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Running On Empty

America's Time-Starved Families with Children

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Parents in the United States today spend less time with their children than parents in any other country in the world. According to Harvard psychiatrist Armand Nicholi, only Great Britain rivals the U.S. in parental absence, a fact which he believes Americans should find troubling:

> If one factor influences the character development and emotional stability of a person, it is the quality of the relationship he experiences as a child with *both* of his parents. Conversely, if people suffering from severe non-organic emotional illness have one experience in common, it is the absence of a parent through death, divorce, time-demanding job, or absence for other reasons.[1]

Parents in the U.S. today devote roughly 40 percent less time to childrearing activities than did parents a generation ago. In 1965, the average parent spent approximately 30 hours a week in direct or indirect contact with children; by 1985, parent-child interaction had declined to just 17 hours a week.[2]

Many Americans share Nicholi's concerns about the rise of parental absence. For example, a recent survey commissioned by the Massachusetts Mutual Insurance Company found that Americans believe "parents having less time to spend with their families" is the single most important reason for the family's decline in our society.[3]

The decline in parental time with children is due in large part to an increase in the number of hours families with children devote to paid employment. While the length of the average work week in America has changed little over the last three decades, the fact that so many more families today have two adult earners (65 percent of all married mothers were in the labor force in 1988, up from 28 percent in 1960) means that there has been a substantial increase in the total number of hours two-parent families work for pay.[4]

There are two ways to view this shift in time with children to time on the job. From a patriarchal perspective, the shift stems from a significant increase in the number of employed married mothers. From an egalitarian perspective, the shift stems from the fact that the increase in labor force activity by married mothers has not been offset by a corresponding decrease in hours of paid employment by married fathers. In either case, there is a growing consensus that the increase in time devoted to wage-earning activities has been driven by both economic and cultural forces.

Property Values, Cultural Values

One of the supreme ironies of economic developments since the early 1970s is that while America has experienced steady growth in its gross national product, more and more families have found it increasingly difficult to live on a 40-hour-a-week paycheck. Higher taxes on middle-income parents and real wage stagnation (especially for non-supervisory workers and males under age 25) have both contributed to growing economic pressures on families with children. So have increases in the cost of most major family expenses -- including housing, health care, transportation, and higher education -- which have outpaced the general inflation rate.[5]

The trade-off between time and money can be seen in the Hobson's choice many families face in buying a home: Should they buy a lower-cost home in a poorer school district with higher crime rates in order to minimize income-producing pressures? Or should they sacrifice time with children in order to earn enough money to purchase a higher cost home in a safer neighborhood with better schools?

Growing economic pressures, however, are not the only reason families spend less time together. Karl Zinsmeister of the American Enterprise Institute believes "unbridled careerism" is also to blame:

> For years, one of the most cogent criticisms of American sex roles and economic arrangements has been the argument that many fathers get so wrapped up in earning and doing at the workplace that they become dehumanized, losing interest in the intimate joys of family life and failing to participate fairly in domestic responsibilities. Now it appears workaholism and family dereliction have become equal opportunity diseases, striking mothers as much as fathers.[6]

Unfettered materialism has also contributed to the reduction in family time. A recent Pennsylvania State University study found that the rise in two-earner white families since 1960 has been driven more by a preference for a higher standard of living than by economic necessity. "The rising proportion of married mothers entering the labor force since 1960 is largely due to family decisions to earn a second income so that the family may enjoy a higher standard of living," the authors concluded.[7]

Not only have adults sought material possessions for themselves, but it has become all too common for parents to buy material goods for their children in an attempt to compensate for their frequent absence from the home. Harvard University psychiatrist Robert Coles calls this the "teddy bear syndrome":

> Some of the frenzied need of children to have possessions isn't only a function of the ads they see on TV. It's a function of their hunger for what they aren't getting -- their parent's time. Children are no longer being cared for by their parents the way they once were. Parents are too busy spending their most precious capital -- their time and their energy -- struggling to keep up with MasterCard payments. They're depleted. They work long hours to barely keep up, and when they get home at the end of the day they're tired. And their kids are left with a Nintendo or a pair of Nikes or some other piece of crap. Big deal.[8]

Some material goods are even designed to substitute directly for parent-child interaction. For example, Hallmark recently introduced a line of pre-printed greeting cards with messages like, "Have a super day at school" and "I wish I were there to tuck you in."[9] The cards demonstrate that it can no longer be assumed that parents are available to children at times that have been reserved traditionally for family life. As one father interviewed at a recent focus group

study in Baltimore, Maryland observed:

> One of the TV stations used to come on at 11 o'clock and say, "It's 11 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" It should have said, "It's 11 o'clock, do you know where your parents are?"[10]

Coming Up Short

How do different work arrangements affect family time? A recent study by University of Virginia sociologists Steven Nock and Paul William Kingston shows that two-earner couples not only spend less time together than do breadwinner-homemaker couples, but the time they do spend together is of lower quality since hours not spent on the job are often devoted to chores and errands homemakers typically do during the day (meal preparation, laundry, grocery shopping, etc.).[11]

In addition, two-income households spend considerably less time with their children than do breadwinner-homemaker households. This discrepancy is most pronounced in maternal time with children. Time diary research collected by University of Maryland sociologist John Robinson shows that as hours of maternal employment increase, time spent in "primary child care activities" -- dressing, feeding, bathing, chauffeuring, talking to, playing with, helping with homework, etc. -- decreases.[12] Accordingly, mothers employed full time spend just under half as much time in primary child care activities as non-employed mothers at home.[13]

Moreover, contrary to some published reports, employed mothers do not spend a higher proportion of their total time with children engaged in "high quality" child-centered activities like playing with dolls, going to the park, or reading *Green Eggs and Ham*. Instead, non-employed mothers spend roughly twice as much time as employed mothers in child-centered activities and this 2-1 ratio is also found in comparisons of overall time with children.[14]

