

# Quantity time: Do children want more time with their full-time employed parents?

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**Quantity Time:  
Do Children Want More Time with  
Their Full-Time Employed Parents?**

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The Working Paper Series is intended to report preliminary results-in-progress. Comments are welcome.

### **Abstract**

This paper explores children's views on whether they get sufficient time with dual-earner or single parents who are employed full-time. It draws on semistructured interviews with twenty-two children, ages ten to twelve and from diverse backgrounds, and on supplementary interviews with twenty-six of their parents. The children's responses about parental availability were complex and contradictory. Most children seemed to feel more dissatisfaction than they stated on the surface. I argue that family, social, and economic pressures influenced them to damp down or suppress desires for parental time. I raise concerns about the potential for underestimating children's discontent.

In studies of how children are affected by the work schedules and work/family conflicts of their parents, seldom have we heard the views of children themselves (Corsaro 1997; Daly 1996; Qvortrup 1994; Thorne 1987). Research that *has* explored children's perspectives suggests that they may differ considerably from those of their parents and that parents may make incorrect assumptions about what their children think or feel (Belle 1999; Galinsky 1999a; Moore, Sixsmith, and Knowles 1996; Solberg 1990).

This paper addresses whether children wish that they could spend more time with their working parents when both parents or single parents are employed full-time (defined as thirty-five or more hours per week). To explore children's thoughts and feelings on this matter, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews. I chose as subjects children ages ten to twelve, expecting that they would be old enough to respond well to such an interview (Medrich et al. 1982; Solberg 1994), yet young enough to have substantial recall of their earlier childhood. My analysis takes into account how particularities of this age group may have affected their responses.

As part of a larger research project on issues of care in the middle-school years, I interviewed twenty-two children in this age range. These sixth and seventh graders live in a California metropolitan area and have diverse class positions, racial-ethnic identities, and family configurations. For additional information and perspectives on the children's situations, I also interviewed twenty-six of their parents.

The children's responses demonstrate the importance of probing beneath the surface in assessing their views about their parents' availability. For the most part, the children did not readily state that they want more time with parents, but over the course of the interview, most displayed levels of discontent beyond what their initial responses indicated. Not only did children hesitate to *express* discontent, but some seemed to be trying to *suppress* discontent—i.e., not allow themselves to feel any. I analyze factors in their social environments that led them to “damp down” desires for more parental time.

## **The Issue of Parent/Child Time Together**

The extent to which children expect parental time and attention is shaped by the social context in which they grow up. In the United States, industrialization fostered the mainstream ideal that children should have a devoted mother at home full-time and a father focused on wage earning outside the home. Although a substantial minority of families could not or did not conform to this pattern, it became the predominant model of appropriate parenting.

During the last four decades of the twentieth century, the employment rate of mothers rose dramatically. Having an employed mother has become the typical experience for children of all ages. In 1999, almost two-thirds of mothers with children under six years old and about three-fourths of mothers with school-age children were in the labor force (Zinn and Eitzen 2002).

The trend toward mothers' employment has generated public concern that children are not getting enough parental time. Initially, discussion polarized around whether having a "working mother" affects children negatively. Researchers compared children of at-home and employed mothers, measuring outcomes such as psychological health, social adjustment, behavioral problems, and school performance. These studies found little basis for recommending a return of mothers to the home (Belle 1999; Galinsky 1999a; Hoffman 1989).

Debates about "working mothers" in the 1960s and 1970s often did not distinguish between part-time and full-time employment. By the 1980s, though, feminist criticism of women's "double workload" was foregrounding the fact that more and more mothers worked full-time. Long hours on the job plus the demands of housework made it difficult to provide attentive parenting (Hochschild 1989). Far from arguing that mothers should stay at home, feminists called for greater participation of *fathers* in parenting and housework. They also wanted better options and remuneration for *part-time* employment, so that more parents could choose it.

Data from the late 1990s, however, showed that fathers as well as mothers were putting in *more* hours at work. Comparing their national survey data from 1977 and 1997, Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg (1997: 8) found that fathers' average workweek had increased 3.1 hours and mothers' 5 hours. Counting time spent on all jobs (and including overtime and take-home work), fathers in 1997 averaged 50.9 hours per week and mothers 41.4 hours. To some extent, public

concern about children with “working mothers” has shifted to concern about children with “working parents” who work long hours.<sup>1</sup> The length of a parent’s workday does not by itself determine the quantity (or quality) of time spent with children (Galinsky 1999a), but the “bottom line” is for parents to have time available.

Attitudinal research about the amount of time parents and children spend together has concentrated on the views of parents and the adult general public. Recent surveys find high percentages of working parents stating that they wish they could spend more time with their children—e.g., 70 percent in Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg’s 1997 survey—and even higher percentages of the adult public stating that parents are not with children enough (Mott Foundation 1998; YMCA of the USA 1998; “Young Men” 2000).

However, some scholars have warned that working parents may downplay children’s needs for their time and attention. Caught up in long-hours jobs and confronted with multiple competing demands, parents may put a positive spin on minimal parenting time by rationalizing that it is desirable for children to learn self-reliance (Ehrensaft 1997; Elkind 1989; Hochschild 1989, 1997).

