

# Family and work

*The family's perspective*

**One aspect of the changing context in which many children live today relates to the fact that many parents will have a paid job in addition to their parenting commitments. What is the experience of children with working parents? How do children feel about the amount of time that their parents work, and the amount of time that they spend with their children?**

**I**n research and public discourse, the issue of the relationship between work and family life has largely focused on working parents, and the stress that they may experience from “balancing” their roles.

In the United States, Ellen Galinsky (1999) explored the way that families “navigate” their work and family commitments. Based on her research and a review of related literature, Galinsky argued that children’s evaluations of their parents on a range of parenting skills and behaviours were not predicted by whether their parents worked or not. She argued that factors related to parents’ experiences of work, and the resources they had available to them in their parenting roles, were better predictors of children’s evaluations. Part of Galinsky’s early program of research was a qualitative exploration of the experiences of parents and children.

This article reports preliminary results from new qualitative research commissioned from the Australian Institute of Family Studies by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and the Marriage and Family Council, in order to consider the experiences of Australian families.

The study aimed to explore the way that children experience family life across a range of circumstances, with particular emphasis on their perceptions of the

impact of the employment choices, or imperatives, of their parents on their lives.

The study involved 69 parents and 71 children from 47 families in Melbourne. In-depth one-on-one interviews about work and family were conducted with parents and their children aged eight years and older. Among the questions, children were asked what they knew about their parents’ work, and about their perceptions of the impact of parental employment decisions on the family’s life. Parents were asked about many issues including their employment decisions and how they were influenced by their family responsibilities, and about the amount and nature of the time they spent with their children.

A broad range of families took part in the study. Families were initially recruited from: primary and secondary schools in inner, northern, and eastern Melbourne; various workplaces, including a state government department, a large city legal firm, and two large public hospitals; two large Unions; and a community legal service. Thus there was a focus on recruiting parents who were likely to have different patterns of full-time, part-time and shift work, and differing work responsibilities.

There were 18 single-parent families, and 29 two-parent families. All patterns of employment were represented, from two parents both working full-time to single parents not in regular employment. Only a



**VIRGINIA LEWIS, JACQUELINE**



TUDBALL AND KELLY HAND

couple of parents reported working more than 50 hours a week. Parents ranged in age from 31–58 years, and children interviewed ranged in age from 8–21 years. The parents' education backgrounds varied widely, as did their occupations, ranging from senior executives in significant corporations to unskilled people finding it difficult to maintain regular work. Family incomes ranged from less than \$16,000 per year to more than \$78,000. Each adult interview averaged one hour, and each child interview averaged about a half an hour.

Preliminary results, particularly focusing on the responses of the children in the sample, support Galinsky's broad argument that it is not whether and how much parents work, but how they work and how they parent, that matters. "Time" was a major and recurring theme in the interviews with children and parents, but the many meanings attached to the concept of time draw attention to the complex interaction between what parents do and how they do it.

This article reports on the way that the theme of "time" emerged in the interviews, and considers how current research and public discourse might be enriched by considering how the concept of time is typically used to over-simplify a complex issue.

The findings reported here focus mainly on the responses of the children, who, it should be remembered,

were aged eight years and over. While some of the families in the sample had younger children, the research focused on the experience of family life for children aged from the middle primary school years to adulthood.

### *Parents' working hours*

Children were asked specifically how they felt about their parents' working hours and whether their parents spent enough time with them.

In terms of hours worked, more than two-thirds of the parents were described by their children as working about the right amount of time. This is a similar proportion to that reported by Galinsky (1999). Of those children with two parents working full-time, nearly all described their parents as working about the "right" amount of time. In two-thirds of single-parent families where the parent worked full-time, the children described it as the right amount.

When asked the reasons for their judgements, most of the children referred to the direct impacts that they perceived parents' working hours had on them, such as whether they had to go to after-school care or not. Regardless of their overall judgement, most of the children talked about the impact of work on the time that parents spent with them.

*"Mum works about the right amount, because she spends some times with us as well as work. Dad works too much. [probe] Because he never spends time with me or my sister."  
[Boy, 10: mother works 15 hours, father full-time]*

Some of the older children supported their opinion that a parent worked too much with an expression of concern about how stressed or tired parents were.

A number of children explicitly referred to unpaid domestic labour in their judgement of their mothers' working hours, either in terms of what she does, or what she should do.

