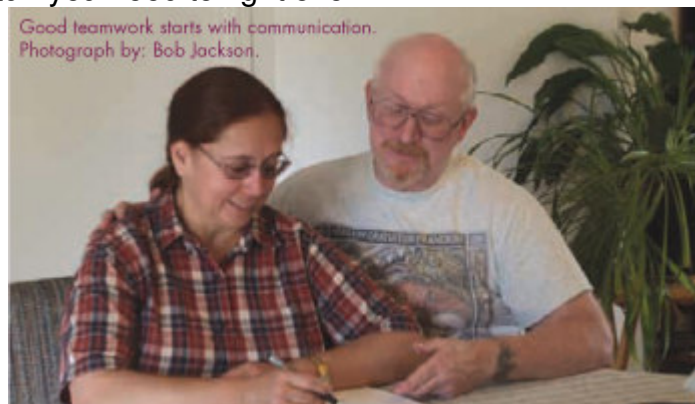
"Honey, we need to talk ..."

Obviously, there is a lot more ground that could be covered here. The issues above are really only the barest beginnings of a start. But I'm hoping they are enough to illustrate the types of questions that can be valuable to explore together as you and your partner work to become a defensive team.

Gun Shy -- Talking about Self-Defense with your Unarmed Partner

Not everyone is fortunate enough to share a love of firearms with the love of their life. Some folks have loved ones who are less than enthusiastic about defensive firearms ownership and concealed carry. If your spouse doesn't carry a gun and never will, do you still need to talk? Absolutely. Here are some tips for getting the conversation started.

When? Pick a time when you are both feeling relaxed and agreeable, and try to keep the conversation free of highly charged emotional overtones. This is just stuff you need to talk about, not stuff you need to fight over.



Why? It's important that your partner understands the basics of what you are doing when you carry a gun. It is also important for you to understand the reasons your partner does not carry a gun. You need to know what your partner is, and is not, willing to do for the team. You need to respect your partner's choices and work within the framework that actually exists, not the framework you wish exists. Remember that you are both on the same team, even if one of you has chosen the role of an armed citizen and the other has not. You can take different positions on the same team -- that's okay!

Where? In private. Don't try to have the conversation in the midst of a crowded restaurant, even if you did want to soften your partner up by going out to dinner first. Try talking in the car on the way home after dinner instead.

How? With casual, matter-of-fact practicality, just as you'd discuss your home fire safety plans or your vehicle maintenance schedule. If you encounter resistance, avoid the temptation to argue and instead focus on actively listening to your partner's concerns. Those concerns may provide an important clue to developing the best team strategy for coping with shared danger.

What? Here are some subjects your conversation might cover:

- Things NOT to say during a crisis. "Honey, shoot him!" pretty well tops this list. Make sure your partner knows and understands that if something terrible happens and you don't pull your gun, it won't be because you've actually forgotten you have a gun.

Instead, it would be because you are waiting for the safest time to act. Ask your partner to help you preserve the all-important element of surprise.

- What to say after a shooting. It's best to say very little except perhaps, "I am really shaken up because that man tried to (kill, rape, attack) me (or my loved one)," and then ask for a lawyer. Explain to your partner that you will never shoot someone unless you believe that you or someone you love will die if you don't act immediately. If the worst happens, you will need your partner to help you afterward by not saying anything until you have both talked to your lawyer. Similarly, if you are ever involved in a shooting when your partner is not with you, you may call home from the police station, and will expect your partner to call whomever else might need to be notified that you were involved in a shooting (the lawyer, a bail bondsman, your pastor, etc).

- What should your partner do with your firearm if you need medical assistance? Paramedics do not like working on patients who are carrying a gun, and if they find a gun on you, they might even delay giving medical care until the police arrive. For this reason, if you need medical help, it might be a good idea for your partner to plan to secure the gun before the ambulance gets to the scene. Is your partner comfortable doing that for you? Does your partner know the basic safety rules for handling a firearm? If so, where will the firearm be secured? Can it be locked in a car, placed carefully into an otherwise-empty compartment of her purse, or placed, while still in its holster, inside his jacket pocket? Discuss each one of these options and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

- What's the combination to the safe? On two separate occasions, I have stood in a friend's living room while they tried to remember the combination to their family safe. In the first case, he had to call her at the office to get the number. In the other case, she finally remembered the combination after a solid fifteen minutes of twiddling the dial and mumbling naughty words under her breath. For convenience' sake, if nothing else, the combination should be written down and both partners should know where to find it. This is even more important if any part of your defensive plan involves the unarmed partner getting into the safe.

- "I wanna hold your hand." Which hand should your partner hold when you are walking together through a dark parking lot? If you get into a tense situation, should your partner grab your clothing so you stay together no matter what? Or would you prefer your partner split to one side and you to the other, to divide the attacker's attention and perhaps help keep your unarmed partner safe from incoming shots? The answers to these questions really depend on your personal level of training, and also on how much your partner understands and is on board with your desire to defend both of you.

Kathy Jackson is a freelance writer who lives with her husband and their five children in Washington state. An Assistant Instructor at the Firearms Academy of Seattle, Kathy takes special pleasure in teaching other women how to shoot. Her personal website may be found at: www.corneredcat.com