While there is a negative correlation between hours of maternal employment and time with children, fathers employed 40-49 hours a week actually spend more time in primary child care activities than do fathers employed less than 40 hours a week.[15] Moreover, even though some traditional families clearly suffer from father absence due to the time-demanding nature of the sole breadwinner's work, Nock and Kingston find that, on average, fathers in one-income households actually spend more time with their children than do fathers in dual-income families.[16] One research review suggested that guilt-ridden employed wives may "push the dads out of the way in their rush to spend time with baby at the end of the day."[17]

Whatever the case, Nock and Kingston believe data on paternal time with children contradict "the widespread sense -- or, perhaps more accurately, feminist hope -- that a new, more involved male parental role has emerged with the prevalence of dual-earner families."[18]

Indeed, breadwinning responsibilities continue to dominate paternal time use patterns, and many men continue to view their family responsibilities primarily in wage-earning terms. For example, one Baltimore father said he would be reluctant to turn down a significant increase in salary, even if it meant giving up time with his children:

> That raise or promotion might make it a little bit easier . . . You want them [children] to have it a lot nicer than you did, to have some things that you didn't have growing up, or go someplace that you always wanted to go to and never went to.[19]

Still, many men report making career sacrifices for family reasons. For example, one Baltimore father said he switched occupations because his former line of work required him to be on call 24 hours a day. Another described how he turned down a substantial promotion because it would have required his family to be transferred far from close relatives.[20]

A recent Washington Post survey found that 23 percent of the fathers in the Washington metropolitan area had declined a job promotion due to family considerations. In addition, 15 percent said they had taken an unchallenging job to give them more time with their children, and nearly half said they had cut back their work hours to be home more often.[21]

While it is difficult to know just how significant these sacrifices are, it is worth noting that the amount of time married fathers devote to primary child care activities has actually increased slightly since 1965. Unfortunately, this increase has been offset by a decrease in the proportion of father-present families during this same time period.[22]

Double Trouble

Just as the increase in time devoted to income-producing activities has contributed to America's "family time famine," so has the rise in single-parent households.

Children in single-parent homes usually receive less parental attention, affection, and supervision than children in two-parent families. Not only is one parent absent from the home (and research by sociologist Frank Furstenberg shows that three-fourths of all children of divorce have contact with their fathers less than two days a month), but the other parent is often overloaded with money-making and household tasks. For example, one single mother who participated in the Baltimore focus group worked an average of 64 hours a week between two different jobs. She typically left the home at 7:30 a.m. before her 10-year-old son left for school and sometimes did not arrive back home from her second job until well after midnight.[23]

On average, single mothers spend one-third less time each week than married mothers in primary child care activities.[24] Moreover, children in single-parent families watch more television and sleep fewer hours a night than their counterparts in two-parent homes -- in part because their overloaded mothers have greater difficulty monitoring their activities and maintaining consistent bedtime routines.[25]

This lack of household order and predictable routine negatively affects child development. "I don't think we can escape the conclusion that children need structure and oftentimes the divorce household is a chaotic scene," writes psychologist John Guidubaldi, past-president of the National Association of School Psychologists.[26]

The time deficits in single-parent households are aggravated by the devastating emotional effects of divorce on children. It is little wonder that, when compared with children in two-parent families, children in single-parent families have lower measures of academic achievement, and increased levels of depression, stress, anxiety, aggression, mental illness, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, youth gang membership, and other physical, emotional, and behavioral problems.[27]

Life in the Fast Lane

Increased time demands on families with children mean that the pace of life is faster. "Increasingly, family schedules are intricate applications of time-motion principles, with everything engineered to the minute and with each piece designed to fall in the right place at the right time," observes Barbara Whitehead of the Institute for American Values. "When a shoe is lost, or a cold car engine fails to turn over, or the baby fills his diaper just after he's been zipped into his snowsuit, or the staff meeting runs late, the whole intricate schedule can unravel and fall apart."[28]

The added stress associated with such hectic schedules means that the time parents and children do spend together is often hurried or of poor quality. As one Baltimore parent put it:

> There was more conversation in my house growing up. In place of communication [today], you have the Nintendo and the VCR and cable.[29]

Much of the stress parents face comes directly from work-related pressures. A recent study by Dunhill Personnel System and the University of Columbia Business School found that three of four managers say stress at work sometimes affects their home life, while only one in three say stress from home affects their work life.[30]

Part of this increased job pressure is an outgrowth of growing diversity in the labor market. A generation ago, Joe Familyman worried little about leaving the office at the designated quitting time to go home to his family because virtually all of Joe's colleagues also had family responsibilities to fulfill. Today, Joe and Joan Familyperson often feel pressure to stay late, in part because they are in daily competition with individuals who have no family or civic responsibilities -- individuals all too eager to burn the candle at both ends in their unrelenting quest to climb the corporate ladder.

Of course, parents are not immune to workaholic fever -- and its time-related frustrations. Many can identify with Marcia K. Hornok's recent poem, "Psalm 23, Antithesis":

> The clock is my dictator, I shall not rest,
> It makes me lie down only when exhausted.
> It leads me to deep depression.
> It hounds my soul.
> It leads me in circles of frenzy for activity's sake.
> Even though I run frantically from task to task,
> I will never get it all done,
> For my "ideal" is with me,
> Deadlines and my need for approval, they drive me.
> They demand performance from me, beyond the limits
> of my schedule.
> They anoint my head with migraines.
> My in-basket overflows.
> Surely fatigue and time pressure shall follow me all
> the days of my life.
> And I will dwell in the bonds of frustration
> forever.[31]

To be sure, other factors contribute to the problem. For example, much of the increased job pressure stems from greater global competition in the marketplace -- competition that heightens the need for new technologies that can turn work around faster. For example, one legal search consultant observes:

