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Time for work, commuting and parenting? Commuting parents' involvement with their children.

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Abbreviated title

Time for work, commuting and parenting

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For most Australian parents, there is continuing tension between work and family commitments. This tension is exacerbated by the need not only to have sufficient time available to children in the family, but also for that time to be characterized by nurturance and guidance. This paper reports on a qualitative study that explored how 21 part-time or full-time working parents, who also commute 10-15 hours a week to work, manage both the quantity and quality of their time with their young children (0-5 years). The study revealed the difficult conditions of commuting and the importance of social support to parents' wellbeing, as well as a significant pattern of parent-child interaction which we have described as 'attentive parenting.' Parents felt these activities contributed to the parent-child bond and their children's wellbeing in spite of an acknowledged lack of interactive time.

Keywords: time-use; parenting; commuting; parent-child relationships

Pour la plupart des parents australiens, la tension entre travail et famille existe toujours. Cette tension est exacerbée par la nécessité non seulement d'avoir suffisamment de temps disponible pour les enfants dans la famille, mais aussi et surtout pour leur apporter soutien et encadrement. Cet article porte sur une étude qualitative qui a exploré la manière dont 21 parents, qui travaillent à plein temps ou à mi-temps et qui se déplacent 10-15 heures par semaine pour aller travailler, ont géré la quantité et la qualité de leur temps avec leurs jeunes enfants (0-5 ans). L'étude a révélé les conditions difficiles de déplacements, l'importance du soutien social au bien-être des parents, ainsi que d'une importante tendance à l'interaction parent-enfant que nous avons décrite comme étant du «parentage attentif». Les parents ont estimé que ces activités contribuent à l'attachement parent-enfant et au bien-être de leurs enfants en dépit d'un manque reconnu de temps en interaction avec leurs enfants.

Mots-clés : emploi du temps; comportement parental; déplacements; relations parent-enfant

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Introduction

At the heart of family life are parents' concerns for their children's wellbeing and their relationships with their children (Daly, 1996a; McAdams, Hart & Maruna, 1998). Most parents recognize that it is important to spend time with their children, yet as working hours increase, their child-available time decreases, and many parents feel they do not have enough time with their family (Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi & Robinson, 2004; Pocock, Skinner & Ichii, 2009). Parents also recognize that the 'quality' of the time with their children is important. However, we know very little of how time-poor parents use their child-available time to accomplish vital emotional or 'relational work' with their children (Daly, 1996b; A. Gray, 2006). This paper addresses the 'quality-quantity' issues of parenting by using qualitative data to investigate the working conditions and approaches to parenting of one group of parents who are particularly time-poor: employed parents who also commute long distances to work.

Although there is a significant amount of literature on work-family balance (for a review, see Bianchi & Milkie, 2010) and on the amount of time spent with children (Rapoport & Le Bourdais, 2008; Root & Wooten, 2008), in Australia there is relatively little discussion of the effect of time-scarcity on family processes such as relationships or parenting strategies. There are several possible reasons for this lack of discussion.

First, analyses of the three dominant Australian time-use studies (Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Surveys [ABS], the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia [HILDA] Survey, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children [LSAC], detail how much time parents spend on work and in family activities and the differences between fathers and mothers (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Craig, 2005). Although they also

describe parent-child activities, most do not explain how these interactions accomplish the emotional work that creates warm relationships between parent and child. Second, the concern that Australian parents are feeling pressured and wishing they had more time with their children is now greater. Although research on family trends dates back to the 80s, data collected through successive waves of HILDA and LSAC have only recently revealed parents' concerns (ABS, 2009; Relationships Forum Australia, 2007). Third, although we know that strains from work 'spillover' into family life (Grzywacz, Almeida & McDonald, 2002; Nelson, O'Brien, Blankson, Calkins & Keane, 2009), other aspects of work life may well spill over. Commuting long distances to and from work has specific benefits and disadvantages that may impact on work-family strain (Flood & Barbato, 2005; Wener, Evans & Boatley, 2005), but this time commitment is often hidden in working conditions or overall time burden statistics (e.g. Pocock et al., 2009), and not considered as a separate contributor to family wellbeing.