*"I think Mum works too much, because sometimes she has a busy day and cooks, and she doesn't get to sit down as much."  
[Boy, 11: both parents work full-time]*

*"Mum works too much. I think she should do housework more."  
[Girl, 10: mother works 32 hours, father full-time]*

Even allowing for some concern about difficulties experienced by parents, it was clear that most of the children evaluated this question from the perspective of how they were directly affected by their parents' working hours – a naturally self-centred view. However, children also appeared to be reflecting on their relationships with their parents. Some said this quite explicitly when explaining that the hours their parents worked were all right "because it doesn't impact on me". They seemed to be saying that the number of hours that their parents worked was not the most important determinant of their relationship with their parents.

Further evidence that many children judged parents' work hours by their direct impact on the children's own lives came from some of the children whose parents worked irregular hours.

*"Before he used to have his holidays on Saturdays and Sundays, but now Mondays and Tuesdays, so I don't get to see him much and that."  
[Girl, 11]*

## Parents' and children's time together

The lack of a strong and direct correspondence between time worked and satisfaction with relationships with parents was for many children evidenced in responses to a question about how children felt about the amount of time their parents were spending with them. In general concordance with Galinsky's findings, the responses were divided roughly evenly between those saying that they wished their parents spent more time with them and those who said their parents currently spent enough time with them.

All potential patterns of employment and satisfaction with family time were observed in the sample. There were parents working full-time whose children felt that they worked about the right amount of time, and with whom they spent enough time. There were parents working part-time whose children said that they worked too much, and with whom the children would like to spend more time. Between these two extremes, all other possible combinations were observed.

It is notable that the children who talked about wanting more time with their parents tended to speak of wanting "a bit more" or "a little more". When asked about what they might do with the parent in the extra time they would have together, most children talked about activities such as going shopping, going out for lunch, playing ping-pong and chess, swimming, going to the park, and talking. In general, the children talked about everyday activities – not extravagant holidays or special outings.

*"Perhaps play a bit of totem tennis or sit outside with a cup of tea and a piece of raspberry slice. And she could watch me jump on the trampoline." [Girl, 8]*

Parents' judgements about whether they had enough time with their children were also not necessarily directly related to hours of employment. Some parents working full-time were very satisfied with the amount of time they had, while some parents working part-time felt that they would like more time with their children. Just under one-third of parents said that they would like more time with their children. Of parents working full-time, about two thirds said that they'd like more time with their children.

The perceptions of children and their parents often differed on this question of time spent together. Fewer than half of the parents of children who had expressed a desire for more time with them had the same opinion as their children. A similar number of parents felt that they didn't have enough time with their children, although their children said that they spent enough time together. Parents working part-time also expressed views different from their children. Once again, all combinations of hours worked and satisfaction were observed.

Parents also talked about the kind of time that they would like to spend with children. They were strongly in favour of having time that was spent in directed or focused activity, as well as time that was just spent "hanging around". Most parents considered that their children needed both kinds of time, and that one could not necessarily have one without the other.

Some parents talked about the differences between their children, and themselves, in terms of personality and preferences for time spent together. Some also talked about wanting to have more one-on-one time with each of their children. While the term "quality time" was not used by many parents, there was no other term that emerged as

particularly popular either. One father talked about "isolating ourselves from other things, so I can concentrate on being with them".

Some parents talked about the nature of the time they spend with their children being negatively influenced by the need to meet their children's extra-curricular commitments. One mother who deliberately contained her working hours to within school hours considered the time spent with her children to be sufficient in quantity, but not ideal in nature.

*"I think the time is right, but it is hectic time, because the majority of the good times, they are at school, and the times you have with them are hectic times. There's plenty of it, but we are always going somewhere."*

Some parents considered that as long as there was some shared enjoyable family time, the fact that at other times it might not feel like enough time was acceptable.

*[Do you feel that you have enough time with your children?] "Yes and no. Yes, in that I think that if I was with them more, either they or I wouldn't have enough time for other things. Something about having enough freedom, not getting too enmeshed, not getting too involved. On the other hand, after we've gone camping or something, I think how nice it would be to have that much time all the time. I guess the answer is 'as long as we have those times'. It doesn't have to be all the time, but they have to exist. And they are really precious." [Mother, works 30 hours]*

Some parents expressed the idea of certain everyday events being an essential part of family life and considered their absence as a clear indication that something was not right about the relationship between work and family.