> In the past, clients would say, "Give it to me in two days." Then there was Federal Express and overnight mail. Now people want it to be faxed. There's just a much faster pace.[32]

This faster pace takes its toll on family life, especially when both spouses are involved in high-powered jobs. "On the fast track of two-career families in the go-go society of modern life, the most-rationed commodity in the home is time," writes author and columnist Suzanne Fields.[33]

Moreover, since different families (often appropriately) respond to time and money pressures differently, Whitehead says "today's family schedules are customized to fit each individual family -- they are as unique as a fingerprint or a snowflake."[34] This is a marked contrast from life in the 1950s and 1960s. As Whitehead recounts:

> Family routines tended to be shared by nearly everyone on the block. Mothers put babies and toddlers down for naps at about the same time in the afternoon. Kids played in the streets until they were called in for supper. Fathers washed cars in the driveway after work. Since family life moved in common rhythms, it was easy for parents to connect with each other, build friendships, help each other out, and support each other as parents.[35]

Because community life no longer moves in common rhythms, parents find it increasingly

difficult to build neighborhood friendships and support networks. This is especially troubling since extended families are more scattered geographically, leaving many parents cut off from kin networks.

The absence of close-knit communities fuels parental fears about the safety of their children. As one Baltimore parent put it: "When my kids go out to play, I have my head out the window every minute, 'Yo! Answer me!' You know, you're just afraid."[36]

Such close supervision is a notable change from childrearing in previous generations. One Baltimore parent recalled:

> I remember my mother letting us go. We'd go back in the woods and we'd go back to the stream, and we'd play kickball in the middle of the street. You can't let kids do that nowadays.[37]

The decline in community, and the increasing time pressures within families, are also threatening many organizations that depend heavily on volunteers. For example, *The New York Times* recently reported that several thousand New York-area youths are on waiting lists to join the Boy Scouts because of an acute shortage of individuals "willing to denote their own precious time to become troop leaders, assistant leaders, merit badge counselors, and general role models." The *Times* attributed the shortage in part to the fact that employed parents "have enough problems juggling their personal assignments and ambitions with the competing demands, schedules and ill-timed illnesses of their own children, let alone trying to leave work in the midafternoon once a week to help a dozen 12-year-olds send semaphore signals the length of a church basement."[38]

Thus, when all the evidence is taken together, there is a clear and unmistakable breakdown in what sociologist David Popenoe of Rutgers University describes as "arguably the ideal childrearing environment":

> a relatively large family that does a lot of things together, has many routines and traditions, and provides a great deal of quality contact time between adults and children; regular contact with relatives, active neighboring in a supportive neighborhood, and contact with the world of work; little concern on the part of children that their parents will break up; and the coming together of all these ingredients in the development of a rich family sub-culture that has lasting meaning and strongly promulgates such family values as cooperation and sharing.[39]

Clearing Up Confusion

Despite all these problems, some observers pooh-pooh talk of a growing time famine. They lambaste commonly-cited surveys showing that Americans are working longer, pointing out that more reliable time diary studies show that the average work week has remained fairly stable since the 1940s when the 40-hour work week was standardized.[40] Moreover, they note

that since 1965 there has been a 10 percent increase in the amount of time Americans devote to leisure activities.[41] Thus, Robert Samuelson of *Newsweek* argues:

> Just about everyone seems to think that Americans are more harried and short of time than ever before. Well, we aren't. This is a psycho fact. We feel it, and therefore it must be . . . The sense of an unprecedented time squeeze is partly a generational phenomenon. Baby boomers are raising children, and these years are always crowded. But being self-absorbed as ever, baby boomers think their experiences are uniquely unique.[42]

Gary Burtless of the Brookings Institution is even more pointed in his criticism of those who complain about time pressures:

> In the past 20 years, the amount of time devoted to watching television has climbed faster than the average amount of free time. To judge by their actual behavior, most Americans who complain they enjoy too little leisure are struggling to find a few extra minutes to watch Oprah Winfrey and "L.A. Law."[43]

When America is viewed as a nation of individuals, Samuelson and Burtless are right on the money. At a macro level, reliable time diary data show that Americans today do not work more or play less than Americans a generation or two ago. But when the scope of time measurements is limited to families with children, the picture changes quite dramatically. The average worker may not be working more or commuting considerably longer than in 1965, but since the average family is now much more likely to have two wage earners, families with children today are devoting more time to paid employment and commuting than did families a quarter-century ago. This, combined with the growth in single-parent families, means that parents today have less time with children and less leisure time. In fact, the amount of time fathers of preschoolers devote to leisure activities has declined 25 percent since 1975. For mothers of preschoolers, leisure time has dropped 11 percent during this same time period.[44]

Declines in leisure time among parents of young children have been more than offset by increases in leisure time among other demographic groups. For example, due to a significant rise in early retirement, the amount of leisure time among Americans aged 51 to 64 has increased 22 percent for men and 25 percent for women since 1965.[45]

While it is clear parents have less discretionary time, some play down the significance of America's parenting deficit by arguing that the decline in family size means that children today receive more individualized attention from their parents than did children a generation ago. Even if this were true -- and sociologist Harriet Presser reports "not only are Americans having fewer children than ever before, they are spending less time with the children they have" -- a reduction in the total amount of time parents spend with children indicates, at the very least, that the importance of the childrearing function in the life activities of parents has declined.[46]

In addition, it can hardly be argued that a one-child family generally has as rich a family experience as a larger family. Even if an only child receives more individualized parental

attention, he still misses out on the intimate joys of having brothers and sisters -- playing whiffle ball in the backyard, exchanging gifts at Christmas time, double-teaming Dad in a wrestling match on the family room floor, attending a sibling's ballet recital, and (later in life) reminiscing about old times at family reunions.