Finally, the conventional division of time into 'work time' and 'family time' or 'domestic labor' (Baxter, Haynes & Hewitt, 2010; Duxbury, Lyons & Higgins, 2007) may inhibit a more nuanced investigation of parenting in the context of time-scarcity. Sampling the frequency and amount of parents' time across different activities with children gives only a 'broad indication of parents' involvement' (Baxter, Gray, Alexander, Strazdins & Bittman, 2007, p. 49). Other activities such as travel or domestic work in the presence of children may have underlying attributes that also serve as relational work between parent and child.

Therefore, a different approach to studying time use in families may be useful. For example, some authors have considered time not only as a linear or temporal phenomenon – 'clock-time' – but also as having qualitative, social or process meanings (Daly, 1996a; Davies, 1994). Here, the subjective experience of time is seen as socially constructed, where these meanings of time are infused with values and beliefs about how time is to be used (Levine, 2006). Thus researchers of time in the family domain argue that to understand

family life better and ultimately to improve conditions for families in work, education or service delivery, it is important to look at the socially constructed aspects of time and family.

In particular, Daly's theory of family time (1996a) singles out the difference between the study of time management (how individual, family and work time is organized through tasks and schedules), and the study of people's attitudes to time allocation (for activities such as housework, market work or caregiving). He suggests that consciously monitoring and reflecting on family time use will be helpful when families seek 'a pace that is attentive to individual and family wellbeing' (p. 212). In this view, Daly suggests that one important task of research is to understand how families create 'family time', what this family time might look like, and the values behind these decisions. Researchers who consider time as a family resource are also keen to identify the nature of 'family time' (e.g., Huston & Bentley, 2010; Zubrick, Silburn & Prior, 2005).

Therefore in the following sections of the paper, we review previous research that shows how the scarcity of 'clock-time' for working parents has generated a concern for the quality of parent-child time in families. We discuss the conditions in which working parents find themselves, how they organize their time, and point to a hidden source of time consumption and work-family conflict: the long distance commute to work. The remainder of the paper then presents the study findings and discussion.

Time for work

Balancing family and work time is an enduring day-to-day challenge for parents. More than half of all Australian two-parent families are dual-earner families (ABS, 2008) and their work hours are increasing (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC], 2005). Australian men work an average of 46 hours per week and men with dependents tend to be those who work the longest hours (Australian National University, 2003). Australian mothers

are following the trend of US mothers (Bianchi & Mattingly, 2004), as 51% of mothers with children under 5 years are employed either part-time or full-time (AIFS, 2008).

As parents' work-hours increase, so too do the possibilities for the uneasy tension between time for work and free or family time. Working parents are on-call in both their work and family domains, although the relative pressure of these domains may see-saw over time (Edgar, 2007), and work conditions such as flexibility, access to paid parental leave, and some perceived job security can ameliorate the conflict (Strazdins, Shipley & Broom, 2007). Long work hours contribute to work-family interference (Alexander & Baxter, 2005; Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002), conflictual marital relationships (Wong & Goodwin, 2009), dissatisfaction with life (Wooden, Warren & Drago, 2007), poor health (Wooden, 2000) and chronic time pressure for both men and women (Bittman, 2004; Gunthorpe & Lyons, 2004). Strain or anxiety in the work place can also spill over into negative parenting practices (Costigan, Cox & Cauce, 2003; Leionen, Solantaus & Punamaki, 2003).

Time for travelling to work

Concomitantly, many work places are spatially dislocated from Australians' family homes. Perhaps because of our renowned open spaces, much of the population lives in low-density, widely spread, residential zones. In efforts to avoid this sprawl and its associated malaises such as inaccessibility or social disquiet (Davison, 2006; Forster, 2006), people have also decentralized to what may be called satellite areas: coastal, rural or mountainous regions that offer lifestyle benefits at the same time as accessibility to the central business district ([CBD] Healy et al., 2009; Williams, Pocock & Bridge, 2009). The downside however, is that the CBD is still a central place of employment (Davison, 2006), and for those who live in satellite areas, the 100-150 km commute is long and often unpredictable (Bill, Mitchell & Watts, 2006).