*"I think, in terms of the routine of family, work ought to match the routine of family. So I think that ideally the family should be together for the main meals of the day, and the family should be together for bedtime, and the family should be together for getting up time. I think things are out of balance when one or other, or both of the parents are not pretty much regularly in attendance for those most important parts of a family day." [Father, works full-time, 60 hours]*

While actual hours worked did not necessarily relate directly to feelings about time spent with children, many parents talked about the value to them of any job flexibility they had, which allowed them to spend critical time with children. Often they referred to themselves as "lucky" that they had the flexibility to be able to respond to special circumstances or demands. For some parents, there was no day-to-day flexibility, and this seemed to influence their feelings about their job more than the actual number of hours they worked.

Many of the parents had made significant changes to the way they worked since they had had children. Some of these changes were induced by circumstances, such as marriage breakdown, but many were changes that parents made in an effort to better manage their work and family responsibilities. Some parents had changed jobs to reduce the pressure, although they lost work status and income in doing so. Some rejected jobs that involved too much travelling. Some parents who had chosen shift work as an ideal arrangement when their children were young, had re-evaluated the suitability of such work as their children got older.

"I announced that there was no more night shift for me and he raised his hand in the air and said, 'Yes!', like that, in a show of triumph, because he used to say 'why couldn't you be at home on weekends like other daddies?'"

For most parents the theme underlying their change was a search for more flexibility to allow them to meet family obligations. This increased flexibility was, for many parents, associated with reduced levels of stress.

"When I stopped working in that management role, my step-son summed it up by saying, telling me not to take offence by this, but he thinks I have had a personality change since I came off work! I pointed out that this was really me." [Step-mother who changed to a job with less responsibility and fewer hours]

Of course, there were some parents who expressed dissatisfaction with their working hours, but who said that they could not afford to change. About a quarter of the parents indicated that the hours that they were currently working were not their preferred hours. All but two of these parents said that they would like to spend more time with their children. Some of these parents said that their jobs could not be done part-time, others worked jobs that were only done as shifts, or long hours, but for most of these parents the financial need to keep working meant that they continued despite their feelings of dissatisfaction.

Not all parents were reducing hours or downgrading the kind of jobs they did; a number were increasing their hours of work as their children grew older. Some were also studying with a view to future full-time employment or career changes as they perceived their children becoming more independent. Some talked about working so that they would have a broader experience of the world which they could share with their children as they became more independent.

The parents in this study revealed what a dynamic process the navigating of work and family is, and how common it is for parents to make changes to their employment status in response to the perceived needs of family life.

### **Points of contact with children's lives**

It is generally considered that a family that is functioning well will be characterised by positive interactions between family members. One of the consequences of a relationship with not enough interaction, particularly of a kind that supports communication, might be that parents know little of their children's lives.

In the interviews, children were asked whether they thought their parents knew much about their lives. Most said that their parents knew "a fair bit" – often described by children as "as much as I want to tell them". These responses highlighted the idea that factors other than work influenced the parent-child relationship. The older children in particular said that parents would not know any more if they were working less "because I wouldn't tell them about the other little bit."

For the younger children in middle primary years, the perceived impact of work seemed particularly to relate to access that parents had to their school day, including this as a key time of access to children's friends. This was reflected in responses to questions about whether parents participated in children's school life. It was clearly the case that many children in primary school preferred to have parents participate actively in their school lives. Some of the younger children expressed this directly, openly acknowledging that

they felt bad if parents did not participate. Some parents were aware of their younger children's feelings, and tried to respond with extra efforts to attend school events.

By the time they were in late primary school, some of the children were expressing more ambivalence. Whereas many of the older children said that they didn't mind if their parents couldn't come to activities and events at school, they usually still indicated that they preferred them to come. Older children were more likely than the younger ones to express the view that perhaps it was not appropriate for parents to come to secondary school. The following response captures the ambivalence about work preventing parents from coming to school events:

"Sometimes I get annoyed at the time, but afterwards I think it doesn't matter, I didn't want them to come much anyway. I just wanted them to say they could, even if they couldn't." [What is it about them saying they can come that you really like?] "I don't know. I just want to hear them, like, 'yes, I want to come', rather than 'I'd love to but I have to work'." [Girl, 12]

The reason that children might like their parents to be present at school events was clear from several responses. One older boy articulated the benefit that can flow from parents being at events.

[Is it important to you that they come?] "Well, for the major events, just for support, and just to be able to talk to them about it, and what they felt about it as well, is good to hear." [Boy, 15]

This theme of the significance of parents sharing their children's notable events emerged in another way also. Several children described the way that their parents, unable to come to school assemblies, responded to success or major events that they learnt about later.