Moreover, dividing the amount of parental time with children by the number of children in a family presents problems. As David Blankenhorn explains:

> I am instinctively suspicious of the argument that fewer children per family means more time per child. What if 20 years ago on a Tuesday a mother in Omaha spends 15 hours taking care of her three children, while this year on a Tuesday a father in Paducah spends five hours taking care of his only child, then sends the child to day care for the rest of the day. I suppose you could say that all four children in question got five hours of parental time -- but I think that would distort the real situation rather than illuminate it.[47]

Quality and Quantity

Apart from other considerations, some question the seriousness of the family time problem, pointing out that measurements of both maternal and paternal time devoted to "primary child care activities" (a subset of total time spent with children) have remained fairly constant since 1965.[48] While this is true, macro measurements of "primary" time mask significant changes that have taken place at a micro level. For example, given the fact that "primary" time with children is significantly influenced by marital status and maternal employment, the stability in maternal and paternal "primary" time suggests that decreases in "primary" time due to growing proportions of single-parent and employed-mother families have been offset by increases in "primary" time (though not necessarily total time) among non-employed mothers and married fathers.[49] Thus, even if one is concerned only about "quality time," there is reason to be concerned that more families today face significant time pressures than was true a generation ago.

Of course, focusing primarily on measurements of "primary child care activities" poses significant problems. While there is little question that some parent-child activities are typically more significant than others, measuring "quality" interaction is not easy -- especially when researchers are processing parental diaries of time use rather than observing family interactions first-hand. Indeed, as most parents know, some of the most delightful and meaningful times with kids are those spontaneous episodes that often arise during the course of routine activities -- squirting each other with the hose while watering the lawn, talking about schoolwork while walking the dog, singing silly songs together on the drive to the grocery store. Such episodes are not considered "primary child care activities" unless respondents identify their primary activity as being child-centered. In other words, such episodes are not considered "primary" time unless respondents report that they were "singing silly songs with the children" rather than "driving to

the grocery store."[50]

Likewise, many non-routine family activities that often play an important role in building strong parent-child bonds and in developing a shared family identity -- such as visiting Grandma, attending a baseball game, or viewing home movies -- are often subject to similar definitional problems. Accordingly, it is easy to see why author Deborah Fallows is critical of time studies which focus exclusively on "all-out, undisturbed, down-on-the-floor-with-the-blocks time."[51]

Even if "quality time" could be measured with great precision, there would still be a need to give significant attention to total parent-child time together. In fact, it could be argued that even total contact time is too narrow a measurement since it does not include time when parents are accessible to children though not in their immediate physical proximity. While there is little data which measures parental accessibility to children per se, a number of indicators -- including the growth in "latchkey" children -- suggest that parents are less accessible to children than they were a generation ago.

Thus, there is merit to focusing on narrow measures of "quality" time as well as broad measures of "quantity" time. Clearly, children need both. Indeed, the once-popular myth that "it is the quality of time -- not the quantity -- that really matters in parent-child relationships," has been widely challenged by child development experts in recent years. They point out that if this same "quality, not quantity" logic were applied to other areas of life, a business would not suffer if it were to cut back to only four hours a week -- so long as they are four high-quality hours -- and a hungry man would be satisfied by a mere one-ounce serving of the very finest filet mignon.[52]

Starved for Attention

"To succeed as a family, folks have got to spend time together," observes John DeFrain, a psychologist whose study of more than 3,000 families identified "spending lots of time together" as one of seven keys to strong family life. DeFrain adds, "Dinner time is one of the best for throwing all of the good things and bad things into the family melting pot."[53]

Nevertheless, eating dinner together is one time-honored family tradition some believe is on the way out. "The family meal is dead," columnist Jonathan Yardley writes. "Except on the rarest occasions -- Christmas, Thanksgiving, certain religious holidays -- when we reach down to the innermost depths of the tribal memory and summon up turkeys and pies, roasts and casseroles, we have given up on what was once a central element in American domestic life."[54]

Recent research on the prevalence of regular family mealtimes paints a somewhat different picture. A 1990 *New York Times* poll found that despite the growth in single-parent and two-earner families, 80 percent of all families still eat each day's major meal together.[55] While the poll results underscore the resiliency of some family traditions, it is important to point

out that the *Times* may have overstated the case. For example, the poll defined "dining together" in such a way that a three-person family that regularly eats without one member being present would nevertheless be counted among the 80 percent who eat together regularly. Moreover, the story failed to cite Roper poll data showing a 10 percent decline in the number of families that eat dinner together since 1976.[56]

In addition, it devoted little attention to the recent emergence of heat-and-eat microwave dinners for children to prepare themselves which one frozen food industry representative calls "the hottest new category in food products."[57] This development concerns many. As Suzanne Fields observes, "The child who grazes, standing in front of a microwave eating his fried chicken, biscuits, or refried beans won't starve, but he may suffer from an emotional hunger that would be better satisfied if only Mom and Dad were there to yell at him for every pea he slips onto the knife."[58]

Of course, the *Times* is hardly alone in putting a happy face on some ominous social trends. For example, in a 1990 article about the growing number of fast-track commuter marriages, *Time* magazine observed that spouses who live in different cities have "more time for work, friends, and hobbies." The line prompted a tart reply from Fields: "Who needs a husband when there's a bowling alley down the street?"[59]

Gimme Just A Little More Time

Whatever the "experts" may say, it is clear many parents are concerned about the lack of time they have available for their children. A 1990 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 57 percent of all fathers and 55 percent of all mothers feel guilty about spending too little time with their children.[60] A 1989 *New York Times* survey found that 83 percent of employed mothers and 72 percent of employed fathers say they are torn by conflict between their jobs and the desire to spend more time with their families.[61] And a 1988 *USA Today* poll found that parents with young children identify "missing big events in their children's lives" as the thing they most dislike about their current day care situation.[62]