### **Studying Children’s Views**

The attitudes of children about parenting time have been touched upon in a few studies of after-school arrangements. Medrich et al. (1982) asked 764 sixth graders in Oakland, California whether they “would like to spend more time doing things with their parents.” Over 80 percent said yes, even though close to half of the sample had a parent at home part- or full-time. Children may have been responding to the language of “doing things” with parents, given that many felt bored after school. In a recent study, Belle (1999) followed 53 children, initially ages seven to twelve, for four years, interviewing them annually. All of their parents—single or coupled—were employed (or in school) full-time. Belle found that, even though children appreciate “caring attention from other adults . . . [and] often enjoy the freedom of time on their own, many still wish they could have more time with their own parents after school” (p. 79).

Other research has emphasized more strongly children's enjoyment of autonomy. Studying these issues in Norway and drawing in particular on interviews with twelve-year-olds and their parents, Anne Solberg (1990: 143) highlights age-related differences in perspective: "Looking at it from their own point of view, adults sadly describe a home with no adults present as being 'empty.' Coming home [after school] with their friends, children are pleased to find it vacated." According to Solberg (1990: 140, 139), children enjoy the "control of time and space" and the "large amount of self-determination" that the absence of adults makes possible.

Although Solberg raises an important challenge to "adult-centered" perspectives, the picture she presents has limitations. She describes children coming home with friends, in neighborhoods that are relatively safe. In my study, they more often came home alone, in urban areas with relatively high crime rates. Furthermore, even if children enjoy spending unsupervised time with friends, we still do not know whether they feel that they spend enough time with their parents.

Another effort to present child-centered perspectives is the 1996 British interview study *Children's Reflections on Family Life* (Moore, Sixsmith, and Knowles 1996). Two of the co-authors explain that they wanted to "give voice to the children's experiences rather than overindulge in researcher interpretations" (Sixsmith and Knowles 1996: 13). Although I share the mission to convey children's perspectives, I prefer not to back off from also critically interpreting what they express. In my own interviews, I found it important to notice body language, hesitations, contradictions, etc., in order to "read between the lines" and reach a fuller understanding of what was being communicated and what, perhaps, was being avoided or withheld.

The *Children's Reflections* study includes a chapter on "Dual Career Families" (Lewis, Sixsmith, and Kagan 1996), which does not give voice to children whose parents both work full-time. The chapter is based on interviews with only two children, both of whose mothers work "reduced" hours—a fact that the authors fail to mention until their conclusion. Even then, they do not specify *how many* hours. Lack of specificity about the number of hours "working parents" are employed—still fairly common in public and academic discourse—limits our ability to assess the effects on children.

The most extensive study of children's perspectives to date is Ellen Galinsky's 1999 book *Ask the Children: What America's Children Really Think About Working Parents*. Galinsky utilized multiple methodologies, including interviews and focus groups, but her centerpiece was a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1023 children in grades three through twelve (ages eight to eighteen). They completed a twenty-five-minute written questionnaire at school. Galinsky also surveyed by telephone a nationally representative sample of employed parents.

Some of Galinsky's findings bear indirectly on whether children want more time with employed parents. On the questionnaire, children graded their parents on various parenting skills, such as "making me feel important and loved" and "being someone I can go to when I am upset." Children also estimated how much time they spend with each parent on a typical workday and a typical nonworkday. The data reveal a consistent correlation between how much time children say they spend with a parent and how high they grade that parent's parenting. Interestingly, though, grades for mothers were *not* significantly affected by whether the mother was employed full-time, part-time, or not at all. Regarding fathers, a few parenting grades were higher for those employed full-time than for those employed part-time or not at all. In any event, Galinsky (1999a: 72) concludes that "the quantity of time with mothers and fathers does matter a great deal."

However, her direct measures of whether children actually want more time with employed parents suggest that most do not. This conclusion comes from two questions posed to children about each parent. The first asks, "If you were granted *one* wish to change the way that your mother's/your father's work affects your life, what would that wish be?" Galinsky reports the results concerning "employed mothers" and "employed fathers." Those broad categories not only encompass all degrees of employment, but group together employed parents regardless of whether they have no spouse, an employed spouse, or a spouse at home full-time. With such a range of parenting situations, it is difficult to interpret what the children's responses tell us. Galinsky (1999a: xv) emphasizes that time together "is not on the top of children's lists," that "only 10 percent of children wish that their mothers would spend more time with them" and 15.5 percent wish that their fathers would.

Because these statistics have been cited—and misrepresented—in popular media, it is important to underscore that they do *not* show that few children desire more time with employed parents, only that relatively few made that their *single top* wish.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the most popular responses seem *interconnected with* the matter of parenting time. Regarding mothers, children wished for them to make more money (23 percent), be less stressed by work (20 percent), or be less tired by work (14 percent). These responses, also prominent regarding fathers, can be tied to the syndrome of parents working long hours. Galinsky seems to agree when she argues that wanting parents to make more money probably stems not so much from consumerism, but from the belief that with more money, parents would feel less stressed. Although it is useful to know that being concerned about parents' stress or tiredness (34 percent combined) came out ahead of wishing for more time with them, we cannot conclude from these data that children are satisfied with parents' level of availability.

