

May 1, 2001

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Family Time: Why There's Never Enough

Family time – the stuff of memories – is highly valued, endlessly pursued and acutely missed when snatched away by over-bloated work and activity schedules. But is this elusive treasure just a nostalgic illusion? If so, it is persistent and pervasive in today's work-driven culture as parents strive to build a secure bank of memories for their children to reap in the future, according to research published in the May edition of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.

In “deconstructing” the ideology and realities of family time, University of Guelph (Ontario, Canada) sociologist Kerry J. Daly explored the contradiction between the sentimental expectations of the quest and the actual experiences – including the disillusionment and guilt – of failing to meet this deeply felt obligation.

Collectively, families are working more than in the past, but the total amount of time they have together hasn't changed dramatically over the past few decades, according to Daly. What has changed, however, is that the time they have together is faster and has a greater density of activity with household chores to be done and children's activities to go to, he says.

Daly's study included 61 in-depth interviews with 28 dual-earner and single-parent families – the two most common forms of families in North America. Some observational studies of their pre-school children were also conducted.

“Parents see family time as being spent primarily in the service of children, with children's needs and schedules setting the timetable for everyone,” says Daly. For “time-poor” parents, the demands of schedules and households – even when the whole family is present – prevent the type of family time they desire.

Parents in the study were consistent in describing what family time should be, with the past serving as the primary source of their ideals. Togetherness, positive experiences and happy interactions were viewed as essential to creating a source of memories. Even the young children talked about “the whole family having fun together.”

Ultimate family time was distinguished as being spontaneous and unstructured. “Spontaneity is highly valued in the face of their fast and highly structured lives,” Daly explains.

While pressures on family time have changed in response to a transformed economy and different types of family structures, beliefs about this traditional value seem resistant to the most radical cultural shifts. The production of memories is a compelling social and personal responsibility.

Parents want to give their children a secure anchor of memories to call on and perpetuate in the future, says Daly. But regardless of the most earnest efforts, they aren't able to recreate what they recall and cherish as calm, uninterrupted family time in their childhood. Some parents expressed fear that they were so preoccupied trying to produce ideal memories for their children that they might not fully experience the moment themselves or miss it altogether.

This gap between what they expected and experienced caused pervasive disappointment and guilt. Parents felt guilty for working too much, for not spending enough time with their children, for getting babysitters, for wanting their children to go to bed, for taking time for themselves – personally or as a couple – at the expense of the family. Culpability was so commanding that many parents gave up trying to overcome it and instead focused on how to live with their guilt.

Either the realities or the ideal must change, says Daly, if families – and Western culture – are to reconcile the discordance between sustaining the reassuring myths and values of a more simple past and living with today's time-constrained family circumstances.

Daly suggests two approaches to realigning family time expectations and experience. One is to find ways of creating and protecting time boundaries that can be used by the family. This might involve decisions to work less, reduce the number of children's activities, watch television less, or to schedule more unstructured time in the family agenda. The other approach is to re-evaluate expectations for what family time should be. This means redefining family time to accommodate smaller segments of time and more fragmented activities, or even developing pastimes that build one-on-one relationships instead of having everyone together and interacting.

“Perhaps the ideals we carry in our heads are no longer viable in today's world,” says Daly. “Family time has become a kind of prescriptive term for upholding standards from a nostalgic past. The difficulty is that parents are struggling to meet an expectation that may no longer be sustainable or meet the realities of living in more complicated, work- and activity-driven families.”

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The *Journal of Marriage and the Family* is the quarterly publication of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), 3989 Central Ave. NE, Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421.

Telephone: (763) 781-9331. The article, “Deconstructing Family Time: From Ideology to Lived Experience” will be available soon on the NCFR website:

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