While the breadwinner-homemaker model still has considerable appeal among ordinary Americans, it is important to note that concerns about family time are not limited to those who regard this model as ideal. For example, when respondents to the Massachusetts Mutual survey were asked to identify "extremely effective" ways to strengthen the family, nearly twice as many answered "spending more time together" than answered "full-time parent raising kids."[63] Similarly, a 1988 *Parenting* magazine survey found that home-based employment outranked both full-time homemaking and employment outside the home as the most appealing work-family arrangement for mothers and fathers.[64] A 1987 Cornell University study found that two-thirds of all mothers employed full-time would like to work fewer hours so that they could devote more time to their families.[65] As one Baltimore mother employed full time put it:

> I would like to spend more time with my son hugging him and just doing anything where we could be together... I see that there is a lot of hate and confusion and

upset in him and just one thing I would like to do is hold my child.[66]

The breadth of concern about America's family time famine may surprise leaders in government, academia, and the mass media who often view efforts to increase family time -- particularly those that recognize the strengths of the breadwinner-homemaker model -- as an attempt to "turn back the clock" rather than "facing the realities" of modern family life.

Such assumptions fail to recognize that most Americans do not sneer at the past the way many "experts" do. As Barbara Whitehead observes:

> In the official debate [on family issues], the remembered past is almost always considered a suspect, even unhealthy, guide for the present or future . . . But for the parents I met, the remembered past is not a dusty artifact of the good old days; it is an important and vital social resource. Parents take instruction from their own family's past, rummaging through it for usable truths and adopting -- or modifying or occasionally rejecting -- its values . . . In the official language, the family isn't getting weaker, it's just "changing." Most parents I met believe otherwise.[67]

Indeed, many parents sense that the climate for raising children has deteriorated in recent years. Whereas June and Ward Cleaver's biggest worry was that their sons might get caught up in some of Eddie Haskell's schoolboy pranks, today's parents often have to contend with much weightier fears: drugs and guns in school, sex abuse in day care, teen pregnancy, and youth suicide. Not surprisingly, a recent Gallup poll found that 81 percent of all American adults believe it is tougher growing up today than it was when they were children.[68]

Much of the reason for parental concern stems from the fact that children today face extraordinary pressures at ever-younger ages. For example, one Baltimore mother reported:

> My son came home -- he's in first grade -- and said somebody told him his clothes were dorky . . . He said, my clothes aren't cool, Mom. And, I said, what does "cool" mean? And he didn't know, but he knew that was something he wanted to be.[69]

Another Baltimore mother reported:

> I talk to my daughter a lot because in school she's under a lot of peer pressure for a lot of different things. At nine years old, they're already talking about sex in school. So it's very, very important to me, even with my schedule, [to] make sure that I sit down and ask her what she thinks.[70]

Like these mothers, many parents lament the loss of childhood innocence. They recognize that the children most vulnerable to negative peer and cultural influences are those who lack strong relationships with their parents. And they believe the increasingly treacherous road to adulthood only heightens the need for significant amounts of parent-child interaction. As one

Baltimore parent put it:

> I think they [the children] need [their parents] in times when you're not doing anything. They need to see what you do during the day. They need to learn your values by being with you.[71]

All in the Family

Many parents believe unfriendly cultural changes in recent years have made unhurried time with children even more important today than it was a generation ago. While parents in the early post-World War II era could count on various social institutions -- schools, churches, youth organizations, and the mass media -- to reaffirm the values they wanted instilled in their children, parents today are more apt to see themselves swimming upstream against outside forces.

Thus, it is not surprising that many families today seek to maximize the amount of time they spend with children, often by having one parent forego employment or by having one or both parents work part-time or from home. (Were it not for the efforts of such parents, the national drop in time with children since 1965 would be even greater.) According to a 1990 Census Bureau report, 47 percent of all U.S. children under age five are primarily cared for by a non-employed mother at home.[72] While some of these women view themselves as permanent homemakers, many see themselves as "sequencers" -- women seeking to "do it all" over the course of their lifetime instead of all at once. Since most sequencers return to the labor force before their children are fully grown, the proportion of school-aged children with non-employed mothers is 32 percent, about one-third less than the proportion for preschool children.[73]

Among those mothers who are employed, many hold seasonal jobs or work for pay part-time (which the U.S. Labor Department defines as anything from 1-34 hours per week). This is particularly true for married mothers with young children. In fact, only one in three married mothers is employed full-time year-round.[74]

Moreover, some employed mothers, especially those with preschool children, work from home. According to the Census Bureau, 20 percent of all employed married mothers regularly work at home. A similar proportion of employed fathers also work from home (although fathers are less likely than mothers to work exclusively from home) and the proportions for each gender are growing rapidly. In fact, between 1988 and 1991, the number of workers who do some income-producing work from home grew from 24.9 million to 38.4 million.[75]

Some of these homeworkers are exclusively home-based, while others divide their paid work time between home and an outside work site. Likewise, some home-based parents are self-employed professionals or small business owners, while others are employees of an outside company. For example, a number of major corporations -- including IBM, Honeywell, Aetna, J.C. Penney, AT&T, American Express, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield -- use home-based "telecommuters" for word processing, data entry, telemarketing, claims processing, and other

clerical functions.[76]

Many parents find home-based employment appealing because it offers them significant control over their work schedule. This means that rather than trying to squeeze in some "quality time" with the kids at the end of long work day, homeworkers can often organize their work schedules around family needs. For example, one part-time accountant interviewed at the focus group study in Baltimore said she did much of her work at home after the kids were in bed so that she could be free during the day to be involved in various child-centered activities, like being a "grademother" for her child's class at school.[77]