The other key question asks children outright whether they have “too little time,” “just enough time,” or “too much time” with each employed parent. Overall, 31 percent of the children answered “too little time.” Galinsky (1999a: 70) contrasts this finding with data from her sample of parents: “While 53 percent of employed parents with a child 8 through 18 feel they have too little time with their child, only 31 percent of children with employed parents feel the same way.” The comparison is noteworthy, but the finding that almost a third of the children wish they had more time with employed parents is, in effect, minimized. I also wonder about the impact of wording the contented choice as “just enough time.” To me, that suggests barely enough time rather than “as much time as I would like.” However, my main concern about the 31 percent figure emerges from my own research. My experience interviewing children makes me doubt whether these kinds of survey questions capture what children really think or feel about time with parents. I suspect that Galinsky's survey data underestimate the extent of children's discontent.

### **Research Design**

My research was based primarily at an urban public middle school. In cooperation with school personnel, our research team interviewed children (and, separately, their parents) about

after-school needs and arrangements (Polatnick 1999).<sup>3</sup> This topic served as a springboard for exploring children's feelings about their parents' work/family balance.

Subjects were recruited via flyers distributed in classes, announcements at school events, and, most successfully, requests made individually to parents and children as they walked around campus on parent-teacher conference day. For a family to be in the study, a child and at least one parent had to agree to be interviewed.

This paper is based on interviews I conducted with all sixth graders recruited, the youngest of the seventh graders (no older than twelve), and three children from other local middle schools (part of a snowball sample recruited for preliminary focus groups). These twenty-two interviewees included European Americans (14), African Americans (4), Mexican Americans (2), and Asian Americans (2). Family incomes ranged from under \$20,000 to over \$200,000. Girls outnumbered boys (14:8), and in the supplementary parent interviews, mothers far outnumbered fathers (21:5), reflecting the higher proportion of females willing to discuss care arrangements.<sup>4</sup> In studying this small, nonrandom sample of children, I aimed simply to identify themes and patterns in the responses.

Although the children had diverse family structures (twelve lived with two parents, six with a single mother, and four moved between co-parenting households), all but two had substantial experience living with a single parent employed full-time or two parents employed full-time. Ten of the children had experienced *only* full-time parental employment in recent years, but the rest had experienced changes in parents' (especially mothers') employment levels, giving them a basis to make comparisons.

Most parents wanted me to interview them before their child, so that they could "check me out." Usually, I scheduled the child's interview on a subsequent day, to underscore that the interviews were independent. I emphasized to the children that *they* are the real experts on their after-school experiences and that the research team especially wanted to know *their* opinions. Confidentiality guarantees were explained carefully. About two-thirds of the child interviews were conducted at their home; usually a parent was home too, but out of hearing range. For about a third of the interviews, I was alone with the child in an apartment to which I had access, next to the school.

The interviews with children ranged from forty-five minutes (which seemed to be the limit for the most restless ones) to over an hour and a half. Although I had a list of questions, I let each interview flow somewhat spontaneously, in order to build rapport and explore the child's perspective. I took notes and also (with permission) taped the interviews. Transcripts were coded thematically for analysis.

### **The Children's Responses**

My analysis highlights five patterns I observed in the responses concerning time with parents. Together, they construct a case against any surface reading of children's views on this matter.

#### **1) Children's feelings about more time with parents were complex and contradictory.**

In the interviews, asking children directly about the impact of parents' long workdays evoked the most pauses and the most stammering. One such reaction came from Bradley, whose parents both work forty-five hours a week or more and have longer-than-average commutes.<sup>5</sup> His mother usually gets home around 7:00 or 7:30 PM. Here is what this otherwise articulate boy had to say about his mother's workload:

*Interviewer:* So with your mom, do you feel like she's working too hard, or is it okay, or what?

*Bradley:* It's—it's—she [*pause*]. Well, she's, uh, eh, ee—it's okay, but ah!

Sarah provides another example of an articulate child having difficulty with this subject. Her mother works two jobs for a total of five and a half days, including all day Saturday. (Her father, who lives separately but co-parents, also works full-time.) Sarah had given flowing answers to prior questions, but when I asked how her mother's work schedule affects her, she replied:

Well, uh, um, my mother's work schedule is all right to me. It's not very hard to cope with [*pause*], and [*pause*] I think [*pause*], uh [*long pause*]. Let me see, um [*pause*]. I think it [*pause, then says with sudden cheerfulness*] really helps, because she has two jobs, and they both help us out a lot. So I'm pretty okay with the work schedule she has. It's not very hard to cope with.

If this answer were reduced, on a questionnaire, to “I feel okay about my mother’s work schedule,” would that truly represent this girl’s feelings?