"Oh, no, like if they had something on, I wouldn't really mind if they couldn't come, because if I'd won something I could still go up and show them and there would have been as much excitement as there would have been being there." [Boy, 13]

"She comes to parent teacher interviews and concerts. Not so much sport days because they're on during the day and I can just tell her if I won anything. Um, but yeah, I tell her when something's on and she'll be, like, after school, 'oh, I was thinking of you today', you know." [Girl, 14]

Whether they have consciously planned it or not, these families had developed strategies to deal with the restriction they experienced from working, and the children seemed to appreciate it. Parents may not have a physical presence, but they acknowledge the importance of the events in their children's lives. Of course, part of the success of strategies like this depends on having a reasonable level of communication in place so that children tell parents about events as they happen.

Responses suggested clearly that it is important to children that parents share significant moments in their lives in some way. In middle primary years, children seemed to feel a need to have parents physically present to witness key events and participate in activities. Older children seemed to want an acknowledgment of the importance of the events and could accept that parents will not always be physically present.

A lack of understanding of the conditions of some parents' employment was displayed in the responses of some

children who expressed the view that parents could come if they really wanted to. They did not understand the lack of flexibility that many parents experience in their workplace, instead interpreting parents' failure to come as a lack of interest or lack of will. Younger children in particular may not realise that their parents, as the power brokers in the home, do not have a similar degree of power in their role as worker.

### *The consequences of working*

While they had preferences for how much time they spent with parents, and the nature of the time spent with parents, none of the children thought that parents should be present in their lives all the time. Virtually all the children accepted the need for and/or desire of parents to work, and all could identify the benefits of parental employment, particularly in the case of their own experience.

Most children mentioned that their parents' working brought money that paid for the homes they lived in, the food they ate, the schools they went to (for some), and other things that were bought for them. Some children talked about positive consequences related to their everyday lives, such as enjoying being babysat by a grandmother, or having the house to themselves after school before parents came home from work. Some children again talked about lack of time spent with their parents as a negative consequence of their parents' working.

Some of the older children talked about other less tangible outcomes of their parents' working such as confidence and responsibility gained from not having parents around all the time, learning about what work means, and that one has to work in order to be able to provide things for the family.

*"Well, she's taught me that getting a job or whatever, you've got to try hard. And she's encouraged me, whichever way I want to go. And I guess I've learnt a lot from how she manages things, and how she does things. I try to pick up on things to do and not to do."* [Girl, 16]

The fact that the children were rarely overtly critical of their parents' employment choices when asked reasonably direct questions about their own experiences, may reflect an unwillingness to criticise their parents. If so, questions expressed in fairly general terms may be more revealing of the overall evaluation of the impact of parents' work on children. When asked whether parents' working was good or bad for children in a general sense, nearly all the children responded sensibly with conditional statements such as "it depends". Nearly all the responses referred to the financial benefits that working brings, but also to the potential cost of children not having enough time with their parents. While these children had a general acceptance of their individual circumstances, and work was not perceived as an evil, these children were still clearly indicating that they like and want to spend time with parents.

When the responses of children are considered according to chronological age, it is clear that the same themes are being presented, but the expression of them becomes more sophisticated.

*"I think it's all right because they can save up money. And the bad thing is some people they can't see their mum or dad very much."* [Boy, 8]

*"I think it is good and bad. Sometimes you wish you had more attention, although it is nice not to have them around all the time."* [Girl, 12]

*"Depends on what the kids are like and how much the parents work and what they do when they are working. I don't know, it's nice to have your mum around, but if she has to make some money, well I suppose you just have to adjust, I suppose. I definitely think it is better when you are young to have your mum there, just because it's good."* [Boy, 17]

*"I think it is a good thing that parents work provided that they don't lose sight of their kids and the kids' needs. Whether it is after school or during the day, kids do need their parents, and it's just not the one. They need both I think, and I mean, it's just something that you have to do – work. I mean, if no one wanted to work, then no one would be working, so I mean it's just pretty much that parents who do work full-time, they've got another job at the end of the day trying to keep a bond with their child, and it's pretty much like working."* [Girl, 19]

### *Future intentions*

The children were asked what they wanted to do when they grew up, whether they thought that they would have children, and whether they thought they would work when they had children.

Responses to these questions revealed particularly fascinating insights, because they did not require a child to criticise their parents' own choices, but did allow them to incorporate their evaluation of those choices into their own intentions. Based on the future intentions of the children interviewed for this study, the issue of how families navigate work and family is going to remain high on the agenda in the future.