In addition, home-based employment spares family-oriented workers the time-consuming hassle of commuting, and saves them money on transportation, meals, business clothes, day care, and other work-related expenses. To the extent that these savings reduce the number of hours one must work for pay to make ends meet, parent-child interaction is facilitated further.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, five percent of all preschool children are primarily cared for by their mother while she earns income.[78] Most of these mothers are involved in some sort of home-based employment, but a small fraction have "carry-along jobs" -- such as working in a day care program -- which allow them to care for their own child while they earn income outside the home. For example, *The Washington Post* recently ran a feature story on a part-time cab driver who did her rounds with baby on board. The cabbie, who grew up in an inner-city ghetto, said she opted for this unusual child care arrangement because she did not want her baby to spend the better part of its childhood the way she had -- with a babysitter.[79]

Most employed parents, of course, do not have jobs which permit them to care for children and earn income simultaneously. These parents employ a variety of time-management strategies to meet their work and family responsibilities. In many families today, spouses work different shifts. In fact, one employed married mother in six has an employment schedule that does not overlap at all with her husband's work schedule, and many other couples have shifts that only partially overlap.[80] "Tag-team" arrangements are particularly common in families with preschool age children. These families often choose this arrangement to maximize the amount of time children are cared for by at least one parent. The most prevalent "tag-team" or "split-shift" arrangement is one in which the father works a standard full-time day job and the mother works part-time in the evenings or on weekends.

In other two-income households, both parents work daytime shifts. Families in which the youngest child is of school age often choose this strategy to maximize the amount of time the entire family is together and to minimize the amount of time parents are unavailable to children during non-school hours.

Of course, not all two-income families can work out an arrangement that minimizes family time loss. Moreover, not all want to. In some dual-earner households, greater attention is

given to career and income maximization than to childrearing and family time maximization.

Recent research suggests that such families may be more the exception than the rule, however. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the primary child care arrangement for 60 percent of all children under age six is care by one or both parents. For another 11 percent, the primary child care arrangement is care by a grandparent or other relative. Thus, roughly seven in ten preschool children in the U.S. today are primarily cared for by one or more family members.[81]

While there has been a clear trend away from family care in recent years, the resiliency of parent and grandparent care has not been reported widely. This has been due in part to the fact that government bean counters rarely include children with non-employed mothers at home in their child care statistics and usually focus greater attention on where a child is cared for (his home, another's home, a day care center) than on who is providing the care.

Moreover, since most research studies, media stories, and policy debates present a neat dichotomy between employed and non-employed mothers, many are quick to draw the mistaken conclusion that the number of families using day care can be determined by measuring the number of employed mothers. This practice fails to take into consideration all those families where spouses work split shifts or work from home or turn to Grandma to care for the kids.[82]

Of course, some policymakers and day care advocates claim that most families that care for their own children do so only because they cannot afford or do not have access to more preferred forms of "high quality" care. Field interviews by social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of the Institute for American Values contradict this claim. "Most parents believe the safest and best child care is provided by a parent or close relative," Whitehead reports.[83]

A number of recent surveys support her case. A 1989 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll found that eight of ten parents with children under the age of 14 believe it is best for young children to be cared for by their mother at home.[84] A 1989 *USA Today* survey found that 73 percent of all two-parent families would have Mom stay home full-time with children "if money were not an issue."[85] And a 1989 University of Michigan study found that most employed mothers opting for care by family members do so out of preference rather than necessity.[86]

Parental preference for child care by family members is widely shared by the American public. A 1989 Lou Harris poll found that 82 percent of the American public believes care by parents and other family members is superior to care by non-relatives.[87] A 1989 Gallup poll found that by a 5-2 margin, Americans believe it is better for families to make economic sacrifices so that children can be cared for by a parent at home than to maximize family income to improve their economic standing.[88] And a 1990 Times-Mirror poll found that 73 percent of the respondents believe "too many children are being raised in day care," up from 68 percent in 1987.[89]

Concerns about group day care are well-founded. A number of recent studies have raised

serious questions about day care's impact on the physical health, social development, and psychological well-being of young children. Indeed, Harvard University's Burton White believes day care centers are ill-equipped to provide the "large doses of custom-made love" children need.[90] Bryna Siegal of Stanford University observes that children placed in day care at an early age tend to be more conformist and peer-dependent than other children.[91] And Jay Belsky of Pennsylvania State University notes that infants and toddlers placed in full-time substitute care are at greater risk of establishing weak and insecure bonds with their parents and of demonstrating problematic behavior -- serious aggression, social withdrawal, uncooperativeness, and intolerance of frustration.[92]

Time for Action

Despite such findings, some experts believe our nation's government and business policymakers should respond to America's growing parenting deficit with a massive effort to socialize childrearing -- day care for infants and toddlers, mandatory preschool for young children, after-school programs for latchkey kids, longer school days and year-round schooling. Indeed, some steps towards such a brave new world have already been taken.

Thankfully, there is a growing recognition that easing work-family tensions in these ways places a much higher premium on enabling parents to work than on encouraging them to parent. In addition, there is a growing recognition among people across the political spectrum that government programs, however well-designed, are inferior to strong families.

As William Galston and Elaine Kamarck of the Progressive Policy Institute put it in their landmark 1990 report, *Putting Children First*:

> Government cannot, under any set of circumstances, provide the kind of nurturance that children, particularly young children, need. Given all the money in the world, government programs will not be able to instill self-esteem, good study habits, advanced language skills, or sound moral values in children as effectively as strong families . . . Government will never have the resources or the ability to replace what children lose when they lose supportive families. This suggests that the focus of public policy should be to look for ways to create stable families, not substitute families.[93]

Rather than expanding the scope of government to replace families, policymakers should seek to help parents fulfill their child-rearing responsibilities by giving special attention to promoting: (1) pro-child tax relief; (2) home-based employment and other family friendly work policies; (3) life cycle reorganizing; and (4) policies that encourage family stability.