Taken as a whole, Sarah’s interview illustrates the contradictions I often encountered in children’s responses. Further along, she told me that she does not get enough time with either parent and that they both work hard and are tired almost all the time. Yet when I asked her about the balance her parents have between their jobs and their time with her, she described them both as having “a pretty good balance.” Again, I envisioned her filling out a questionnaire, checking off that her mother’s and father’s work/family balance is good.

In many of the interviews, children seemed to be struggling with an uncomfortable mix of feelings. When my questions tapped those feelings, they tended to respond by stammering and then trying to say something positive, which usually came out sounding lukewarm and not too convincing.

## **2) Children seemed reluctant to express—or even let themselves *feel*—negative emotions about their parents’ long work hours.**

Children’s body language marked moments at which they seemed to be holding in or repressing feelings. Most strikingly, two children dropped their heads down so far toward their laps that they seemed to curl up in a protective ball. One of them, Ranita, is the only child of a single mother who works full-time in a computer software job. Ranita leaves school at 2:45, comes home by city bus, and usually is on her own for the rest of the afternoon. I asked about the impact on her of her mother’s work hours:

*Interviewer:* How does your mom’s work schedule affect you, in terms of when she can be there and when she can’t be there?

*Ranita:* Well, I don’t know. She’s—she’s there enough, I guess. She doesn’t need to be there, like, all the time, but she’s [*clears throat*]—she’s there, like, 6:00, 6:30. [*Long pause.*]

*Interviewer:* Do you ever miss her being there or wish she were there earlier?

*Ranita:* [*Drops head toward lap and says very softly*] No.

Kevin has two parents who also work long hours in the computer industry. A few years ago, his mother had worked on the East Coast for a year, flying home to California on weekends or every other weekend. Subsequently, his father had worked in the east for a year, coming home

every other weekend. When I asked in each case how the parent's absence had been for him, Kevin responded with a perfunctory "fine." He told me that, currently, his mother works more than full-time and often gets home after dinner. Again, I asked about his feelings:

*Interviewer:* Do you wish she worked fewer hours?

*Kevin:* [*Drops head way down.*] No, I think it's fine. [*Clears throat.*]

In Kevin's case, I had strong reason to doubt his flat responses of "fine." While setting up at his home for the interview, I had overheard him complaining (in the hallway) to his father that his mother again would be home from work quite late. Kevin then went off to the kitchen for a quick snack. Before disappearing upstairs, the father came over and told me that the mother's long workdays are a big issue for Kevin. Yet, in the interview, Kevin did not articulate any negative feelings about his mother's (or father's) work schedule.

Like adults, children do not necessarily express to a researcher what they really feel (or all of what they feel). Of the twenty-two children in this study, Ranita and Kevin were among the least forthcoming overall. However, when I asked children whether they wish parents spent more time with them, the responses often were guarded. Loyalty to parents probably played a role, deterring them from revealing dissatisfaction to an adult stranger.

Some children seemed to prefer not to let themselves feel discontent about parents' limited availability. In other words, they did not "want to go there." Jaleel had immigrated six years ago from a Southeast Asian country, where his parents had held professional jobs. In California, the parents have been doing low-paid sales and service work. Currently, Jaleel's father has two full-time jobs and works seven days a week. When the father had just one full-time job, he was able, at times, to ride bikes and play catch with his two sons, but now he hardly ever can. I asked Jaleel about his father's situation:

*Interviewer:* How do you feel about his working two jobs right now?

*Jaleel:* I don't know how to, um, explain. [*Pause.*] Let's see. [*Long pause, nervous smile, silence.*]

*Interviewer:* Do you miss him?

*Jaleel:* Kind of. A little bit. Maybe.

Like other children I interviewed, Jaleel seemed to be trying to make the best of the situation:

*Interviewer:* Do you get to see [your father] much?

*Jaleel*: I only get to see him in the morning [before school], and right now he comes back at 9, and that's my bedtime, 9:30 is my bedtime. And, so, not as much, but I get to see him a lot in the morning. And on Wednesdays he comes back early. And on, I think, Saturday he doesn't come back as late, and I get to see him a lot because, um, I get to stay up late, and I can see him [*voice gets softer and fades*] a lot more then.

It seemed to me that Jaleel had reconciled himself to his father's schedule and was hesitant to express or even feel any longing for things to be different.

To the extent that children did express negative feelings about parents' long work hours, those comments tended to come toward the end of the interview, after the child had opened up more. Jason provides a striking example. At two different points, he spoke about his life several years earlier, when his parents had separated, his father had moved away, and his mother had needed to work long hours to keep the family (Jason and three siblings) afloat. The first time around, Jason stated:

I used to stay home for, like, six hours, 'cause my mom never was home. . . . It was neat, though. It was pretty neat, 'cause I used to get on the phone and talk [with friends] for hours and hours and hours.

Twenty minutes later, Jason brought up that same situation again:

Sometimes she'd stay out pretty late, and I would get worried, and I'd start shivering, and I'd call my friends, and I'd talk to them for hours and hours on, till my mom finally got home. And I'd be, "Yippee, she wasn't kidnapped!" . . . It would be, like, 8 o'clock, which was late for me, and it was all dark. I didn't want to have foster parents, pretty much.