The unpredictability of commuting is a very real strain on people, although it is regularly overlooked in studies of work strain or family-work balance (Evans & Wener, 2006). Unreliable transport, conflicting timetables, congested roads and overcrowded trains are typical experiences for the everyday commuter (Cantwell, Caulfield & O'Mahoney, 2009) and these experiences have been shown to contribute substantially to people's physiological and psychological stress (Lucas & Heady, 2002; Novaco & Gonzalez, 2009), with the potential of negative mood spillover into the family domain (Jansen, Kant, Kristensen & Nijhuis, 2003). On the other hand, some people consider long distance commuting to be a 'gift' (Jain & Lyons, 2008). Many people use regular, work-related travel time for personal relaxation, preparation for the destination, or time for themselves (Redmond & Mokhtarian, 2001), and these effects can give a sense of autonomy and personal space (Mann & Abraham, 2006).

However, while commuters' concerns are often aired in the popular media (e.g., Gough, 2010; Horin, 2008), solutions in terms of policy and infrastructure changes are slow and remain ad hoc (Ruming, Randolph, Pinnegar & Judd, 2010). Families in decentralized areas are particularly vulnerable. Long hours spent commuting disrupts parents' ability to attend school and community events (Central Coast Social Atlas, 2000). Commuting may also pose additional stressors for parents who have young children in childcare, particularly since there are substantial financial and emotional costs associated with parents 'being late' when picking up their children from childcare (Maume, 2008).

Time for family

Thus a key issue for most families is the amount of time that parents have available to their children after accounting for both work and commuting hours. Duxbury et al. (2007) argue that families respond differently to these time pressures. Many working mothers do not reduce their hours with the children in an hour-for-hour equation (Craig, 2007). Although

some parents do cut back on their work hours to reduce work-to-family conflict (Reynolds & Aletraris, 2005), others multitask (Bianchi & Mattingly, 2004), share caregiving responsibilities with their spouse (Hattery, 2001; Milkie & Petolta, 1999), making sure that they ‘squeeze and shift’ their commitments (Craig, 2005) to satisfy their perceptions of adequate time with their child.

This emotional caregiving work for children is a major part of parents’ concerns for family relationships (Day, Gavazzi, Miller & van Langeveld, 2009), and the effort to do both caregiving and work is often thought of as a juggle, fit or balance (Bryant & Zick, 1996; Milkie et al., 2004). But as Daly’s (1996a) theory of family time suggests, family time is more than a function of time management, and qualitative and relational aspects of time use should be equally considered in discussions of family, work and time (see also Zubrick, Williams, Silburn and Vimpani, 2000).

The everyday notion of ‘quality time’ has come to represent this nexus of time and family. As a buzz word of the 80s and 90s (Reid-Boyd, 2002), the concept of quality time helped to focus attention on how parents can relate to their young children (e.g., Gardner, 1995; Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh, 2007; Stride, 2009). Quality time refers to positive involvement and lack of negativity (Booth et al., 2002), or focused, ‘special’ time (Conrad, 1994). The concept of quality time is closely related to the sort of activities parents do when they are supportive, nurturing and warm, such as playing, reading, or singing with children (Lezin, Rolleri, Bean & Taylor, 2004). Offering empirical support for the concept, Hsin (2009) found that the substance of parents’ interactions with their child (such as reading and talking), was more important for the child’s outcomes than the amount of time spent together. Parents’ perspectives on the enactment of this time vary though; Snyder (2007) found conceptions of quality time varied from structured planning, through heart-to-heart communication, to a global, ‘all family time is quality time’ perspective.

Therefore, in view of children's need for emotional and social connection with their parents, and the time shortage that oppresses many employed parents, further research is needed to explore how parent-child relational work is accomplished when time is scarce and other pressures apply.

In contrast to a 'deficit model' approach that focuses on problems (Morgan & Ziglio, 2007), we chose to ask parents about their successful strategies in managing their commuting and family life. The strengths-based perspective of the research design allowed us to identify the family processes that worked best for these parents. this perspective attributes transformational capacity and potential to individuals, and views problems as a result of interactions between individuals and structures, rather than deficits in the individual (Ronnau & Poertner, 1993). Like the risk and resilience framework (Devereux, Bullock, Bargmann-Losche & Kyriakou, 2005), the approach is useful when researchers wish to identify factors that enable individuals to adapt to their circumstances. However, the negative impact of social structures over which individuals have little control, such as working conditions or housing availability, should also be considered (M. Gray, 2010).