Pro-Child Tax Relief

Since time is money and money is time, allowing families to keep more of their own earned income would free parents to spend more of their time with their children. Accordingly, Congress should restore to their 1948 value tax benefits keyed to the presence and number of children by either: (1) increasing the dependent exemption and expanding eligibility for the Young Child Tax Credit (which is currently limited to low-income families with infants); or (2) consolidating into a single tax credit all existing tax benefits for families with children, including the dependent exemption, the Dependent Care Tax Credit, Dependent Care Assistance Plans, and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

In either case, Congress should ensure that middle-income families are no longer shortchanged in tax policy (a child born to a middle-income family currently has a significantly lower "tax value" than one born to richer or poorer parents).[94]

In addition, Congress should ensure that tax benefits tied to day care expenses are replaced by benefits available to all families with children. This would eliminate the tax code's current "parenting penalty" which not only discriminates against families in which one parent stays home full-time to care for children, but it also shortchanges two-income families that seek to minimize their use of paid substitute care by working part-time, working split-shifts, working from home, or having a grandparent or other unpaid relative care for their children. Interestingly, the Soviet Union eliminated in 1990 a similar policy which penalized non-users of day care, opting instead for greater across-the-board benefits to all families with children.[95] Canada is considering a similar policy change.[96]

Home-Based Employment and Other Family-Friendly Work Policies

In addition to giving parents greater control of the money they earn, government and business policymakers should seek to give parents greater control over when, where, and how much they work for pay. For starters, policymakers should remove impediments to home-based employment and help usher in a computer-driven, high-tech version of the old agrarian economy in which the home is a major center of economic production for both mothers and fathers. Indeed, from a family time perspective, the pre-industrial agrarian family model was superior to the 1950s-style breadwinner-homemaker family model since it facilitated greater father-child interaction and allowed mothers to make a more significant economic contribution without abdicating childrearing responsibilities.

Making the transition to a neo-agrarian economy will require some modifications. For example, in the old agrarian economy, children typically could play at their parents' feet without significantly disrupting work. Today, this is less possible, especially for parents with information-processing jobs which require considerable mental concentration.

But such challenges should not deter the shift to a more home-based economy. Indeed, home employment has many advantages. For starters, there is reason to believe that children benefit from having parents accessible during the day. Charlotte Hails, a 19-year-old daughter

of a homeworking mother, recently told *The Washington Post* that she and her brother were pleased their mother worked from home while they were growing up because "if we had a question we could ask her" and because "we were not left with people we didn't know" like so many other children in their neighborhood.[97]

In addition, there is reason to believe children benefit from being able to observe their parents work for pay. Not only does it provide a marked contrast to more-commonly observed parental activities, such as unpaid work and leisure pursuits, but it can also open up opportunities for children to receive some job training at home. "My [teen-aged] daughter has four years' experience in retail sales and is computer literate," one father whose family has a home business recently boasted.[98]

Of course, home-based employment is not just good family policy. It is also good energy policy since it reduces gasoline consumption, good environmental policy since it reduces automobile pollution, good foreign policy since it reduces our dependence on foreign oil, good budget policy since it reduces the need for roads and bridges to accommodate rush-hour commuters, and good public safety policy since it reduces daytime home burglaries.

Apart from encouraging more homework, policymakers should further the proliferation of flex-time and compressed work week policies, and should offer greater flexibility in benefits and compensation. Cafeteria benefit plans, which permit employees to select benefits from a menu of options, help employees build a compensation package that meets their unique needs. They ensure that all employees are treated fairly. This is an important consideration at a time when some are advocating benefit reforms that promote certain tax-free employee benefits -- such as day care assistance -- that are of little or no use to families seeking to maximize parental time with children.

Of course, there is good reason for government and business policymakers to steer clear of some benefits altogether. For example, no benefit could be less worthy of the "family friendly" label than day care for ill children. If ever there were a time for work obligations to take a back seat to family responsibilities, it is when a child is sick. Thus, rather than encouraging parents to deposit sick kids in institutions (with endearing names such as "Chicken Soup" and "Sniffles and Sneezes"), employers should offer, among the menu of benefit options, additional leave days to care for ill family members.

Life Cycle Reorganizing

In addition to other changes, government and business policymakers should encourage a re-ordering of priorities over the life cycle. Curiously, Americans tend to work greater hours during the stage in life when they are most apt to have childrearing responsibilities and fewer hours (if any at all) during the twilight years of life when they are least apt to have childrearing duties. This discrepancy is accelerating. Indeed, at the same time that young families have been

devoting more time to paid employment, Robert Samuelson reports a dramatic decline in labor force participation among the over-65 population. "In 1947, nearly half of all men over 65 worked; in 1960, it was still a third. By 1987, only 15 percent of men over 65 (and 11 percent of all elderly) worked."[99]

To remedy this perverse allocation of time, policymakers should make it easier for Americans to approach paid work more like distance runners (who pace themselves and run for a longer period of time) than like sprinters (who run at breakneck speed for a shorter period of time). In practical terms, this means more part-time work and job sharing for people of all ages. It means multiple career ladders paced at different speeds, which allow workers to adopt a career path that best accommodates their family goals and responsibilities at each stage in life. It means "sequencing" so that families can have one parent stay home to care for children, particularly during the critical early years of a child's development.

One way to encourage "sequencing" would be for employers to provide "parental preference" in re-hiring to former employees who quit their jobs to spend a number of years devoting themselves to the care of children or ill family members. "One of the reasons mothers stay in the work force [after the birth of a child] is they are afraid they won't be able to rebuild their careers if they stay home with young children," observes *Washington Post* columnist Judy Mann.[100]

Parental preference policies would allow mothers to take time off to raise children, without seriously jeopardizing opportunities for future employment. Furthermore, parental re-employment privileges would be of particular benefit to displaced homemakers who unexpectedly find themselves in need of employment after the death or divorce of a spouse. Thus, "parental preference" policies would reduce significantly the economic vulnerability of non-employed homemakers.