On a questionnaire or in a short interview, Jason might just give his initial response that the experience was "neat" and not disclose the more intimate information about his shivering and fear.

Jason's interview illustrates another tendency in the children's responses: it seemed easier for them to complain about the *past* than about the present. Jason's mother still is single and still works full-time (as a real estate agent). I asked how he feels about her current work situation:

*Interviewer*: How does [her job schedule] affect you?

*Jason*: Doesn't. Doesn't. It doesn't. Only when she [*yawns repeatedly*]*—I'm* lacking oxygen right now. I don't know why. It doesn't, uh, 'cause it only— it only used to, when she used to have appointments that went to, like,

midnight. . . . And I'd be in bed by then, so I wouldn't get to see her before I went to bed, which made me kinda disappointed. But not [*laughs*]*—she doesn't do that any more.*

Later, I tried another way of probing his feelings about his mother's current availability. I found it painful to listen as he labored to get out his halting, jumbled response:

*Interviewer:* At this age, now that you're in middle school, do you think what you need from her as a parent is different from when you were younger?

*Jason:* I just—I think—I think it would have been better if she was with me as much as she was this—now—back then. But in—as she was then—but now—but I still wish she—I'm still glad she was here now, because it's really nice. I wish she was still—she was more there then—and now—because I'd feel a lot better.

My interviews led me to believe that quite a few of the children were not expressing the extent to which they wanted more time with parents or the extent to which they experienced parents' limited availability as problematic. Not only did children seem reluctant to *express* such feelings, but some seemed to be trying to *suppress* such feelings.

### **3) Some children who liked having more time with parents nonetheless put other considerations first—especially financial needs/desires and parents' well-being.**

Older children understand that whatever desire they may have for parental time must be weighed against other needs and desires. In my interviews, the factors that children brought into the equation most frequently were economic considerations and thoughts about what was best for their parents. If children cede priority to these other considerations, this does not necessarily mean that they are satisfied with the amount of time they have with their parents.

*Financial Needs/Desires.* Children showed awareness of the financial worries of parents. In the two-parent family with the lowest income among those I studied, the mother (of three, including a baby) has been in and out of the labor force, while the father has worked full-time in a blue-collar job. When I interviewed their son Antonio in December, the mother had been at home for several months with the baby, but was just starting a new full-time clerical job. She had told me that the family was far behind in paying bills and badly needed her to bring in income. Fortunately, her own mother lives nearby and can provide child care. In my interview with Antonio, I asked about the impending changes:

*Interviewer:* Your mom said that she's about to start a new job, full-time, so how do you think that will work out?

*Antonio:* That's gonna be great, 'cause she's gonna have more money for Christmas to buy more presents for us, and that's gonna be great.

*Interviewer:* She'll have more money, but then she won't be around in the afternoons. Is that a problem or not?

*Antonio:* It's almost like a problem, but it's all right. It's good that she's working and everything.

Although Antonio stressed the presents for Christmas, just two weeks away, elsewhere in the interview he brought up the unpaid bills. He has enjoyed having his mother at home full-time, but would be unlikely in the next months to assert a desire for more time with her, given the family's precarious economic situation.

For some children, material aspirations outweighed the desire to have more time with parents. For example, in another working-class family, Sandra has had her mother at home for several weeks on a stress-related leave from a full-time job. The father works full-time in a factory and, after work, spends much of his time building a third story to the house the family co-owns with two families living downstairs. Sandra spoke about how nice it was to have her mother more available now and how stressed her mother had been while working. Thus, I was surprised by her next answer:

*Interviewer:* If it was totally up to you to decide whether your mom was here in the afternoons or not, what would you want?

*Sandra:* I would probably want her to work.

*Interviewer:* Why?

*Sandra:* Because I want to have a new bedroom. And she—when she gets back to work, she'll have the money to pay for it. Because, with my dad, we mostly pay the bills and food and our clothes and stuff. But we need her to work so we can buy the bedroom [furnishings] and fix the rooms upstairs.

Sandra has been sharing a bedroom with her younger brother, and one of the new rooms will become hers. She wants a rug for it and a new bedroom set, because her current one is old.

Sandra certainly was not oblivious to or callous about her mother's stress and has appreciated her mother's greater attentiveness and calmer state since the mother went on leave. However, for Sandra, those considerations were secondary to her wish to have a room of her own rather than share with an eight-year-old boy—understandable for a girl entering adolescence. Her

new room will be finished only if her mother brings in more money, so Sandra was not choosing time with her mother (or even her mother's well-being) as her top priority.

In the middle-class families, children knew that their lifestyle depended on their parents' working long hours. Elaine, whose parents both have full-time professional jobs, told me that she would like more time with them but refrains from telling them so. She explained that her mother

works because she wants me and my brothers to have good educations and she wants us to, um, when we're older, be able to afford everything. . . . I get sad sometimes that they work so much, but, you know, they're just doing it to help us and support us and . . . send us to college and to buy us what we want.

Although Elaine noted negative effects of her parents' long workdays, she understands the values and priorities that lead them to work long hours and does not press for more time with them.

