After she had her second child, Michelle Jacobs was desperate to get fit. The 43-year-old baby gear retail executive joined a gym and went every morning at 5:30 a.m.—a big improvement over Jillian Michaels exercise DVDs in the living room. All was great, until her husband caught the workout bug.

Initially he was content with one SoulCycle class on Tuesday mornings. But then he wanted Thursdays.
Staking out prime time for exercise is the land-grab of modern day parents. Once children come along, working out often seems more like a luxury than a basic need. Compared with a night out for cocktails, a request for an hour of Pilates would seem like something no one would want to deny a spouse. But that isn’t always the case.

Couples squeeze in athletic windows at odd hours, sometimes in the dark of night, to avoid disrupting quality family time. Some spouses push for priority, but promise the workout means a smile and a day of devoted caretaking in return.

With two children to prep for school, and both Ms. Jacobs and her husband commuting from the suburbs into New York City for work, there wasn’t time for both to claim the mornings. Evenings were their only chance to be with the children. Now Ms. Jacobs spins, lifts weights or runs every other morning, plus Sunday, when she tag teams with her husband, tossing the car keys to him as they pass on the front walk.

Eric Roza, 47, a vice president at Oracle Corp. and self-declared fitness nut in Boulder, Colo., admits that tension around workout turf “has been bubbling up.” He does CrossFit weekdays at 5:30 a.m., returning to help get four children ready for their day. His wife Melissa can never go to a 6:30 a.m. strength class she loves. Until recently, he never considered whether this was fair. “I’ve always had this presumption that my workout comes first. I’m like, ‘Come on, Honey, it’s my self-medication. It’s my therapy,’” he says.
Her less obsessive approach compounded the problem. Her job managing the CrossFit gym the pair own is more flexible, so his work schedule dominated. She was always too busy to exercise midday.

After some “tough conversations”, Mr. Roza says he is prepared to make changes. “I realize now I can’t just keep my head in the sand,” he says.

Who gets priority, and how time is apportioned, can reveal deeper relationship dynamics, therapists say. One partner demanding his or her workout matters more “can be heard by the other as, ‘I’m just a little more important than you are in this partnership,’” says Washington, D.C. psychotherapist Karen Osterle. She adds that gender roles can play a part in the power struggle. “The negotiation is becoming more complex as more women become the chief breadwinners,” says Ms. Osterle.

Filmmaker Xandra Castleton can’t help but see old-school stereotypes at play in the exercise push-pull at her Oakland, Calif., home. A recent afternoon, she grabbed her running shoes and went to ask her husband, also a filmmaker, if it was an OK time to go jogging while he watched their daughter. Before Ms. Castleton got the words out, he was out the door in his running shoes. Apparently they had the same bright idea.

“I’m a little more the type to say, ‘I’d like to go for a run, is that OK?’ He’s the type that just puts on his shoes,” she says. Her instinct is to split the available running time. “He’s like ‘Ugh,’” she says.

Some spouses defer to their exercise-dependent partner, determining that their workout is in the family’s best interest. San Francisco investor Josh Richter’s wife Rachel Levin needs her daily run. “The run is sacred,” Mr. Richter says.
Desanne Martin does Master’s swim workouts. PHOTO: PETER EARL MCCOLLOUGH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

She gets her children ‘firehouse ready’ for school the night before. PHOTO: PETER EARL MCCOLLOUGH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
When he travels Ms. Levin runs hill repeats on her steep street, keeping her 3 and 6-year-olds alone in the house within earshot. “My neighbors I’m sure think I’m nuts,” she says.

Tapping weekend time or working out at night can help. “Remember, there are two weekend mornings, so even if you only go twice during the week, you can still get in four sessions,” says American Council on Exercise Director of Professional Education Anthony Wall. His strategy: “Get up earlier,” he says. Mr. Wall runs or lifts weights weekdays from 3:30 a.m. to 5:30 a.m. He also suggests a baby sitter, involving children in the workout, an exercise date, or devising an at-home regimen.
When Desanne Martin began 5:15 a.m. Master’s swim workouts six years ago, she involved her three children in her exercise time solution. Her investment manager husband works stock market hours, leaving their Marin, Calif., home weekdays by 3 a.m. (When he bikes—his fitness solution—he leaves by 2:30 a.m.) Every night before bed, she got the children “firehouse ready”. “The shoes, pants, shirt, backpack were all laid out. The cereal bowls were on the table,” she says. “My son took it one step further. He would sleep in his clothes, with the shirt tucked in.” She still comes “flying” in at 7 a.m. to drive them to school “usually still in my towel, or with my wetsuit hanging halfway down,” she says.

Swiss trainlike schedules help. “I tell couples to sit down on Sunday night with a glass of wine or cup of tea and the calendar,” says Samantha Ettus, a Los Angeles-based life coach and author of a book on efficient living. “Exercise has to go on the to-do list just like business meetings.”

A rigid routine has allowed Martina Jones and her husband Chris to keep competing, even as parents—she does marathons, biathlons and triathlons, and he is an open-water swimmer. The San Francisco couple both have demanding product management jobs, so “making it explicit is the only way to make it work,” says Ms Jones.

On Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, she is “on point.” Her 6 a.m. exercise takes priority, and his job is to assure that so she doesn’t have any worries beyond her stride length and split times. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, it’s Chris’ turn. “On point means you get what you need. The other person’s job is to protect it,” Ms. Jones says.

When training for her 2010 Ironman race she needed more time. Ms. Jones bought a treadmill and got a trainer to turn her road bike into a stationary bike, which she used in the basement on off days.

Joanna Strober, who runs a Palo Alto, Calif., weight-loss startup and her entrepreneur husband race for the same treadmill. If he beats her downstairs, she doesn’t get to exercise that day. “I do not complain, but, yes, I’m mad.” A second treadmill wouldn’t work. “We wouldn’t agree on the TV show,” she says.