The two aims of this study therefore are to explore parents' perceptions of the impact of commuting on their family lives, and then to identify how parents characterized their interactions with their young children in relation to these conditions.

Method

We designed the study as an exploratory inquiry, with a purposive sample using semi-structured interviews. Recruitment took place in a coastal region of Australia, approximately 80kms from the closest CBD. Parents who commuted more than one hour to work, and had at least one child under the age of 5 years in childcare on the days they commuted, were invited to participate. Of the 25 responses, 21 interviews were successfully completed (15 mothers, 6 fathers, including 2 couples and one single mother). For fulltime employees, commuting

times averaged 15 hours a week, while for those who worked 3-4 days per week, commuting times were approximately 10 hours a week. In most families recruited, at least one parent was employed in the professional sectors of finance, business, engineering or technology. Details of the participants are included in Table 1.

Table 1 here

Data Collection

A telephone interview was undertaken with each parent who consented to the research invitation; these took approximately 30 minutes, and were recorded. Created by the researchers, the interview protocol was based on a review of the literature concerning commuting stresses and benefits, work-life balance, and family relationships. The interview protocol contained three sections. The first collected the attributes of the participants, including social demographics, information about family structure, and information about the commuting journey. The second section asked parents about their experiences of commuting and the nature of the benefits and stresses of commuting particular to each individual. Different aspects of the commuting journey were detailed in the protocol to facilitate reflection on objective and subjective perceptions of commuting (see Novaco & Gonzalez, 2009). Parents were then asked if and how these benefits and strains of commuting might flow into their homelife, and the methods they employed to promote the benefits or buffer the stresses in their home life and also to maintain a strong connection with their youngest child.

Analysis

Using an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006), the data were coded in three steps. The first step, structural coding, was to examine the data and place it into categories representing the key concepts of the research questions. The second step was to

examine the content of the categories in order to dimensionalize them, in other words, ‘what does this data segment tell me about the category?’ The categories were described and compared at the sub-category level, and reflective, theorizing memos were written to accompany the dimensionalizing of the categories. New hierarchies of categories were also created at this point when data did not fit the existing categories. The third step consisted of seeking patterns and links between hierarchies of categories in order to construct themes. This final step raised the analysis to a more interpretive level in order to understand the significance of the themes to the research topic. Team member collaboration involved meetings at initial, mid and end points of the analysis. We used cross-checking of coded text and discussion to refine the coding framework and to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings (Barbour, 2001). The analysis process was facilitated by the use of the qualitative analysis program NVivo 8 (QSR).

Findings

First, we describe the conditions of commuting and how these conditions affect parents’ wellbeing. We go on to show how parents managed their time, and how they then invoked processes and strategies that enabled them to fulfill their role as nurturer and caretaker despite the lack of time.

The conditions of commuting

I usually get up about half past four, quarter to five and have a shower and then my husband gets up after that. And hopefully on a good day he’ll dress one of the kids and then I’ll dress the other two. And then we leave by about six. We drop off at daycare probably quarter past six and then I go to the station.

The start of this mother’s day seems well organized. Ahead of her is the journey to work and the working day itself. Both have the potential to add to her strain or satisfaction. Spending approximately 1.5 hours on a one-way trip, parents felt commuting itself could be either a ‘gift’ or a ‘burden’ (see Jain & Lyons, 2008 for a similar finding). When parents experienced

commuting as a gift, they described it as a period in which they could take time for themselves, relaxing by reading, listening to music or resting. They also used travel time as transition time, a time to catch up or get ahead with family or work demands.

On the other hand, some parents found the commuting time and experience to be a burden, finding it a ‘waste of time’, because spending a ‘lot of time in the car’ can be ‘unproductive’. Unreliable transport, lack of accessibility to childcare facilities, or unusual work hours contributed to the burden of commuting. A major concern was the ability to return home before the close of the childcare facility, most of which had rigid closing times and over-time fees for late pick-ups.