Recent research suggests that many children are pressuring parents to buy them expensive toys and the "right" brand-name clothing (Center for a New American Dream 1999). Their consumerism reflects a rise in advertising and marketing aimed at children. I wondered if children in my study wanted such material goods more than they wanted additional time with parents. For the most part, my interviewees associated parents' long work hours with overall family maintenance or with significant aspirations, such as Sandra's getting a bedroom of her own or Elaine's getting to go to a good college, rather than with discretionary spending on upscale items. Elaine did state that her parents like to be able to "buy us what we want," but she emphasized more their spending for private schools and high-quality colleges.

In the family with the highest income, Kevin's family (in which each parent had worked on the East Coast for a year, and the mother now often works past dinner), the issue of consumer goods versus time with parents came up in a poignant way. Because Kevin had responded mainly in monosyllables to probes about his feelings, I tried a very direct approach, which evoked his most fervent response:

*Interviewer:* A lot of adults worry about are they spending too much time or energy with the job and how does that affect their time with their families. That's what I'm trying to get at, kids' point of view, is it a problem or not? How does it affect you?

*Kevin:* I don't care what my mom does, 'cause I think whatever she does is fine with me. Because she does plenty *for* me, so I shouldn't be too [*inaudible—sounds like "needy" or "greedy"*]. She's a great person. For

Christmas she got me something I really, really wanted. And the Christmas before that, she got me something else that I really, really wanted. Before that, she got me something else that I really, really wanted. And she has done, really, a lot of nice things for me. So I don't really care whether she's at work late or not, 'cause I know she always has time for me.

Kevin seemed to feel his mother's caring and love despite her demanding work schedule. The spirit of his statement did not convey a valuing of material gifts more than his mother's presence, but a fierce loyalty to his mother and a defensive effort to see the situation in the best light he could.

*Considerations of Parents' Well-Being.* Despite children's initial hesitation to express negative feelings about parents' long work hours, most eventually did describe their parents as tired and/or stressed. In effect, then, they are being asked if they want more time from a parent they know to be under pressure and already drained. Directly or indirectly, several children told me that they did not want to burden their parents further.

A few children whose mothers held professional, technical, or managerial jobs conveyed their support for the mother's career and their pride in her accomplishments. One girl with an engineer mother spoke admiringly of her mother's struggle as a woman to succeed in a nontraditional field. Other children showed awareness that the mother's work meant a lot to her. To the extent that children empathize with their mother's occupational aspirations, they may be more accepting of the limits on her parenting time.

Thus, my interviews indicate that children may put other considerations ahead of whatever desires they have for more time with parents. Under those circumstances, children to some extent "damp down" or "turn off" desires for more parental time and may respond that they are getting enough of it.

#### **4) Children were influenced by social messages that they should not press for more time with parents.**

Along with the trend toward full-time employment for both mothers and fathers has come the notion that as long as children and parents spend some "quality time" together, there is no

need to spend large *quantities* of time together. The flip side of the legitimation of rather limited parenting time is a certain *de*legitimation of desires for more parenting time.

This social climate affects children as well as adults. The two children who brought up the concept of spending quality time with a parent used it to refer to doing ordinary, mundane activities together. Sarah, the girl whose mother works five and a half days, including all day Saturday, was explaining that she spends “*every single* Saturday” [her emphasis] at a friend’s house. She said she wishes that instead she could “spend some quality time” with her mother—“like, we could go shopping or something.” Sarah seemed to be couching her wish for *more* time with her mother in the socially acceptable language of wanting some quality time.

Jason, who as a small boy had shivered when home alone, also spoke of quality time in relation to his mother. He explained, “I like to spend time with [her]. That’s what I do. It’s, like, quality time. . . . We normally sit down, we have a little laughs, we eat a little, and we just, we talk, we do homework.” Whether or not those activities fit most people’s definitions of quality time, Jason is describing a leisurely “hanging out” together that requires a fair *amount* of time. The way in which he invoked the phrase “quality time” suggested a certain need to justify or legitimize wanting to spend time with his mother.

##### **5) Children tended to accept and not question their parents’ work/family schedules; later, looking back, they might be more critical.**

To some extent, children regarded their parents’ work/family situations as simply “the way things are”—not something to question or evaluate. Two girls displayed this kind of attitude about their fathers, who had worked long hours throughout the girls’ childhoods. When I asked Aline how she (and her brother) are affected by her father’s not getting home until 6:30 or 7:00 PM, she replied, “It doesn’t really affect us, because he’s always been home that late, ever since I can remember.” Lee Ann’s father gets home around 6:00 PM, but then often spends the evening working at home. Lee Ann explained,

I don’t do a lot with him. I don’t know my dad as well as I know my mom. My dad just has his little things to do, and sometimes he doesn’t want to be interrupted, but I’m fine with that. It doesn’t really matter. . . . I don’t usually do things with him alone or anything.