Promoting longer-range, slower-paced career strategies is apt to appeal to men as well as women. In fact, a 1989 survey conducted for Robert Half International, an executive recruiting firm specializing in finance, found that only one in four men would prefer a "fast-track" career path over a slower-paced alternative that promised career advancement.[101]

As one might expect, there is a linkage between taking time off when children are young and working for pay later in life. A 1989 study conducted by researchers at Duke University and the University of Florida found that sequencing mothers tend to retire from employment later in life than women who work outside the home when children are young.[102]

While there is reason to believe this trend would continue, there is certainly no harm in seeking to promote a more economically productive lifestyle for Americans in the twilight stage of life. Indeed, given that life expectancy has steadily risen in recent years, there is reason to at least consider accelerating currently scheduled increases in the Social Security retirement age, raising retirement thresholds beyond age 67, and eliminating early retirement benefits altogether.

In addition, policymakers should encourage "phased retirement" plans which allow those working during the twilight stage of life ("twilighters") to gradually reduce rather than abruptly halt their labor force commitment. Moreover, policies should alter the Social Security earnings test to eradicate the bias against paid work among benefit recipients, although this tax change should certainly be given lower priority than pro-child tax relief.

Encouraging Family Stability

Finally, lawmakers should construct family policy which favors two-parent families. While it is appropriate to laud the efforts of conscientious single parents striving to give all they can to their children, policymakers and other leaders have a moral obligation to acknowledge -- in their words and in their policies -- that children are best served when they have the opportunity to be raised in a two-parent family.

The will to acknowledge such an obvious truth has often been lacking, yet the urgency to do so has never been greater. As Vanderbilt's Chester Finn puts it:

> Today we seem to attach more opprobrium to dropping out of school, experimenting on a cat, or uttering nasty remarks on campus than we do to giving birth to what, not so many years ago, were called "illegitimate" children . . . [C]hildrearing arrangements not based on a decently functioning family are inferior to arrangements that are based on such a family. It's like a heart transplant. You may live for a while, and you may be better off than when your own heart was failing, but you are always worse off than people with healthy hearts that came into the world with them. To acknowledge this is not enough. We need to teach it, to preach it, to persuade people of it. It's a whole lot more important to the society's future than stopping smoking or lowering cholesterol levels or recycling aluminum cans.[103]

There is much that needs to be done to discourage illegitimacy. Policymakers should adopt policies which encourage sexual restraint as the way to avoid out-of-wedlock pregnancy. In addition, attention should be given to promoting marriage or two-parent adoption as the best responses to an out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

Indeed, marriage is the number one escape route from poverty and welfare dependency. More than one third of those leaving AFDC do so because of marriage. Thus, policymakers should promote a variety of "wedfare" policies which remove government disincentives to marriage among the poor. Not only would such policies combat economic poverty, but they would alleviate some of the task overload of single mothers struggling to raise children.

To combat the primary route to single parenthood -- divorce -- policymakers should seek to reform no-fault divorce laws. Galston and Kamarck at the Progressive Policy Institute advocate

"braking mechanisms" which would call for a "cooling off" period before a divorce can be granted in cases where children are involved. Others have suggested giving prospective couples the option of choosing either a "first-class" marriage which can be severed only by findings of fault or a "coach-class" marriage which can be dissolved by current no-fault standards.

Policymakers should not shy away from giving serious consideration to proposals designed to reduce single-parenthood. While many fear that acknowledging the weaknesses of a single-parent structure will stigmatize children being raised in one-parent households, the truth is these kids and their parents already know they are disadvantaged. And many are not afraid to say so. In fact, one single mother in Baltimore confided:

> I feel kind of funny saying this, but my husband and I are talking about getting back together. I don't really feel that much for him, but I know my boy needs a father. And it's hard being on your own.[104]

Passing the Front Porch Rocker Test

While there is clearly a need for government and business policies which give parents greater economic autonomy, it would be a mistake to suggest that policy changes are the sole key, or even the primary key, to greater parent-child interaction. Indeed, no dramatic change in parent-child interaction is apt to take place so long as the predominant cultural message of our time is one which says that family time should take a back seat to career aspirations and material gain.

To be sure, most young people would not object to seeing the work and family pendulum swing back in the direction of home. A 1990 special edition of *Time* magazine on the "twentysomething" generation found that 63 percent of the 18-29 year olds polled hope to spend more time with their children than their parents spent with them.[105] As Ellen Galinsky of the New York-based Families and Work Institute explains, "These young people have seen their parents come home from work wiped out and not have time for them, and they are saying they don't won't to live that way."[106]

Not surprisingly, the desire for parental attention and family time is shared by younger children as well. In fact, when 1,500 schoolchildren were asked, "What do you think makes a happy family?", John DeFrain and his colleague Nick Stinnett report that children "did not list money, cars, fine homes, or televisions." Instead, the answer most frequently offered was "doing things together."[107]

There are signs that attitudes are changing, that U.S. parents are increasingly concerned about the lack of time they have available for children. In fact, recent polls taken by Gallup, Roper, *The Washington Post*, and Yankelovich Clancy Shulman all show that concerns about family time have grown since the mid-1980s.[108] Ultimately, however, it is parental behavior -- not parental attitudes -- that must pass the "front porch rocker test" First Lady Barbara Bush

described in her 1990 commencement address at Wellesley College:

> At the end of your life, you will never regret not having passed one more test, not winning one more verdict or not closing one more deal. You will regret time not spent with a husband, a friend, a child or a parent.[109]

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- "primary activity child care," in which respondents reported that their time was spent in some child-centered activity ("feeding the baby," "helping with homework," etc.);
- "secondary activity child care," in which respondents reported some child care activity when asked, "Were you doing anything else?" for each primary activity (for example, "burping the child while watching television");
- "with whom" or "child-contact" time, in which respondents reported children as social partners when asked "with whom were you doing this (primary) activity?" (for example, grocery shopping with child, eating a family meal together, etc.).

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