But it can be really frustrating if they say “Oh your daughter’s sick” and my wife can’t leave work, and I say, “No problem, I’m leaving work right now”, which is a sacrifice for me, and sometimes it’s a big sacrifice, and they say, “Great, when can you be here?” “It’ll be two hours.” And then they’re just like, you know, they don’t want to know about it: “Should we be ringing someone else?” (014)

Being late was also an emotional burden on parent and child:

So it’s not only stress but it’s guilt that like she’s the last one at daycare. (005)
I feel a bit sad sometimes because [my daughter is] the last one there. (017)

Representing this emotional burden was the notion of ‘tyranny of distance’, a phrase coined by Blainey (1966) to explain the effect of distance on Australia’s history and culture.

Distance between home and work, and the time to cross it, weighed on parents’ minds. The distances in themselves had some practical constraint, most being approximately 100kms, and the unreliability of access to destinations, by either private or public transport, meant that the temporal dislocation was an unpredictable and persistent strain on parents. This is shown in one mother’s comment below.

You know, if my husband's stuck, because he picks her up from kindy [kindergarten], if he's stuck doing something at work and leaves 15 minutes later, he's just not going to get to her in time to pick her up. (002)

Parents became adept clockwatchers, timing each phase of their day to precise deadlines. For example, two mothers explain their routine:

We leave here about twenty past seven at the latest...I've got to park the car, lock the car and then walk to the station. And then I have to wait...15 minutes for a connection, so I get to work at 8.45. (027)

I have only got about 45 seconds to make the connection...And if you don't make that connection it is a 15 minute wait which is wasted time...I have my laptop and so I am not just standing at the platform staring into space, but that is 15 minutes that I would rather be at my desk looking punctual. (007)

Parents in the study were strongly committed to their lifestyle choice despite the associated difficulties. Parents wanted homes in neighborhoods that offered relative peace, a healthy, unpolluted environment, and opportunity for rural and seaside leisure. For most families, these attributes were only affordable outside the main metropolitan area. Yet paradoxically, many parents found that only the metropolis could offer the financial and intellectual conditions that matched their lifestyle needs.

Adjusting to the commuting life

In acknowledging the dual commitment of working and parenting, clockwatching mothers and fathers found they had to 'count the hours' to account for their total available time for their family. These parents had a heightened sensitivity to the intersection of time, family and work. For example, parents detailed the time they would leave their children, the time they would return, while at the same time noting what activities the children would be doing, whether going to bed, already asleep, getting dressed and so on. Parents appeared to be highly aware of the last time they saw or spoke to their child, and expressed concern over compacting meals, bathing, play, reading and pre-sleep activities into a short space at the end of the day. One father expressed his life as an equation into which he needed to add the commuting hours:

...how much of the day I do spend away from my home and from my son, because I have to factor in an extra three hours every day on top of my normal eight hour day. (012)

It appeared to be an important equation to balance because, as expressed by the same father, it was time in which the child develops:

I am consciously aware that these are important times, particularly at the age he's at now and that it's an important age for him and that even if it's just half an hour or an hour every day; but just to make sure that it's time that I do spend with him. (012)

The struggle of accommodating the tyranny of distance is clearly expressed in this father's statement:

I'm sort of on that razor's edge where if I have to work back half an hour...it has an impact on when I see the kids. If I have to spend a bit more time with the kids for something, it has a big impact on when I get to work or when I can leave work. (014)

The concern shown here was the most typical and pervasive fear of the commuting parents, and it was not associated with transport mode. Stress from travel was felt differently by individual parents; for some, the drive was stressful, for others the unpredictability of public transport was worse. Feeling rushed or tired was a given for the 3 women working fulltime (and 2 of the 6 fulltime fathers), although working part-time did not universally alleviate stress. The strain of clockwatching and counting the hours often led parents to seriously consider the sustainability of their commuting commitments; however there were resources that parents could draw on to alleviate the strain and augment their availability.