The children whose mothers consistently have worked full-time also tended to perceive that situation as the norm. Nora is an only child whose single mother gets home around 6:00 PM. Nora used to stay in an after-school program, but since turning ten, she has been spending those hours at home, alone. When I asked about her friends' after-school arrangements, she mentioned two girls whose mothers are at home in the afternoons. She added, "For me, it seems really weird, since their mom is there when they get home. . . . [They] have another person in the house, and that seems odd to me. . . . It's so *different*."

Children also adapt to *increases* in their parent's work hours and, before long, may accept the new situation as "the way things are." As Tanya observed, "Once you get used to something, you don't really think about it very much. It's just what happens." For example, Bradley and his three siblings had to adjust to their mother's longer workdays when she was promoted to a management position, two years ago. (Bradley is the boy who said 'uh, eh, ee—it's okay, but ah!' about his mother's workload.) As a manager, the mother doesn't get home until 7:00 or 7:30 PM. (Bradley's father works an early shift and comes home in the late afternoon, but then often falls asleep on the couch.) I asked Bradley about how his mother's longer hours have affected her parenting:

*Interviewer:* With your mom, when she gets home from work, does she tend to be tired or does she have energy for you?

*Bradley:* She has a little bit of energy. Usually, when she comes home, she's tired. She has, like, this little rule that we have to follow. We can't ask her any questions past 9 o'clock. She starts to get grumpy, and, if she's sleeping and you wake her up, she acts like a bear. She gets mean.

*Interviewer:* So how do you feel about that?

*Bradley:* It's okay, because I usually ask her questions before 9 o'clock.

Children often are described as resilient because of their ability to adjust to a wide range of family situations and find them "okay." Perhaps Bradley truly does not consider it problematic that his mother arrives home as late as 7:30 and by 9:00 is too tired to respond to him. Perhaps, in his mind, "it's just what happens." However, Bradley's acceptance of the situation does not mean that the situation is positive for him.

Children may accept their parents' work/family schedules because they feel powerless to change them. In retrospect, though, they may feel more critical about parents' level of

availability than they felt—or “allowed themselves” to feel—at the time. The most negative descriptions of life with a full-time working mother came from children whose mothers (whether single or married) had gone, in the recent past, from full-time employment to being at home part- or full-time. Perhaps these particular mothers *had* experienced worse situations than the others. However, my sense was that these children felt freer now to criticize “the old regime” and to let out negative feelings about it. Also, the contrast provided by the current situation brought into consciousness or sharper relief the problems of the old regime:

*Sandra:* Before, she was always in a rush, because she was late. . . . And she would also come tired from work and, like, kind of frustrated and mad.

*Lauren:* She's been able to help me on homework, and hang out, watch movies if I'm done with homework, and relax together. It's a lot better [than] when she had to work. . . . She was always mad, frustrated.

*Michelle:* She has more time to sleep. . . . And so then she's, like, happier, and sometimes she can just rest and stuff. And so she's nicer now.

My interview with Sophie also illustrates this point about retrospective criticism, even though Sophie was the sole child in the study complaining about *too much* time with a parent. For two years, her single mother had been at home on disability and only recently had returned to full-time employment. In the at-home period, the mother had spent many hours helping out at Sophie's elementary school. Sophie told me that she had not liked having her mother there so often. Yet she had not told her mother this, during that period. I asked why, and Sophie replied, “Well, at the time, I didn't really think about whether I liked it or not. . . . I didn't mind it then, but now that I think about it, it's like, ooh, why!” Similarly, children may not mind, at the time they fill out a questionnaire, that their employed parents have little time for them, but in subsequent years, looking back, they may say more critically, “ooh, why!”

For a variety of reasons, then, I concluded from my interviews that, beneath responses expressing acceptance of or contentment with parents' long work hours, there often was a mix of feelings, including negative ones that children were reluctant to verbalize or even acknowledge to themselves. Some of this discontent did get spoken as the interview progressed; some likely remained latent or suppressed.

## Discussion

My analysis has emphasized the extent to which children's negative feelings about parents' work schedules were difficult for them to access and express. However, these children also had positive feelings about being on their own after school, like the Norwegian preteens studied by Solberg (1990). My interviews led me to caution against underestimating children's desires for more time with parents, but the complex and contradictory reactions of the children demonstrate that they both do *and* do not want more time with them.

Given that these respondents all were ten to twelve years old, I need to consider in what ways their age may have affected their answers, even when they were recalling reactions from earlier years. In the larger study of which this research is a part, I found that the transition to middle school (at age ten or eleven) typically emboldened children to press for substantially more autonomy from adults. At the same time, these preteens faced many challenges in adjusting to the changes of puberty and to the new middle-school environment, making support from caring adults very important (Polatnick 1999). Thus, a strong mix of feelings about time with parents may be especially characteristic of this age group.

Both Belle (1999) and Galinsky (1999a) address how the variable of age affects desires for more time with employed parents, but their conclusions differ. In studying children ages seven to sixteen, Belle found that the *younger* ones were particularly likely to want more time with parents after school (p. 79). Galinsky compared children eight through twelve with children thirteen through eighteen and found the *older* group more likely to want more time with parents (p. 69). With continued research on care issues of older children as well as younger children, perhaps scholars will be able to develop a more age-differentiated analysis of how children experience their parents' work schedules.