Nearly all the children said that when they had children they intended to work. They clearly had a sense of the personal importance of working and, moreover, they had clear ideas about *how* they wanted to work. Most of the children, both boys and girls, said that they would work not at all or part-time for at least the early part of their children's lives, perhaps returning to full-time work as their children grew older. Nearly all the children referred to being able to spend enough time with their children as a primary motivation in their intentions.

Supporting the earlier observation about the centrality of school as a key access point for the middle primary years, several children mentioned being able to pick up children from school at least some of the time as a primary aim of any work schedule.

*"I would probably try and work weekdays, like Monday to Thursday, so on Fridays I could pick them up from school, and I would have the weekend free. So a couple of days free."* [Boy, 13]

*"When you first have kids take a bit of time off, and when they start getting older start doing part-time work, and then when they are at school you could go back to work full-time or something."* [Girl, 16]

*Responses suggested clearly that it is important to children that parents share significant moments in their lives in some way.*

One child talked about monitoring the impact of work on her children. She referred also to the differences in the way that children can respond to parents working full-time.



"I'd probably start off part-time, and then as they get older or whatever, I might get into full-time. Sometimes full-time can be a bit of a strain on your kids. It just depends which way kids handle it." [Girl, 16]

Some children were quite explicit about planning the way they would work when they had a family by considering what they liked or disliked about their own experiences.

"I'd try and work five days a week because I'm going to try and keep in mind all the stuff I like when I was a kid and put it into their point of view, so I can try my best to do it. Like, if I liked it when my dad came home on the Saturday and Sunday then I'd try and come home on Saturday and Sunday for my kids." [Boy, 11]

The children were fairly united in their view of the ideal way to work and have children, in that they expected to work and to have time with their children. Their attempt to quantify the way that they would achieve this goal was usually referred to in terms of working "part-time". Any more specific attempts to quantify their future plans would probably have little accuracy.

## Conclusion

Having talked to 71 children from 47 families, it is clear that parents may gain new insights into navigating work and family if they talk to their children. Children have opinions about whether the amount of time that parents can spend with them feels like enough, and about what they would like to do in that time. These opinions are not easily predicted by the number of hours that parents work.

Within families there are internal and external factors that will have an effect on how work and family impact on each other. Children have different needs that vary with their temperament and developmental stage. Parents differ in their capacities to provide the different kinds of attention and interaction that children need. This indicates the need

Picture: Rhonda Milner



to consider the amount of "time" available as only one of the critical factors that influence quality of family life.

The way parents and children talked about work and family is consistent with models of work and family interaction (Menaghan and Parcel 1990; Hoffman and Youngblade 1999), and models of parent-child interactions (Patterson et al. 1992; Silburn et al. 1996).

There are many aspects of a job that influence how parents feel about working. Galinsky's model emphasises some of these factors, including job demands, job quality and support at work. Other factors that Galinsky acknowledges but gives less emphasis to – how much parents are paid and what kinds of family-friendly initiatives are available within the workplace – also appear to be important.

This research cannot give answers to questions of children's outcomes. It is important that the findings not be interpreted as evidence for how parental employment actually impacts on developmental outcomes for children, such as their school achievement, or their behavioural and emotional adjustment. For instance, a child may not like homework supervision provided by a parent at home after school, but such monitoring and supervision may help them in the long-term. Similarly, an older child may not like having to be at home alone after school, but may gain independence and confidence through the experience.

But while it cannot comment on outcomes, the research can provide a guide to the kinds of questions that parents should ask themselves, and should ask their children, when evaluating the current state of family functioning. It is notable that all the parents who participated in the study were actively responding to the issue of how they manage work and family responsibilities. Many parents had developed strategies to improve the quality of family functioning. Some of these strategies involved changing jobs, cutting back hours, or making use of flexible conditions of employment, while some were related to parenting itself and how life at home is managed.

The fact that there is such a lively discourse about work and family in both the media and the community reflects the fact that parents are aware of the issues. This research encourages parents to include children in that conversation.

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Virginia Lewis is a Senior Research Officer and Kelly Hand is a Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Jacqueline Tudball, previously of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is a Research Officer at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. This article is an edited version of their paper entitled "Family and work: the family's perspective", presented by Dr Lewis at the "Family and Work: Listening to Our Children" conference, held in Sydney on 2 May 2001.

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