Making the best of it

Many parents admitted that the role of commuting parent required a personal flexibility that could bend when other constraints could not, for example, work hours, child care hours or train timetables. Personal flexibility was required as a general tool to be able to cope, 'the good days with the bad', for 'if anything does go wrong...you need to just maintain focus and not get too stressed'. Parents found that they had to be flexible in regard to work, for example, bringing work home if they needed to catch up lost work time through child illness. Parents enacted their flexibility in several ways: 'letting things go', 'making the best of it', and not being over-concerned with particulars, such as their child's clothes, the length of the lawns and so on. By adapting to circumstances, such as showering at night or eating breakfast on the train, parents were able adjust their daily lives to cope with anticipated stressors as

well as the unexpected. Parents here seemed to accept both the costs and benefits of the commute-work-family balance. Some parents tended to be resigned to the fact: 'I've just got to put up with it'; while others perceived the same situation as out of their control, but something that they aimed to make the best of.

I view it's out of my control so there's not really much I can do about it anyway and I try and make the most of the situation. (012)

You've got to work around with what you can do. (015)

Some parents indicated this was also an important learning opportunity for their children:

They just know they've just got to get on with it. (017)

She's learning routines and learning that there's things that, you know, on certain days that have to happen and that's how life is I guess. (002)

Social resources

Social resources were a further decisive factor in managing the quantity of time available to the family. By negotiating with their spouse and gaining support from family and friends, parents were able to reduce some of the tyranny of space and time. A key point of unity here was spousal support and shared care-giving. Mothers and fathers discussed their collaboration with their spouse in all aspects of family life, including caregiving and domestic tasks. They emphasized the crucial support of their spouse in smoothing the impact of various deadlines on the family.

My husband has an RDO [rostered day off] once a fortnight which is good so on that day that he has off he does all the children things. (027)

On the weekends, my wife works every other Sunday and I look after [our daughter] on that Sunday. (019)

I'm just lucky, my husband is quite hands-on. (005)

It was also clear that support from friends and family members (generally the children's grandparents) was important in alleviating stress among parents. When families and friends were available for the children, parents gained flexibility; when grandparents also provided

caregiving, parents gained comfort in knowing their child was with family. The grandparents of ten families were involved either occasionally or regularly in child care. The most coveted benefit of sharing responsibility with the spouse and having others on whom to rely was the diminution or prevention of stress.

Managing the quality of family life: Attentive parenting

When parents were able to manage the quantity of family time, they were then free to determine how best to use their child-available time. In parents' account of their time with children, the emphasis was on enrichment of their interactions with their child. These activities discussed by parents comprised the usual activities parents do with young children, such as reading, craft or 'playing', but it also involved deliberately choosing activities known to delight the child. Key statements representing these intentions were 'talking with the kids', 'being together', and giving children 'undivided attention'. Parents' intentions were clearly directed at maintaining and developing their relationship with their child. Parents also demonstrated their awareness of their child's emotional needs, recognizing their child's 'clinginess' or being understanding of evening tantrums for example, and were ready to respond. These intentions, which underpin the study's findings of 'attentive parenting', are elaborated below as three dimensions: 'mindful attention', 'talking to the kids', and 'undivided attention'.

Mindful attention

Parents' accounts of their interactions with their child were often detailed descriptions of their child's feelings, preferences and behaviors. Most parents reflected on the emotional state or needs of their child, some feeling that the nature or temperament of their child influenced the fit between them and the demands of commuting preparation. Parents reflected

on how their child's emotional states and needs changed according to age and situation, and acknowledged that as parent, they were the 'main focus' of their child's life. For example:

I usually play I Spy with them or sing a song with them, or do something like that. That's pretty vital, actually, because often one or two of them are cranky and perhaps crying, having a bit of a tanty about something. Generally by the time we get to day-care they're all laughing and they're happy and it's all good. (014)

As the example above suggests, when parents were mindful, they were aware of those small moments when their child needed specific emotional attention, 'she's just really cuddly at the minute', 'I kind of tend to know...I let him have a little moment'.

Being mindful of or 'tuned in' to the child also meant that parents were deliberate and consistent in their involvement with their child. This might be in routines with children, for example, making sure story-time was always completed, allowing later bed-times, or spending time with the child in the routines of getting dressed; and talking and explaining to the children about work, travel and play. When shopping or cooking was required to be done, parents would deliberately include the child in the task. Parents were highly sensitive to what stimulated and satisfied their child, and worked out how best to meet those emotional needs given their reduced available time.

Talking to the children

Verbal communication was a key strategy parents employed to meet their child's needs.