My findings also may have been affected by the gender imbalance in my child interview subjects. Overall, the eight boys seemed even more hesitant than the fourteen girls to verbalize desires for more parenting time, although there were exceptions. I asked children about fathers as well as mothers, but they had more to say concerning their mother's availability, partly because mothers had gone through more changes in their hours employed. Children seemed to take fathers' limited availability more for granted. However, in Galinsky's (1999a: 70) study, children

were “more likely to feel that they have too little time with their employed fathers than with their employed mothers.” Does this finding just reflect the fact that fathers work longer hours than mothers, or does it reflect something more about children’s feelings regarding mothers versus fathers? Additional research on children’s views of their fathers’ availability would be useful.

One of the main points I have made about studying “working parents” is the importance of distinguishing among different degrees of employment. Even the designation “full-time” encompasses a wide range of workweeks, from thirty-five hours on up into the long-hours stratosphere. If having “working parents” per se is not problematic for children, research should zero in on what *is* likely to be problematic: i.e., situations in which the parents work long hours.

With regard to this point, Galinsky (1999a: xv) reports some surprising data. Comparing children of at-home and employed mothers, she found that they “do not differ on whether they feel they have too little time with their mothers.” This finding certainly warrants further exploration.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that research on children’s views takes place in a highly politicized atmosphere, in which different interest groups are promoting particular agendas vis-à-vis work/family issues. Right-wing political and religious leaders embrace evidence that children need or want more parenting and construe it as support for returning to traditional sex roles. Some career-oriented feminists resist evidence that children need or want more parenting time, fearing that it will feed the backlash against women’s gains. Corporate interests welcome findings that suggest children do not mind parents’ long work hours. In light of these ideological pressures, researchers should be especially careful in how we study and interpret children’s views and present them to the public. Whether we like it or not, our findings become ammunition in the culture war over “family values.”

### **Conclusion**

In the national discourse about working parents, children’s thoughts and feelings need to be included. The trend in studies of children toward highlighting *their* perspectives and agency provides an important corrective to limited portrayals of children as merely the objects of adult

care. Giving “voice” to children, without “overindulg[ing] in researcher interpretations” (Sixsmith and Knowles 1996: 13) is a valuable contribution to the work/family literature.

However, my research serves as a warning about “underindulging” in researcher interpretations or taking at face value what children check off on a work/family questionnaire. On thorny, emotionally charged subjects, children’s responses, like those of adults, are likely to be complex, ambiguous, and contradictory. The methodology of in-depth interviewing—including critical reading of what is communicated verbally and nonverbally and what is not communicated—allows exploration of that complexity. With younger children, this methodology can be modified or supplemented by creative forms of “play and talk” (Moore, Sixsmith, and Knowles 1996: 6). Extended participant observation also allows for a more nuanced understanding of how children perceive and react to their parents’ levels of availability (Lareau 1998).

Children’s views, like those of adults, are shaped by what is considered “normal” in their environment and by cultural messages concerning what is and is not appropriate to say or feel. It is the task of sociologists to put the views people express in context and ponder how they reflect social pressures and counterpressures. The majority of children I interviewed did not expect to have “quantity time” with their mothers or fathers and felt that it was not realistic or appropriate to desire that. When we “ask the children,” their answers may only reflect current realities, in which most parents work long hours and few can achieve a healthy work/family balance. If children tend to accept this situation as the way things are and to feel that they cannot or should not expect anything different, let us think twice about construing that response as contentment.

## Notes

1. However, talking about “working parents” also can mask or relapse into a focus on “working mothers” only.
2. Some media accounts have presented the 10 percent and 15.5 percent figures as simply the percentages of children who want more time with mothers and fathers. See, for example, Delsol (2000) and Facts in Action (2000). In fact, when Galinsky (1999b: 52) launched her book with a short excerpt in *Newsweek*, the article had on its first page a box highlighting key findings, including that “only 10% of kids want more time with Mom, 15.5% with Dad.” Although later in the excerpt, Galinsky conveys what the question really asked (i.e., for their number one wish), I think that the misleading boxed statistics leave an impression on readers’ minds.
3. The team included Dr. Elaine Bell Kaplan and Christopher Davidson.
4. Because the official purpose of the interviews was to find out about after-school arrangements, fathers typically deferred to mothers and bowed out, even though I wanted their perspectives, too.
5. The average roundtrip commute for U.S. employees is 47.5 minutes (Bond, Galinsky, and Swanberg 1997: 37).

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Parents spend very little time with children in my country because they have to work so much that they have no time. Then they buy children so many toys because they feel guilty. They buy them electronics like iPhones and iPads to stimulate the children, and the kids and parents rarely put them down when they do have time together. Do children spend enough time with their parents? Kathleen Godfrey, Raised 3 children. Answered Jun 1, 2017 · Author has 1.5k answers and 1.1m answer views · Often, when I was employed full time, it was because my spouse was not. I knew lots of families who followed similar employment patterns, (mid 1980 through to 2010) So to answer your question, Yes. I think a lot of kids do/did have lots of time with their parents in my country.