Parents' efforts at verbal communication were consistent across the 0-5 year age group, and whether with their infants or toddlers, parents emphasized the importance of interactive communication. Parents used conversation to prepare their child for the activities ahead, to teach the child about their world or to encourage their child to reflect and communicate.

Sometimes this was a 'sit down and talk' opportunity; at other times, parents would use the cooking or driving times to talk to their children. For some, talk was a substitute for play, but for many others it was a deliberate strategy to engage their children.

I try and talk to her while I'm doing things but I can't actually put things down and play a game or do a puzzle. (011)

But we still have time for cuddles and talk...the first thing we do on the trip home is we're talking about what they did that day, what was good about their day, what was bad about their day. I'm really involved from that kind of view in terms of talking. (013)

I just try and communicate I suppose with her whether it's talking or singing or whatever. (015)

Thus while parents acknowledge that talking is at times an accompaniment to driving or domestic tasks, they emphasize that the purpose of the communication is not for information-giving, but for emotional connection.

Undivided attention

A decisive approach through which parents determined to stay connected with their child was to ensure that they spent time together. This would mean that days, times or activities were especially dedicated to the child: 'I try to spend Tuesdays doing things just with him...where it's just the two of us' (023), or going 'somewhere different and special together' (027).

Parents said they used these times to engage purposefully with the child, wherever there was opportunity. For instance, one parent expressed this attention as her deliberate attempt to be inclusive of the child, explaining that:

Well, my days that I don't work they are my focus. So we do activities together. We go to playgroup, we do swimming, I try and just organise activities at home as well like painting and craft and making cakes and things like that. So the days that we are home I try and focus more on them and not on, you know, cleaning the floors or something like that. (001)

It appeared that parents coveted this type of interaction with their children. Some eschewed restaurants, cinemas and the necessary babysitter; others used 'everyday' tasks as child-inclusive opportunities. 'Home' was an important place to 'focus more on them', and for children to feel that the child had the parent's 'full attention'. This attention meant also that parents developed habitual connecting routines:

...we have our own special things that we talk about, or the things that we say to each other, so that they...you know, just that little bedtime routines or little things that I guess we've developed between us. (013)

Having these less frequent but intense, enriched moments with their children were ways in which parents attempted to engage and remain connected with their child over the long working days and weeks.

Discussion

Time as a resource is fiercely contested between children's needs and economic demands on parents, and yet it is not a commodity that can be equitably substituted across the family and labor domains. This study extends recent research that has examined parents' use of time (e.g., Craig, 2007; Von Doussa, 2007) and family processes (e.g., Kremer-Sadlik & Paugh, 2007), by providing a qualitative examination of how parents' work-time affects their parenting. Although work-life balance is a universal problem, and people solve it in individual ways (Hochschild, 1997), it is important to identify family relationships and processes that serve as a resource for families, particularly when other resources are low. There continues to be a need for data to represent 'what constitutes the quality dimension of time' (Zubrick et al., 2000, p. 24), and commuting parents provided a unique site for such an inquiry.

Family life for the parents in our study appeared to be based on an ideal or philosophy that family life should be safe, warm and rich. Parents were prepared to make sacrifices for this ideal, such as feeling rushed or tired. However, most also held jobs that, according to Strazdins et al. (2007), were likely to contribute positively to their physical and mental health, and their ability to cope. Nevertheless, parents spent at least 3 hours commuting to and from work daily, and this dislocation between work and home made the tyranny of distance plain. However, most parents had strong personal resources to construct their travelling time as a gift: a useful period, time out or transition period (Jain & Lyons, 2003). Other researchers have also found a similar satisfaction with commuting (e.g., Ory et al., 2004).

A key facilitator of parents' ability to cope with the journey was social support. Although by virtue of the study's sampling criteria all parents had chosen childcare centers for daily care of their child, some parents also chose relatives to look after their child for the trust and love they felt this environment afforded (Wheelock & Jones, 2002). When friends and relatives were available for urgent child care or regular primary caregiving, parents' strains were alleviated (Kossek, Pichler, Meece & Barratt, 2008).

Contributing significantly to this balance was the alliance between parents. Mothers and fathers in this study both seemed to value the other's working and parenting roles, and each took on significant caregiving responsibilities, a finding similar to some studies (Blain, 1993; Hattery, 2001; van der Klis & Karsten, 2009), and not others (Baxter et al., 2007). Although an increase in father involvement when mothers return to work is not unexpected (Kitterod & Pettersen, 2006), in this study, it also appeared welcomed and unproblematic. Parents appeared to hold fairly egalitarian gender role orientations (Livingstone, 2008), for only one father (from 6) spoke of his wife as being the traditional home-care-taker while he was the breadwinner. Parents' strong alliance, where both were invested in the child and both valued each others' involvement with the child, accorded with their philosophy of family life and bodes well for their children's outcomes (Morrill, Hines, Mahmood & Cordova, 2010).

With regard to individual experiences of family time, although parents were 'clockwatchers', this was not an indicator of their commitment to children and family for, as Brannen (2005) argues, to measure time spent in relational work is to go against the 'very ethos of care' (p. 113). Of course, parents must find some time to be with their children to have any relationship with them, but we found that under this degree of time pressure, parents' descriptions of their parenting were positive. Parents provided caring relationships, combined with high expectations (that the children would cope, teaching them responsibility for example) and maximized opportunities for children to participate purposefully in domestic life and relationships. They conceptualized their available time to children as

purposeful interactional or connection time that contained activity and discourse. Although it was a theme common to all parents, there were differences in intensity of attentive parenting; some parents talked more about their children in these ways than others. As Hsin (2009) showed, the quality and content of interactions is more important than time alone. Similarly, parents in this study felt that children benefited from their particular family routines. Parents were mindful and attuned to their children's emotional and cognitive development and their intentions to provide this support were clear, indicating a well-developed capacity to reflect on their child's feelings (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008).

We acknowledge that the data set in this study was small and localized, yet generalization was not a goal. However, the findings provide a window into how parenting in this context might be described. There were no significant patterns of differences between parents regarding the relationship of stress to number of children in the family, to whether they had kin carers, to their work mode (part-time or fulltime), or to transport mode (car or train). Indeed, all parents considered at least some of their journey as a 'gift' rather than a burden. Those who pointed to the burden of commuting were not markedly different to those who did not. The results point to the fine balance of individual solutions worked out by each family, with marital cohesion and personal flexibility the two most important attributes.

The common views across the themes are likely to be related to several points. Because the research questions were aimed at exploring parents' perceptions of commuting and their interactions with children, specific measures of stress, whether work, travel or parenting, were not gathered. Instead, we focused on qualitative perceptions of travel such as gift and burden and on descriptions of the impact of commuting on parents. The analysis process also focused more specifically on finding common themes among parents and describing the richness of the emergent thematic matter, rather than focusing on idiographic data. Another qualitative approach, for example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), would most likely provide an alternative perspective on the

same data. In addition, the participants in the study self-selected. These parents obviously felt fairly positive about their family-commuting balance, and may well have overcome crises where they had to question their family-worklife nexus. There was evidence from two parents in the study that crises around children and transport had precipitated change; being in crisis could well inhibit desire to participate in an interview study.

Inevitably too, there were parents who were so overly time pressured that they chose not to participate in the study. Interviews were completed en route, in work breaks or on days off, and thus full-time employment or non-private transport options could have limited participation. Data from chronically time pressured parents may have differed in direction or potency. A follow-up study includes measures of parenting alliance and the parent-child relationship to make stronger claims about the effects of these parenting strategies.

Daly's theory of family time (1996a) draws attention to a paradox of family life. In highlighting the false dichotomy between quantity and quality of parent-child time, he problematized 'quality'. In this study, we have found how child-available time can be intensified to provide warmth and regulation for the child when other resources such as time are low. The study draws attention to parents' potential and strengths in accomplishing emotional caregiving in a difficult environment. Examining this notion of family time brings into relief the contested space of family in the 21st century. Too little time, and parents will be unable to support their family's wellbeing; without a healthy family however, the viability of society at large is tested (Edgar, 2007). Yet the problem of time-scarcity is not an individual crisis to be met only by personal strengths; family and work policies need to take into account not only the proportion of parents' time spent at work, but also contextual factors that contribute to successful family functioning.

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